

MIKE GALLANT

## 9. BATTERED FISH OUT OF WATER

*A Work in Progress*

In the summer of 2001 my family and I moved to the Shetland Islands, the most northerly of the Scottish Islands and an archipelago set on the edge of the North Atlantic some 225 miles west of Bergen, Norway. We were enthusiastically grasping an opportunity to live and work in beautiful natural surroundings—and an opportunity to bring up our children away from the hurly burly, the violence and the pollution of urban life. In 2007, for the sake of our daughter's mental health, we moved back to the UK mainland.

Bullying within schools is not a solely Shetland, Scottish, or indeed European problem. This universal issue affects victim, perpetrator, family and community. It affected, and continues to affect, me. In this auto/biography I tell one story of a father and his teenage daughter living through her experiences of physical and psychological bullying at school. I use writing as a methodology to both explore this experience more deeply, and to uncover a way of expressing embodied experiences in text and photograph. I have presented this writing in the metaphorical structure of a well-filled sandwich: something apparently ordinary and digestible.

### PROLOGUE. SANDWICH MAKING WITH ANGER

Take two slices of bread and ~~ery~~ lay out  
On a well-used surface  
Butter up—they're a little stale  
Choose your filling—  
I suggest:  
Take a healthy young fish from the sea of life (immature and keen to grow). Hit  
very hard to stun. Hit very hard. Hit. Stun. Hit.  
Hit very hard. Hit.  
Stunned.  
Fillet—dead or alive (hard to tell) —  
Hang to smoke  
pepper and salt  
peel off skin  
mash in bowl (with mayonnaise for good measure).

Pile generously on one dry slice  
cover with the other

MIKE GALLANT

take a bite  
I invite ...

#### BROWN BREAD (BOTTOM SLICE)

If the narratives I weave form my identity shawl, then this comfort cloak that warms and protects me must be created in a place, a context. Space, place, and non-place<sup>1</sup> are the familiar scenery for my costume dramas, my tragic tales—for my (un)performable<sup>2</sup> script. As Sarbin (2005, p. 205) puts it:

(T)he built and natural environments provide a multiplicity of stages upon which people engage each other in dramatic interactions. Such engagements are the raw materials for building life-narratives from which identities are formed.

There are many *me*'s that inhabit my world—a community struggling to live together, negotiating shared stories that I use in the complex task of constructing a stab at a world, and then negotiating with others' moderated multiple selves to form a further shared understanding. I am the trainer, the car driver, the greying long-haired fashion-follower. I am the consultant, the therapist, and the supervisor. Some of these *me*'s are fascinated by the liminal—the spaces and places where we step out beyond our comfort zone to face the threshold of the unfamiliar—the places of the partially known, touching our toes in foreign water—inviting and yet so full of uncertainty and danger. It is in these boundary places that I walk alongside the people who consult me. It is in these spaces where novels of new lives can blossom and fruit as we spill off the well-trodden path and discover new joys—and sadnesses.

There is another *me*. A parent. This *me* couldn't give a damn about liminality and intellectual theorising. This particular *me* gets so f\*\*\*ing angry—and mad and confused and frightened and frustrated and sad this bit of me is broken out from its comfort zone when I live amongst the stories of the bullying. The bullying of my 13-year-old daughter. This is one part of Rosie's story. It is a work in progress—forever.

#### THE FILLING (IN THIRTEEN SCENES)

##### *Scene 1. The Pink Bedroom*

I'm standing over her bed, about to kiss her good-night. She's reaching out to turn off her mobile. The little green light still flashing. Its strobing stopped, she's placing it back on the shelf behind her head (green flash in my skull—green flash in—green flash) and I'm noticing the gouges in her arm. Her left lower arm. Then the vicious gouges in my mind. The scratching. The surface. The now.

“God, Rosie, have you been scratching at your eczema? That's really bad!” She pulls her arm back and I sense some change in the place—some empty, lonely space, some movement from the comfort zone to the unknown. I plough on,

noticing the discontinuity—feeling my fear. The maiden plate cutting a dangerous furrow.

“You really should be careful doing that you know—it looks too much like you’ve been cutting yourself, and we don’t want the Social Work jumping to conclusions ....” She’s turning away from me, grunting something I can’t hear. And don’t want to hear. We are kissing and saying goodnight.

“Love you.”

“Love you too, dad,” she replies.

I’m walking down the corridor, away from her room. I know it’s her eczema getting worse—she’s under stress, after all. I know my daughter’s cutting herself. How can I know both at the same time?

*Scene 2. The Beach Below Our House*

Walking down to the beach we can see something going on. A wedding party? A baptism? A funeral? (The graveyard is on the banks beyond the beach.) Then, as we approach, it becomes clear. Sixty impeccably dressed Vikings marching down the track, over the banks, onto the sand. A posse of photographers settling themselves above the gathering squad, and a flurry of women and children following in the wake.



*Figure 1. ‘Einar of Gulberwick’ and his Jarl Squad (2006 Up Helly Aa’) on Gulberwick beach, 29/01/06, from the souvenir brochure for Up Helly Aa.’  
Photo by John Coutts, Shetland*

We’re jumping the stream as the purple tunics, the shining stainless shields and raven banners are unfurled and positioned. Hoarded into place. Loud voices laugh as larger than life men mount roughly made benches; standing on scaffold planks set on saw horses. Organised chaos; a photographer’s bad dream.

MIKE GALLANT

Now we're amongst the family followers, the boys talking with boys, and I with mothers from the lower hillside. We point to Viking friends—there's the goalkeeper of the under 11's. He's the son of the Guizer Jarl. And there's another colleague—I had no idea he was in the squad! The TV camera pans the scene; the press set their focus and record in digital clarity the crazy carbuncle on the natural shore.

Einar of Gulberwick was no bruising bully—not so far as Orkneyinga Saga tells.<sup>3</sup> When Earl Rognvald was washed up here on this beach, his two longships *Hjolph* and *Fifa* wrecked on a dark Odinsday night a thousand years ago, he and his men were welcomed. They were billeted, each home taking their part. The largest house in the neighbourhood appears to have been Einar's. Perhaps he was hot on image—he'd take in twelve men, though only if it included the Earl himself. The Earl was on good form it seems, improvising poetry for the occasion despite the loss of much of his party's belongings as a result of the storm. Of course, the Earl had just sailed from Norway, and that was where Shetlanders' loyalties lay.

Back on the beach an Englishman ponders the importance of history, of cultural heritage, of identity—and of improvised poetry. As my boys are 'in,' and yet 'outwith,' I consider the 21st century welcome we received—and the possibility that within that garish costumed attempt to recreate a grand Viking history there stood my daughter's nemesis: we had presumed to step onto this foreign ground in the expectation that, like Earl Rognvald, Shetland would welcome us. Of course, many did.

And yet, that morning wait for the bus was a scary schooling in how children search for self-identity and meaning. Was I simply naïve to have expected anything else? Perhaps I was conned by my assumption that we shared a common tongue—the language of Shetland is unquestionably English-like.

### *Scene 3. Busy Pedestrianised Street in a Provincial Town*

If you ever come to Lerwick you really must go to The Fort fish shop! It's just above where the Bressay ferry comes in, and has the best battered fish in town—just part of the local knowledge I share with you. Enjoy!

I'm standing in the queue. It's as busy as it always is at this time: crowds of us salivating as we wait for our Fish Suppers. No longer concentrating on the task in hand, my mind has time for rumination. Now my mouth seems dry. The grease behind the glass is turning my stomach; my anxiety response as I'm looking at the girl behind the counter.

### *Scene 4. The deck of a P&O ferry*

We're passing the Ness of Trebister now—the point at the north edge of the bay of Gulberwick. The light fading as the evening wears on, we watch from the top deck, taking in our new homeland. It was here that the Pionersk KN-D121, a Latvian Factory Ship, smashed against the splintered rocks in autumn 1994. Maybe they were seeking the shelter of the *Sooth Mooth* to Lerwick harbour. Crossing the deck

BATTERED FISH OUT OF WATER

to look to the east we pass the Bressay Light, whitewashed buildings set below the towering cliffs of the island. And through the harbour mouth now we turn again to the west as we pass by the cemetery and the modern mish-mash of the High School buildings.

Down below on the car deck sits Trailer 30, packed with the material of our lives. Our car is parked next to it. In the footwell behind the driver's seat our goldfish swim to their new home. It is I who brought us here into this unknown, cutting our ties, moving on.

*Scene 5. The Head Teacher's Office*

The Head Mistress is telling us that she's lied. She cannot be believed.

*Scene 6. The un/shoreline*

Each breaking wave  
cutting through  
the picture that the last one gave

Each grain of sand,  
washed and turned  
building a beach on which to land

Each tide of the ocean  
swamps blunts grows  
changes my every notion

Back and forth  
colours thrown  
water painted  
on shell-sand and stone

Oil sheens  
acrylic hues  
pastel shades  
forever new

sharp cutting shells  
broken creatures  
underfoot hell

Each delicate life  
each temporary strand  
stands ready for the final knife

Each surge of water  
turns and skews  
the way I see my precious daughter



MIKE GALLANT

*Scene 7. Office Environment—Brightness 95%*

I am sitting at a bare table crushed into a room with seven others—it's some sort of 'behavioural support' room. I don't feel mainstream. I'm feeling like a tragic backwater defending my view of the world. Of course, I'm looking for anything consistent with MY view of what has happened. Of why Rosie has been out of school for two weeks following a couple of incidents that led to the school reporting her as a child protection case for the second time this year. The police are now investigating allegations of sexual and physical assault. Last time around it was racial assault. There wasn't enough evidence to take it further. Now she's sitting next to me, her mother in the chair beyond. I'm proud that my daughter has decided to be here and to state her position, her view. This morning, as I left for work, she wouldn't consider it—I wonder what had changed, and yet now is not the time or place to ask. Our eyes meet again and we smile. Nervous love.

The bully is here—no, not one of the 15-year-old boys who do this, no: this is the bully from the education department. He's telling the attentive crowd once more, "At Primary School I was a bully ...." For the second time he leans forward, looking Rosie in the eye, six foot and sixteen stone. He could be wagging his fingers; he could be laughing at her. His experience, he is implying, gives him an insight. Yes, he knows about bullying. And now he's responsible for the council's policy on bullying. He ordered the blue and white armbands 'say no to bullying.' He is the only one in this room who does what he says he'll do. He makes things happen. Where is that unsure line between assertiveness and bullying, between clarity and control?

The head of year is angry. I am talking of an organisational culture, of sweeping it under the carpet. "I really object, Mr. Gallant," he says "to such an accusation!" I tell them that they're not to blame—they're only working for the organisation. Only working for the organisation. They're hurt. I'm feeling that I should sit back and hold my tongue.

The social worker is disturbingly quiet. He questions whether we can be involved in mediation with the parents of the accused—the police investigations continue. (The day after he seems to agree that the school don't believe that Rosie is being bullied—that she ever has been bullied. She is the problem; the Gallants are the problem. If only they would go away. Perhaps we will, like the others before us.)

And then I find that we're agreeing once more to the same package—our ideas are *maybes*, *we'll sees*; their ideas are *Musts*, *Shoulds* and *Can'ts*. Two hours of meeting, and I feel bullied once more. Are we returning her into an abusive situation—am I responsible, despite the Social Worker's presence, for forcing her into re-abuse? How can I live with this? And yet she seems to agree to it—I give her every chance to object. I almost feel let down that she won't continue to rile against the purveyors of authority.

This mo(ve)ment<sup>4</sup> of subjection, the paradoxical simultaneousness of mastery and submission.<sup>5</sup> Is this, captured in the mo(ve)ment, simply a concentrate of her education—and of my lifelong education?

BATTERED FISH OUT OF WATER

*Scene 8. Night—High Angle View of Father and Mother Asleep*

I am watching from above. Tunnel vision love. She is on the cold stairs. In the well. They are beating her. They are beating her.

They are beating her. “English Catholic Bitch!”

whimpers

they hit

they hit

I am forming words to shout—words in my heart, and words in my throat—dry mouthed words unable to shout them out—

gagged in the sky looking down on my stairwell nightmare

“Oh God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

physically fighting the strange chains that hold me from intervening in this barbarous world

struggling

shaking

the twitch

the clamminess of the cold sweat

Now woken in the night too early to face another day

brutally loaded with embodied fear

*Scene 9. Close-up LCD Screen6*

Soz i never spoke to u! I mis u loads! Im havin a bit of a bad time. Spoke 2 sum of the girls calmed me down a bit. don't know when u get this or where u r. luv u r

*Scene 10. The Pink Bedroom7*

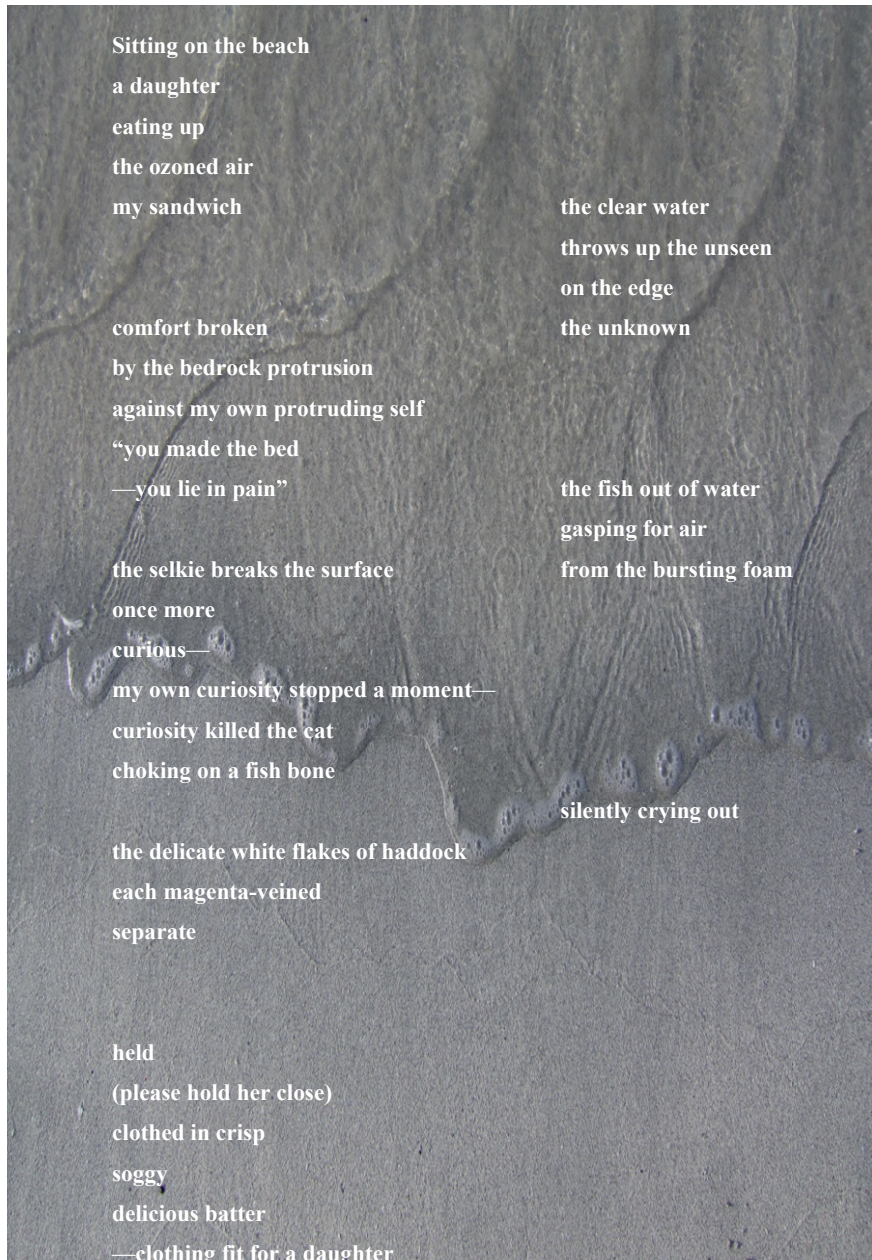
Dear Lord

Help me to get through life without hurting myself and others around me. Help me to keep calm even when I feel like I need to hurt myself. Help me not to lose my temper and fight back when others hurt me. And remind me that you love me, and so do my family and friends. Help me to be patient when people don't understand how I am feeling or why I react to certain situations the way I do.

Amen.

MIKE GALLANT

*Scene 11. Battered Fish out of Water*



Sitting on the beach  
a daughter  
eating up  
the ozoned air  
my sandwich

comfort broken  
by the bedrock protrusion  
against my own protruding self  
“you made the bed  
—you lie in pain”

the selkie breaks the surface  
once more  
curious—  
my own curiosity stopped a moment—  
curiosity killed the cat  
choking on a fish bone

the delicate white flakes of haddock  
each magenta-veined  
separate

held  
(please hold her close)  
clothed in crisp  
soggy  
delicious batter  
—clothing fit for a daughter

the clear water  
throws up the unseen  
on the edge  
the unknown

the fish out of water  
gasping for air  
from the bursting foam

silently crying out



*Scene 12. The Pink Bedroom and the Father's Office*<sup>8</sup>

Just one more normal day, just one more normal place, just one more normal situation .... No! That's wrong, the situation should NOT be normal.

That's what I think, everyday, Monday to Friday, this sounds like a job description. It's not, in fact, I'm not even old enough to get a job.

I'm 12, my name is irrelevant, my story isn't.

I live on the Shetland Islands, lucky you, most people say. It must be wonderful ... They're wrong!

I came when I was 8 a little cute girl, a little cute, English, brown skinned, Catholic Girl. I tried to fit in, make friends. I made 3 and about 10 times more enemies.

We live out of town, only 4 miles, but far enough away from school to merit free transport ... That's how it started, 1 girl, 2 boys, 6 school bullies and a school bus full of kids.

It was painful, it was necessary and it happened.

That was 5 years ago. The 6 school bullies went to high school, I was alone. This summer I went to high school, worked my way through a primary school nick-named HELL to a high school which now carries a similar name.

This was my life, a life of fear and pain, a life of bullying.

3 weeks into high school it started again. I had friends, things to do, I thought they'd get over it .... They didn't.

I started talking about it; it was the only thing to do. Sometimes it upsets me, others I just don't care. All I care about is my friends getting hurt. This still goes on months after it started.

It's gone on so long, the temptation is to normalise it—it appears that some part of you really has. You have resilience though—a real belief that your experience is not normal.

Sad to think that your expectation of 'a job' appears to be some sort of tedium. And then there's that tension about your age—you should be a child/you should be grown up.

Resilience again—I'm proud of you .

Yes, 'lucky you' is what I thought, and lucky me is what I thought when first I said yes to the offer of my own (not at all tedious) job—it has been good though ... hasn't it?

You are who you are—and I love you for growing that way, and for believing in life the way you do.

Enemies? Surely not? You must be exaggerating.

I know now—how blind I must have been not to see it at the time not to hear it from your brothers, or from words caught on the wind.

No it can't be 'necessary'—surely, no, shout it from the rooftops! IT CANNOT BE NECESSARY!

Sounds like 'alone' is so good. I don't think of you as liking or disliking 'alone.' Both in balance feels more like you ....

HELL? Why should your primary school be called that? I don't see it. Oh, believe me, HELL is surely worse than this! Though sometimes, Rosie, I wonder how much worse it can be.

We all thought they'd get over it—though now, as I write this more than a year after you first went to high school, I feel the flutter of anticipation that maybe this time, maybe this time ...

MIKE GALLANT

This school carries the old nick-name  
.... This has got to stop ....

You must care about  
yourself and others

... this has stopped.

*Scene 13. The Living Room, Sunday Afternoon*

“Dad—I am not your psychology project!”

She leaves the room. I sigh, and feel like I’m a bully. Is this all really about subjection?

#### BROWN BREAD (TOP SLICE—TO COVER AND CONTAIN)

If Judith Butler’s interpretation of the process of education towards citizenship is to be believed, “... at the heart of becoming a subject ...” (note the ambivalence of this word—subject/object and subject/ruler/measurer/quantifier) “...is the ambivalence of mastery and submission, which, paradoxically, take place simultaneously—not in separate acts, but together in the same moment” (Davies, 2006, p. 426). In adversity is, indeed, growth.

The writing (and the experiencing of this *Action Research*) is ‘rhizomatic,’ affecting the participants in complex and unexpected ways (e.g. Amorim & Ryan, 2005). Use of the present continuous tense as in my previous work (e.g. Gallant, 2005) is bringing an active urgency to this narrative, at one time placing it in a very particular moment and taking away a specified chronology, enhancing the uncertain truth.

Readers may well question the ethics of involving my daughter in what she, quite rightly, termed my ‘psychology project.’ I have struggled with this dilemma, and can only say that at this point in time I am writing with the full agreement of Rosie. *She* is not my psychology project—my focus has been on *my* experience of her experience. To attempt to anonymise the material entirely would be impossible: the relationship of father and daughter is central to this work. Likewise, any thoughts of protecting the identity of the Islands where I lived run into the same problems experienced by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2000) in her studies of rural Ireland. This community is too small to hide in. My decision is to call a town a town, and not to pretend that it all happened somewhere else. I have drawn the line in naming individuals however—if they ever read this, then I hope they will at least respect my sincerity in writing about my own personal experience.

#### EPILOGUE

I asked Rosie what she thought: “It was correct in showing the way I feel. Some bits were hard to read because they make me think of things I don’t really want to. I like the way you’ve involved some of my stuff in it.”

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Marc Augé (1995) describes non-places as lacking direct cultural identity, the most obvious examples being connected with transportation: airport lounges, motorways, bus stations etc. They may signpost the passer-through to places with identity, becoming thresholds; spaces of liminality.
- <sup>2</sup> I use '(un)performable' to convey an understanding that this script is both performable and unperformable. It has already been a performance as a constitutive part of my own life, and yet this script is an incomplete representation of that performance.
- <sup>3</sup> Orkneyinga Saga is a mix of fiction and history written around the end of the 12th century by an unknown Icelander and is our main source of knowledge surrounding the early social and political history of Orkney and Shetland (Pálsson & Edwards, 1981).
- <sup>4</sup> Davies & Gannon (2006, prologue) use *mo(ve)ment* to express a process that takes a "... remembered *moment of being ...*" and transforms it through "... telling and writing and reading that *moves us in a variety of ways*" (italics in the original).
- <sup>5</sup> Davies (2006) uses this analysis in her exploration of how Judith Butler's philosophy of education may affect its praxis.
- <sup>6</sup> Rosie and an older friend, who had also experienced bullying at the school, wrote this prayer jointly. Both gave permission for their work to be included.
- <sup>7</sup> This is a text message sent to my mobile by Rosie, May 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> The left hand column here was written by Rosie early in 2006. The right hand column is my reflection later that year.

## REFERENCES

- Amorim, A. C., & Ryan, C. (2005). Deleuze, action research and rhizomatic growth. *Educational Action Research*, 13(4), 581-593.
- Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. Transl. J. Howe. London: Verso.
- Davies, B. (2006). Subjectification: The relevance of Butler's analysis for education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(4), 425-438.
- Davies, B., & Gannon, S. (Eds.). (2006). *Doing collective biography*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Gallant, M., (2005). My feelings of forgiveness. *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 5(3), 32-144.
- Pálsson, H. & Edwards, P.(1981). *Orkneyinga saga: The history of the Earls of Orkney*. London: Penguin.
- Sarbin, T.R. (2005). If these walls could talk: places as stages for human drama. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 18, 203-214.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (2000). Ire in Ireland. *Ethnography*, 1(1), 117-140.

*Mike Gallant*  
*Centre for Lifelong Learning*  
*University of Warwick*