

## Research Space

Journal article

**Stuff as dreams are made on**

**Field, V.**

## Stuff as dreams are made on

by Victoria Field

It is September 2020 and I am in Augustine House, the huge modern library of Canterbury Christ Church University. It's located just outside the city walls, a short walk from the higgledy-piggledy main university campus, which is built on the site of St Augustine's ancient abbey. I like both spaces for different reasons.

I'm sitting in the Silent Zone on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. It is far from silent. The ventilation system hums and buzzes, cars on the ring road roar past. Occasionally, an ambulance or police car screams, or the air brakes on a large truck cough and splutter. Someone behind me is opening and closing doors emphatically, and there's a clatter of what might be a mop and bucket. Cleaning must be seen and heard to be done, as well as done.

As I do most days, for many hours, I am looking at a computer screen. Here, the rectangle has different proportions from my screen at home but still shows a portrait document on a landscape ground. Arial, my font of choice, is in a slightly different variation here, but still recognisably Arial, just as a friend with a new haircut is still recognisably the same person.

*As I write 'Arial', I am aware of a hinterland, the kind of hinterland that can take me into a poetic mode. Arial, the sans-serif font, conjures Ariel, the Hebrew name and the spirit character in Shakespeare's The Tempest. There is always a hinterland, half-glimpsed, half-felt, that can lure us, like a spirit, away from the path we think we want to follow.*

Beyond the screen, the computer and the partition behind it, are the flinty city walls, the tall trees in Dane John Gardens, just turning autumnal, and a multi-storey carpark near Whitefriars shopping centre. Groups of young people are walking along walls at the same level as my desk, but they can't see me through the tinted glass.

What am I doing here? Here, in a university library, in the anxious autumn of 2020, looking for words in a noisy so-called silent space?

*I wrote the above paragraphs spontaneously. When I write, I am more of a so-called 'pantser' rather than a 'planner'. I find out what I want to write in the writing and what emerges gives me clues for where I want to go next. As Kate Evans pointed out in a recent blog,<sup>8</sup> the two categories are not mutually exclusive. A planner may find freedom in*

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<sup>8</sup> Evans, 2020

*structure, and a ‘pantser’ may in fact be an intuitive planner. A prize-winning short story of mine was praised for its exemplary structure, but was actually written with no forethought of plot or resolution.*

So, I know I want to write about being a mature student and the place of poetry in that identity. I have questions about so-called ‘poetic inquiry’ but at this point, I genuinely have no idea where this article will take me. I am heartened by knowing that ‘writing as inquiry’ is not only ‘a thing’, (by which I mean a recognised methodology), but that it was the approach taken by Wilma Fraser in her exploration of wisdom in education.<sup>9</sup> She uses Sofia, the name of the holy wisdom, as both metaphor and guide in her exploration of spirit in education.

*A memory: I lived in Istanbul from 1989 to 1992 and often visited Hagia Sofia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom. It was built in 537, sixty years before St Augustine set foot in here Canterbury. It remained the world’s largest cathedral for almost a thousand years. After the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, it became a mosque. Then, during the secular republic of Ataturk, in 1934, the building became a museum, and this year, 2020, controversially, a mosque again. White drapes cover the Christian mosaics. Where is Sofia now in contemporary Istanbul?*

All writing has an ‘imagined reader’ even if that is only the writer themselves. My imagined readers of this piece are people interested in the Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred initiative. It is appropriate that Wilma’s name came to mind. She facilitated the establishing of the MA of that name at Canterbury Christ Church University and also employed me in the Community and Arts Education department over several years. I like to think Sofia was holding open the door, inviting me in to an academic space that has the characteristics of the CCCU campus – gardens, vineyards, courtyards, olive trees, orchards, a ruined bakehouse, a chapel, ponds with lilies and cormorants, a repurposed prison and courthouse, a labyrinth, a bookshop, a new theatre – a space where the human spirit communes with the natural world, and a space where active devotion to knowledge goes back fourteen hundred years.

*Sofia, Augustine, the world-famous scriptorium, Queen Bertha, Shakespeare’s Ariel, all haunt my thinking about coming back to studying. I have just had my first walk around the campus since lockdown. I had three spontaneous conversations, face to face, in the sunshine, visited the bookshop and felt the aliveness of young people eating, chatting and moving through a beautiful public space. I unlocked my locker for the first time since March*

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<sup>9</sup> Fraser, 2018

*(fortunately, no forgotten sandwich) and in the same spirit tried several doors in the building called Erasmus. Some were surprisingly open, others unaccountably closed.*

The MA course thrived and attracted students from all corners of the globe (a globe of course has no corners) and the CAE courses I taught in turn fed into the MA and changed lives in other ways. CAE closed a few years ago and the last cohort of the MA will finish their studies in 2021. Sofia was present in those courses I taught, on poetry as therapy, women poets of the spiritual and writing from the earth. There was no testing, no entry requirements, no modules, no formal outcomes but there was deep connection and real conversation in rooms overlooking a Tudor garden, a cathedral, a police station, a building site, the rich interconnected city of Canterbury.

Wilma Fraser's account of wisdom bridges a gap that seems to be widening between the measurable approach to knowledge that increasingly dominates the discourse of a university, and the deeper, transpersonal, mysteries of a love of learning, between so-called *logos* and *mythos*.

This again seems to speak to the dichotomy of the planner-pantser and other related dichotomies, such as logic-intuition, atomistic-holistic, cool-warm, head-heart. These binary distinctions have been codified through the metaphor of left and right brain by thinkers such as Iain McGilchrist. The truth is, I have one brain, one heart, but as we now know from research on the microbiomes within us, we are not one entity, but walking communities. A university too is a unity containing multitudes, no element insignificant, its intangibles as important as the buildings, doors and windows. It is, or should be, permeable.

The poem, *My Proteins*, by Jane Hirshfield, perfectly captures for me the meaning of community and interconnectedness.<sup>10</sup>

I want to close this piece now, and the word Ariel at the top of the screen catches my eye again. Through some theatrical wizardry, in flies Ariel, Shakespeare's spirit who was played by both boys and women. Some think that *The Tempest* was a play about initiation, with allusions to the Ancient Mystery rites. I have always loved it just as I have always loved libraries.

Certainly, entering a university again at 57, is a sea-change for me, an initiation and a hoped-for transformation. The Royal Shakespeare Company, in a guide for teachers, list

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://poets.org/poem/my-proteins>

the themes of *The Tempest* as Power, Control, Betrayal, Revenge and Forgiveness and its motifs as Magic, Sounds, Music, Water, Sea, Earth, Air, Costume, Theatre, Servant and Master.<sup>11</sup> All of those have something to say to me, my studies, this university and the times we live in.

It's September 2020, and many of us are acutely aware of a desecrated world, fear and despoliation. But looking out of the window of a library named for a saint, at Canterbury, a city I love, I am still excited at entering this particular university where words like the sacred, enchantment, meaning, soul, magic and devotion might be whispered these days, but still permeate the walls.

Canterbury itself has, over the centuries, been invaded, raided, burned and bombed. The ring road I see outside, a disastrous post-war planning decision, destroyed Queen Bertha's processional route from church to Abbey to the cathedral, but we know where she walked and can trace her steps. Sofia of Constantinople may be hidden these days by white drapes in contemporary Istanbul, but we know she can never be cancelled.

## References

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.rsc.org.uk/education/teacher-resources/>