

What Difference Does Writing Make?

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Waiting For The Past

By Kate Burns

The morning is fresh, crisp. The sun is dazzling to my eyes, so I pull my sunglasses from the top of my head. They come as relief, though I still squint. I glance across to her and see that though her head is bowed, her eyes are narrowed and creased, almost closed, like flowers at sunset. My movement stirs her and she glances at me, looking me up and down I know, she's judging me. She's judging the way I sit, the way my legs are crossed, the way my right leg hangs carelessly across my left, waving in time to music that drifts across the breeze towards us. I look at her feet, the way they sit daintily next to each other, ankles almost touching, and I can feel the air of wisdom that she exudes. She knows how to sit in the presence of company, knows how to behave.

She sits in her cane chair, staring off the veranda towards the bush on the other side of the highway. Her eyes follow a path that only she can see — she's watching images I will never be able to see or understand. I realise she's stopped squinting — her eyes are fully open. I'm about to ask why when a truck rattles past, blasting its horn. Though I jump with a start, she seems unfazed, uninterested. My instinct is to swear at the driver, to yell after him that he's ruining the moment, but I don't. I sit and I watch her reaction — I watch as she settles further into her chair, as her perfect posture melts away.

The expression on her face depicts pain mixed with fear, and I open my mouth to pull her from the moment. As I do a breeze rushes through the trees next to the veranda, and as it flies away it takes with it my motivation to speak. Her body suddenly seems at ease — it seems she is calmed by the wind,

as a baby is by its mother's voice. And I believe this until suddenly I see it. A memory. A memory is floating above her head — it is lingering there like a cloud around a mountain. I can see she wants to open her mouth, to let it all come gushing out, but she isn't ready so her lips stay pursed and tight as they have been all morning.

I've seen things similar to this memory before and felt no need to pry deeper, but this memory is different. It has come and stayed. All at once I know this memory is the reason she called me here, it is the reason she invited me to tea. I watch her experience the memory for a few moments. I watch her face light up in the subtlest of ways, I watch as her face softens to show glimpses of a young woman long passed. But only for a few moments do I watch — after that the feeling of intrusion becomes overwhelming, so I turn to the table beside me where a teapot and two cups on delicate saucers sit. For the first time I smell the tea brewing — until this point I have needed nothing to distract or entertain me. I pour tea into the cups on delicate saucers, and for the first time in my life I hear the water as it hits the china, I hear it hissing in the teapot, I hear the veranda creaking. I pick up a cup and hold it to my mouth. I feel the heat on my lips though I haven't yet sipped, and my tongue anticipates the bittersweet taste of over-brewed tea.

As I drink, I think about what I'm doing here. Why I'm sitting on her veranda, why I'm waiting for her to speak. And all at once I realise that I'm not waiting, I am being. All I'm doing is sitting, drinking tea, anticipating the words slipping from her mouth: when they do I want to be the first to catch them, to catch the memory. I glance at her again, and as I do she turns to face me. She doesn't open her mouth or take a breath as if to speak, she just sits. Watching. Judging. Waiting. I can see there are no secrets or lies in her eyes, merely unrevealed truths, but these are truths that suddenly I cannot wait around to hear.

I glance at my watch, suggesting that I have places to go, and in a panic I stand. The veranda creaks as I walk, and though I want to run down the stairs, across her neatly mown lawn and down the road, I do not. Instead I pick up my empty

cup and her cold, untouched tea and carry them through the scraggly fly-wire door into the kitchen. At the door I glance back at her. She's still sitting there amid the brilliant sunlight, caught in her daydream, unaware of me. I cannot watch her any more, yet I don't know why. Her memory intrigues me. I know if I wait that in time I will know her secrets, but I can't wait. Waiting takes time, takes patience. Suddenly I have neither.

I walk towards the sink and place the cups down with a clunk. I reach for the old-fashioned faucets and turn them hurriedly. As water spurts from the tap, a rush of steam and fury, I rummage for gloves and detergent. There is none, only several bars of crusty soap. Cursing I pull myself to stand again, and as I do I see her standing in the doorway, watching me. All at once I am the one with the busy mind, the one with other things to do, and she is the one that's waiting. And in that instance I see it, the memory, floating above her head. In that instance I realise that there is no more waiting. She's ready to tell her story.



Kate Burns wrote this essay in 2005 when she was in Year 12 at Warrandyte High School, Warrandyte, Victoria.