

Picturing the Graig: a rich portrait of the construction of loss and remembrance

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Abstract

This paper tells stories from the unfolding of my life through descriptions of my physical and emotional connection to people, place and landscape. I show how I use rich portraiture (Day 2014) to explore loss and identity. I describe the process of making a rich portrait and link this to portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997) and a/r/tography (Springgay et al 2005). Ultimately, this describes an evolving rather than a finished piece.

I have been thinking/making/writing this piece for four years. There is something intrinsically systemic about how time perturbs and connects events. Narratives unfold and fold back on themselves in recursive patterns to create meanings, re-shape memories and point toward future stories.

A beginning

My mother died in October 2013. She never knew that my partner, Gaby, had bowel cancer and that for the previous six months we had been struggling with the shock of the diagnosis, uncertainty about the future, and the grinding effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Our elderly cat, Juno, died that year too, while Juno's daughter, Polly, lost an eye, became progressively blind and then died. I missed my mother's death by thirty minutes, because I was with the vet who was removing the stitches that had closed Polly's empty eye socket. It was a difficult and messy time; tangled clots of emotions. Feelings surged, sucked, and crashed, leaving me gasping for breath; like the time I got caught in a riptide and almost drowned.

I wrote and delivered the eulogies at my mother's funeral and at her memorial service a few months later. She grew up in South Wales and her family home *Graig-y-pâl*, in the village of Glais, is a very special place for me. My mother was a keen writer and I tried to incorporate her voice in my eulogy through pieces of her own: poems, journal entries and reminiscences of her childhood in Wales and her time in Bletchley Park (Station X) during the war. I wanted to write more but wasn't sure how or where to begin.

In July 2014, I went to an opening event at the Peltz Gallery in London. My friend Rosy Martin was showing four pieces: two films, a set of photographs (*Acts of Reparation*) and a silk hanging printed with images (*In Situ*). The show, *Family Ties: Re-framing Memory*, was created by the Family Ties Network (2017) – “a research group of artists, filmmakers and writers who explore memory, space, place and the family in photography and moving image. Through events, conferences, exhibitions and publications, they aim to investigate a range of issues, encompassing the visual representation of family memories, the family album, oral history, bereavement, displacement, estrangement and the family home.”



Sitting on top of the Graig

Rosy spoke about *re-enactment phototherapy*, the collaborative therapeutic process through which she dressed as each of her parents, wearing their clothes and posing as them in the house in which they lived for many years until their deaths (Martin 2012). This reimagining and exploration of identity and relationship was extraordinarily moving. I was reminded of *sculpting* (Satir 1967) and *enactment* (Minuchin and Fishman 1981). As I listened to Rosy I was seized with the idea of making a series of works of my own which connected and developed my relationship with the place where my mother grew up and the landscape it inhabits. *The Graig* rises above *Graig-y-pâl* and is the mountain that my grandfather gave to my grandmother as a wedding present, and where I spent the most magical days of my childhood.

I began to visualise *the Graig series*: drawings, paintings and texts which create a sense of embodied resonance.

I read through my mother’s notebooks. In the front of one of the books are two black and white photographs lying loose: my grandparents standing on the lawn of *Graig-y-pâl* with the Graig in the background, and a young woman (my mother or one of her sisters) sitting on a projecting rock at the top of the Graig swinging her legs out over the drop below. I feel the place run through my veins, spreading out like a network of points of connection. I take a slow in-breath. Time and memory coalesce.

Among my mother’s things, I find a leather-bound book with plain pages. Because she loved writing I had given it to her one year as a present, but she never used it; she continued to write in old half-used school exercise books. Her frugality developed during the war and never left her. Now I take back the book as her gift to

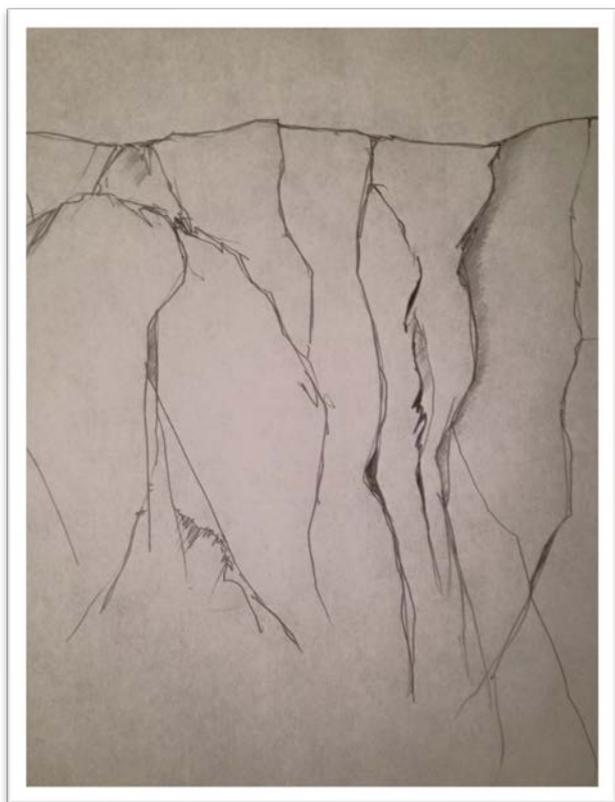


Gran and Grandpa in Graig-y-pâl

me and begin to write in it – the story of this project.

I draw from felt and embodied memory. I draw with a sureness and purpose. I talk about plans for trips to South Wales and I gather materials. I phone my mother's cousin Elaine, who still lives in the village, and tell her about my project.

My sister and I set a date for the summer to scatter our mother's ashes on the Graig. The ashes of my grandparents and my mother's two sisters are already there. But I don't tell my sister about my project. It's just too personal. I don't know how she feels about the Graig. I don't know how to ask or how to talk about these ideas without being overwhelmed. She's just that bit younger than me, I don't know *how* she remembers things.



I feel the cragginess of the rock, the splits and the crevices. The way the sky was so wide above the quarry face. I remember the heather, bracken and bilberries on the top; a sea of green and purple. The way the skylarks trembled high up in the blue air. Lying on a big, flat rock with my arms outstretched, I had, for the first time, a sense that my body resonated with the landscape, was part of it.

Mountains will continue to do this to me for the rest of my life and will bring me an inexplicable peace I yearn for constantly.

I Google *Graig-y-pâl* and find a website about mountaineering and climbing. I download photos of rocks that are very familiar, they feel right, they resonate. There is a map too – my body stretches until I feel it overlaid on the contour lines. Google Street View takes me up the mountain road; my centre drops away.

Sylvia Wilson (2002, p.2) quotes Angela Baker writing, “that the grieving and art making processes are interwoven as they both involve ‘losses and creation, destruction and reconstruction, and a reformulating of meaning and patterning’ (1998, p.87).”

I draw on my own development of Rich Portraiture as a way of researching into this thing that I don't know how to say in language. I have a strong sense that I can *feel* my relationship with the Graig in a bodily sense – its depth, scope and complexity – but that I can't describe it in words. I wonder if this is partly because I was a child when my grandparents left South Wales. My grandfather had a stroke, and my grandparents were forced to sell *Graig-y-pâl* because they could no longer manage. I remember the constant bonfires in the orchard when we stayed there that last time; my mother and her sister sorting through the house; piles of paper burning, smoke rising into the air like ghosts.

This is my mother's voice: *Our parents went on holidays abroad and then we would be packed off to our grandmother's house in the country. We loved staying there and rejoiced when in 1931 we moved there ourselves. Both our parents came from this village; father's father combined the roles of village blacksmith and village postmaster and farmed a smallholding; mother's father had made a*

fortune in the nineteen hundreds owning collieries and brick works and lost it in the depression of the twenties and we never realised that we had moved into his house after his death so my grandmother would not lose her home.

It was the 1950s. We would travel down to South Wales by car overnight; my parents sharing the driving, my sister and me wrapped up in blankets, asleep in the back of the car. Sometimes we travelled during the day on the Pullman steam train from Paddington station.

When we arrived, Gran would come out to meet us. The side of the house led to the kitchen door and we always went in that way. The paved side way was cool and the air was moist. There was a sound of constant running water from the *pistyll* or water spout that dropped into a tiled catchment drain surrounded by ferns; mountain water piped down from higher up the valley. There was a big, round, dark blue jug of spring water sitting in the kitchen. Gran would sit outside shelling peas and rinsing potatoes under the *pistyll*. I can still conjure up the smells and sounds and the faint echo created by the stones and I am transported there in an instant. The stone-flagged kitchen had a large double Aga and a scary ironing machine. My grandmother kept geese in the orchard up beyond the wash-house. They were aggressive and noisy, and Gran controlled them with a stick; they often chased us, and one of them once bit my sister on the thigh, leaving the imprint of its beak.

The Graig, like many Welsh mountains, is more of a hill. There are two stone quarries cut into one side, which are what interest the climbers. I imagine projecting images of my mother, her parents and her sisters, onto the flat stones of the quarry face.

In summer 2007, we scatter the ashes of my mother's younger sister Joy and her husband Dai. Theirs was a double funeral; Joy was found dead on Christmas Day, Dai died at New Year. Two of their grandchildren (Lucy and Charlie) climb one of the big stones and leave flowers picked from Elaine's garden on the top. My cousin, Steve, mixes the ashes and scatters them round the base.

We walk on up the mountain road together, much as we did as children fifty years ago.

There are a dozen of us: Steve and his two brothers; Simon, who is older, and younger Michael, their wives and children, my cousin Clare and her husband, my mother's cousin Elaine, my partner Gaby – three generations.

The dappled light and the twisting, sessile oak wood is unchanged; it is as if no time has passed at all. As I write this, I realise that now, ten years later, four of the group who were there have advanced cancer; every generation is represented, and all of us are deeply affected.



Rich Portraiture

When I decided to undertake the professional doctorate in systemic practice, I started drawing. Scott-Hoy (2003) describes how she needed to draw in order to do research, and I felt the same way. I wanted to find a way of using this physical and visual way of responding to ideas as part of my new research method.

Rich portraiture (Day 2014) brings together the thick, detailed narratives of the work of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) and augments them with arts research methods (Knowles and Cole 2008; Leavy 2009) and performance ethnography (Denzin 2003). My use of the word “rich” in rich portraiture comes partly from the systems theory tool “rich pictures” (Checkland 2000; Checkland and Scholes 1990; Cushman and Venters 2004) but also references thick (rich) description (Geertz 1973; Ponterotto 2006; Ryle 1971) and rich stories (Roberts 1994; White 1991; White and Epston 1990).

Rich pictures are a way of thinking creatively about, and understanding, complex problems or situations. They incorporate text, images, doodles and drawings and can be produced by an individual or a group. The aim of a rich picture is to explore and understand something rather than to communicate to others. The Open University teaching module on rich pictures has an animated rich picture which describes the process as starting with “exploring ideas you haven’t had yet”, then moving from messy confusion to a group of themes to explore (Open University).

When I was introduced to rich pictures by a friend, the idea sounded very exciting. But the examples of rich pictures I found were visually disappointing. I wanted my method to be rich in a number of ways. I did not want it to look thin, flat or monochrome. I wanted to bring a textural richness that was not just about words and narrative, but was also performative and colourful. Here I mean ‘colourful’ as in a richly textured and complex performance, rather than necessarily having to incorporate pigments, although that is my own preferred medium. I wanted the work to have artistic merit and beauty.

I call my method *rich portraiture* because it belongs to the tradition and methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis 1997), while also being an exploration in which colour, form and texture combine with texts. However, locating it within arts research methodologies or arts-based research practices means the method also has a strong relationship with the practice of a/r/tography (Springgay et al 2005).

A rich portrait combines narrative textual portraits with arts-based performance. Like portraiture, rich portraits are constructed from within the relationship between the portraitist and the subject of the portrait. In this sense, rich portraits are both relational and dialogical.

A/r/tography combines text with visual imagery, which seems to make it specifically about visual art, rather than the arts more generally. This fits well with how I have developed my particular way of researching because I include text in my paintings, but it limits the method to visual artists. Rich portraiture is not limited by the ability to make visual images. Arts-based research practices incorporate a wide range of arenas in which performative inquiry can take place: poetry, video, music, textiles, drama, performance, photography (as in re-enactment phototherapy).

O’Riley (2011) suggests that the important contribution art makes to research is one of incompleteness, what he calls ‘provisionality’: art is always waiting to interact with the viewer in order to extend its function and create new meanings in that dialogue. Art privileges the idea of open-endedness, of a continuing unfolding of meaning. Ingold (2011, p.198) argues that written

texts, painting, drawing and walking through the landscape are all equally valid and, “are but outward, sensible forms that give shape to the inner generative impulse that is life itself”. Dewey (1934) describes art as being yet another way in which the social and political landscape manifests itself. He uses the metaphor of mountains in a landscape, with the arts being the peaks. Dewey is not saying that the arts are more elevated than the rest of the landscape, but that they are an inseparable and integral part of the unfolding contours and resonant with the underlying geography. Art reflects life. It is not better; it just *is*.

A rich portrait is invited, compelled by the subject. In this instance I am compelled by my need to explore my own personal stories, relationships and losses as well as being struck by the parallels with my mother’s slow loss and disintegration of identity caused by dementia. In the Graig series, I hope to perform the reconnection and re-establishing of the memories and identity which relentlessly ebbed away from her. I return to Michael White’s (1988) paper, *Saying hello again: the incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief*. I realise that strangely this is not only about the death of my mother but, more significantly, the loss of my relationship with the Graig and the landscape that was so important to me.

A way forward

Among a pile of old black and white photographs, I find one which shows the Graig in the distance. I haven’t seen it from this perspective for over half a century. Although the image is rather blurred I start drawing some of what I can see. I have an odd feeling of familiarity and I go back to the sketches I have been doing over the last few months. I compare the previous drawings with the one I have just completed: they are strikingly similar.

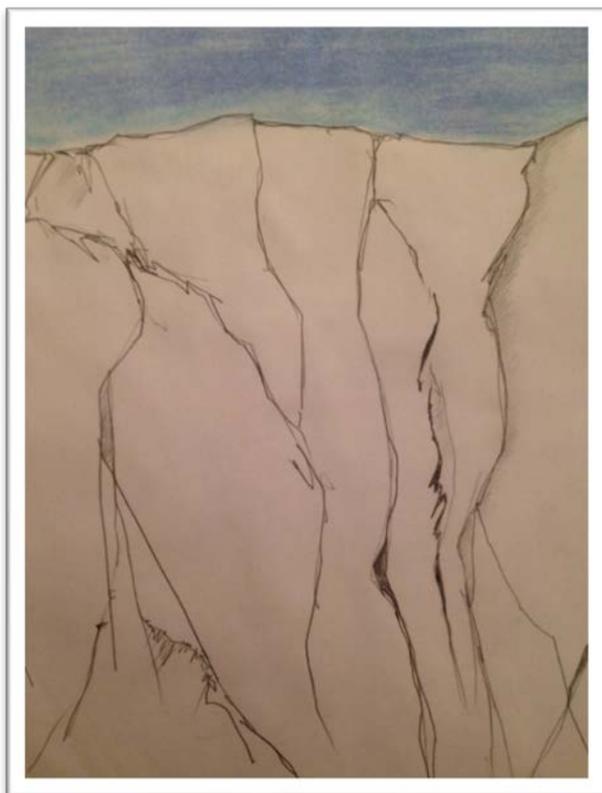


Image 1 - imagination 1

I draw to find a way back into a relationship that is important to me on many levels. This is just the beginning of the research process, which I call rich portraiture.

However, I also think of this approach as having a practical and clinical application in the therapy room. It is about the nature and variety of the stories we tell about ourselves: different ways of creating and stitching together, through the various activities of story-making, the patchwork of stories lived, untold, unheard, unknown, and told (Pearce & Pearce 1998). A way of communicating stories in more than words, of increasing their punctum - the word Barthes (1980) uses to describe the photographic image that hits us, and the ability of stories to move us by incorporating methods which are visual and performative.

Like my two similar drawings - the first of which I thought was just a repetitive doodle, and the second done from a photograph of the Graig - stories told in the therapy room may have many multi-layered connections which only emerge when they are seen in relationship to one another.

Stories stand together like a family sculpt and speak from their particular position, or move and change in relation to the words and movements performed in the room.

Interlude

In February I am travelling back to London from the Lake District; reconnecting with other systemic practitioners at the University of Bedfordshire winter school. I hold Gail Simon's (2011) words about writing in my mind. It is vital for me to write in a way that incorporates movement into the text. I need my writing to be alive and living, if it is to open up and explore this personal resonance with landscape and stone. But I also narrate by image-making: pen, pencil, paint, ink and paper. Wales and painting require sun, or at least for it not to be pouring with rain. This means waiting until the weather is warmer. In March, Gaby has surgery and my trip has to be postponed. I show my sister what I've been writing and she confirms that she doesn't have the same relationship as I do with the Graig and doesn't remember those final days. She thinks it's partly that she is younger and partly that I am a painter.

I look forward to completing the Graig series and to being able to work en plein air but this will have to wait. However, I continue with the preparation work: the reading, drawing and writing. I have my 65th birthday and retire from my job in the NHS. I start life drawing, and book onto courses in digital photography and landscape painting. I feel the next stage of my life opening up in front of me and beckoning me forward.

A change in direction

In June 2015 Gaby's cancer comes back, aggressively and without warning. I hear the news sitting on the double bed of the guesthouse I have booked for the trip to Wales to scatter my mother's ashes. Gaby hadn't been well enough to come with me, and is in hospital in London. She has to tell me that she may be going to die quite soon. I decide not to tell my sister or the rest of the family. We are scattering the ashes the following day. I am going to read a poem up on the Graig. I don't want to confuse the focus of the occasion. I tell my cousin and her husband because they are staying in the guesthouse with me. I ask them to look out for me. As usual for Wales, it is pouring with rain. We walk up to the far field where my mother used to walk with Dinah, her black labrador. I read the poem and say a few words. We drink champagne and toast her. A skylark sings in the high air. I pick up two stones from the Graig. I give one to my sister and take the other home with me.

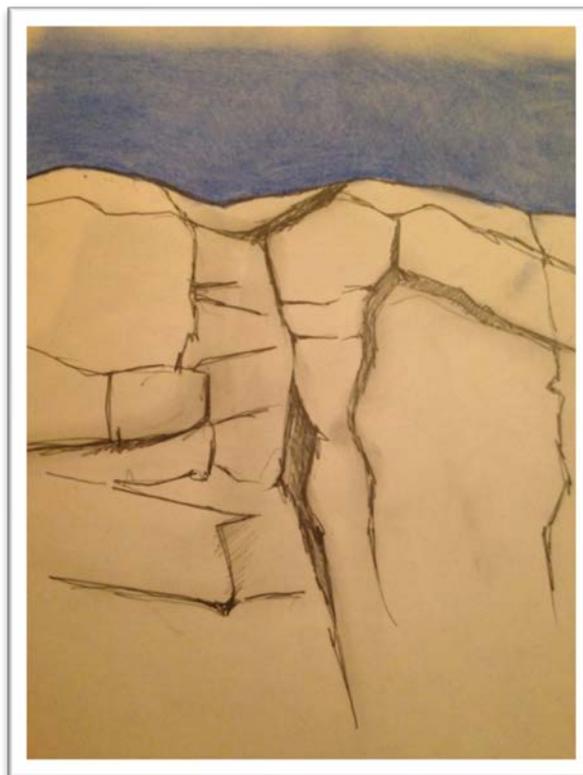


Image 2 – from a photograph 1

Now I don't know what direction to go in. The yearning for Wales and the Graig is taken over by what is happening here and now. Gaby's treatment begins, and we enter a phase in which the abnormal quickly becomes normal. I learn to do dressings and disconnect chemotherapy lines, and just carry on as if nothing has changed; but everything has changed.

Opportunities

As the narrator in Dylan Thomas's play *Under Milk Wood* says, *Time passes. Listen. Time passes.* (1954, p.4) – and I am astonished to find that almost two years have gone by. Gaby's cancer had retreated in the face of targeted treatment with a monoclonal antibody, but it looks now as if it is beginning to act up again. I receive a telephone call from Elaine, my mother's cousin. She tells me that she is about to reach 90, and is having a birthday party in Glais the following weekend; she doesn't really expect me to come. To my surprise, I locate a flat where I can stay, opposite the gates of *Graig-y- pâl*. I seize the moment and drive down to Wales on the Friday. I feel extraordinarily excited, in a rather feverish way.

The next morning I set off up the Graig with my sketchbooks and materials in a rucksack. The woods are wet but it isn't raining. I try to get up to the quarry face but there are so many trees. When I was a child, this area was open ground covered in heather and boulders. Now it is thick with saplings and slippery undergrowth, which



masks the stones and crevices underneath. I make myself a thumb-stick from a sapling; a stout staff with a V-shape at the top, where my thumb grips for support. It is all much steeper and more treacherous than I remember. I clamber up using my thumb-stick to probe for holes, grabbing onto the saplings to lever myself up the sharp slope. I wonder if this enterprise is at all sensible but I can see, if I don't do it now, the whole area will soon become invisible; the leaves will start to open and all will be hidden.

I slip several times on the wet, mossy surface. Each time I wonder about my safety (and sanity) – but I'm only a short distance from the road and I have my phone. Finally, I am close enough to see some of the quarry face. I wedge myself between two trees to stop myself falling and do some rather hasty sketching. I am wet through, my face is scratched and muddy, but I have a real sense of achievement.



I slide back down, it seems a safer course of action, but I get even wetter. Finally, I reach the road. This is my only chance to walk onto the top of the Graig, because I have to be at the party soon and it's going to rain tomorrow. I take photos for Lucy, my cousin Steve's daughter, of the big rock near the road and post them on Facebook. She has asked me to say hello to her grandparents, Joy and Dai.

It was Lucy who climbed the rock and laid flowers from Elaine's garden at the top, in their memory.

Coming home

I climb further up the Graig until I reach the big, flat rock at the top, which looks out over the valley. I take off my rucksack and rest my thumb-stick between the stones. I lie down on the rock, on my back, stretch out and feel the moment where the earth touches the sky. I am connected to the place once again through this punctuation and physical enactment of our relationship. This is how it was fifty-seven years ago; nothing has changed; everything has changed. But amidst the trauma, loss and grief, there is continuity and connectedness and growth. I can see a way forward and this piece of writing performs the beginning.



Afterword

I email everyone whose name I have mentioned, or whose photograph I have included, sending them my writing and asking for their consent to publish this piece in its current form. And new and

unexpected joint email conversations unfold. I'm not sure that I had thought about how our different stories and experiences would coordinate together, or the degree to which my story would engage my family and move them to tears.

I receive one email from someone I hadn't written to. Elaine had not been able to open the attachment, so had forwarded my email to one of her daughters who wrote to me about her own response to my piece.

"I could identify with all that you wrote and it provoked in me an emotional response that I always have when I walk the Graig. It's called *Hiraeth* in Welsh (n) a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for lost places in your past."

This time the tears are mine; they are for reconnection and relationship, and a shared experience and a naming of *hiraeth*.

As John Shotter writes in his final book (2016, p.72),

"... it is a kind of thinking *from within* a particular flowing circumstance in which we open ourselves up to being 'moved' by that flow. Thus, an engaged encounter of this kind is not simply a matter of 'seeing' of objects, for what is sensed is in fact invisible; nor is it an interpretation (a representation), for it arises directly and immediately in the course of one's encounter with an other's expressions; neither is it merely a feeling, for it carries with it as it unfolds a bodily sense of the possibilities for responsive action in relation to one's momentary placement, position, or orientation in the present interaction."

As always, for me, Richard Long the artist brings things together as he comments on his engagement with the landscape in a film made to accompany his 2017 exhibition *Earth Sky* at Houghton Hall in Norfolk.

"My work is really a self-portrait: it is about my own physical engagement with the world ... To walk across a country is both a measure of the place – its size, shape, terrain – and also of myself."

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