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Whimsy, ethnographic writing and the everyday: Possibilities, politics, poetics

Katie Fitzpatrick (University of Auckland) and Jonathan Wyatt (University of Edinburgh)

Abstract

The whimsical interrupts our focus on the banal, the practical, the instrumental. It is the thing out of place: a rose on the pavement, a magnolia inexplicably in full bloom in the winter grey, a bright red velvet coat, a downpour as you're getting out of the car without an umbrella; art slid under a door to say 'thank you'. In this chapter, we think, write and play with notions of whimsy, drawing into our scrutiny and inquiry reflections on how whimsy intersects our everyday living and working, and how it applies to our ethnographic writing. Engaging with prose and poetic writing that came to us both before and after Covid-19, we consider how we each have been living through the pandemic, and how whimsy offers a way to experience as well as to write. We argue that whimsy is both relational and contextual, as well as political, but that its power lies in the aesthetic and the indirect. Whimsy can be disruptive and power-ful but it is a power that asserts itself gently, slowly, even arbitrarily.

Introduction: Waving at a passing train

In her 2015 paper, *Towards a Politics of Whimsy: Yarn Bombing in the City*, Joanna Mann argues for whimsy's capacity to prompt change. Impossible to grasp, always in excess, always in-between, whimsy, she argues, is "intrinsically joyous" (65), a way of becoming in the world that renders the familiar, the quotidian, indeterminate and mysterious and that calls the body into action. "Despite, or perhaps because of, its out-of-placeness", Mann writes, "whimsy can function as a powerful political force that is able to ... foster new ethical spaces and modes of political action" (65).

Katie, 16 December 2019

I'm driving home from work, along my usual route. The day has been filled with meetings, emails, plans for next year. As ever, I try to focus on academic writing and get consumed, instead, by admin. It consumes me, eats me whole, swallows my day. I'm thinking about this as I drive, winding along roads lined with summer trees. The route I take to get home from work includes a railway crossing. As I approach it, the lights flash and the barrier arm swings down. This happens often. I don't mind this pause in the journey. It makes me happy to see the train and to know that this city is getting more committed to public transport. I think about my own driving, and feel a little ashamed about the choices I make to get to work. A blue car is stopped in front of me, the only one between me and the train, which is now approaching the crossing, moving towards the city. As the train rushes closer, the driver of the blue car extends his arm out of the window and starts waving. He keeps waving and waving, arm extended to its full length, an insistent and enthusiastic wave. He waves to each carriage without stopping. He keeps waving and waving until the train is past. Until the lights and bells subside, until the pause is over and the day is resumed. Once I notice him waving I watch the train, each carriage filled with people going somewhere. And not one single person waves back. I watch the whole scene with a mixed sense of wonder (will he keep waving, why is he waving? who is he waving to?) and tension (will someone wave back? how long will he keep waving for?). I am answered soon enough: he kept waving for the whole passing of the train. No one waved back. At first, I feel a bit sad. Surely someone might have waved, returned his gesture, made a connection? But then I realise that the waving back doesn't matter; his waving was an action sent forth, a gesture that is not diminished by a lack of reciprocity. His waving didn't require any such obvious or spontaneous validation.

The wave is like a poem that we send out into the world and we don't know what response, if any, it will get. We don't know what effect, if any, it will have.

In this chapter, we think, write and play with notions of whimsy, drawing into our scrutiny and inquiry reflections on how whimsy intersects our everyday living and working. We follow whimsy in exploring ways of doing and being in the world, in the academy and in

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inquiry. We seek to catch up with how whimsy stretches us: whimsy as engaged, gritty, relational, political encounter, an ethico-onto-epistemological something-that-happens. Waving at a passing train from a car obliged to stop is relational, power-ful; a moment of potential contact offered into the busy-ness of an early-evening rush hour, a gesture whose effects are open; a summons into the unknown.

We could position this paper within substantive scholarly fields, for example as an argument within discourses about mental health and the potentialities of whimsy (e.g. Williams and Doessel, 2018). We could rehearse previous arguments about neoliberalism and the constraints of the academy and why we need whimsy especially right now, especially when we are locked down, locked out, and have restricted geographical possibilities (e.g. Davies et al, 2006). We could position whimsy in instrumental ways as 'important', 'useful', 'meeting a need', 'filling a gap'. We could, but we won't. We won't, because to attempt to do so misses whimsy, fails to pay attention. Whimsy resists being tied down to the logics of those kinds of argument.

Instead, we offer a text that attempts to pay due respect to whimsy's ontology and to what whimsy can teach us. We engage with writing that came to us between June 2019 and August 2020 as we were living and working (Katie in Auckland, New Zealand, Jonathan in Edinburgh, UK), and, until March 2020, when we were travelling; when travelling was possible, taken for granted, privileged, and when it was possible to be with others, go to cafés and bars, hug, leave our home cities. The writing also turns to how we each have been living through the COVID-19 pandemic, and its implications and politics. The chapter's writing moves between these times. The writing is exploratory, jarring, incommensurate; exchanges across continents, across chronological time and across time zones, as we search for whimsy and what it teaches us. We draw on writing from the fields of ethnography, poetic inquiry, and qualitative writing (Richardson, 2000, 2004; Lather, 2007), showing rather than telling what might be possible if we attend to whimsy in our writing.

Whimsy and what counts

Jonathan, June 2020

I wonder what counts as whimsical during a pandemic. Maybe not the cold, unwelcome breeze as I sit outside on this bench on a late mid-summer evening, nor the rare, obtrusive car rattling over the cobbles. Nor the nagging awareness of pain in my body. But maybe the grey underbelly of the clouds as they blow east overhead. Maybe the blackbird singing on a nearby roof, audible only when the car has passed. Maybe sitting here, being here, on this bench, my favourite city bench near home. Maybe writing here in this notebook.

Or maybe the show I watched earlier, the actors performing themselves being actors thwarted by the virus, rehearsing online a play whose rehearsals and performances have been cancelled; the impact on livelihoods, cultural life, life, lives, all, hinted at through the humour and pathos of their futile venture. Maybe singing 91st birthday greetings to Mum through my phone and the phone being held by her carer, Elsa, whom I have never met.

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Maybe Mum's face, happy with the surprise and confusion. Maybe the light drops of rain falling on me now. Maybe the pandemic quiet itself, this city stillness.

Katie, January 2020

Walking on the beach, on holiday, on the east coast of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is remote here, out of bounds. Off grid. There is 1 bar of service on my cell phone. If I walk around I can sometimes get 2, but it's inconsistent. Being on holiday feels whimsical. Writing about whimsy feels indulgent, like it could be purposeless. Like it could be tangential. Tangential to what? To the kind of writing I usually do: argumentative, certain, purposeful, political.

As I walk, I see a small, dried, star-like, circular plant – I guess it's a dried seed head – tumbling across the sand. I take a short video of it. The only visible thing moving on the beach, that I can see. That I notice. But the beach is, of course, full of life and movement and action. Holes in the sand signal creatures underneath; their breathe-holes. The waves move incessantly, rhythmically but unpredictably, crashing, moving up and back, across and awash, tumbling so that my small dog runs away.

Jonathan, February 2020

I'm travelling by train, south through Italy, a full day from Milan to Siracusa, Sicily, on my way to Malta for the 2020 European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Back in Edinburgh I have been feeling small, remote from myself; I have been tumbling, blown across the sand. The train spears south along the west coast, rocks and ocean staccato-glimpsed between tunnels.

I'm unwell. Not seriously. Well, yes, seriously, in that it's not funny, it's miserable. But not critically. Well, yes, 'critically' in the scholarly sense that it's throwing me into and against the material-discursive constructions of how the medical world characterises 'illness'. I read Arthur Frank again, having first read him at a distance 10 years ago, but now I'm in, I am, his text. He's writing about me, a wounded storyteller veering between the *recovery* and *chaos* narratives and mostly unable to access the *quest* narrative. So, let's say I'm unwell and it's critical, but it's not life-threatening. No, that's not right either: it's a threat to who I am, how I see myself. I tumble as the not-being-well arrives in waves, comes and goes, crashing upon me, unpredictable.

The journey south takes me through Florence and Rome, and along the west coast, the line hewn through rock and hugging beaches. I arrive in Siracusa late. Early next morning, I look for the train at Siracusa that will take me to Pozzallo and the ferry to Valletta. I wander the station, the information board directing me to a platform I can't find. After 15 minutes of fruitless searching I ask for guidance from the man staffing the desk, pointing at my ticket. He directs me to the back of the station, away from the main lines. I find a lone, abandoned carriage, its shell decorated – or defaced, depending upon your point of view – by the multiple vivid colours and swirls of spray-painted graffiti. I wonder why the authorities leave it there, why they haven't junked it. I'm early, so wait on a bench nearby. Another passenger arrives, and another. They pass me by and alight the abandoned carriage.

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When still others arrive and do the same, it becomes clear this decorated, abandoned carriage is not junk: it's my train. I jump on and, soon after, we leave. Hope is there, I sense, its life, movement and action in the surprising speed of a psychedelic train carriage; hope is alive, its breath brushing my cheek through open windows.

Whimsy may be something that surprises on the way home from work, like a man waving at a train; something not planned that interrupts the purpose of the evening, that makes us think about the futility of arbitrary practices. How such practices are imposed, insisted upon. It is awareness of the arbitrary practices of necessity. The whimsical interrupts our focus on the banal, the practical, the instrumental. Whimsy is the oblique, it is refusal, it is resistance to conforming. It's the graffiti-sprayed carriage whose value we don't see. It is responsiveness to that which is (apparently) invisible, the tumbling seed head we notice that calls us to that which we ignore. It's stopping where a steep, wide path curves right, to notice white butterflies that can barely be seen. It's the autumn sun, cool-warm on the skin. It is the thing out of place (a rose on the pavement, a magnolia inexplicably in full bloom in the winter grey); and/or unexpected – a bright red velvet coat, a downpour as you're getting out of the car without an umbrella; an art work a colleague slides under our door one morning (photos from an exhibition for her late husband) to say 'thank you for listening'. It is a surprise that makes us smile but, more than that, it's a surprise that throws the arbitrary into perspective. It does something. Whimsy is less that which is out of place and more what may be deeply in and of place, necessary, the necessary we fail (most times) to notice, and that reminds us of beauty, fragility, mortality, connection.

Whimsy is the poetic, not as tangential or as distraction, but the poetic as a reminder of what counts, of what matters.

This is not a poem

This is not a poem. This is not a poem as it has sentences, like this one; and capital letters; and full stops, like that first one back there after 'poem'; and this one about to appear, here. It even has semi-colons, as you can see. It can't be poem.

This is not a poem. This is rebel prose, its full lines, proper paragraphs and multiple prepositions taking a stand against the spare and the implicit. No hints, no nuance, no paring back when you read this. No hidden meanings here.

This is not a poem. It's not about feeling. Poems are about feeling, about the moving heart, the moved heart; about the body's depths, the blood coursing. They're about fire. Pain. Loss. Joy. Hope. Love. (Did you see that? The sentences shorten and, lo, the poetic appears.)

This is not a poem. It has sentences, capital letters, punctuation, is without hidden meanings, and is not about feeling. This is not a poem; it never will be. This is full prose. Delight, longing, desire, loss, love; none of these lies hidden between these lines. It's not, and never will be, a poem; its words, phrases, full sentences and

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plentiful punctuation marks will never be stuttering gestures of touch and glimpses of, hope for, what is possible.

Listening with whimsy

Katie, January 2020

For my own work, in school ethnography (e.g. Fitzpatrick, 2013), whimsy helps me to let go of the direct question, the focused inquiry. It lets me just be in the field (or whatever a research context might be called) and just be open to what's happening, what's not happening, what speaks, what might be surprising. Whimsy is actually everywhere if you are open to it (but not looking for it). I think of it rather as 'listening with your whimsy'. You can hear and attend to things that are there but which might be (almost) imperceptible.

Here is a recording of the ocean

you will hear the waves

Loud and insistent

A force of collision, resounding

dominating

answering the direct question

but, if you listen carefully

you can hear my breathing

and the tussock waving in the wind

If you listen with your whimsy

you can hear

the memory of oyster catchers flying overhead

a bee grazing a flower

the edge of a butterfly arc

the death that resides in each moment

the tail of the wind

It's easy, perhaps to listen for whimsy on holiday but what about when I'm researching, doing ethnographic work in school, caught up in the pressures of academia, schooling logics,

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systems that frame possibilities? What then? When I read back to my ethnographic writing in a school in 2016, I can sense whimsy there too:

I feel the deep dragging pull of the school timetable. The inflexibility of the day that my body rebels against. When the alarm goes off in the morning, I immediately start bargaining with myself, I try to make excuses and then castigate myself for such weakness. I remember this feeling as a teacher (not so much as a student); my body is recalling the ache of days on end of routine, the lethargy I felt at crossing the days off the calendar as they stretched endlessly through winter. It's not that I didn't enjoy teaching in high schools; I actually loved it, I was highly motivated and worked hard (too hard), but I always felt the routine, timetable and set-nature of the school day invoked a certain inertia. My body resists the endless stretch of time on the calendar and I start counting the days. Right now, I am sitting in a year 12 health education class and counting the weeks until the school holidays when I can re-embrace the flexible time I usually live as an academic. The funny thing is though, there are few expectations on me here as a researcher. Although all interactions are performative, I have little in the way of planned performance to enact here. And maybe that's part of the problem: my role is an ambivalent one and I don't feel very useful to the school on a day to day basis. I am hovering, lingering, asking questions and just hanging out and writing. I think if I had microphones on students, was measuring interactions or had a rubric for teaching and learning then it would be more obvious. I would have 'hard data' to present to the school. What I have so far are long, written reflections on classes, snatches of conversations, my thoughts and feelings about the school, and recorded research conversations. Last week someone asked me what I was finding. I just replied: 'it's too early to know'.

Germs

In the classrooms all I can think of is

*Germ*s

snot, body fluids, dried blood, spit

I get sick three times in two months

soaking up the germs, taking them into my body

Students ache their way to school, filled with flu

trudge-walking heavy cold corridors

trying to listen through headache haze

shivering in the back of the room

I imagine the germs on the surfaces that never get cleaned

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I can see them float in the humid heated air

I can smell them on the windows

Revisiting this makes me think about several things. First, that ethnographic methods are themselves whimsical. Or, they at least require a suspension of the organised, purposeful, and direct search for meaning. Ethnographic work requires us to be open, bored, uncertain, patient, enduring, responsive. It requires us to experience without assuming particular meanings. It is possible – even ideal – to undertake ethnographic work and not be really sure what you're looking for, what you're sensing, what might be experienced. It is common to feel off track, to assume what's happening isn't relevant, to feel lost. Lather (2007) describes getting lost as an ontological necessity, in moving toward ethnographic "research approaches that no longer confidently assume that we are 'in the know'" (p. 4). She suggests that researchers might purposely get lost "at the limits of representation" and engage in "a fruitful sense of dislocation in our knowledge projects" (p. 4). When I began the above ethnography, I was interested (I thought) in health education pedagogies in schools. I was interested in the curriculum and in student experiences. I never anticipated the sickness my own body would experience, how that would limit my willingness to be at school, how I might see schools in relation to physical health. I did feel lost doing ethnographic work, lost and unsure and bored and lethargic. Denzin (2015, p. 200) reminds us that "Meanings are always in motion, incomplete, partial, contradictory". Accepting this, seeking this, is whimsical practice.

Jonathan, 15 August, 2020

It's a Saturday. I've been alone all my day thus far. I have spoken with myself, had conversations with others within me, had text exchanges, written an email to a friend. I've listened to the news – the reimposed quarantine on travellers to parts of Europe, Auckland's extended lockdown, the thrashing of Barcelona in the remaining European Champions League games. An 8-2 loss to Bayern Munich, but with no one there to witness it in person, I wonder who cares. I try to care, I am open to the usual excitement, but find none.

Words have surrounded me today, have circulated within me, but I haven't spoken aloud to anyone, except to order coffee at Soderberg in nearby Stockbridge. I was wearing a face mask, the barista too. We could see only each other's eyes, skin creasing at our edges. The transaction was straightforward. I resented the wariness of each other that masks indicate.

I sat with my oat milk flat white and heard others' conversations, even if I didn't wish to, their voices in private exchanges carrying across the room to my perch at the window. My friend messaged me from Melbourne, telling me of the passing of her long-loved dog. Meanwhile she, along with everyone else there, is shut in. Locked down.

There have been words spoken around me and words offered to me as text; the air, my ears and eyes, have been full of words.

Katie writes about listening for whimsy. My quietness today (though not only today) is attuning me to listening for whimsy, but I hear none this morning. I have not found whimsy

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within. I have not found it in the silence. I have not found it in what lies beyond words – the faint hum of traffic in the distance, my neighbour's miniature fountain from outside my open window, the stillness of the trees. Except for this, perhaps. Writing now, these words here. Not the words themselves, nor what lies behind or within them, but how the act of writing lifts towards and beyond the ordinary, connecting with its life that we so often miss. How it catches hold of something passing that we hadn't seen, and maybe didn't want to see, were resisting.

Whimsy is remembering what it is to be alive, to be in the body, in the world, in love, in place, in appreciation, in the political and enraged: it is a happiness that also holds the impossibility of happiness: it is not a happiness naïve to power, to injustice, to violence and oppression. We listen with whimsy for what's ignored, rendered invisible, silenced.

Looking away to look more closely

Katie, Sunday August 16 2020

We are back in lockdown in Auckland. This is the second lockdown, the first was interminable but somewhat novel. This second one feels harder, more unfair, more wearing. I want to hide under the covers, ignore the steady stream of email telling us what to do, asking me what to do, requiring me to do something. I don't want to move my class online, I don't want to think about all the implications. I have no choice about either of these things. The situation requires some kind of response. The situation requires multiple, urgent responses. In the midst of the urgent and constant email stream, I notice that calls for special issue papers keep popping up. The special issues all have Covid themes. I read the descriptors with disinterest, admiring those who seem to be able to pivot so quickly, to think through and write about what such a crisis might mean for their scholarship. But I feel a deep lethargy, I don't want to write about the virus and what it means, I don't want to think of this as an opportunity. Not yet.

So, now I go walking in the city, in my local neighbourhood. One of my dogs is with me and people want to stop to pat him. I can tell they want to as they approach and then they remember – lockdown – and they pull away, step away, step aside. Sometimes they smile. The shops are all closed but the street is busier almost than usual. Despite it being winter, the sun is shining and the day is warm. People are out walking, out with kids, out with dogs, out on bikes. The city feels alive with moving creatures, alive with people and birds and dogs. Some cafés are selling takeaway coffee and food. People wait outside patiently in the sun, wearing masks, and I wonder how they will drink the coffee with the mask. What kind of negotiation they will have to do between coffee cup, mask, and dog lead. What kind of bargain between intimacy and distance. What kind of balance between fear and solitude and action. No one is sick. No one dares sneeze or sniff or shiver in public now.

Jonathan, February 2020

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Back home from Malta, one Sunday I walk back along the long lower beach at North Berwick as it curves west to the edge of the town and harbour. I am slow, breathing deep, in the chill February air, gloved hands in pockets, head down in the wind. At least the sun is out. I step aside from the remains of a washed-up crab and reach the low stone wall of the tidal pool, close to the town. The narrow wall heads out to sea a few metres before it right-angles left, parallel to the beach, some distance before another left turn to complete the rectangle.

The tide is on its way in, the waves not yet beginning to lap into the pool. A minute and some twenty tentative paces later, I'm standing on the long far wall with my back to the still, numbing waters and looking out across the waves toward Bass Rock, a volcanic plug standing 100 feet high in the Firth of Forth. The Rock has been home to hermits and prisoners, has a well, battlements, and a chapel, and plays host to 150,000 northern gannets. Its gaol was notorious in the 17th century as the destination for political and religious prisoners such as the Scottish Covenanters.

Looking out at the rock, the water rising towards where I am standing, I am grateful for what I read now as the whimsy of those who built this pool last century. To contemplate a swim in the Scottish North Sea is out of place, perhaps, but in place at least as a call to walk its walls a few metres out to sea so a middle-aged man can imagine himself, for a moment, a streamlined, swooping gannet, at ease in its body.

Katie, January 2020

I go running along the path that has been built for bikes. It follows the coast line, overlooks the sea in places and dives into the tussock-covered dunes in others. It is hot on the path. As I run up a small hill, breathing hard, I come across a structure. It is made of driftwood and is a kind of chair with a wooden canopy. It overlooks the water, stares out to sea like a sentry. It holds a place, at once natural and seemingly of the dunes and the sea and the coast. But also, at once, clearly interventionist. An echo of peopled intervention. No, a collaboration between the beach and those who visit or perhaps live there. A monument to the intersection of the driftwood, the dunes and their outlook, the hands that collected and assembled a structure, the canvas of the ocean. And me, as I run and construct a kind of meaning from how the chair stares out to the sea, out toward Whakaari – the volcanic island in the distance that is visible from this beach; the scene of a tragedy only a few weeks back when her eruptions caused multiple deaths - who is blowing smoke into the air. The driftwood chair seems like a witness, marking the moment of the tragic, calling to the sea and the air and connecting me, as I run, to the dunes, the sky, the island, the deaths. It is a whimsical structure, evoking the earth's measured beat. A call for us all to witness and co-habitate. My body feels this as I run and I take it with me, through the days that follow and back now to my laptop and this writing. And this moment layers across and between the weeks – the deaths on Whakaari, my running, this writing and telling. I read the driftwood structure as whimsical – out of place but of the place at the same time – signalling to nothing in particular necessarily, and so, to something. It makes me think about how, sometimes, we can see things more clearly when we look at them indirectly. Looking away to look more closely, looking askance, like looking across the cold North Sea and being caught by the elegance and arcs of the sea-birds. Whimsy can be found that way, perhaps; we need to be open to it but not looking directly.

Jonathan, January 2020

In my work – writing as inquiry, creative-relational inquiry (e.g. Wyatt, 2019) – the notion of whimsy invites, permits, articulates, catches hold of, the possibility of surprise, the chance of being taken. I might be writing on a morning like this one at a gym, typing on my phone between sets, and something might happen. It might not, but it might. Perhaps; if I'm lucky; if I listen with whimsy, my thumbs on my ancient phone. Whimsical inquiry may be inquiry that stays open to not knowing, open to its imagination, just open, letting go. It's Inquiry that resists the staid rationalism of the academy. Inquiry whose "ways of operating [are] more like those of an artist, rather than of [those] who are always haunted by an outmoded ideal of scientificity." (Guattari, 2000, 35)

There's a class every morning in the gym at this time. Today's is loud, with an incessant soundtrack and staccato shouts of encouragement. Out of sight behind the half-walls, the amplified voice wanting more seems incongruous, intrusive, the main body of the gym almost yogic. Here the music is gentle, the voices quiet, and the movements slow. There are about fifteen of us here amongst the free weights. A man and a woman training together, concentrating over deadlifts. A woman on her own at one of the racks, lifting a heavy bar overhead. A man with his personal trainer, just talking it would seem. Otherwise, it's what I take to be men, like me, training alone; each of us intent, focused, here for our own purposes. Bettering ourselves. Forgetting ourselves. Recovering ourselves. Engaged, each, in our own struggles or joys. Or something else, something less obvious, something outside clichéd narratives of men in gyms lifting weights. Something particular to each of us working with and against these stories we tell. Something not available to us, out of awareness.

Alone, I write to the beat of an unseen class

and its calls for more

I write amongst the dropping of weights,

like muffled bells tolling with relief,

and weighted balls flung to the floor,

amongst the cheers and slapped hands,

and the cries of success

Alone, I rest, and write, eyes open, not looking,

breathing, and find not the striving, the strain, and the effort

but the tenderness of words written in held breaths

in the silk of muscle under skin

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in how the body can hold its strength in the extension

and feel a poem for you – there –

as it lets go

Endings

In this chapter, we have attempted to show whimsy, as well as talk about whimsy. By writing our way into whimsy – listening for it in our writings and our experiences - we have looked indirectly at whimsy, suggesting that it is there, perhaps, in the background, in the body, in comparison and in-between. As a result, we have discovered in and through this writing that whimsy can be many things. It doesn't have to be overt like the yarn-bombing in Mann's (2015) article; it can be found in the juxtaposition of past and current writing, in the drive home from work, and in the banal everyday act of walking the dog with a mask on. We are struck by how there is whimsy in the temporal comparisons of our writings pre-and-post-COVID-19. How effortless it was to travel and holiday and be at the beach not so long ago, before we adopted masks and distancing and new kinds of restriction. Whimsy can be found in the new ways we have had to negotiate intimacy and distance, connection and solitude. Whimsy is there in the everyday. It can be expressed or sought in writing or can appear indirectly like someone inexplicably waving to a passing train, like writing a poem at the gym, like the graffiti on a railway carriage, or a driftwood sculpture on a remote beach. Whimsy reminds us of the relational and contextual, but it points there aesthetically and indirectly. Whimsy can be disruptive and power-ful but it is a power that asserts itself gently, slowly, even arbitrarily. Nevertheless, it evokes emotion and can connect with desire, liveliness, discovery, and intensities of feeling.

Whimsy is identifiable in ethnographic writing practices, especially those that seek openness and uncertainty, and those that embrace getting lost. In this chapter, we have attempted to engage a "nonlinear, many-layered textuality" (Lather, 2007, p. 87) by working with temporality across prose as well as poetic forms of inquiry (Richardson, 2000, 2004). A little like poetry, whimsy does seem to assert itself in writing, experience and research if we allow it, if we invite it. When we attend to the pause, there it is. Bauman (2002) argues that poets have a duty to uncover that which is there but hidden behind the walls of the obvious; the truths that might be underneath what we all believe to be true. "The poet" he argues "must refuse to serve up truths known beforehand and well-worn truths already 'obvious' because they have been brought to the surface and left floating there....those truths are not this 'something hidden' that the poet is called to uncover; they are, rather, parts of the wall that the poet's mission is to crush" (p. 359). We wonder if listening with whimsy allows us to see or hear beyond the accepted everyday meanings and accepted truths, to those that are present but which may be missed. Listening and writing with whimsy might help us to attend to the invisible in the everyday. The pause that we have gained from being locked down has enabled a break from the barrage of stress, pressure and busyness. While the lockdowns all around the world have certainly created other stressors (loneliness, distance, fear, economic deprivation) there has also been relief. An excuse to stop. Traffic has halted

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in many cities and industrial noise and bustle have ceased. As the cities stopped, other things have become apparent. In Auckland, native birds came back in numbers into the city; people on bikes proliferated, and teddy bears appeared in the windows of houses as a game for children. Some days the pause gave us permission to turn off email, to walk away. The lockdown has created a pause where it's possible to look at the obscure, to notice the small, to notice the insignificant and the undemanding. To hear the birdsong, to connect in different ways. Whimsy is, perhaps, a kind of connection. Whimsy is an attention to the beautiful in the banal; an attention to the minutiae in the bustle of life.

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