Every Time You Close Your Eyes

Pulling The Trigger: Writing in the Aftermath

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Part Two: Exegesis

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Introduction

In this exegetical essay I will examine the process and challenges involved in approaching my creative work *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*, including both my research and influences. My creative work takes the form of a long narrative poem in two parts, dealing with scenes and characters linked by historical events. My poem is set in New York City and centres around the two major blackouts of 1977 and 2003 and their ensuing impacts on a changing city.

I decided early on to label my creative work a ‘long narrative poem’. Poetry is the form that I am the most comfortable writing, having previously written two poetry collections. A long narrative piece made up of individual poems was a form that I hadn’t attempted before, though certain poems in my published works *Ambulances & Dreamers* and *Urban Squeeze* contain long poems that create a story. When I realised that I wanted to tell a story set during both blackouts, it was natural to choose poetry as the form. I like to play with silences and the way words are set out on the page and I feel these spatial structures sit less comfortably in a novel and are, for me, best achieved in poetic form. I began this project confident that *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* would not have the same sense of play, ambiguity and style if it were written any other way. However, there was much about the project that was new and challenging to me, primarily the task of building from short, stand alone poems into a coherent long poem structure.

Catherine Addison, in her essay ‘The Verse Novel as Genre: Contradiction or Hybrid?’ writes that, ‘The existence of a specific genre called “verse novel” may be challenged. Narrative poetry is one of the oldest genres in the world, and all texts labeled “novels in verse” fit comfortably into it’ (541). She describes ‘verse novel’ as a term applied by publishers to increase readership and instead embraces the more universal term long poem
My long poem *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* does follow a traditional narrative style – there is a clear beginning and end. Also, the character arc and objectives are clearly defined just as in the traditional novel form. Further, the language offers a realistic representation of the time and space in which the characters find themselves. Because the primary challenge for me as a poet was the length and depth of this piece, I decided to draw on works that I felt achieved a similar narrative structure or aim, regardless of form. Here, it is contemporary novels, particularly the novels of Ian McEwan and Haruki Murakami, which have been sources of inspiration and driving forces for my creative work, and in particular, my drive to embrace a more narrative form within my poetic structures. As both of these authors commonly use physical or environmental triggers as sources to propel their narratives forward, I found a study of their methods was more useful to my work than simply confining myself to narratives defined as conforming to a specific form – the ‘verse novel.’

As such, this essay will not be a discussion of form or genre. It will instead focus on aspects of my creative process that relate to the development of narratives and character development and the challenges and tools I encountered as I worked to develop an effective and coherent long narrative poem. As Dorothy Porter mixes crime fiction (*The Monkey's Mask, El Dorado*) with poetry, I mix with my own poetry with both the popular romantic fiction used by Murakami and the literary (and often political) fiction used by McEwan.

I will discuss the initial research process and my observations about New York and the blackouts that feature in my work. To situate this discussion, I will set the scene with my research about New York City in 1977, the setting of Part One of my creative work. I will
also explore examples of public consciousness and the political state of the world post-September 11, 2001 – the setting of Part Two of my creative work. I will draw on my research about New York City, in particular, the major blackouts of both 1977 and 2003. The influence of this research on my own fictional account of both events will also be detailed.

I will then move on to a more detailed discussion of how Ian McEwan and Haruki Murakami use major activators such as disasters, war protests and acts of thuggery, as well as smaller triggers such as an evocative song or a poem to advance plot, to comment on society and to reveal character. In this essay I use the term ‘triggers’ not in any theoretical sense, but simply to describe physical or environmental events that force characters on a narrative path. I will also explore the ways these triggers function in my long poem and what I have learned about the development of narrative, showing how the two aforementioned novelists have influenced my own writing through comparisons, direct contrasts and parallels. I will also argue that along with the initial trigger – a 2003 blackout of the US east coast – the events of September 11, 2001 also function as an ‘off-stage’ trigger to the events and attitudes explored in my work.

McEwan uses triggers such as a hot air balloon crash (Enduring Love) or an airplane disaster (Saturday) to reveal the world in which he lives. Murakami uses triggers such as the Beatles’ song ‘Norwegian Wood’ to take the narrative back to Japan in the late 1960s, a time of social unrest. In a similar vein, in my creative work I use the power cuts in two distinctive eras of history to reveal not only the wants and needs of major characters, but also the public consciousness of New York City before and after September 11, 2001 and the ways in which this event has necessarily influenced my interpretation and representation of the city in my long poem.
Chapter 1: New York City in 1977 and 2003

New York City has experienced two major blackouts in the past thirty years – in the summers of 1977 and 2003 – pre and post the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. The poems in my creative work *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* explore collective reactions and human connections made in the wake of unusual circumstances. Divided into parts one and two, the first part deals with the social unrest of 1977, and the relationship between Rose, a young single mother, and her nine year-old son, Alex. Part Two is set in 2003, again against the backdrop of a power cut, but this time in a city changed dramatically. Still featuring Rose, Part Two has more of a focus on Alex and his journey from his Manhattan office space, over the Brooklyn Bridge to his apartment. In this chapter I’ll provide an overview of the blackouts, my research on them, and the way they are juxtaposed in my creative work. In each case, they function as one of a number of triggers – a theme I will explore in following chapters. I will also describe aspects of my research regarding the city further – the people, the subway and the Brooklyn Bridge and outline changes in them over the periods I am concerned with. My research process and methods for developing my knowledge of the city will also be discussed.

1.1 No Lights, Big City

Part Two of my long poem is constructed around a journey home. Alex, the main character wants to get home, and there are certain obstacles that get in his way. This is the basic premise of many narratives: what does the protagonist want? What is standing in the way of him/her getting it? The answer here is the collapse of infrastructure – Alex can’t catch the subway and he can’t hail a taxi cab, so he must walk from midtown Manhattan to his
apartment in Brooklyn. I have done this walk in the absolute height of summer when no other person was walking in the mid afternoon heat. Of course, I didn’t walk under the collapse of infrastructure (the usual gaudy abundance of electricity surrounded me), but I imagined what it was like to have thousands of people walking with me. I imagined being handed water like a marathon runner, and I imagined stopping for freshly cooked meat from a butcher’s shop or a beer from a bar. Both of these imaginings ended up in Every Time You Close Your Eyes.

My intention in visiting New York City, and in particular, locations in and around lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, was to get a better understanding of the city – the buildings, the people and the weather. I wanted to blur imagination and experience in order to make my long poem seem as real as possible. The heat is different to the heat I have experienced in the Australian summer (in both Melbourne and Adelaide). The humidity is stifling. The weather report might say that it’s the equivalent of 28 degrees Celsius, but scroll down the web page and you see that the ‘feels like’ factor is more like 38. It’s like swimming in your own breath. People use air conditioning almost constantly and it seems to be about ten degrees hotter in subway tunnels. In my poem, I wanted to give readers a clear sense of this heat, especially in the beginning of Part Two, when two of the main characters, Martha and Robert, are trapped in the subway. I found that the subway was a key part of life in New York and would need to occupy a role in both my creative work and my research process.

While I was in New York I watched a 1970s thriller that brought to light some of the key issues surrounding both the subway and the changes New York had undergone in recent years. The Taking of Pelham 123 (United) starring Walter Matthau and Robert Shaw, is a hostage drama based on the 1973 book of the same name. It made use of the
subway’s ‘crumbling architecture’ and ‘reputation for being filled with crime and graffiti’ (Pellegrinelli 1). This was the city at its ‘dirtiest and most anarchic’ (Edelstein 1).

The subway is a place where cultures and people come together. Commuters might sit in silence, share a conversation, busk for money or argue with other travellers - but none can choose their fellow passengers. It’s this universality, combined with the physical dimensions of the subway, which make it a perfect setting for mystery, crime or intrigue. Anything could happen and it could happen to anyone. In Part One, I show the subway in darkness with rats, people swearing and general unrest (10). In Part Two, I show Martha and Robert realising a new fear which I will return to later in this chapter. The film and further reading about the subway as well as perspectives in society, all illustrate some of the changes made between the two decades in question.

New York in the 1970s had a reputation for street crime and drugs (Rosen) and the city’s financial woes saw it close to bankruptcy (Roberts). *The Taking of Pelham 123* played on these aspects of the city’s reputation. In the film, a train carriage is hijacked and separated from the body of the train. There are those that idealise this rough and real 1970s version of the city, however, journalist Jody Rosen counters that:

> Don't get me wrong: New York in the '70s was uniquely vibrant ... But the town was also uniquely miserable – not a place we want to revisit. There is something gross about nostalgists aestheticizing squalor that they never really, fully experienced. (1)

By comparison, New York City at the turn of the century had a much safer reputation. According to NYSubway.com ‘[i]n 1993, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani took office and quickly enlisted the transit police to use innovative means to get the vandals and the punks out of
the subway’ (Thornton 1). In the modern city, the NY PD takes care of subway security and ‘the transit command center is state of the art’ (Pellegrinelli). Crime rates are down – a comparison of burglary numbers shows a reduction from 273,704 in 1971 to just 75,453 in 2003 – despite a population increase of almost one million people (New York Crime Rates).

A 2009 remake of ‘Pelham 123’ reprises these themes in modern times, playing on the fundamental vulnerability of the subway (Edelstein 1). But now, when we worry about the darkness of the subway, surrounded by strangers, there’s a new fear. A.K. Thornton muses:

> The subway is an especially desirable target for terrorists because it is the lifeblood of the city, and it has large numbers of people concentrated in small spaces. It also allows easy access since there is no mechanism for keeping weapons and explosives out (there is no formal security check, and bag searches are very rare). (2)

For individuals in New York post 2001, the threat on the subway has changed. It’s not so much the punks or the drugs. It’s a fear of modern day terrorism, like the London bombings or the Tokyo subway gas attacks, which I will return to later. It is as if the remade New York has a broader perspective, and is more aware of its place in the world. Community relationships have changed, too. Goodman explains that after September 11, 2001, the way New Yorkers, and perhaps westerners in general, directed their racist views was not so much, as in 1977, from white to black:

> It was a new city, pundits said, a city remade. Families were more stable. Streets were cleaner. In the parks, flowers bloomed. The police were
tougher. Drug use was on the wane. New Yorkers cared for one another
and for New York. ... The subways were safe, and often on time. And
thanks to Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, black and white New
Yorkers were finally on the same side of the colour line. (224)

The differences in the mindset of New Yorkers during the two blackouts were
significant. Older, or long term New Yorkers may have learnt from the first one but, still
many people assumed the 2003 blackout was a terrorist attack. Word-of-mouth spread
reassurances an hour or so later, but in most accounts that I have read (Salon.com,
DiMarco) people responded positively even in these initial moments of fear and suspicion.
While the city was richer and had a lower crime rate, one must consider the contribution
the events of September 11, 2001 made to the fact that New Yorkers behaved differently in
2003. From my research outlined, it was clear that it would be vital that I represent these
changes in my creative work – the fears, insecurities and perceptions of race and religion.

In the forward to Afterwords: stories and reports from 9/11 and beyond, Salon.com
editor David Talbot points out that after the attacks on the World Trade Centre:

Americans, long complacent or ignorant about their country’s role in the
world, began speaking knowledgeably about radical Islam’s case against
the West ... The political and cultural effluvia that had once enthralled us
now seemed “so September 10.” We no longer felt immune to the
world’s madness and mayhem – on one bright and terrible morning it had
come swooping down and torn a hole in our sky. (ix-x)

Kennedy explains the change in another way:
Before September 11, fear seemed to be one of those things – like panhandlers or cars without heat – that was becoming more scarce in the new and improved subway system. Crime was down. Subway cars were crowded at 2 a.m … But the first attack changed that sense of security, and then the anthrax scares sweeping the city seemed to tip the scales, causing even seen-everything straphangers to start looking around, suspiciously, on their platforms. (217)

I talk at length about the subway here because I wanted to develop my characters’ relationship to it – both the culture and the system itself. In Subwayland, Randy Kennedy points out that in Internet chat rooms, there are discussions about ‘how the subway is the perfect engine for a chemical attack, because the gusts of air caused by the trains would sweep substances up hundreds of yards and spew them up through the grates onto the streets’ (217). When Part Two of Every Time You Close Your Eyes begins, we meet Martha in a poem titled ‘Martha, on the Subway’. The narrative mentions that ‘calm, trained voices soothe worried passengers/Some soften foreign accents (58). In those two lines I intend the reader to see that in 2003, even if only for a minute, there is a (perhaps irrational) fear of terrorism as opposed to the street crime and drug addicted city of 1977.

1.2 Researching the blackouts of 2003 and 1977

Having set the scene with research about the political context and mood of the city during the periods when the blackouts took place, my next step was to get a sense of how these things actually played out during the hours of darkness.
In the blackout of 1977, there was revelry in bars and dancing in the streets, but there was also widespread looting, arson and vandalism. According to historian James Goodman ‘[t]hat night there was no moon, and an oppressive mass of hot air had just drifted into the metropolitan area’ (xi). He goes on to explain that ‘there was excitement, adventure, and fright in skyscrapers and subway tunnels, busy intersections and bus terminals’ (xi). Every person, every part of the city, it would seem, was affected. Stephen Curtis adds that the blackout ‘sparked a fiery national debate over race and class after 3,076 people were arrested in the disturbance that injured 436 police officers, 204 civilians and 80 firefighters. The property damage totaled at least $150 million’ (Curtis 1).

Curtis explains the period between 1965 and 1977 as ‘turbulent’. It was ‘marked by political assassinations, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, high inflation and unemployment, and inner-city disturbances from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C.’ (4). By that hot and humid summer of 1977, he describes that ‘New York was in the throes of a fiscal crisis after nearly declaring bankruptcy in 1975. A killing spree by a serial murderer dubbed the ‘Son of Sam’ provoked fear and tabloid fodder in a year when more than 121,000 incidents of violent crime were reported’ (4).

David Richard Berkowitz, also known as Son of Sam and the .44 Caliber Killer, is an American serial killer and arsonist whose crimes terrorised New York City from July 1976 until his arrest in August 1977. Shortly after his arrest (almost one month after the 1977 blackout), Berkowitz confessed to killing six people and wounding seven others in the course of eight shootings in New York between 1976 and 1977 (Cender 2). I was particularly taken with the idea of setting these fears against the more contemporary fears of terrorism. But before I set about writing, I sought out conversations with individuals who had experienced both blackouts and could give first hand accounts of the changes I was trying to document.
To explore and illustrate the differences between the two blackouts, and community response to them, I interviewed Nancy Learner and Noel Rodriguez Jr., both citizens of New York City in 1977 and 2003. Rodriguez Jr. was five years old in 1977 and lived in the Bushwick area of Brooklyn, NY.

Bushwick was predominantly Hispanic and African American and if there was ever a ground zero for economic blight this was it. Drug use and prostitution were rampant in my neighbourhood; people were poor and very frustrated that they didn’t have much. (Rodriquez)

When the blackout occurred, Rodriguez Jr. was walking home from his aunt’s apartment with his mother. ‘She picked me up and hurried down a few streets using the car lights to see.’ When they got to their apartment building they made their way up the staircase to the second floor:

The phones were working because they were the old analogue kind, so my mother called my aunt to find out if she knew what was happening. My aunt, who always had a small transistor radio above her sink, told my mother that it was a blackout. My mother hung up and this was the first time I ever witnessed fear. In a soft muddled tone she said, “Oh my God.” Then it all started to unravel – the windows to the pharmacy and check cashing place across the street were busted. We both ran to the windows to see a mob of kids, teens, men and women, just breaking everything up. There was an old woman screaming in the middle of the street in Spanish
that the world is coming to an end. She was preaching that we should find
God in these last hours.

Rodriguez Jr. explains that the fires didn’t start until one hour later. ‘My uncle who
must have been 18 at the time took me up to the roof against my mother’s wishes. It was
surreal; my city was burning right in front of my eyes’. He explains that the ‘smells,
screams and looting left a lasting impression in my mind’ and as a kid he did not fully
grasp how this would affect his community:

I thought that it was cool to see things burning so I had no worries at all.
It was not until the morning after, on my way to my grandmother’s house
on the other side of the city, that I noticed what had happened. Stores and
supermarkets that my family used were no longer there, buildings were
still on fire and the streets were completely littered with trash.

He mentions that the owner of the cheque-cashing store, Mr. Monetti, was crying
because his business was taken down in a matter of hours. ‘Looking back it was a sad
moment and it showed the true nature of people. The actual people that robbed and looted
Monetti’s were the same that he helped throughout the normal course of the day.’

Rodriguez Jr. later found out that Mr. Monetti was ‘a very kind man’ that would give
out small loans to people from the neighbourhood until they got their unemployment or
government (welfare) cheques. ‘He never returned to the space. Today it is a failed Internet
café with a “for rent” poster in the front.’

By contrast, in 2003, Rodriguez Jr. was working at New York University when the
lights went out during the middle of the day. ‘I got a call from my wife that the lights also
were out in Brooklyn, so I knew that it was a blackout and I had to make my way home.’
His wife and one-year-old daughter were home alone and he ‘had to get there before it got dark’. He was still living in Bushwick and although it was a ‘stark contrast’ to the 70s, ‘the neighbourhood was still not safe’. He made his way from 8th street and Broadway downtown to walk across the Williamsburg Bridge into Brooklyn.

From the onset he noticed that the city was ‘a little bit calm, people helping direct traffic and stores were giving kids ice cream’. He decided there was no need to panic. He made it home before the sun went down, after a gruelling walk. He reported that his wife had also experienced the blackouts in 1977, and that she was anxious for him to get home before it got dark.

I got home, changed my clothes and took my daughter out to the front steps of my house. It was a very hot day so everyone was outside and it was getting dark. That night, instead of screams and the crackle of glass breaking, I heard children and adults laughing, music being played, and the smell of meat being grilled. There was an impromptu block party - people were drinking and socialising and groups of kids were walking around with flashlights in the street, playing hide and seek. The next morning … the only reminders that there was a blackout were a few scattered empty beer bottles, the faint smell of charcoal and a few busted car windows. I was expecting the news to report that there was mass looting and violence around the city, but the look on the newscasters face was one of disappointment. It was nothing compared to what I experienced as a child, but then again it was a different time. The economy was up, people had jobs. Drugs, although present were not as visible, and there was a bigger
police presence this time around. In a way I was also a bit disappointed, not that I am evil and wanted the city to burn. I just wanted to experience the sensation that overwhelmed me as a five year old. To me Bushwick in 1977 looked like a post-apocalyptic world out of a science fiction movie. Bushwick 2003 was more like a feel-good movie of the year.

Nancy Learner also experienced a marked difference in response to the two blackouts. In 1977, she and her new husband lived in Brooklyn Heights, ‘a rather upscale neighbourhood in Brooklyn directly across from lower Manhattan and right near the Brooklyn Bridge’. They lived on the top floor of a four-floor town house (a walk up), the least expensive place they could find in that location. ‘It had all sorts of charm including not too many electrical outlets and the entire floor had settled into a rather distinct tilt – so that if you put a marble on the floor on one side of a room, it would roll all the way to the other side with pretty good momentum.’ She comically reports that they were in the kitchen embarking on their first joint baking project – zucchini bread.

We took out our brand new blender, plugged it into the outlet, put the ingredients in and turned it on and – the apartment went dark. We thought we had blown a fuse in this ancient un-renovated apartment. So we started to look for a fuse box. Of course, we had no flashlight handy so we used a candle. And then we realised that the building directly across the street from us was dark, too. So we said, “Wow, if we blew out the fuse in our house, we must have blown the whole street”.


Learner and her husband went down the four flights of steps to the sidewalk and saw the whole street was dark. When they crossed the street to go to the Promenade, they realised that Manhattan was blacked out and thought the whole city must be, too. The light was out in the Statue of Liberty. The Brooklyn Bridge was dark. The World Trade Centre and all the buildings were dark. ‘It was incredible’ she says. ‘People were initially in good spirits about the whole thing. My husband and I will always recall this blackout as being caused by our attempt to make zucchini bread.’

In the morning, after they had enjoyed the view (or rather the darkened, lack-of view), they woke to a city still enduring a power cut.

It was not until the electricity came back on that we could watch TV and see what had happened to the city in the previous 24 hours or so. The weather had been really hot and when the electricity went down, people did what people sometimes do when they are hot and bothered and don't know what else to do – they went on a looting spree. We were shocked to see the images of many neighbourhoods where stores had been broken into ... there was a general feeling of lawlessness and anarchy. The city had had a kind of nervous breakdown. It was not a pretty sight.

She remembers the newspapers filled with stories about looting ‘and of course ... the olfactory factor – the city smelled to high heaven from rotten food. Sanitation pick ups were somewhat disrupted and, as I mentioned earlier, it was during a particularly hot stretch of weather.’

Learner says it was somewhat coincidental that she experienced both blackouts in and around lower Manhattan, ‘but the reaction to each one city-wide was very different’.
In one blackout there was a World Trade Centre to go dark and in the other there was no World Trade Centre. In 1977 there was anarchy and a lack of official response and in the 2003 blackout there was a calm and orderly response by officials and camaraderie among New Yorkers. But the view of a blacked out skyline was the same – indelible and eerie.

In 2003 Learner was leaving work in a government office south of the former World Trade Centre site – Ground Zero – when the blackout occurred.

It was clear that something was up when I stopped to do an errand and a lot of people were standing in front of (a) store. People had begun to buzz about the fact that all the lights were out. And I thought "Oh great, another blackout." I turned around to find a public telephone and found a long line. My cell phone was not working.

She found some spare change in her pocket and made two or three quick calls – one to her husband to make plans to meet to walk home together. She then set out to walk uptown.

The streets were quickly overrun with people – the sidewalks had simply overflown. And some people had some information to share. Some people thought it was some sort of act of terror (I did not - even though I experienced the World Trade Centre disaster from the same office location). I had a memory of the 1977 blackout and reflected. The people
were very calm. I walked to the first deli and bought a few bottles of water and some protein bars. Other people heard information that the whole eastern coast of the US was blacked out.

According to Learner, others thought that a power transformer in Ohio had overloaded and gone down.

My immediate assumption was that this blackout was going to take a while (as it did in 1977). One of the most important distinguishing characteristics of people's reaction to 2003 (as opposed to 1977) is that people were really very calm and very helpful to their fellow citizens. Sporting good stores began handing out sneakers to women in high heels for free. Everyone I saw or spoke to was helpful with directions. People who had working cell phones lent their cell phones to other people. As I recall, you could only make connection to a land line – not cell to cell. There was a great sense of camaraderie and helpfulness and cooperation.

It took her nearly two hours to reach 59th Street to meet her husband. Walking across the 59th Street Bridge was ‘an amazing circumstance’. Nearing sunset, it was ‘eerie looking back and watching the sun set on the blacked out city’. As they walked up the major thoroughfare, Queens Boulevard, she tells me that people from nursing homes, community centres and hospitals had set up tables on the street and were giving out water in paper cups. ‘It was as if the entire city had become a village – people helping people they didn't know, just to help everyone through a shared experience’. It took them over five hours to walk home and by this time it was dark. She explains how New York was better
organized for disaster planning and it showed. ‘And the camaraderie borne of the crucible of the World Trade Centre was in marked difference to the reaction to the 1977 blackout.’

In *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* I needed to reflect the marked differences in people’s reactions to the 2003 blackout compared to 1977. In Part Two, gone is the looting, the violence and the fear of the serial killer. These interviews reinforce the idea that these fears had been replaced with a genuine willingness to help one another, magnified by a stark remembrance of the attacks on the World Trade Centre two years before. I was particularly struck by the terror that Rodriguez Jr. describes in his interview. The fire, the busted windows, his aunt’s exclamation to a higher power. I wanted to weave this fear and destruction into Part One of *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*. When Alex as a boy looks from the roof (30), he sees and smells fire. He encounters seedy characters in his building. It was important to me to show the breaking glass, the cut skin and the actual terror and to ensure that this was used to add substance to the narrative.

Similarly, both interviewees talked about the camaraderie on the streets in 2003 and how people wanted to help each other. I wanted to draw on references to people giving away food and helping fellow neighbours to weave and shape Part Two of my work. The main source of inspiration that came from the interviews was that people talked to strangers – this would form a major impetus in my work as Alex is propelled to converse with Martha. It seems that in 2003, people felt they were on the same side. It was the village community that Learner describes in her interview.

### 1.3 Writing the Blackouts

By 2003, the city had changed dramatically. New York was recovering from the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001. Kaplan explains that ‘New Yorkers struggled to find
ways to make meaning of what had happened, to work it through on many levels (personal, political, intellectual), so as to continue with life in the city and as citizens of the world in the wake of the attacks’ (137). In the 2003 blackout, as Learner and Rodriguez Jr. explain, people stood by one another, fearing another terrorist attack. They were calmer and helped each other, as they had been forced to do two years before. Both rioting and looting were absent and replacing the known fears of 1977 (Son of Sam, violence and theft) were fears of another unknown. My characters would clearly be forced to wonder, at least for a moment – could this be another terrorist attack?

In Part Two of Every Time You Close Your Eyes, three characters try to make their way home in the chaos of a city that has been ‘shut-down’. Along the way, a number of events and observations underline the changes that have taken place in the city and its people, and in the broader society in general. Alex meets Martha, who has shared a broken down subway car with Robert, an older cellist, who appears briefly in Part One. They are unable to communicate with loved ones (email and mobile phone connections are down), nor can they find a working form of public transport. They must make the best of extreme circumstances. Twenty-six years since 1977, the population of New York has become more dependent on relatively new technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, and the collapse of these infrastructures adds further to the sense of isolation and chaos.

In contrast to this are the fears posed by serial killer, Son of Sam. during the 1977 blackout. The young Alex writes letters to Sam (21, 46) pleading with him to understand that if his mother is murdered, then Alex will be left alone. Having been the subject of news reports, both on television and print, Sam is treated almost as a B-list star of New York City. Alex’s mother Rose, on the other hand, tries not to think about him. Thinking about it may force her to turn back, towards home, and she is determined to set out to meet her married lover.
I also worked to set the scene for these fears against a backdrop of social unrest of the time. In my poem ‘The Looters’, I depict dozens of men storming shops and carrying boxes up to an apartment room. The poem describes police sirens, glass smashing and men stealing boxes of unknown contents. ‘Holes are small/so they make them bigger with their boots/Kick it in. Kick it in/Unless they kick, they can’t kick it in’ (19). In other parts of my manuscript, I also show people rioting and vandalising and I try to demonstrate an air of general unrest at the time of the blackout.

Rose in 1977 fears Son of Sam, yet her desire and loneliness sees her leave Alex at home as she heads out. There are times where the reader knows that she questions her own motives, and also where we see her as scared and vulnerable, although mostly she appears confident. Rose in 2003 is fifty-six years of age. Still single (the lover is long gone), she is now alone in the same apartment, cooking food from her fridge before it can go off, and busying herself with menial tasks.

Alex, on the other hand, has grown from the small boy into a well-respected man. Now a 35 year-old architect, he has just ended a relationship with another New Yorker, and when the power goes off, he is in the middle of sending her an email – simply ‘I guess we should talk soon’ (56). Of course, this email never gets sent. On his way home, next to a butcher’s shop (where the owner is giving away cooked sausages before they rot), he meets Martha. They decide to walk together, experiencing an intimacy that would not have been shared on any other day. Throughout their journey together, they briefly share views about September 11, and here, I attempt to show their fears of the threat of terrorism (99).

In Tower Stories, a collection of first person perspectives about September 11, Tom Haddard, an interviewee who had escaped from Tower 1 of the World Trade Centre, mentions the blackout. ‘... I won’t lie to you, there’ve been some really rough times. Here and there I’ve experienced sudden bouts of panic and anxiety. Do you remember the
blackout in August 2003? That really rocked me’ (DiM arco 46). In the footnotes, the author points out that ‘rumours of terrorism quickly circulated as having been the root of the blackout but these were dispelled within an hour, leaving many people to wonder who was more dangerous, Islamic fundamentalists or the power companies’ (DiM arco 46). In *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*, Rose blames the power companies, yet we see other characters in the text demonstrate fear fuelled by blatant racism, as I explore further in Chapter 5.

As a result of my research into both the changing city and the blackouts themselves, I was particularly struck by the need to include some of the physicality of the city. Of course, the physical and visual change in the city – the absence of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre – is obvious. But other features of the city kept coming up in my research, too. Nancy Learner mentions looking out over the dark city in 1977 and seeing the lights out in the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge in darkness. This changed physicality of the city seemed to create poetic opportunities that I wanted to explore further.

Hart Crane’s long poem ‘The Bridge’, published in 1930, begins with a trigger: A mentally ill man falls to his death, unnoticed by the crowd:

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momently, shrill shirt ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan. (1)

In his introduction (1970) to *The Bridge*, Thomas A. Vogler describes the theme of the poems as a ‘quest for a mythic vision’ (x). He states that the vision here is ‘one that will assure a hopeful future in the face of a sorry present’ (x). In the lines that follow the death
of the man, Crane provides descriptions of modern society while taking the reader on a journey to the past. He ends with an optimistic view of the city. This poem, and the journey the poet goes on, echoes some of the themes and descriptions in my own poem. Although more concentrated on religion and metaphor, Crane’s poem shows us his version of New York, filled with filing cabinets, elevators and fog horns in the harbour.

John Wargacki interprets Crane’s poem as ‘... a grand attempt to both reflect and project the poet’s own rendering of American history and culture primarily through a self-constructed spiritual lens’ (331). In Every Time You Close Your Eyes, I also try to reflect history and culture through a poetic lens but have tried to use the bridge in more practical terms – the journey across the bridge is the journey home. In my own reading of Crane’s poem, he uses it as a metaphor for old and new, a way to refer to the gap between distinct periods in America’s history.

From Manhattan, you can get to the pedestrian walkway of the Brooklyn Bridge from Centre Street. It has a walkway open to pedestrians and cyclists. I’ve done this walk from both sides, but my characters, Martha and Alex, take to the bridge from the Manhattan side as Alex lives in Brooklyn and Martha is going home with him. I set out to write about two people walking home over a bridge. They ask questions as they walk, occasionally looking back at the skyline. They stop to kiss. I also describe the Brooklyn Bridge as inspired by an unusual passage in a guide book, Let’s Go: New York City. The poem from Every Time You Close Your Eyes titled ‘The Brooklyn Bridge’ (83) ends with a description of how far the bridge is from the water and begins with the guidebook description:

Like all great bridges, this one has had its share of post-construction death as well. A Mr. Brody leaped off the bridge in 1920, marking the
first suicide. Locals say if only he had tucked and rolled, dived and not belly flopped, he might have lived. (194)

I included this description in *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* because I wanted to show the bridge from an observer’s point of view, rather than that of Alex and Martha. This point of view is from a man sitting on the edge and provides a point of difference to the thousands of people walking. I also appreciate this quote because of its innocence, as if everything would have been fine if only he had ducked and rolled.

During the walk home, the bridge provides a setting for Alex and Martha, but I also describe the thousands of people walking with them:

They lean on the railings with their elbows like they’re still drinking at some dive bar in the neighbourhood.

Martha thinks about falling. Not falling from the bridge, but about falling for someone like him.

People walk by.

Everyone looks closely at their feet hoping not to step on any cracks or to get left behind. (106)

When I was around nine years old, I recall being terrified for some family friends who were travelling to New York City. It was the 1980s. I was convinced that they were going to get mugged, because that was all that I knew about New York: muggings and killings. During that time, and before in the 1970’s, many people both in America and
international thought of New York as dangerous. Allen Ginsberg, for example, wrote about New York in his 1974 poem ‘Mugging’:

Lying on the floor shall I shout more loud? – the metal door
closed on blackness
one boy felt my broken healed ankle, looking for hundred dollar bills behind my socking weren’t even there – a third boy untied my Seiko Hong Kong watch from right wrist leaving a clasp-prick skin tiny bruise. (Marquesee and Harris, 209)

Over the years, this perception has generally changed as described in 1.1 of this chapter. Through my reading of texts cited in this essay as well as my travel experience and research, I have attempted to build a solid base on which my creative work stands, yet, for all my visits to New York, one thing I could never have experienced properly is a blackout in New York City. Goodman fills us in.

For people who have never been in a big city during a blackout, it is a difficult night to imagine. So much of what makes New York the city that it is – the height of its buildings, the density of its population, the hours (twenty-four) of its operation, the mass of its mass-transit system, the brilliance of Broadway, the role of its business and finance in the work of the world – is made possible by electric power and light. (xii)

My perceptions of New York, whether as a dangerous place where one might be mugged, or as a city of light and excitement, were an inspiration for my creative work, but
certainly not the basis of it. Without visiting New York City and without interviewing people who have first hand experience of the blackouts, I believe that Every Time You Close Your Eyes would have lacked many qualities, including an understanding of place, period and people and most importantly, of the events, moods and politics of the time.
Chapter 2: The Hot Air Balloon and The Plane Crash

Ian McEwan’s novels *Saturday* and *Enduring Love* both begin with external triggers in the form of disasters. *Saturday* sees the protagonist, Henry Perowne, standing outside his bedroom window at 3am on a Saturday morning, witnessing a burning plane heading to land at Heathrow airport. *Enduring Love*’s Joe Rose (to be referred to hereafter by his given name to avoid confusion with the character Rose in my own work) is picnicking with his partner, Clarissa, when they witness a hot air balloon crash that results in the death of a man named Logan. However, it’s the internal crisis and the events that snowball after the initial catalysts that become most engaging throughout the narratives of both of these novels and which have most informed and influenced my aims in creating my long poem.

In *Enduring Love*, Jed Parry, a young man who helps in the failed attempt to save the balloon victim, begins to stalk Joe. This then leads to further conflict with Clarissa who doesn’t seem to give Joe the support that he believes he needs and deserves. In *Saturday*, Perowne has a minor car accident with three men in another car. One of them, Baxter, becomes obsessed with Perowne after Perowne offers him false hope in the form of a cure for his Huntington’s disease. This later leads to Baxter intruding on and physically attacking the rest of his upper-class London family.

McEwan has used the idea of the trigger and the crisis in many of his previous novels. *Atonement* sees a young Briony send the wrong man to jail based on her stubborn misconceptions of the truth. *Amsterdam* is an account of the aftermath of a mutual friend’s death. *The Child in Time* is a man’s response to the kidnapping of his daughter. They all begin with a crisis—whether it’s internal, inevitable, or imagined. But it’s *Saturday* and *Enduring Love* that begin with the two most spectacular disasters, and then continue to delve into the deeper narrative that drives the plot. Both events in themselves are not only
newsworthy, but significant enough for one plot line in any disaster novel. The balloon incident results in a spectacular death - a man plunging to a crude end. As the narrator Joe explains:

We watched him drop. You could see the acceleration. No forgiveness, no special dispensation for flesh, or bravery, or kindness. Only ruthless gravity. And from somewhere, perhaps from him, perhaps from some different crow, a thin squawk cut through the stillled air. He fell as he had hung, a stiff little black stick. I have never seen such a terrible thing as that falling man. (16)

In *Enduring Love*, it’s not the balloon accident that causes most of the drama. Instead it is Jed Parry’s illness that underlies much of the conflict. He suffers from de Clerambault's syndrome - a delusional disorder whereby the subject believes that the object of his or her affection is in love with them. Parry believes that he and Joe shared something sacred when trying to save the victims of the accident by holding onto the ropes (though they were physically unable to bring the balloon to ground). An initial, unsolicited phone call to Joe reveals this: ‘I just wanted you to know I understand what you’re feeling. I feel it too. I love you’ (37). Parry stalks him, resulting in gunshot and knife violence, and in the end, Parry’s admission to an asylum. Conflict is also evident in the fact that Clarissa initially suspects Joe of being at best irrational, or at worst, crazy. She tells him one night that it’s over:

‘Joe … ’ This time she blew my name through the half pucker of her beautiful lips, and then she frowned and inhaled deeply and gave her
words their rich low tone. ‘Joe, it’s all over. It’s best to admit it now. I think we’re finished, don’t you?’ (145)

There is also the inner conflict of guilt. Joe says to Clarissa ‘[w]e tried to help and we failed’ (33), and later ‘... I thought about John Logan and how we had killed him’ (55). Added to that is Joe’s sense of inadequacy – he feels that he never deserved to be loved by Clarissa. He describes himself as ‘the world’s most complicated simpleton’ (5), and believes quite certainly that Clarissa is in love with someone that she can never have and that he can never be – the poet, John Keats.

The emotional isolation between Joe and Clarissa is set up from the beginning, and is revealed to be more important than the crash itself. Clarissa is also a witness to the accident, yet she doesn’t, as Joe does, run after the balloon. Instead, she remains the passive witness to Joe’s failed heroics. The reader wonders if she too should feel guilty that she didn’t even try to save Logan. We also wonder if she might have more empathy for Joe if she had been helping. This conflict is further explored when the couple’s trust is broken (Joe suspiciously goes through her drawers). Clarissa refuses to believe that Jed Parry is crazy and throughout the novel the two become more and more alienated. Here, the internal is juxtaposed and contrasted with the external. McEwan sets this up by not focusing on the balloon crash as an event, but on the aftermath, the characters and their different, and ultimately revealing reactions.

The conflict between Joe and Jed Parry is more obvious externally. Joe is being stalked by a crazy man. Parry believes that, because they shared part of a deep tragedy, they must automatically become close. ‘We’ve seen something terrible together. It won’t go away, and we have to help each other. And that means we’ll have to love each other even harder’ (33).
This theme is also explored in my own work, as various characters begin emotional or physical journeys together, though it’s more out of a deep necessity to get home than to build close emotional attachments. Of course, Parry was possibly going to stalk someone, or perhaps his delusion is triggered by the trauma of the event itself, but it’s Joe who, because of the accident, becomes the object of desire. In Part Two of my work, it’s Martha and Alex who begin a journey together, the seed of which has been planted by the blackout. If it was not for the initial crisis, they would not have met. The external trigger to their friendship is September 11. Would they have trusted one another or been drawn to one another if this was not the post September 11 city that I attempt to reflect?

I also explore this with Alex and his ex-girlfriend. I’ve included poems that suggest that Alex may be having second thoughts about their relationship ending, thoughts that may become more prominent in the dark, when distractions are less prevalent. Finally, I explore this in the relationship between Alex and his mother, Rose. Questions of her guilt, his emotional isolation and his forgiveness are explored throughout the work. There is a stark contrast to Enduring Love here. After the balloon trigger, Clarissa and Joe begin to focus on suspicion and doubt, whereas Martha and Alex overlook their differences and the awkwardness of meeting. After the trigger, they find a shared comfort drawn from the uncertainty at hand. Conversely, in Part One of my long poem, we see Alex as a boy getting progressively more disappointed by his mother’s behaviour as she wanders the streets of Brooklyn during the blackout. This suspicion and doubt, triggered by the blackout, is very similar to the doubt in Enduring Love discussed above. I will further explore this tension later in this chapter.

McEwan’s Saturday explores different types of triggers, not defined by only one moment. After the opening few pages, the plane crash is only briefly mentioned. Initially, it is described in urgent terms:
It passes beyond the tower and begins to recede across an open patch of western sky, angling a little towards the north. The fire appears to diminish with the slowly changing perspective. [Perowne’s] view now is mostly of the tail and its flashing light. The noise of the engine’s distress is fading. Is the undercarriage down? As he wonders, he also wishes it, or wills it. A kind of praying?’ (18)

The accident involves a Russian cargo plane. There are no deaths, and although almost disastrous (Perowne thinks it could be a terrorist attack), McEwan, as in *Enduring Love*, focuses on the aftermath of the trigger. The conflict here is written in the collective – the aftermath of the September 11 attacks (namely the start of the war in Iraq and the fear of terrorism), the fight after the car accident, and more prominently, the aftermath with the three thugs on the street. The conflict with Perowne’s family can be seen as more pedestrian, but none-the-less intriguing. Perowne’s daughter, Daisy, has different political views (outlined in her opinions of the war protests), his father-in-law possesses a rather oppressive manner, his mother suffers from Alzheimer’s and his son has an unfulfilled desire to make his father proud.

Henry Perowne is involved in a fateful incident on his way to play squash with a work colleague. He turns down a blocked off street (due to the war protests) and has a minor accident with three men in another car. A fight breaks out, in which Perowne realises that one of the men, Baxter, is showing symptoms of Huntington’s disease. Perowne, a neurosurgeon, cleverly dodges further violence by offering Baxter the false promise of treatment. He escapes under this pretence and so ensues a spiral of internal guilt (for having
lied), an external conflict whereby the three men invade his house and attack his family, and internally again, the sense of being emotionally isolated from his family.

In my own work, both the blackouts of 1977 and 2003 can be seen as the initial crisis, but these events are not what the poem is ultimately about. I have attempted to develop my long poem as more than simply an account of the blackouts. I intended it to be about specific characters, their fear and internal struggles that contrast with external ones (getting out of the subway, getting home safely, being home alone). As McEwan has done, I have aimed to explore human nature through the breach of routine after the effects of a crisis.

During the first blackout in *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*, Alex is left alone as his mother wanders the streets to meet her married lover. I have tried to make *this* the internal conflict that shapes the rest of the poem – the sense of being entitled to something more, the fear of abandonment, the fear of being un-loved and un-cared for. Where is his father in all of this? How could a mother leave a child alone for her own physical and emotional fulfilment? This echoes McEwan’s use of underlying emotional issues magnified by the trigger as discussed earlier. When Alex meets Martha, a talkative and naïve younger woman, on the streets after the power has failed, I’ve set him up to fail emotionally. He’s scarred by earlier conflict with his mother that has never been resolved. Yes, the blackouts in both 1977 and 2003 are the triggers, but the real conflict is within his mind. And the real resolution has to be made there – not when the lights come back on. They are *always* going to come back on, but Alex’s ability to resolve his own conflict is less certain.

I also try to juxtapose the London Blitz with the blackouts. Robert, a cellist with the New York Philharmonic, is a Blitz survivor. Forced to spend nights hiding in train tunnels in 1940, he’s experienced in surviving darkness. Of course, there’s the inevitable internal crisis going on here, yet, it’s difficult to avoid the cliché of ‘darkness’ being the integral theme, both internally and externally. I allude briefly to the internal struggle with poems
that reveal that Robert has been through far worse and that only the lucky people during the blackouts will be frightened. ‘Everybody claims their part in history/Some hit it harsher and harder/A dull chord is struck/Only the lucky will be scared tonight’ (81).

The internal struggle that McEwan uses to create conflict throughout both *Saturday* and *Enduring Love* is guilt. Joe Rose feels guilty that he was not able to save Logan, even though it was physically impossible to bring that balloon down. Perowne is guilty that he lied and used information about Baxter’s Huntington’s disease to get himself out of a precarious situation. Whether the guilt is rational or not, it further fuels conflict with both of their families – Joe becomes obsessed with the details of the lead up to the accident and Perowne fails to tell his own family the truth of his actions before it is too late – the three men have already violated them. Joe tries to atone for his guilt by visiting Logan’s grieving wife, and Perowne ends up operating on Baxter’s brain after a fall down the stairs. Afterwards, there is some sort of ‘happily ever after’ in both books, even though we all know that life is never going to be as easy and as good as it was before. The crisis has changed their lives, but not in the way that readers may have expected when opening the first few pages of the novels.

In my own work, I have tried to use the idea of starting with a trigger, moving from the crisis into exploring broader emotional issues and then returning to a different world. Throughout the writing process, it became challenging to find the right level of subtlety to portray the thoughts and feelings of a man living in a world which has, to him, been permanently changed. McEwan offered many leads, namely the lives of two main characters returning to ‘normal’ though some outside trigger has changed their views and thoughts. Though subtle, in one of the final parts of the long poem, we see that Alex is feeling less safe in the world in which he lives, yet simultaneously feeling emotionally alive.
[Alex] gets on the train thinking

*maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t going to come.*

With the television promos and the slogans and the slippery seats. It’s here. It has arrived.

Alex rides in the back carriage. Last around the bend.

From now, he always rides in the back carriage.

It’s more likely
to jolt something inside of him. (127)

In *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* it is Rose who consciously and subconsciously battles the guilt of leaving her son at home while she has her fun. In trying to make her actions believable, I emphasise the down-trodden waitress whose husband has left her for another woman. There’s a sense of entitlement that I have tried to portray - she’s been hard done by for long enough and Rose is, in her own way, trying to take hold of the happiness she believes she deserves. Ultimately, I want readers to understand why she left Alex alone. In the final pages, it becomes clear that Alex understands and forgives his mother. He is talking to Martha about the blackouts in 1977:

*Wow, Martha says. You’re very forgiving.*

*There’s nothing to forgive. She just went out, that’s all.*

They look at the ceiling,
until Alex finishes this conversation.
He’s done with it. (109)
In the first half, we see Alex as the character desperately wanting to forgive, even though we know he feels the chill and rejection of his mother leaving. He sets his toy soldiers up to fight her when she comes home, yet pretends that she is ultimately a good mother figure, inventing scenarios in which he feels close and cared for: ‘sometimes when you imagine hard enough you can confuse make believe with a memory. It happens/sometimes. If you try’ (16). It’s only at the end of the poem that he truly forgives and understands her.

In the beginning of *Enduring Love*, Joe says that ‘the afternoon could have ended in mere tragedy’ (18). This sentence sums all three works up well in terms of conflicts. We’re not ultimately interested in the trigger – the power failure, the balloon crash or the plane that catches fire. Joe also explains that ‘[t]he moment Logan hit the ground should have been the end of this story rather than one more beginning I could have chosen (18). Similarly, I could have chosen darkness to end the story, but I chose it as a means to set it up. I was more interested in what happened afterwards because to me, the trigger is less interesting than the aftermath.
Chapter 3: The poem, the song and the superhero

Examining the use of Matthew Arnold’s poem, ‘Dover Beach’ in McEwan’s Saturday and various pieces of music in Murakami’s Norwegian Wood, has allowed me to find distinct parallels and contrasts between the two texts and that of my own work. This, in particular, is the use of the motif of Superman in Every Time You Close Your Eyes. In the context of the plot, subject matter and the characters of each text, the song, poem and the superhero character add layers and help to shape the different revelations at play in each. Music and other texts are used in these works to communicate the identity of characters in various ways and Murakami and McEwan use text and music as both complex and simple metaphors. In her essay on the verse novel, Addison discusses the idea of embedding poems into novels as a possible sign of the novels’ ability to incorporate other genres. She mentions A.S. Byatt’s Possession and Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire in this context. Here, I am not so much interested in discussing genre, but more in the function these insertions play. Much like the large-scale disasters in the previous chapter, it seems that the inclusion of the song or the poem is a trigger for smaller, but vital, developments.

Murakami’s book Norwegian Wood shares a title with a 1965 Beatles song. The opening lyrics – ‘I once had a girl, or should I say she once had me’ (The Beatles), reveal instantly the basic plot and also the theme of the novel – unrequited love. The reader understands that there are certain character traits in Murakami’s hero, Toru. He is submissive and easily led. By mimicking the narrative of the song, the reader realises that the song provides insight and understanding of the characters. Jay Rubin, Murakami’s English translator and unabashed fan, points out that:
Most of the omnipresent music mentioned in *Norwegian Wood* is sentimental. Indeed, the tone of the entire book resembles nothing so much as a sweet, sad pop tune. In English translation, Murakami’s style lends itself to the language of a pop melody, and readers may sense a deliberate attempt to impart such resonance to the language. Of course a good pop song is hard to write. It has to use conventional ideas and images and musical turns to appeal to a wide audience but at the same time manage to say something true about human experience in a fresh way. (153)

The song is also used to describe certain introspective character traits in Naoko, the girl he is devoted to. ‘That song can make me feel so sad … I don’t know, I guess I imagine myself wandering in a deep wood. I’m all alone and it’s cold and dark, and nobody comes to save me’ (109). Again, we see Murakami using lyrics to impart certain information on the reader.

*Every Time You Close Your Eyes* shares its title with a song by a Canadian band, The Arcade Fire. It encompasses darkness and intimacy (or lack thereof) which are two themes of my creative work. However, it is their song ‘Neighborhood #3 Power Out’ that shares the same theme. ‘Power Out’ is set during the North American ice storm of 1988, which left Montreal in darkness for over a week. The song is ambiguous, allowing for only slight narrative storytelling, yet it does allude to a sense of hopelessness and metaphorical darkness. The lyrics state: ‘I woke up on the darkest night/neighbors all were shoutin’ that they found the light. (We found the light)/Shadows jumpin’ all over my walls/some of them big, some of them small’ (The Arcade Fire). This song offered inspiration to my long poem, especially in Part One where I depict images of looting and descriptions of fear.
In contrast, the lyrics of ‘Norwegian Wood’ are strongly narrative and, furthermore, they link to key parts of Murakami’s book. The main character never ‘had a girl’ but he certainly loved her and he was bound by her – ‘she once had me’. As the plot of the book moves forward, the next few lyrics of the song ‘I sat on a rug, biding my time, drinking her wine/We talked until two and then she said: “It's time for bed”’ parallel a scene in Naoko’s apartment: ‘We cleared the table and sat on the floor, listening to music and drinking the rest of the wine’ (38). Murakami himself couldn’t state it more simply. He says ‘I ... wrote a straight boy-meets-girl story called Norwegian Wood after the Beatles tune’ (Rubin 149).

We first read about the song at the beginning of the novel, when Toru, then 37 (the story is told in flashback) is strapped to a seat in a plane. The orchestral cover version, or elevator music, makes him bend forward with dizziness. ‘The melody never failed to send a shudder through me, but this time it hit me harder than ever’ (3).

The narrator goes on to explain exactly what the song has made him remember, and what it has made him feel, smell and hear:

The plane reached the gate. People began unlatching their seatbelts and pulling baggage from the storage bins, and all the while I was in the meadow. I could smell the grass, feel the wind on my face, hear the cries of the birds. Autumn 1969, and soon I would be twenty’ (3).

Here, Murakami instantly takes us back to seventeen years earlier. The use of music to recreate time and place (the novel is set mainly in 1969 and 1970) is a strong and common feature of the novel. He not only uses the Beatles’ song, but songs by other artists from the time such as Miles Davis (217) and The Drifters (244). He also uses music to set the mood. Burt Bacharach (162) represents lighter tones and classical music appears towards the end
of the novel.

The P.J. Harvey song ‘You Said Something’ is set on ‘a rooftop in Brooklyn (at) one in the morning’. The lyrics explain that two people ‘lean against railings/describing the colours/and the smells of our homelands/acting like lovers/how did we get here?/To this point of living?/I held my breath/and you said something’ (Harvey). As in *Norwegian Wood*, this is a song that acts as a narrative driver in my own manuscript. Alex says ‘something’ to Martha, that like in the song, the listener, or reader is not privy to.

She picks up her backpack from the kitchen floor
and slings it on her shoulder. They hug.
She asks for his number.
They kiss.
He says something
that she’s never forgotten.
She says *see ya later*
and limps down the stairs. (119)

It was a deliberate tool to not make the words public. I was hesitant in allowing the reader insight into what was said as I have tried to make Alex an emotionally private man. He’s hardly romantic; he’s emotionally vacant and for him to say ‘something’ clichéd or sappy would be out of character. Later I write about ‘terror sex,’ which explains more about Alex’s motives and desire for closeness. Martha, on the other hand, would prefer something sentimental and I hope the reader understands that she was never going to get it. If Martha is looking for connections as much as any other character in the manuscript, then she will grasp on to anything. The line ‘she’s never forgotten’ is both a reference to the Harvey song
and a reminder that she wants more than Alex gives. She’s never forgotten it because she was disappointed with what was not said.

In my long poem, the use of the PJ Harvey song ‘You Said Something’ is foreshadowed by an earlier scene in the manuscript. Robert hears it when he is drinking alone at a bar. He doesn’t know the song (as it’s hardly a song for his generation), but it does resonate with him as a contradiction to the power failure. Harvey’s song mentions the lights flashing in Manhattan. Robert wonders where they are now:

The barman pads down
a coaster and Robert orders a whiskey. Through a battery powered stereo
PJ Harvey sings of rooftops in Brooklyn at one in the morning.
Lights flashing in Manhattan.

*You said something*

*that I’ve never forgotten.*

Sing some more. Take hold of my breath.
Tell me where the lights are going tonight. (71)

The particular reference of the chorus – ‘you said something that I’ve never forgotten’ – creates a sense of repetition in the manuscript. When we revisit it later in the narrative, we know that it must be something more than a song in the background. Later in the song, Harvey switches it to, ‘you said something that was really important’, and I use it to further emphasise that the characters are looking for important connections.
In *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami uses the themes and plot of the film *The Graduate* (Embassy Pictures Corporation) to mirror the stories of his central characters. Similarly, I use Superman – the film, the film’s character and the comic book hero – to reveal certain character traits, plot lines and motivations. Firstly, Superman provides a hero or perhaps father figure character for the young Alex to look to. Secondly, I use Superman to show that the younger Rose is a sexual being who also misses the presence of a man in her life – she’s attracted to the movie star Christopher Reeve, who plays Superman in the movies. Thirdly, I use Superman to compare and reference the idea of ‘heroes’ during the September 11 attacks on New York City, and most importantly, to use the flying Superman to suggest imagery of the men and women who jumped and/or fell from the twin towers after the two planes hit.

On September 11, 2001, Richard Drew, a photographer for Associated Press travelled to the Twin Towers as soon as he heard that a plane had struck tower one. Tom Junud, writing in *Esquire* Magazine, explains that Drew took hundreds of photographs, but the one that stood out in the eyes of newspaper publishers all over the world was a shot of a falling man:

In the picture, he departs from this earth like an arrow. Although he has not chosen his fate, he appears to have, in his last instants of life, embraced it. If he were not falling, he might very well be flying. He appears relaxed, hurtling through the air. He appears comfortable in the grip of unimaginable motion. He does not appear intimidated by gravity’s divine suction or by what awaits him. His arms are by his side, only slightly outriggered. His left leg is bent at the knee, almost casually. His
white shirt, or jacket, or frock, is billowing free of his black pants. His black high-tops are still on his feet.’

(J unod)

The reasons this image became noteworthy were twofold. Firstly, an investigation to find the man’s identity proved initially to be fruitless (Junud, n.p). (Five years later, it is believed that the man is Jonathan B riley, a 43-year-old who worked in a restaurant at the top of the north tower.) Secondly, as Junod writes, ‘the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo – the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes’ (n.p.). It was the pictures of survival that became the emblem for September 11 – the firemen and the American Flags that symbolised the nation’s tenacity in the face of adversity.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* are both novels set in the aftermath of September 11. The final fifteen pages of Foer’s book feature a flip-book collection of images showing a man falling up towards the top of the World Trade Centre. It is inspired by a photograph by Lyle Owerko – similar to the photograph described above. Near the end of the book, the main character, nine-year-old Oskar narrates:

Finally, I found the pictures of the falling body ... I ripped the pages out of the book. I reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last. When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky. And if I’d had more pictures, he would’ve flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would’ve poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of. (325)
The falling man in DeLillo’s work refers to a performance artist recreating the famous photo. Dressed in business attire, he jumps from unlikely places, tied to a safety line. Lainne, the estranged wife of a survivor of the World Trade Centre attacks, sees him in various places around New York. Here, near a schoolyard:

They all waited. But he did not fall. He stood poised on the rail for a full minute, then another. The woman’s voice was louder now.

She said, “You don’t be here.”

Kids called out, they shouted inevitably, “Jump,” but only two or three and then it stopped and there were voices from the projects, mournful calls in the damp air. (164)

Then later he continues to describe the reactions of the crowd:

There was one thing for them to say, essentially. Someone falling. Falling man. She wondered if this was his intention, to spread the word this way, by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the highjacked planes. (165)

In Every Time You Close Your Eyes, I have tried to weave the image of Superman into the story at various intervals in a way that links with various popular images of both the falling man and the superhero. He is there in comic form when Alex is nine (41); he is then featured uptown (as the day-time soap star Christopher Reeve) filming the first movie (15); and then again in Part Two as a paralysed star (70) – the fallen hero, who can’t save
anyone now that he’s in a wheelchair, having fallen in a horse riding accident (Romano, 1). He died in 2004 from complications resulting from medication that caused heart failure (ABC News, 1).

Initially, Superman represented the hero of the story – the man who could save you in the darkness, or the man who represented strength, power and all-American triumph over adversity. But the more I read and the more I thought about Superman, the hero, the more I came to realise that the Superman in my story might represent a contrast to, rather then the epitome of the Hero. Christopher Reeve was paralysed from the neck down after a horse riding accident in 1995 (Romano 1). In Part Two of Every Time You Close Your Eyes, I show him:

Eight years after he fell from a horse
and severed his spine (nothing at all like flying),
Christopher Reeve sits in an electric wheelchair.
Thank Christ for the generator
that allows his respirator to push air
from his mouth to lungs
and back out again.
Thank Christ for the new kind of super men.
The ones climbing buildings as they fall. (70)

From 1974 until 1976, Reeve starred in Love of Life (CBS), a soap opera that was filmed in New York. He was filming Superman 1 (Warner Brothers) during the blackout of 1977. I use the image or persona of this soap star to reveal character traits in Rose. I show that she is looking for something, whether real or drawn from television, to fulfill her days
and also to make her shifts in the diner less monotonous. In *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*, I have referred to the soap opera that Christopher Reeve was starring in at the time of the 1977 blackouts and though I have not seen episodes, I try to echo general soap opera themes. I show the younger Rose to be a ‘home wrecker’, a single woman having sex with a married man in his car, seemingly not caring about either leaving her son at home, nor breaking up a marriage. Although this is simplistic, I wanted to offer an image of her as the bad, uncaring other woman in order to undermine this stereotype later, and I make the contrast with the television show to do this. In the beginning, Rose shows all the signs of a soap opera character. She works in a diner where she makes conversation with customers while working for tips. Her husband has left, presumably for another woman, and she’s raising her comic-loving son on her own. If only she had a soap opera star of her own. If only she had a Christopher Reeve: ‘Her heart glides over the smell of full breakfasts/and strong, bottomless coffee/Her heart glides like a rescued Lois Lane’ (34). In contrast with the soap, Rose is less of a cliché. In early drafts of the work Rose never got past a soap opera caricature but in later drafts I show Rose to be a more three-dimensional character by revealing both her flaws and her love for her son.

Of course, the Superman of film was initially a popular comic book hero, created in 1932. In Part One, Alex reads the comic book with a torch and wishes for a hero or a father figure in his life. During the blackout, Superman seems to be the closest thing to both.

Later, reading about the jumpers from the September 11 attacks, I came across a few references to Superman and flying. Firstly, from one witness describing his friend Mark, who felt a ‘connection’ with a man who fell or jumped from the building: ‘And Mark said there was one guy who fell … “flew”, he called it. A guy who flew out of the second tower’ (DiMarco 176).
And again, from another witness:

When we looked up at the Towers again, more people were jumping, I don’t know how many people I saw ... but I do remember seeing someone who looked as if he were trying to fly from the right side of 1 World Trade Center to the top of the Marriott Hotel, his arms outstretched like Superman. (DiMarco 69)

In *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*, I use the hero character to tie the attacks of September 11 to the Superman in my text. As described earlier, ‘the new kind of supermen’ contrast with the old, broken Superman. Further, in the poem ‘Realising Your Superpower’ I describe the falling men as almost flying: ‘The falling man. Head down/arms up, turning himself around/from vertically down, into sideways (87). This poem serves to remind the reader that September 11 is the ‘off-stage’ trigger described in my introduction.

Like the soap opera in *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*, Murakami uses film to advance and reveal the plot and characters. In *Norwegian Wood*, Toru and Reiko are listening to the radio and they hear Simon and Garfunkel’s *Scarborough Fair*:

“I like that,” Reiko said when it was over.

“I saw the movie,” I said.

“Who’s in it?”

“Dustin Hoffman.” (139)

Although the name of the film is not mentioned in this passage, (it’s been mentioned
before) we know that they are referring to *The Graduate*. Murakami uses this film to parallel the age gap in both relationships. Reiko is an older woman who Toru meets when visiting Naoko in an asylum. Earlier Toru reveals that he ‘went into a fast-food place for a cheeseburger and some coffee to kill the buzz, then went to see *The Graduate* in an old rep house.’ He continues ‘I didn’t think it was all that good, but I didn’t have anything better to do, so I stayed and watched it again’ (81).

There are many comparisons that can be made between this movie and *Norwegian Wood*. Benjamin Braddock, the main protagonist in *The Graduate*, just like Toru, feels alienated and they both have a real sense of searching for the unknown. Both Mrs. Robinson and Reiko are older women who seduce a younger man. Murakami uses *The Graduate* as tool to warn Toru – a relationship with two women at the same time is awkward at best – just as he uses it to parallel the action of the book and movie.

Similarly McEwan uses text and music to reveal certain traits in his characters. Besides the climactic scene in *Saturday*, McEwan weaves blues music and literature in general to trigger events in the plot line. In *Saturday* Perowne’s father-in-law and daughter are feuding over the father-in-law’s comments about her poetry. His son is a promising blues player and McEwan uses a scene in which Perowne watches him play as a tool to describe their relationship and how music can give ‘everything you have to others’ (171), while ensuring you ‘lose nothing of yourself’ (171). In the end, it is Daisy’s use of poetry that saves the family from further terror. After the intruder Baxter orders her to take off her clothes, the family sees that she is in the early stages of pregnancy. Baxter tells her to read him one of her poems, presumably as a sort of humiliation. Daisy, instead of reading one of her own poems, recites Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’.

Daisy recited a poem that cast a spell on one man. Perhaps any poem
would have done the trick, and thrown the switch on a sudden mood change. Still, Baxter fell for the magic. He was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live. (278)

The poem, printed in full at the book’s end, was written in 1867 and can be read in various ways. I agree with the narrator’s suggestion that ‘any poem would have done the trick’ (278) but I also believe that the political metaphor – ‘a poem about borders and the fear of the other’ (Brown 141) – supports the view that McEwan uses this scene for further political purpose. Others such as Molly Clark Hillard, suggest that the poem can be read as a dialogue within the narrative.

Daisy Perowne's re-reading of “Dover Beach" is a metaphor for the novel as a whole. In a novel about heritage and inheritance, Perowne is prevented from seeing this, or merely seeing this, as a poem about his pregnant daughter; rather, he must acknowledge a more generally pregnant moment in British history. The novel, like the poem, is an argument with itself: an act of imprisonment and misprision. (204)

Perowne himself sees this poem as something more than changing the mood of a dangerous situation, or a device to protect the privacy and sanity of Daisy. Already naked and vulnerable, using someone else’s poem is smart – it doesn’t give Baxter any more of herself, and surely, in that moment, one wouldn’t be thinking about poetic subject matter. At first Perowne thinks that he is hearing a poem about Daisy and her lover:
The lines surprise him — clearly he hasn’t been reading closely enough. They are unusually meditative, mellifluous, and willfully archaic. She’s thrown herself back into another century . . . he feels himself slipping through the words into the things they describe. He sees Daisy on a terrace overlooking a beach in summer moonlight . . . she calls to her lover, surely the man who will one day father her child, to come and look, or rather, listen to the scene. . . . Together they listen to the surf roaring on the pebbles, and hear in the sound a deep sorrow which stretches right back to ancient times. She thinks there was another time, even further back, when the earth was new and the sea consoling, and nothing came between man and God. But this evening the lovers hear only sadness and loss in the sound of the waves breaking and retreating from the shore . . . she tells him that they must love each other and be faithful, especially now they’re having a child, and when there’s no peace or certainty, and when desert armies stand ready to fight. (220–221)

It is here that Baxter becomes transfixed by her poem. He demands that she read it again. This time, Perowne hears something new. And it is here that we see how the poem adds political context to the novel as a whole.

Only on second reading does he see the poem’s political dimension, as a poem about borders and the fear of the other across the channel from a defensively national point of view. At first he sees this dimension of the poem not through Daisy’s but through Baxter’s eyes and ears, but is it not possible to find an unnerving analogy between it and his own domestic anxieties about the threat of Baxter as well as the country’s
political anxieties about the dangers of the other that are voiced in the
text through the image of a Prime Minister wrestling with questions such
as ‘Does Saddam possess weapons of terrifying potential?’ (Brown 141)

Of course, my manuscript is set when the power is out so I have considerable
constraints when it comes to showing my characters seeing movies or watching television.
There’s not an extensive use of external texts in my manuscript, besides letters to Son of
Sam that show Alex as a boy, scared yet protective of his mother. They can listen to music
with battery powered radios or MP3 players, but they can only talk about movies and
television in past tense. In my first draft, I had a scene where Martha and Alex connect
over their love for eighties movies but this scene seemed out of place and served no
purpose in advancing the development of the characters or telling the reader something
interesting about their personalities. It seemed kitsch and over-written and was swiftly cut.
Rose’s love of soaps is used, as I have already explained, to parallel her actions with the
idealistic world of television.

As McEwen and Murakami use poems, songs or films as triggers or symbols, I have
used the image of Superman to trigger ideas about heroes, fathers, and ultimately the loss of
heroes, the inversion of the flying man – the falling man, the crippling of Superman and
Alex’s acceptance of the unfulfilled longings of his own childhood.
Chapter 4: Lost Souls and Late Nights

The use of lost souls, late nights, strange encounters and personal connections in the work of Haruki Murakami, in particular *Sputnik Sweetheart*, *Norwegian Wood* and *South of the Border, West of the Sun* parallel the main characters in *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* and also give perspective to non-fiction accounts of New Yorkers in the wake of September 11. One focus of Murakami’s work is his characters’ struggle to connect with one another and with the loneliness of the human condition. ‘There was nothing solid we could depend on,’ the narrator says in *Sputnik Sweetheart*. ‘We were nearly boundless zeros, just pitiful little beings swept from one kind of oblivion to another’ (93). Many of his other works, such as *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle* and *After Dark*, also explore the theme of disconnection, connection and inevitable alienation.

*South of the Border, West of the Sun*, is a novel about childhood sweethearts, Shimamoto and Hajime, who meet again in adulthood. Shimamoto is mysterious and we never learn much about her adult life. She appears at random, almost haunting Hajime. Although they were connected in childhood, they later drift apart. It becomes apparent that Hajime is obsessed and fascinated by her in adulthood, perhaps because of her danger and mystery. They are both lonely souls searching for something more. Murakami’s male characters are often introverts getting mixed up with strange and mysterious women. Often unsatisfied, they look for fulfillment. ‘It was the first time either of us had met another only child. We both had so much we’d held inside about being only children … We both had a hard time explaining our feelings to others’ (7).

*Sputnik Sweetheart*, a three-character love story, tells the tale of Sumire, a girl who falls in love with an older woman, Miu. The third character is a male narrator who is in love
with Sumire. In this text, we again see Murakami exploring the themes of loneliness and isolation.

And it came to me then. That we were wonderful traveling companions but in the end no more than lonely lumps of metal in their own separate orbits. From far off they look like beautiful shooting stars, but in reality they’re nothing more than prisons, where each of us is locked up alone, going nowhere. When the orbits of these two satellites of ours happened to cross paths, we could be together. Maybe even open our hearts to each other. But that was only for the briefest moment. In the next instant we’d be in absolute solitude. Until we burned up and became nothing. (129)

To some critics, Murakami’s themes and characters are clichéd, pointing to a world where each person lives in a bubble of alienation. Every book seems to have at least one of these characters.

Lonely, fragmented, unable to communicate, they live a mechanical, purposeless existence ... Vaguely they sense that something is missing in their lives. Some are shallow with little interior life; others have a deep need for meaning and self-fulfillment. Mostly they are simply bewildered by their sense of disconnection and loss. (Loughman 88)

Even The Wind Up Bird Chronicle, one of his more existential and less realistic texts, has his protagonist searching for meaning. It begins with a missing cat and an anonymous phone call, descending into a succession of events that push the main character, Toru, into a
world of wells, games, missions and odd moments. Although we don’t see Toru searching for emotion in this work, we see him constantly searching for things—whether abstract or not. *Sputnik Sweetheart* has the narrator ask the following questions:

Why do people have to be this lonely? What’s the point of it all? Millions of people in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating themselves. Why? Was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness? (196)

*Sputnik*, the first earth-orbiting artificial satellite, becomes a metaphor for communication in Murakami’s novel. The image of this Russian symbol of communication technology directly contrasts with Murakami’s use of disconnectedness in many characters. The narrator and Sumire fail to communicate properly on the phone, resulting in further alienation and loneliness. Sumire struggles to communicate through her writing. She writes ‘some works that had a beginning. And some that had an end. But never one that had both a beginning *and* an end’ (13). She even confuses the word Sputnik with Beatnik when talking about Jack Kerouac. The narrator describes how he feels about satellites, clearly a metaphor for the human condition that makes up his world:

I closed my eyes and listened carefully for the descendants of Sputnik, even now circling the earth, gravity their only tie to the planet. Lonely metal souls in the unimpeded darkness of space, they meet, pass each other, and part, never to meet again. No words passing between them. No promises to keep. (196)
In my own work, I have tried to show that a trigger, in this case a power failure, can cause people to connect, but that ultimately, the connection means little. Alex meets Martha and somehow decides to ‘connect’ with her – whether physically or through some kind of other ‘spark’ in their personalities. They walk home together – and stop along the way to drink. She falls down a flight of stairs and he carries her the rest of the way. They reach his home and spend the night together. In the morning, in the light of day, the connection seems to be already broken. She irritates him with her constant photography. She leaves, and he promises to call, but never does.

Alex is forced into a photograph.
He hates this kind of stuff. Being an image.
A design.
Martha has ideas. She tells him to act normal which he thinks is an oxymoron.
Are you calling me a moron?
He does a variety of things: scratches the surface of his stubble, checks his mobile for messages, (there is just one, of course), discards food from the freezer.
Acting normal. Acting like this woman is supposed to be here, in his kitchen, as if they are together, or something.
Acting. She kisses him on the back of his neck.
You should call your mother. (118)

It is certainly my hope that this could be the perfect pop song, as described by Rubin earlier. It has the right themes – a sort of boy meets girl narrative, and, of course, love and
sex, but it’s the sense of alienation that I’ve been trying to make clearer than the other factors. When Alex tells Martha that she has a nice mouth, I want the readers to see that as an awkward thing to say and that he obviously can’t think of anything else. It should be clear that Alex and Martha wouldn’t be together on any other night but the night the power gets cut. Perhaps this is what Cole Kazdin refers to as ‘terror sex’ (Salon.com 47).

In his essay ‘Sex in a time of terror’, Kazdan writes about New Yorkers making connections after September 11. ‘The world had changed; so had relationships. Now, just about everyone she [Kazdin’s friend] knew was having ... “terror sex”’ (47). He also goes on to say that even though having sex in the aftermath of a major crisis seemed somewhat cheap – ‘It reeked of bad-movie cliché: Cue the majestic music’ (47) – people were doing it because they either didn’t want to be alone, or they wanted to re-connect with their partners. In the essay, he quotes Pepper Schwarz, Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington. Schwarz says that ‘During crises, birthrates go up ... People want to connect. It’s life-affirming to feel your body attached to your head’ (50).

Rose, another lonely soul in my creative work, risks leaving her son at home during a threatening time. In Part One, she talks herself into believing that he is asleep while meeting her lover. I hope the reader can see that she will never be more than ‘the other woman’ to this man, but can also perhaps see how hard she tries to be perfect for him. She doesn’t ask him to leave his wife, she is submissive and obedient, even believing that she is unfaithful when she fantasises about the film star Christopher Reeve. She has sex in the backseat of the car with her lover and feels ‘a second of deep and warm’ (37). Later that night she watches as he buys candles to take home to his wife.

McEwan also uses sex as a way to show characters making connections, whether likely or unlikely, with strangers or partners. In Enduring Love, McEwan shows Clarissa seducing Joe on the night of the balloon accident.
Of course. Why didn’t I think of this? Why didn’t I think like this? We needed love. I had been trying to deny myself even the touch of her hand, assuming that affection was inappropriate, an indulgence, an irreverence in the face of death. (33)

Even in *Saturday*, the narrator says after Henry and his wife Rosiland have early morning sex (straight after the plane crash), that it is a ‘different medium, refracting time and sense, a biological hyperspace as remote from conscious existence as dreams, or as water is from air’ (51).

In my long poem, I have tried to show that Alex could be having sex with anyone, as long as he is close to someone. If he hadn’t met Martha, he would have called his ex-girlfriend. If he hadn’t called his ex, he would have met someone else. This circle could have been portrayed in many ways. The following, from Alex’s point of view, illustrates further:

I had imagined this once. One morning, months before.
It doesn’t matter where it lands exactly, as long as it steadily falls onto the tops of our feet.

I have undressed women before you, of course, but it has been fuelled by music or lighting and everything that goes with knowing somebody. I swear, I am awake but empty to details of you. (108)
While McEwan uses sex to draw the reader into the closeness of the relationship, I’ve tried to use it as a decoy of sorts. My intention was to draw the reader into the romance – the idea of Martha and Alex finding love – only to dump them, in the cold light of the morning, with the realisation that it was never to be. I aimed to draw on the ideas and techniques that Murakami and McEwan use to show loneliness and closeness, respectively. Like Murakami, I have tried to ultimately show that Alex leaves the loneliness of the darkened city just as alone as he entered it.
Chapter 5: Earthquakes, War and Terrorist Attacks

I have previously discussed how my research about post September 11, New York City revealed a changed landscape, both physically and emotionally. In writing my long poem, I have drawn on various ways of representing the changes in attitudes and expectations of my characters, including the recurring role of Superman, the desire to connect and a fear of terrorism. In Saturday, Henry Perowne makes his way through London on the day hundreds of thousands of anti-war protesters line the streets. It is February 2003, less than one month before the March 20 invasion of Iraq. McEwan weaves his characters’ views into the narrative, not only as back-story or flashback, but as dialogue and current thought, triggered firstly by the plane crash and secondly by the protests. This allows the reader insight into the protagonist’s character and also to the state of the pre-war world as he sees it.

After the plane crash, we see Perowne, early morning, in the kitchen with his eighteen-year-old son, Theo. Less affected by world events than his other family members, Theo is part of the ‘sincerely godless generation’ (32).

His initiation, in front of the TV, before the dissolving towers, was intense but he adapted quickly. These days he scans the papers for fresh developments the way he might a listings magazine. As long as there’s nothing new, his mind is free. (32)

Perowne’s daughter, Daisy, is a little older, well-travelled and always keen for an ‘adversarial argument’ (30). Upon her return from France, via the London war protests, she argues with her ‘pro-war’ father calling him ‘typical’ (187) and that his (non-committal) view is ‘effectively pro-Saddam’ (190). This difference in opinion allows the reader to see
not only a generational gap, but also shows us the closeness in the father-daughter relationship as, I would argue, a true and passionate argument about public events is a sign of trust and intimacy. They end the argument in a bet, he takes her hand and she offers to help him with his fish stew. Perowne’s relationship with Theo is also strengthening through these world events: ‘they’ve never talked so much before’ (34).

Perowne’s ideas about the war are based largely on his own reactions to treating an Iraqi professor of ancient history for an aneurysm. Since he ‘saw his torture scars and listened to his stories, Perowne has had ambivalent or confused and shifting ideas about this coming invasion’ (62). ‘The one thing Perowne thinks he knows about this war is that it’s going to happen. With or without the U.N. The troops are in place, they’ll have to fight’ (62). Throughout these conversations, the fear of terrorism and war lurks in the background, along with the fear of loss and change that comes with this. I felt it was similarly important to create this sense of urgency and fear in my own creative work.

According to Brown, ‘Saturday communicates its political themes in terms of family life, celebrates the power of the novel to explore both pathological and political states of the mind and draws on uncanny politicising effects in representing the everyday’ (80). In my own work, I also try to do this – politically – through feelings about September 11, and pathologically, through Son of Sam, as McEwan does with Baxter’s thuggery on the street and the home invasion at the end of Saturday.

Son of Sam lurks in the background in Part One of Every Time You Close Your Eyes. The only contact Alex has with him is in the text of two letters that the reader can presume are never sent. Rose shows fear on the street and is warned by passers-by that she shouldn’t be alone, although she is more concerned and offended by the sting of the word ‘alone’ than by the actual threat of a serial killer on the loose. The action in Part One also focuses on the looters, fires and riots and points to a level of danger on the streets on New
York. The randomness and chaos of a city in full anarchy is a clear contrast to the rigid patrolling of London’s anti-war protests in *Saturday*. The dialogue about the danger is scattered and minimal as I preferred to show rather then tell, and my characters are largely alone.

In Part Two of my long poem, it’s the initial feeling that the blackout may have been a terrorist attack that lurks in the background. When the characters realise that it’s not, talk inevitably turns to where they were and what they did on September 11. It is revealed that Martha knew someone in the towers and that Alex has frequently ‘stared south/to the tugboats on the water/and to the big dusty crater/dented into the city’ (73).

Martha says there was a guy she used to go to school with

in Tower 1. He was nice. *I liked him. He died. Sad.*

He died. Sad.

And it all comes down to a line

in a children’s book.

Like this is all there is left. Sad. (99)

It’s the ambiguity that makes for the three-dimensional characters in *Saturday*, especially in Perowne. His argument with Daisy is evidently frustrating to her due to his lack of ability to form a strong opinion either way. He tells her that they will have to wait and see whether invasion is a good idea:
Perowne knows that when a powerful imperium – Assyrian, Roman, American – makes war and claims just cause, history will not be impressed … The marchers could be right. And he acknowledges the accidental nature of opinions; if he hadn’t met and admired the professor, he might have thought differently, less ambivalently, about the coming war. (73)

Later, after his fight with Baxter and after the march, he almost admits to the validity of such political protests: ‘Too young for the Vietnam war protests, he’s never in his life seen so many people in one place. Despite his own views, he was somewhat moved’ (99).

In my research about the aftermath of September 11, I have found much writing about public perception and fear in the United States (DiMarco, Thornton). A week after the attacks, Christopher Cass was in an airport security line. He talks about the increase in security and about the general chaos that surrounded the airport:

There was an Arab-looking man in line and it was impossible not to notice him under the circumstances. And this woman with a baby stroller turned to me and decided at that moment to say, for whatever reason …

“I’m going to Baltimore and I hope that guy’s not on my flight”.

(DiMarco 424)

This shameless racism, at best an embarrassing display of fear, is a view that certain characters in my poem also share. In the airport, ‘Passengers panic at the slightest difference/ Staff refuse to think that they make judgements/based on accents or family names’ (66) and as already discussed earlier ‘calm, trained voices soothe worried
passengers/Some soften foreign accents/and others remember breathing’ (57). In my work, I never intended to confront people with specific views of racism or fear, but to write of a subtle change in public perception.

In Every Time Your Close Your Eyes, as discussed earlier, I attempt to show that the citizens of New York initially thought the blackout was the work of terrorists. It was important for this to happen so that the likelihood of connections was greater; if it was just another blackout, it would be plausible for people to go about their day as if nothing overly peculiar had happened. The blackout is used, simply enough, to propel the story forward and to set the tone of a city in a different landscape. It pulls the trigger, setting a scene of uncertainty that causes unresolved tensions, fears or hopes to surface. Murakami also uses external disasters in his work to do exactly this. After the Quake is a collection of stories based on a real earthquake, and Underground is a non-fiction account of the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system in 1995. Like September 11, 2001, these two events have forever changed the way Japanese citizens view certain disasters:

The Kobe earthquakes and the Tokyo gas attacks of January and March 1995 are two of the greatest tragedies in Japan’s post-war history. It is no exaggeration to say that there was a marked change in the Japanese consciousness “before” and “after” these events. These twin catastrophes will remain embedded in our psyche as two milestones in our life as a people. (Underground 206)

In 1995, Japan suffered a massive earthquake that killed over 6000 people. Murakami’s collection of short stories, After the Quake, begins by describing a woman spending five straight days watching the aftermath on television. She is seen ‘staring at crumpled banks
and hospitals, whole blocks of stores in flames severed rail lines and expressways’ (2). Eventually leaving – ‘I am never coming back ... just get rid of all the stuff I’m leaving behind’ (4) – the narrative turns to her husband’s search for a new way of living. None of the six stories in this collection are about the earthquake, just as Saturday is not about a plane crash, Enduring Love is not about a hot air balloon accident and my long poem is not about September 11, nor is it really about the blackout. Murakami’s use of the disaster is to propel the narrative forward, as in my work the blackout propels revelations about characters. In his opening story, it is clear that the earthquake is the trigger for the wife’s leaving, yet the remark to her husband ‘you have nothing inside you that you can give me’ (4) clearly suggests that it is not the reason for her unhappiness. It’s been going on for years. Perhaps the disaster has made her ‘take stock’ of her life. Perhaps she has found, once in perspective, that her life means nothing.

Underground is Murakami’s nonfiction account of the attacks on the Tokyo subway system. Murakami wrote this account after living abroad for some years and finding that, to his surprise, he ‘urgently’ (204) wanted to understand Japan at a deeper level. He ‘wanted to probe deeper into how Japanese society could perpetuate such a double violence’ (4). Soon after he began to interview the survivors of the attack:

> What were the people in the subway carriages doing at the time? What did they see? What did they feel? What did they think? If I could I’d have included details on each individual passenger, right down to their heartbeat and breathing, as graphically represented as possible. The question was, what would happen to any ordinary Japanese citizen ... if they were suddenly caught up in an attack of this kind? (196)
To gain a better understanding of the facts and details of the Tokyo gas attacks, I turn to Sheppard’s account of the attack.

The religious cult Aum Shinrikyo successfully released sarin, a nerve gas, against the Japanese public with their attacks on Matsumoto on 27 June 1994 and Tokyo’s subways system on 12 March 1995 ... According to the Tokyo police records the attack caused 12 deaths and 3796 people went to medical establishments for treatment. From the personal accounts given by those in contaminated subway carriages and stations, there was no real sense of panic during the attacks. (229-230)

This ‘no real sense of panic’ is intriguing and an idea I explore in Every Time You Close Your Eyes. My characters in the subway file out in an orderly fashion. Some are rude to others, but this is mostly a result of the frustration of being trapped in a tight, dark space. Some are scared, but it’s never revealed exactly what they are scared of. In his research, Sheppard suggests that people may be more fearful of the unknown than of an actual terrorist attack:

Governments and commentators perceive the public to be prone to panic in response to terrorist attacks – conventional or involving chemical, biological or radiological weapons. Evidence ... suggests that the public is not prone to panic, although people can change their behaviors and attitudes to reduce the risk of themselves being exposed to a terrorist incident. (219)
In early drafts of my own work, I wasn’t adequately able to describe the public’s lack of understanding about what was going on and found this a major challenge. It is hardly unusual for disruptions to occur while on the public transport system. Martha, after the light flickers, keeps reading as if completely oblivious to the jolt and the unsteady lighting.

‘Shadows roll on and over each sentence/as Martha keeps reading’ (57). Later, I try to reveal a sense that it’s more about the discomfort of the situation than about any sense of fear: ‘It is dark, pitch black/but they can smell the person/sitting next to them/She can taste the meat on his breath’ (58). It’s only later that she starts to think that it might be a terrorist attack because of the length of time spent in the tunnel. I put a strong emphasis on describing and setting the scene before the blackout hits. I believed that it was important to describe the characters, and in particular Martha, as the reader has not met her in Part One.

She wasn’t born then. In Underground, Murakami also describes the morning of the attack:

It is a beautiful clear spring morning ... Yesterday was Sunday, tomorrow is the Spring Equinox, a national holiday. Sandwiched right in the middle of what should have been a long weekend, you’re probably thinking “I wish I didn’t have to go to work today.” No such luck. You get up at the normal time, wash, dress, breakfast, and head for the subway station ... It promises to be a perfectly run-of-the-mill day. Until five men in disguise poke at the floor of the carriage with the sharpened tips of their umbrellas, puncturing some plastic bags filled with a strange liquid ... (7)

I felt that in similarly setting the scene of normality, the impact of an unusual event, or trigger, is heightened. I have referred to the subway system in New York and its depiction
in my manuscript earlier in this exegesis, but I was interested in Murakami’s interest in the ‘world’ he writes of. The first part of Part Two of my manuscript is set underground – though it is daylight above ground and the majority of Part One is set in darkness. Murakami writes:

A nother personal motive for my interest in the Tokyo gas attack is that it took place underground. Subterranean worlds – wells, underpasses, caves, underground springs and rivers, dark alleys, subways – have always fascinated me and are an important motif in my novels. The image, the mere idea of a hidden pathway, immediately fills my head with stories … (Underground 208)

These hidden pathways and subterranean worlds are also quite prevalent in my work. In Part One, Alex spends a large part of the narrative under the bed, lost in a world of toy soldiers and imagined war settings. I used this as a way to portray Alex as an upset and afraid boy – angry that his mother has left. He uses the toys to fight against her. He uses his setting to hide, to feel safe. In Part Two, I use stairwells, cluttered bridges and, of course, subway carriages as settings to inflate and emphasise the claustrophobic feel of the city. In Underground Murakami describes the darkness as both comforting and terrifying.

… there are times when even we children of sunlight may find comfort in the gentle healing embrace of darkness. We need the sheltering night. But under no circumstances do we venture further, to open that locked door leading down to the deepest recesses. (209)
Both *Underground* and *After the Quake* offer a great level of insight into a country that has been through different types of crises and disasters. My own research into the aftermath of September 11 also explores the reactions of the citizens of the United States and the change in public perceptions before and after the terrorist attacks. In her essay, ‘Missing Women,’ Lauren Sandler writes of the loss of ‘hundreds of women, many of them mothers, in a single day in what is now described as an act of war’ (Salon.com 231), but she also describes the collective feeling of someone who didn’t lose a close friend, and didn’t directly experience the September 11 attack:

Many of us have navigated beyond our immediate and emotional reactions to the events of September 11. We have crammed the horrifying images and attendant incomprehension into a metal closet that won’t quite locked behind us. The door still flies open from time to time, jimmied by the force of an unexpected visceral reminder. (230)

In *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*, the door has flown open to reveal the reminder – the blackout. As time goes on and the characters understand that there is no attack, no real reason to be afraid, the darkness looms as a reminder of two years earlier. The terrorist attack is now a memory – triggers point to it, but I make clear in my creative work that while my characters won’t let themselves be taken back to that day, the unspoken threat is always there. The threat itself reveals the vulnerabilities necessary to trigger the vital internal revelations and external connections that make up the plot of *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*. 

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Conclusion

Writing *Every Time You Close Your Eyes* required a certain understanding of narrative beyond my existing experience, which centred on writing a collection of unrelated poetry. I drew on texts by McEwan and Murakami to help inspire my story as I gave it shape. These authors offered many examples of triggers, political crises and popular culture that paralleled and contrasted with my own work and its aims. As noted in chapter three, both McEwan’s *Saturday* and *Enduring Love* begin with disasters but they are no more about those particular events than Salinger’s *The Catcher in The Rye* is about getting expelled from school. This is central to my overall position - that the crisis propels the narrative forward, but what happens in the aftermath is more interesting than the lead up to, or indeed, the crisis itself.

My research was crucial to the development of my creative work. The interviews with Noel Rodriguez Jr. and Nancy Learner were excellent sources of information for the first draft of *Every Time You Close Your Eyes*. Although not all they said ended up in the final draft, I believe that without their perspectives I would not have been able to represent both the blackouts of 1977 and 2003 as accurately. Both revealed aspects of the political nature of New York, in particular the different perspectives of the people, views on racism and changes in society over the two timeframes. Both gave particular mentions to the calm nature of New Yorkers during the 2003 blackout, which contrasted with the violence and fear during and after the 1977 blackout. Son of Sam, also added to this fear during that time, and his presence sparked uncertainty within the population. This information, as well as my reading about the subway, my own visits to the city and my understanding of the culture and infrastructure, were all pertinent and valuable during the writing of my creative work.
In my introduction, I explored the argument that conventional restrictions on genre were something I found unhelpful in my challenge to write a long narrative poem. There, I discussed the idea that defining my work as a ‘verse novel’ or limiting myself to learning from the narrative techniques or poets and poetry alone might be unhelpful. As I have discussed further in this exegesis, the boundaries of poetry, prose and novel are often more flexible than presumed, especially since poems and songs turned up so often in the conventionally novelistic structures I discussed. In the end, I found it most useful to draw on novels to break down methods of setting characters against politics and social attitudes and for examples of developing complex plotlines.

I found it especially interesting to explore how McEwan used the poem ‘Dover Beach’ in his novel Saturday, in comparison to the various songs in both my own work and that of Murakami. I have tried to build up the image of Superman in Every Time You Close Your Eyes in a similar way. They are the ‘softer’ triggers, used to bring out character traits and to propel the narratives forward. They also reveal the political natures of different settings – the playing of ‘Norwegian Wood’ on the airplane for instance, triggers the memory of the social unrest of Japan in the 1960s. These triggers also contrast with the major activators mentioned throughout the exegesis.

Murakami’s uses of disaster, real, imagined and internal, have influenced my own work a great deal. His lonely characters represent a side of humanity that is easy to connect with and his research and interviews with survivors of the gas attacks on the subway system paralleled much of my own research and indeed my aims for my creative work. McEwan also writes about those lost and lonely souls, namely Baxter and Jed Parry. He contrasts them with happy families and happy couples so that their struggles seem larger. In my poem, I use lonely characters and unlikely connections to explore the nature of the society and the way the culture impacts on people. They get to know each other, and through
dialogue, their opinions and attitudes contrast with each other, the secondary characters, and finally, with the collective attitudes reflected through the different decades.

Addison writes that ‘whatever we choose to call the new poetry, some kind of a revolution does seem to be afoot in current shifts toward formal versification as well as narrative,’ (542). While I do not argue for a revolution, it does seem to me that distinctions in form are often less important than commonality. I personally found that drawing on ideas and techniques used conventionally in the novel in order to enhance my ability to create an ongoing narrative through my work, was extremely useful in capturing these two points in history and imagining the people who might inhabit them.

The fact that both the city and the people had changed considerably in twenty-six years, was to me, most compelling. That people could have so easily turned against each other one decade, and then, only 26 years later, be so helpful was clearly influenced by a deeply affecting political, religious and disastrous event, September 11, 2001, as well as by broader social and economic changes. In writing my long poem, I drew on this research and on the narrative tools of the contemporary novelists I have discussed in order to develop the image of a changed city, populated by a series of individuals who connect and disconnect on a night in which everything is suddenly different.
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Further Reading


