Depression in Autobiographical Sports Writing:

A backstage pass into the dark locker room

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Abstract

Autobiographical sports writing (ASW) enables authors to provide the general public an insight into their world as an elite athlete. Access to the lives of these athletes is otherwise left to sports media and journalism, which can often skew material for the right headline. This autobiographical insight also allows athletes the opportunity to discuss their battles with depression and mental health without the scrutiny of media and without the risks of giving their competitors an edge. It is important for all autobiographical writers to establish a connection with the reader and recognise that by entering into the field of ASW they are also entering into an unwritten contract that implies their story is truthful. This requires a level of vulnerability and bravery from the writer, particularly with a topic such as depression. The resulting ASW grants the audience a backstage pass into their often dark and confronting 'locker rooms'.

This thesis will examine and critically analyse three primary texts from this field: Graeme Obree's *Flying Scotsman,* Andre Agassi's *Open* and Amanda Beard's *In The Water They Can't See You Cry*. I will undertake a literature-focused consideration of the methods each author uses to craft their narrative. These texts represent individual stories which are unique and set them apart from the vast majority of sports writing. Each author uses specific literary techniques to craft their narratives; which include a combination of first-person narration, present tense, outward expression of internal voice and careful selection of opening scenes.

This is a creative practice thesis and the critical analysis will be followed by an extract from my own memoir in the same field, *The Other Games*. The creative component is thematically linked to the critical analysis, examining my personal life as an Olympic rowing coxswain and detailing some of my periodic battles with depression. This section will also incorporate and display some of the literary techniques that bring my chosen texts to life, in particular a carefully selected opening scene and an outward expression of internal voice through italics.

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Critical Analysis

Introduction

Autobiographical writing seems to be surging in popularity, with readers around the world craving real stories from real people. How can the field of autobiographical sports writing (ASW) compete with popular texts such as Tara Westover's *Educated: A Memoir*, Glennon Doyle's *Untamed*, or the recent best-selling memoir *Becoming* by Michelle Obama? ASW has often been regarded as second-rate literature by critics and academic writers; however, it is beginning to gain respect and momentum not only with regard to marketability, but as a legitimate source for many different fields of research.

Although the 2013 best-selling autobiography *I Am Zlatan Ibrahimovic* by the celebrated Swedish soccer player is proof the ghetto-to-superstar narrative is still popular, perhaps ASW's shift into more personal and intimate areas is increasing the genre's appeal and marketability. Some of these texts use sexuality as a point of difference, such as *Proud*, written by Britain's first openly gay rugby player and LGBTQ poster boy Gareth Thomas. Others provide backstory around tumultuous high-profile athletic careers, such as controversial cricketer Kevin Pietersen's *KP* or Mike Tyson's *Undisputed Truth*. However, by detailing mental health battles, and in particular depression, athletes such as John Kirwan (*All Blacks Don't Cry*), Clarke Carlisle (*You Don't Know Me But… A Footballer's Life*), Serena Williams (*My Life: Queen of the Court)* and Ricky Hatton (*War and Peace: My Story*) are paving the way for a much-needed level of openness. By writing about these mental health battles alongside successful sporting careers, these sportspeople ensure the texts are about more than just sport, creating a sub-genre that is not only popular among general readers, but a resource for a wide range of academics.

Within the general media, sportspeople are consistently portrayed and viewed as heroes – untouchable, even super-human – and there may be little awareness that they too can suffer from mental illness. In their guide for applied sports psychology, Hanrahan and Andersen suggest that athletes may in fact be more predisposed to depression than the general public:

> Elite and sub-elite athletes often experience substantial stress both within sport (e.g. performance pressures, coach – athlete conflicts) and in their everyday lives (e.g. work, school, family expectations). Managing all these demands may be taxing. Because of their sport involvement, ironically, athletes may in some ways be more at risk of depression (e.g. the risk of injury, the stress of managing injury recovery and rehabilitation).[1]

When these figures explain in detail their mental health battles via the platform of autobiographical writing, audiences gain a much deeper understanding than the general media provide. Through an examination of ASW, I will be considering real stories from real people at a level much deeper than general media forms can deliver.

The critical element of this thesis will consider three primary texts: *Flying Scotsman* by Scottish cyclist Graeme Obree, who suffered from severe bipolar disorder[2]; *Open* by tennis player Andre Agassi, who reached number one in the world and suffered from multiple bouts of depression during his career; and *In The Water They Can't See You Cry* by Olympic-medal-winning-swimmer Amanda Beard (co-written with Rebecca Paley), who faced multiple mental health issues including depression, self-harm and bulimia. I will discuss the way each text frames and engages with the topic of depression and analyse how the narration provides insight into the mind of the author. I will investigate any significant relationship between age and voice, and provide commentary on specific literary techniques the authors have used to create engaging narratives that transcend what is sometimes perceived to be a 'non-literary' genre.

One of the keys to successful ASW is honesty: an unspoken understanding between author and reader that this is a true account of events, thoughts and details. This integrity is critical and underpins all of the literary techniques which create such gripping stories. As leading creative writing scholar Judith Barrington suggests:

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[1] Stephanie Hanrahan and Mark Andersen, *Routledge Handbook of Applied Sports Psychology: A Comprehensive Guide for Students and Practitioners*, (Routledge, 2010), p. 252, Google Ebook.

[2] (Obree refers to manic depression which was later formalised as bipolar disorder) 'Bipolar Disorder (Manic Depressive Illness or Manic Depression)', *Harvard Health Publishing: Harvard Medical School*, (2019) <https://www.health.harvard.edu/a_to_z/bipolar-disorder-manic-depressive-illness-or-manic-depression-a-to-z> [accessed 10 April 2020]

> In this way, when you name what you write memoir or fiction, you enter into a contract with the reader. You say "this is true," or you say "this is imaginary." And if you are going to honor that contract, your raw material as a memoirist can only be what you have actually experienced.[3]

As well as the critical component to this thesis, I will attempt to enter my chosen field of research via a section of creative prose from my own piece of ASW detailing depression, *The Other Games*. I will attempt to successfully employ literary techniques that are evident throughout each of my chosen texts, particularly first-person narration, present tense, an italicized outward expression of internal voice and a specific opening flashback scene.

Framing Depression

Writing about mental health can pose a challenge to sports authors, considering the material covers psychological rather than physical territory; they may be more familiar and at ease with the latter. However, such authors can use the lens of depression to build connection and understanding with the audience, particularly where autobiographical writing is concerned. Identifying the differences between texts and their own particular framing of depression helps give context to and understand the lens through which the narrative is being told. Stigma around the word 'depression' can be a barrier for people wanting to discuss mental health – whether the same holds true for writing about it is something I hope to explore in this thesis. In some instances, not explicitly writing the word 'depression' does not detract from the effectiveness of the text, whereas on other occasions this puts the author at risk of creating distance between narrator and reader, perhaps limiting engagement and effectiveness.

For example, Amanda Beard uses the word 'depression' only a handful of times throughout her entire text, but the thoughts and behaviour she describes all point towards clinical depression, including, bulimia, self-harm, identity struggles and negative self-image. While these are significant mental health issues, she sometimes frames them in a guarded way. This

[3] Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), p. 26.

particular use of language often rationalises her behaviour, suggesting that Beard is downplaying the severity of her actions:

> I wasn't trying to kill myself; it wasn't about that. I wanted the satisfaction of the tiny slice, not the harm of a deep cut. I was trying to figure out how to live in a bad relationship. I didn't want to commit suicide. I desperately wanted attention and approval from someone who refused to give it to me.[4]

This language demonstrates that Beard has attached reason to her self-harm, as if because she is not trying to kill herself, the cutting is deemed an acceptable means of relief. However, later in the text the reader comes to understand that it is not just linked to her tumultuous college relationship, but to her self-image and depression: self-harm becomes the mechanism to emancipate her negative inner voice.

Graeme Obree, on the other hand, uses the word 'depression' often in his autobiography and seems to present his feelings around being depressed in a very open way. The first use of the word comes early in the text, when he describes a business venture with one of his friends that leads to Obree creating a false insurance claim. A subsequent fraud charge by the police follows, as well as a string of negative thoughts and behaviours, particularly with regard to self-image: 'By this time I was still emotionless, but depressed, with a feeling of pointlessness and a strong desire to be dead.'[5] There is certainly no veiled lens in Obree's descriptions of depression, which sets the tone early on in the book. The selection of language makes for a powerful voice; so too the bluntness of delivery: 'strong desire to be dead' is very direct and foreshadows the type of language we can expect in the book. Although undiagnosed until later in life, Obree's reflective awareness of depressive episodes throughout the story means that he is able to provide the reader with illuminating accounts of his behaviour. This openness is critical in how we engage with him as the narrator. Furthermore, it shows that the process of writing this book is a part of his own recovery: 'I have had other difficulties since [hospitalization], but writing this book has had a positive effect, and been another part of my ongoing therapy.'[6]

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[4] Amanda Beard and Rebecca Paley, *In The Water They Can't See You Cry,* (New York: Touchstone, 2012), p. 133.
[5] Graeme Obree, *Flying Scotsman,* (Edinburgh: Arena Sport, 2003, 2014), p. 44.
[6] Obree, p. 283.

His suicide attempts are described often in brutal detail, which can be abrasive at times. The description of his first attempt as a teenager is particularly confronting, with Obree explaining that it was kept quiet among family and deliberately left off medical records, only furthering his shame and self-loathing:

> One day, the depression and shame and self-hatred became so strong that I could not bear to be alive anymore. I went to the garden shed and reached for the acetylene bottle. It was not a whim or desire for me now – I had overcome those in previous weeks. Now it was both need and necessity.[7]

In this instance, Obree uses language that is direct, coupled with words which are perhaps less specific – 'depression, shame, self-hatred'. Rather than exploring those feelings and providing readers with a chain-of-thought flashback, he chooses to focus on the act of attempting suicide. This could possibly be a tactic used to offer the audience insight into the shocking scene without reliving the memory in more detail himself.

Agassi's book sits somewhere in between the previous two texts in terms of framing depression. Co-written with Pulitzer prize-winner J. R. Moehringer, this text employs more poetic language to deliver Agassi's story, in particular the depressed episodes he experiences throughout his life. In this instance, I would argue that his avoidance of the word 'depression' does not detract from the openness of the text and in fact, as I will explain, enhances the connection between reader and narrator.

One of the common states of mind depressed people describe is the feeling of detachment or absence, as if watching things happen rather than playing an active role. Agassi describes similar states during his career, even while playing a tennis match: 'I'm wholly unprepared, so I become *unpresent.* When we're tied at one set apiece, I leave the court, mentally. My mind departs my body and goes floating out of the arena.'[8] Beard's memoir displays similarities in the sense that she implies or indicates a depressive state, however the word 'depression' is used only a handful of times throughout either book. When the word *is* used

[7] Obree, p. 53.
[8] Andre Agassi, *Open,* (London: Harper, 2010), p. 109.

by Agassi or Beard, therefore, it has significant impact. Agassi's depressive episodes are generally tied to his tennis, his losses, the way he loses. Considering the game is so heavily connected to his relationship with his father and family, there are a number of layers to this internal conflict. After a loss in the 1991 French open, there is a rare instance in the book where Agassi slips into a depressed state, and uses the word 'depressed' directly:

> Nick nags me to play Wimbledon. I laugh in his tanned face.
>
> Back on the horse, he says. It's the only way, my boy.
>
> Fuck that horse.
>
> Come on, Wendi says. Honestly, how much worse can it get?
>
> Too depressed to argue, I let Nick and Wendi push me onto a plane to London.[9]

Another technique seen in the above example is the outward expression of an inner voice. Here, the line 'Fuck that horse' allows this inner voice onto the page. Where Beard uses an italicised voice in order to distinguish it from actual speech, Agassi's is planted straight into regular conversation. Stripped back, with no quotation marks, this voice is released directly within the paragraph by simply dropping to a new line during the dialogue exchange. This is something Barrington refers to as 'musing':

> The "musing" element of memoir appears in two different forms. Sometimes it takes place right there on the page, visibly separated from the experience it is reflecting on; at other times the author lets us see that she has done her musing out of our sight but displays the resulting wisdom.[10]

Agassi details the troubling events of his time in the spotlight, including in 1996, when he and his girlfriend Brooke Shields receive death threats. This brings a significant amount of strain to bear on his support team. He describes the structure of this group as more like a family network, perhaps filling the void left by his actual family:

> Sportswriters rip me about my *entourage.* They say I travel with all these people because it feeds my ego. They say I need this many people around me because I

[9] Agassi, p. 160.
[10] Barrington, p. 86.

> can't be alone. They're half right. I don't like to be alone. But these people around me aren't an entourage, they're a team.[11]

This deep connection to those around him becomes a source of feelings of guilt and doom, and the strain put on his trainer Gil through the turmoil of death threats leaves Agassi in a particularly depressed state: 'Feeling depressed after a loss is one thing, but feeling depressed about nothing, about life in general, is another thing altogether. I can't feel this way. I refuse to admit that I feel this way.'[12] He writes about repressing these feelings, not talking to anyone about them, which in turn leads to a worsening of his mental state and the period of depression extending. This echoes Beard's connection between the repressing of feelings and depression – as I will explain, her description of repressed feelings as a child later impacts on her ability to cope with stress. Although the narrators are not linked in terms of age – Beard's experience dates to her childhood, while Agassi's occurs mid-career – the threads and themes of each author's battle with depression are very similar.

Open makes tennis accessible to a general audience, even though the language can lean heavily on tennis terminology at times. The relationship between sport and the framing of depression is critical, particularly because they are so heavily linked in this instance from very early in Agassi's life. After all, this is first and foremost the field of sports writing and depression is merely one component of the text. By giving us such brutally honest and raw insight into his mental health battles during his career, Agassi's story is one that lifts his book above the usual tropes explored in this genre and also becomes very accessible to the general public, increasing the target audience.

Narrative insight

First person narrative style enables readers to put themselves in the narrator's shoes and is often used to heighten a story's impact. All three of my chosen texts use first-person narration, providing a detailed insight into the inner workings of the author's mind.

[11] Agassi, p. 141.
[12] Agassi, p. 231-232

Beard's memoir, for instance, uses narration that seems honest – at face value at least – and she lets us in to many of her inner thought processes, including her internal justification of her behaviour. This helps us to understand what leads to her actions such as purging, and self-harm through cutting, but is also critical in terms of bringing the reader into the pool with her, as it were. For example, she explains her chain of thought or internal self-talk during swimming events and how this changes as she gets older, navigates different life challenges and grows. One example of this early in the text is her mindset leading into the Olympic Games. At just fourteen years old, while the media try to mount pressure on her, she is still just swimming for fun: 'Am I nervous that I won't have what it takes to go all the way to the Olympics? *What's wrong with these people? Don't they know swimming is a game?*'[13] The italics signal an inner voice, something Beard uses frequently throughout the text. This voice is often very negative and self-deprecating, which I will explore further below. However in this instance the voice is defiant and innocent, a strong childhood voice.

In addition to these contradictions in voice, Beard can use relatively guarded language at times in what seems like an attempt at self-protection. This leads the reader to question the integrity of the text and her reliability as narrator. In certain areas she provides us with only a veiled look at her life and the reader may well wonder if she is withholding details and remaining deliberately guarded during the process of writing this text. However, in other instances she gives us more insight into her own mind, particularly with regard to self-harm:

> I only had the urge to cut myself in moments of extreme stress, which at that point was only when I was fighting with Ryk. I didn't cut to bleed but rather to soothe. It wasn't for the effect or result of the cut. Once it was done, so was I.[14]

While her honesty about self-harm provides us with a certain level of insight in this instance, it is also closely followed by language that justifies this behaviour. The idea of cutting to soothe rather than to bleed or hurt gives us an understanding of her motivations behind the actions, but also raises concerns as to whether or not she understands the severity of her

[13] Beard and Paley, p. 34.
[14] Beard and Paley, p. 132.

mental state. With the words 'Once it was done, so was I' Beard appears to imply that once she has cut herself, she is able to move on, thereby vindicating her cutting.

Towards the end of her book she begins to use language that indicates healing, processing, learning to manage her depression: 'Erika [her therapist] had helped me to find my voice for expressing uncomfortable emotions, such as anger and sadness, as well as to develop tools to rely on when I still couldn't find the right words.'[15] This is language that signals maturity and a sense of understanding of her depression, yet comes very late in the book and is a momentary snippet of self-awareness. Elsewhere, the use of italics provides us with a truly unfiltered voice that is brutal, and the outward expression of this internal battle allows the audience to further connect with the text and Beard herself.

By contrast, Agassi's *Open* uses very specific and deliberate language which enhances our trust as readers. I think language that signals a level of vulnerability and honesty is pivotal in giving ASW credibility, and this is also borne out in Barrington's work:

> You will gain little of value if you end up abusing the reader's trust. Making up a "better ending" to your story, while presenting it as true, or, worse still, inventing a whole piece of your life because it makes a good memoir, will often backfire.[16]

This trust is particularly relevant in *Open*, given that media speculation and scrutiny frequently surrounded Agassi during his tennis career. He was often accused of 'tanking' matches, which is a term that describes a player deliberately not playing to his full potential. Therefore, when Agassi is honest, it gives the reader the sense that they are getting a behind-the-scenes look at his career, life and identity that may be at odds with the one the media give us:

> I play Krickstein, good old Krickstein, and again I just don't want it. I know I can beat him, and yet it's not worth the trouble. I don't expend the necessary energy. I feel a strange clarity about my lack of effort. It's lack of inspiration, plain and simple. I don't question it. I don't bother wishing it away. While Krickstein is

[15] Beard and Paley, p. 220.
[16] Barrington, p. 27.

> running and lunging, I'm watching him with only mild interest. Only afterwards does the shame set in.[17]

Confirming what was previously only speculation, Agassi gives us a glimpse into his mental battles, explaining the thought processes behind what media would describe as 'tanking'.

Another particularly raw and honest section of the text concerns his revelations around his experiences with drugs: 'Slim dumps a small pile of powder on the coffee table. He cuts it, snorts it. He cuts it again. I snort some. I ease back on the couch and consider the Rubicon I've just crossed. There is a moment of regret, followed by vast sadness.'[18] This particular passage signals a new level of honesty – an honesty that is essentially incriminating; although the book was released post-retirement, it puts Agassi's legacy in jeopardy. He is taking a risk by including such candid material; therefore as readers we are all the more likely to trust him – to let him win us over. Agassi's frequent use of crystal meth comes at a time when he is showing all signs of depression, is unhappy in his relationship (then marriage) with Brooke Shields, as well as being injured and unable to play tennis. He speaks openly about his thoughts and feelings during this time: 'Apart from the buzz of getting high, I get an undeniable satisfaction from harming myself and shortening my career. After decades of merely dabbling in masochism, I'm making it my mission.'[19] Admissions like this indicate a level of extreme vulnerability – something that is difficult for athletes to display during their career. However, successful ASW may only result from such a display, as described by Philip Gerard in his influential text on creative non-fiction:

> It's hard to look at unpleasant, frightening things head-on. But that's the writer's job, and he does it with words that go to the heart of the matter, that touch rather than pull away, that clarify rather than obscure. Clear, direct language is a weapon against fear and despair. It can bring monsters up to the light where they're not usually so terrifying anymore. And even if they remain scary, at least we can learn from them. And we can share with the reader the genuine emotions they evoke.[20]

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[17] Agassi, p. 160-161
[18] Agassi, p. 243.
[19] Agassi, p. 248.
[20] Philip Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life, 2nd edn* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2017), p. 130-131, Google Ebook

All three of my chosen authors write about their 'monsters' in different ways; as Gerard suggests, this is critical in the sharing of emotions between author and reader.

In Carrie Battan's 2019 review of *Open*, almost a decade after its original release, she touches on the behind-the-scenes look that this book offers: 'Perhaps most resoundingly, Moehringer and Agassi deconstruct the mythic image that the media created during Agassi's many peaks and downfalls.'[21] As a professional athlete myself, this point around honesty resonates: athletes have to be hyper-aware of what they say and how it can be moulded or twisted into something different. After a few instances of words being cut and pasted to form a headline-grabbing narrative that has no regard for the person in the crosshairs, athletes may feel they have no choice but to become guarded and cautious. This is in stark contrast to the ability of ASW to shed light on the reality of being an athlete, to lift the veil on how athletes deal with mental health problems like any other human being.

Aside from the brutally honest sections about matters other than tennis, Agassi also demonstrates narrative prowess at capturing us as an audience for his matches, using language that makes us feel we are standing with him behind the net, facing his opponent:

> What if I get this close and don't win? The ridicule. The condemnation. I pause, try to shift my focus back to Ivanisevic. I need to guess which way he's coming with his serve. OK, a typical lefty, serving to the ad court in a pressure point, hits a bending slider, out wide that sweeps his opponent off the court.[22]

Not only is Agassi letting us into his match, he is letting us into his brain, his thought process while playing. This 'thinking aloud' style furthers the degree to which the audience is allowed into Agassi's shoes, into his locker room.

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[21] Carrie Battan, 'Revisiting "Open", Andre Agassi's Classic Memoir About the Loneliness of Tennis', *The New Yorker*, 6 September 2019 <https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/read/revisiting-open-andre-agassis-classic-memoir-about-the-loneliness-of-tennis> [accessed 10 June 2020]

[22] Agassi, p. 164.

He also displays this trust and vulnerability when describing one of the most difficult periods of his career; a time when he is struggling for form, suffering multiple grand slam finals losses, but also struggling with himself, his internal motivation and his will:

> Perry grinds me every day, asking me what's wrong, what's the matter. I can't tell him. I don't know. More accurately, I don't want to know. I don't want to admit to Perry or myself that a loss to Pete [Sampras] can have this kind of lingering effect. For once I don't want to sit with Perry and try to unravel the skeins of my subconscious. I've given up on understanding myself. I have no interest in self-analysis. In the long, losing struggle with myself, I'm tanking.[23]

The bareness of the language, which seems clearly deliberate, emphasises Agassi's feelings of helplessness and provides an interesting rebuttal to accusations of 'tanking' by the sports media. 'Tanking', as previously mentioned, is a form of self-sabotage that is almost impossible to comprehend from the outside. It could even be argued that this type of behaviour is a form of justified or accepted self-harm, albeit not physical:

> Sportswriters accuse me of tanking, not going for every ball. They never get it right. When I tank, they say I'm not good enough; when I'm not good enough, they say I tank. I nearly tell them I wasn't tanking, that I was torturing myself for not being good enough. Whenever I know that I don't deserve to win, that I'm unworthy of winning, I torture myself. You could look it up.[24]

This particular example will be very interesting to fans who followed him throughout his career, but also furthers non-tennis fans' knowledge of the sport and enhances their engagement with the text. The fact Agassi says 'I nearly tell them' in reference to sports writers further supports my earlier point around athletes filtering themselves when engaging with the media.

In *Flying Scotsman,* Obree achieves similar results in terms of building a relationship between author and reader. There are multiple ways to frame bipolar disorder in writing, but if the author is going to give credibility to an internal voice that documents this condition, brutal

[23] Agassi, p. 228.
[24] Agassi, p. 229.

honesty is a particularly useful and effective method. This is a process that requires an element of bravery from the writer and an assumed mutual respect between author and audience. During one of the most severely manic and depressed episodes described in the text, Obree narrates us through his chain of thought as he prepares to commit suicide. After swallowing over a hundred aspirin, he then searches for a bridge to jump from. This episode is difficult to endure as a reader, but the step-by-step process and outward expression of inner thought allows us an understanding of what he is experiencing. The narration tends to flow from one suicide attempt to another, each more desperate than the last. This particular example comes from late in the book but is by no means an isolated incident:

> I took out my penknife and readied myself for the ultimate solution, but as I was wrestling with whether or not I had it in me to pull the blunt blade hard enough and deep enough, I realised there was an eight-storey block of flats in front of me. But when I got to the top it was impossible to reach an exit and even the service door was locked.[25]

Of course, there are many memoirs and autobiographies dealing with depression, but these three texts also allow us a glimpse into the mind of a professional athlete: an unfiltered look through their swimming goggles, behind their handlebars or from their side of the net. They accomplish this in a way that helps the audience to feel as though they *are* the athlete, furthering the impact of their respective stories. For instance, when reading *Flying Scotsman*, even an audience completely ignorant of the details of cycling can understand what the author is experiencing:

> The moment of truth surely came, and after a few laps of the track I pulled up to a stop as the feeling of abject fear twisted my stomach, tightened my breath through my dry mouth, as the stench of adrenaline eased through my nostrils. I wiped my shaking sweaty palms on the side of my skin suit, as the official starter said, 'Take a deep breath – remember this is Moser's hour record.'[26]

[25] Obree, p. 277.
[26] Obree, p. 131.

The way Obree uses such deeply sensory language to describe his pre-race anxiety, linking the physical sensations to his fears and feelings, allows the reader to connect even if they have no experience from a sporting perspective.

Where Beard describes the isolation of swimming as a way to escape her life problems, Obree battles with isolation, particularly as pursuit and time trial disciplines in cycling are essentially a lone race against the clock. They are also a battle within an athlete's mind; the cyclist has no gauge on the competition other than trying to go as fast as they possibly can on their own. During a competition against Olympic medallist Chris Boardman, Obree's narration illuminates an intense struggle with his own self-consciousness, which leads to extreme measures:

> I battled on in a sense of panic, and then did something that I still see as a most shameful act. I slammed my brakes on to a complete stop, dismounted and proceeded to loosen the quick-release of my front wheel, with the intention of having a phantom puncture, rather than try to shoulder the terrible weight of failure on my own on the long journey back to Ayrshire.[27]

The openness of this admission echoes Agassi's honesty about his drug use and subsequent lying to the sporting body following a failed drug test. Both instances show an element of bravery but also vulnerability from the authors and allow readers to connect to them as people rather than some form of superhuman athlete often portrayed by the media. We develop a sense of trust in their truthful admissions, even when they are explaining their previous lies.

Obree also lets us into his mind when explaining his motivation, often referencing a fear of failure as being the ultimate driving force behind his sporting success: 'As it came up to the ride itself, my body was bursting with emotions, but the same old patterns emerged as fear of failure was much more powerful than the allure of victory.'[28] Similarly, he recounts one of his tours in which he travels across Europe and participates in multiple races, paid appearances, time trials and other events along the way: 'On the day of the time trial, the lift

[27] Obree, p. 121.
[28] Obree, p. 149.

and motivation I should have had on the big day were totally absent. I was propelled by a sense of duty that I should try my hardest, but I just wanted it over with.'[29] Whether they are athletes or not, the audience can glean a deeper insight into the mind of the narrator via this type of detail around internal thought processes. In this example Obree is providing readers with a level of understanding they could not possibly find elsewhere, taking us behind the masks that athletes adopt for the regular press. This aspect is expressed by academic James Pipkin, whose analysis of metaphor and myth in his book *Sporting Lives* refers to the differing levels of insight as 'outside' and 'inside the lines':

> In *Sporting Lives* I use sports autobiographies as my primary resources and the athletes' own views of their experiences as the subject of my analysis because my overriding concern is not historical accuracy or the objective reliability of the athletes' testimony but the way their subjective expressions of their experiences reflect a view of sports, one different in key respects from those written by journalists, historians, sociologists, and others who do not sit inside the lines.[30]

Pipkin argues that personal experiences, stories and memories provide the substance of the best sports autobiographies. These aspects give ASW superior depth and detail, and allow the audience access to behind-the-scenes stories that would otherwise never be told. His work has been widely reviewed and cited by numerous academic writers, such as Rick Shale[31] and Peter Carino[32], potentially fuelling the call for further research – and for such material to be respected not only as an analytical resource but as a pedagogical one. In their argument on ASW's ability to achieve this level of utility, Sparkes and Stewart describe the narrative maps provided by these texts and their place in teaching with regard to sport, exercise and health:

> By exploring the narrative maps provided by sporting autobiographies in relation to specific phenomena, students can also reflect on their embodied engagement

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[29] Obree, p. 204.

[30] James Pipkin, *Sporting Lives : Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies*, (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2008), p. 3. ProQuest Ebook Central

[31] Rick Shale, 'For Some Athletes, the Name of the Game Is Telling a Good Story', *Phi Kappa Phi Forum,* 89.1 (2009), 32-33 <https://search.proquest.com/docview/235184971?> [accessed 30 April 2020]

[32] Peter Carino, 'Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies', *Biography,* 31.3 (2008), 494-496 <https://search.proquest.com/docview/215616035/fulltext/EEF3BB9B33994A19PQ/1?> [accessed 30 April 2020]

> with the text and how the stories told in some of them are heard, immediately and intuitively, as belonging under their skin.[33]

Voice

All three of my chosen authors make a connection between childhood trauma and future experiences of depression. Kate Douglas suggests that:

> Autobiographies are about the past; the adults who write them are removed from their childhood by time and, usually, place. To write about childhood the author must remember and reconstruct something of his or her experiences of childhood into narrative.[34]

Obree, Beard and Agassi all associate specific childhood events as significantly influencing their present, therefore their reconstruction of these events becomes critical to the overall narrative. However, it is the crafting of a childhood voice through specific literary techniques and language choice that brings these narratives to life.

In her memoir, Beard explains how the divorce of her parents when she was just twelve years old impacted the way she communicated and connected to her feelings. She began displaying signs of obsessive behaviour that would result in later mental health issues. Beard describes using the emotional turmoil from the divorce to apply herself to sport, and turning to swimming as an outlet. This plays such a pivotal role in the text that it even informs her title, *In the water they can't see you cry*, which signals the contrast between guarded and open language: the pool is both a public and private space.

> I became a master at distracting myself from pain. It was almost like a party trick; the more I added to my schedule, cleaning regimen, or athletic training, the less I felt. My coping mechanism won most people's approval. Adults were unusually impressed. Who doesn't like a kid with a serious work ethic? One of my biggest

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[33] Andrew Sparkes and Carly Stewart, 'Taking Sporting Autobiographies Seriously as an Analytical and Pedagogical Resource in Sport, Exercise and Health', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 8:2 (2016), 113-130, <doi: 10.1080/2159676X.2015.1121915> (p. 127)

[34] Kate Douglas, *'Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory'*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), p. 21

> flaws turned into my best asset. *A hard worker. Determined. Unstoppable. Tireless.*[35]

It is interesting to think about how this behaviour is connected to an early compulsive obsession and the repression of uncomfortable emotions. As an audience we begin to perceive the hints which are woven throughout the book and this connection is indicated early in the text by her childhood voice. These clues are sparse at first, but enough to create moments of uncertainty for the reader, forcing us to question whether things are as they seem. When the hints finally crystalize, readers will understand why these are threaded through earlier in the text: they aid the depth of story, connecting layers of emotional trauma to future mental health battles which become clear throughout the course of the book.

Childhood voice plays a pivotal role in the way Beard's memoir frames depression, but so too does the transition to a more negative older voice. After competing at her first Olympic Games as a fourteen year old, Beard goes through a growth spurt and consequently struggles to find the fluidity of her swimming movement that had made her so successful: 'A breaststroker wants to feel weightless in the water. Instead I was a sinking stone. My new giant-sized self could no longer glide forward like a little frog skimming the surface.'[36] Through this period we begin to see more concerning behaviour, frustration, repression of feelings and negative body image, signalling a shift in voice from the previous tone of childhood innocence. These events seem to be clear delineators in Beard's life, giving the impression of distance between her as narrator, and her lived experiences. This is something which Miller and Lenard-Cook discuss in their book on memoir: 'Some of us can point to clear delineators in our lives, with the result that we have come to regard the child, teenager or young adult we once were as if he or she were someone other than ourselves.'[37] Perhaps Beard's feeling that she is someone other than herself may help us understand the sense of distance which is sometimes evident in her narration.

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[35] Beard and Paley, p. 19.
[36] Beard and Paley, p. 70.
[37] Lynn Miller and Lisa Lenard-Cook, *Find Your Story, Write Your Memoir*, (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2013), p. 87, Google Ebook

It is also worth noting that the voice in italics, a display of direct inner thought, develops a more negative tone: '*I did it because I'm a horrible human and can't do anything right. I'm poison and now other people are getting hurt because of me.*'[38] The italicised voice, which I have touched on earlier, adopts multiple different tones throughout the text, a technique that effectively brings her internal struggles to the surface. Sometimes, as in the previous example, the voice is critical, self-loathing, but at other moments Beard uses it as a positive self-talk mechanism, displaying her determination particularly when it comes to competition. As Bennett and Royle explain, there are perhaps multiple layers to every voice:

> [L]iterature encourages us to think about the idea that there may in fact be no such thing as a voice, a single, unified voice (whether that of an author, a narrator, a reader or anyone else). Rather, there is difference and multiplicity within every voice.[39]

We see this voice mould and morph through experience and different life struggles throughout the memoir. At the 1999 Olympic trials, Beard has worked her way back to being competitive in the pool again:

> That race meant a hundred times more to me than winning gold and two silvers in the 1996 games. I had to push myself to such extremes, both mentally and physically, to get to this point, never giving up on myself, even after a lot of others had. I wanted to say to all those who had lost faith in me, *To all of you who didn't believe, I'm still here.*[40]

The tone of this is defiant and positive, which is in contrast to the negative and hyper-critical voice often expressed in italics. Indeed, throughout the text, it is often the fluctuations of this inner voice that allow the reader an intimate glimpse of Beard's inner workings. In a roundtable discussion, memoirists Silverman, Steinberg, Schwartz, Root and McClanahan 'discuss a variety of techniques that enhance and complicate the truth of experience by giving voice to the author's many personae.'[41] Silverman in particular highlights the importance of

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[38] Beard and Paley, p. 75.

[39] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), p. 78, ProQuest Ebook Central < https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/reader.action?docID=4429796> [accessed 14 April 2020].

[40] Beard and Paley, p. 110.

[41] Sue Silverman and others, 'Multiple Voices in Memoir: Why One Voice Isn't Enough, *Fourth Genre; East*

voice in both fiction and non-fiction: 'These voices interact throughout a memoir to create a unified whole, which contains the insights you want your story to sing.'[42] Beard's multitude of italicised voices, therefore, lends depth to a narrative within a genre often accused of one-dimensionality.

Agassi's description of his experiences during early childhood seem designed to evoke empathy in the reader, establishing a narrator we can connect to early in the text. He describes a father, for instance, who pushes him to extreme levels of commitment and has no boundaries in his quest to see his son become the best tennis player in the world. However, through Agassi's 'direct speech' narrative style, we understand how this pressure and parenting approach impact his mental well-being, and how the resulting trauma and depression impact his entire tennis career:

> My father says that if I hit 2,500 balls each day, I'll hit 17,500 balls each week, and at the end of one year I'll have hit nearly one million balls. He believes in math. Numbers, he says, don't lie. A child who hits one million balls each year will be unbeatable. Hit *earlier,* my father yells. Damn it, Andre, hit *earlier*. Crowd the ball, crowd the ball.[43]

An example like this takes us onto the court with Agassi; the direct speech style allows the audience to feel as though his father is addressing us individually. The commands, the use of italics for emphasis, even the removal of his name – 'a child who' – remove emotion from his father's instructions. It is, however, easy to question the reliability of these direct quotes, given the text was written at a much later point in life. As I have previously referenced, according to Barrington, an autobiographical writer enters into a kind of contract with their reader, in which the material is perceived to be accurate. Agassi's 'verbatim' exchanges, therefore, may stretch the credibility of such a contract – are we really supposed to believe that he can recall conversations word for word, decades after they took place? He certainly

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Lansing, 6.2 (2004), 121-131 <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/230083357/fulltextPDF/D5F0E1EEBD564E9EPQ/1?accountid=17287> [accessed 30 April 2020] (p. 121).

[42] Silverman and others, p. 122.

[43] Agassi, p. 28.

uses the technique liberally throughout the text in order to demonstrate his father's influence.

The more we learn about the lengths his father will go to in order for his son become the best in the world, the more we understand the deep psychological impact this has on Agassi's life. For example, his father modifies a tennis ball machine (which he calls the dragon) so that it can fire balls faster and at a steeper angle at Andre while he is practising; he buys a property in Las Vegas that has enough space for his perfect tennis court. One section of the text in particular, however, shows us that this is an unhealthy relationship like no other: an eleven-year-old Agassi is given the drug speed by his father in an effort to elevate his performance at the national competition. This revelation would be shocking enough to read if delivered by an adult narrator; delivered as it is in Agassi's pseudo-child voice, it is devastating, and enables us to connect with the depth of childhood trauma Agassi is subjected to. This child's voice invites empathy from the reader, and is used effectively in the early sections of the book:

> Such moments, and many more, come to mind whenever I think about telling my father that I don't want to play tennis. Besides loving my father, and wanting to please him, I don't want to upset him. I don't dare. Bad stuff happens when my father is upset. If he says I'm going to play tennis, if he says I'm going to be number one in the world, that it's my destiny, all I can do is nod and obey.[44]

Specific wording creates this effect, 'bad stuff happens' being the key phrase to anchor this quote to a vulnerable child's voice. Despite telling us explicitly that he is seven years old, this type of syntax and language is critical in actually creating the voice we empathise with and connect to.

The idea of 'tanking' matches also comes into play early in the text, after Agassi's brother Philly warns him about 'the pills' and they hatch a plan to deceive their father.

> Sure enough, at the nationals in Chicago my father gives me a pill. Hold out your hand, he says. This will help you. Take it. He puts the pill on my palm. Tiny. White. Round. I swallow the pill and feel OK. Not much different. Slightly more alert. But

[44] Agassi, p. 36-37

> I pretend to feel very different. My opponent, an older kid, poses no challenge, and still I carry him, drag out points, hand him several games. I make the match look tougher than it is. Walking off the court I tell my father I don't feel right, I want to pass out, and he looks guilty.[45]

Here we are faced with an extremely distressing section of the text, and it contains a number of psychological red flags that are potentially critical. However, it is the use of single-word sentences that really emphasize the apparent simplicity of his father's solution to the problem. Furthermore, these sentences provide a sense of escalation, a sense of panic on the narrator's part. This kind of insight is not something we could possibly learn about through other media sources and is a good example of ASW providing the audience with a much greater understanding of athletes. Not only does this contextualise Agassi's relationship with his father for the audience, it also sheds light on behaviour such as tanking matches that will become a focal point both throughout the text and his career.

In describing his time as a teenager at the Bollettieri academy, Agassi uses voice once again to provoke certain reactions from the audience.

> People like to call the Bollettieri academy a boot camp, but it's really a glorified prison camp. And not all that glorified. We eat gruel-beige meats and gelatinous stews and gray slop poured over rice – and sleep in rickety bunks that line the plywood walls of our military style barracks.[46]

This use of words which are often associated with prison imply the broader phase in life Agassi is going through and in particular the prison that tennis has begun to represent for him. The move to the academy also comes at a time when Agassi, like many other teenagers, is struggling to find his identity while going through puberty, while at the same time coming under extreme pressure to succeed in tennis. The head of the academy, Nick Bollettieri, notices Agassi's talent and extends his stay free of charge. This sequence of events results in rebellion from Agassi: 'The worse I do in school, the more I rebel. I drink, I smoke pot, I act like an ass. I'm dimly aware of the inverse ratio between my grades and my rebellion, but I

[45] Agassi, p. 60.
[46] Agassi, p. 74.

don't dwell on it.'[47] Teenage rebellion is not an uncommon phenomenon and many readers may be able to relate to his description of this tumultuous period of life. However, in Agassi's case this rebellion signals to the audience his struggle with authority – something that later in the book we find out is an important initiator of emotional trauma and depression. The language in this section is an obvious reflection of Agassi's mood at the time: short clauses, frequent bursts of internal monologue – 'I drink, I smoke pot, I act like an ass'. Even without superlatives or detail, the tone is clear; Agassi is displaying his desire to rebel and allowing his teenage voice to boom. The reader is left with the impression that Agassi feels freed by this voice, and permitted to delve deeper into that period of his life.

There are a few instances in which he puts into words the inner thought processes behind the external rebellious actions such as getting his ear pierced, or getting a mohawk and dyeing it pink. One of these instances comes at school, where anxiety becomes part of Agassi's daily routine, and he talks of the barriers in expressing these feelings, echoing the behaviour we can also see in Beard's memoir:

> I don't tell her [Agassi's English teacher] everything, because I can't. I'd feel like a sissy talking about my fear of school, the countless times I sit in class drenched in sweat. I can't tell her about my trouble concentrating, my horror of being called on, how this horror sometimes morphs into an air bubble in my lower intestine, which grows and grows until I need to run to the bathroom. Between classes I'm often locked in a toilet stall. Then there's the social anxiety, the doomed effort to fit in. At Bradenton Academy, fitting in takes money.[48]

This section provides the audience with a glimpse inside Agassi's mind at a vulnerable time in his life. The stream of consciousness style builds intensity and creates a sort of breathless delivery through repetition of phrases like 'I can't', a deliberate technique that gives us a sense of what Agassi is feeling. This has the effect of evoking the same feeling in the reader, furthering our connection to the narrator's voice and bringing us into the story.

[47] Agassi, p. 82.
[48] Agassi, p. 82.

An example that is similar in content but contrasting in style is Obree's establishment of a connection between his anxiety while studying at college and the same feelings he had previously experienced at primary school:

> If I passed a group of people standing about, I would break into a cold sweat and my breathing would become laboured. Some of the feelings I had in the classroom when I was seven would return. I could feel peoples' eyes burning into me as I would quickly hasten my stride to get away, and at these times the world was polarised into 'them and me' and 'the world and me'.[49]

Here we can see a continuation of extended reflection or flashback in past tense, rather than the present tense employed by Agassi and Beard. The use of past tense makes the audience feel more removed, or distanced from the event. It may not be too much of a stretch to consider that the author has deliberately created this distance in order to avoid reliving difficult periods of his life. On the other hand, perhaps it is merely a technique which enables him to reflect on his struggles with the clarity of distance. We cannot be certain as to Obree's intentions when electing to construct his book in the past tense, however the result is nonetheless an effective control and use of distance. Judith Barrington suggests that regardless of tense, the reader must feel that the narrator is creating a certain immediacy, despite the actual chronology of events:

> The reader must have a sense that the narrator is rooted in a particular moment from which he or she may look back, may speak in present tense, or may look forward to the future. The "now" doesn't have to be explicit. Readers don't care about the exact date, or even the decade; what they do care about is a sense that it exists and that it anchors a logical time span.[50]

This suggests that although we may feel a certain level of distance in Obree's story, the fact that he anchors the reader in a logical time span ensures the narrative is still effective.

Agassi's teenage years are critical in his overall journey and link to his early rise to fame and tendency to rebel against public opinion, or more particularly the criticism from media. At

[49] Obree, p. 82.
[50] Barrington, p. 95.

just 19 years old, he is criticised in an *LA Times* article for tanking a match against Jimmy Connors:

> Agassi lost, 6-0, but not before he walked over toward the stands and told his brother, Phil, and coach, Nick Bollettieri, that he wanted to go five sets. Such an admission is a serious breach of tennis etiquette, where egos are as deep and profound as a John McEnroe soliloquy. In effect, Agassi was telling Connors that he would give him a set and still win.[51]

As the article explains, Agassi leaves no doubt as to his intentions:

> "I felt the set was over with," Agassi said. "I didn't want to struggle to hold serve and get beat, 6-2, so my mind went.[52]

This is just one instance of Agassi not abiding by traditional 'tennis etiquette'. His failure to conform is explored at much greater depth in his book, where behaviours such as wearing a wig to cover his hair loss or not wearing white at Wimbledon display his desperation to be an individual and his struggle with identity. The *LA Times* article also offers a contrasting perspective to the one Agassi gives us during his text, in which he describes a humiliating pre-match conversation with Connors: 'Just for that, I tell Perry, I'm beating this guy in three easy sets – and he's going to win no more than nine games.'[53] This is a prime example of ASW filling a void that is generally left to media speculation. However, as readers, whom are we to believe? Is the press more accurate than Agassi himself? We can only assume that Agassi is upholding his end of the unwritten contract with the audience and that he is following the lead of his title *Open.* On the same page as the previous quote, Agassi describes this match by giving us bursts of inner thought:

> The crowd wants Connors to defy the odds, and Father Time, and I'm standing in the way of that dream scenario. Each time they cheer I think: Do they realize what

[51] Thomas Bonk, 'Long Match Is Too Much for Connors : Agassi Advances in Open by Outlasting His Older Opponent in Five Sets', *LA Times,* 8 September 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-09-08-sp-1883-story.html> [accessed 10 Feb 2020].

[52] Bonk.

[53] Agassi, p. 121.

> this guy is like in the locker room? Do they know what his peers say about him? Do they have any concept of how he responds to a friendly hello?[54]

The colon signals the beginning of a series of rhetorical questions, which give us an understanding of what it must be like to stand as Agassi at the net, trying to deflect but in reality absorbing taunts from the crowd.

Beard's memoir is set apart from the other texts in one sense because it deals with different issues – specifically, an eating disorder and negative body-image. However, Beard's bulimia, which she generally refers to as purging, is inescapably intertwined with the same level of depression we see in the other texts. The language she uses in describing her purging is often self-justifying and also closely linked to her toxic relationship as well as to her external stresses as a college student:

> In my room, I got an overwhelming sensation of needing to get rid of whatever was in my stomach. *I can't have this food in me. I need to get it out.* As logical as it was to eat when hungry, it also seemed logical to throw up when full. I walked into the dorm's communal bathroom, and after checking that it was completely empty, I put a finger down my throat and threw up my dinner. And it worked. I felt lighter and had a sense of satisfaction. I found something that felt good, something that finally told the voice calling me fat to shut up.[55]

As we previously explored in regard to her cutting, this example uses language that suggests self-vindication, that links Beard's purging to a positive defence against internal voices. The italicised sentences are again employed to lend impact to her negative inner voice. The sense of positivity regarding her purging might raise concern in the reader: 'And it worked.' Once again, Beard justifies her actions. This behaviour continues to become a rationalized mechanism for self-control over her depression:

> You know those days when right from the moment you open your eyes, you're in a bad mood and pissed off? *The day is going to be shitty, and nothing will make me happy.* Those days were a battle to stay in charge of the one thing that gave

[54] Agassi, p. 121.
[55] Beard and Paley, p. 91.

> me a sense of control. Anything I put into my body, I had to get rid of right away. *Get it out. Get it out.*[56]

This is one of the rare instances when Beard acknowledges her depression and links it directly to purging as the only form of self-control she has. The repetition of '*Get it out*' in the relentless italicised voice signals an urgency to the reader, a desperation for Beard to listen to that voice, to act. As with Agassi, Beard is describing a feeling of hopelessness that is not linked to sport or external events, but rather to her sense of self.

Obree uses a childhood voice in a similar way to Agassi and Beard, a method that engages the audience and lends depth to the narrator and their story. Childhood and teenage trauma are at the heart of Obree's early interaction with depression and anxiety, but he also describes feeling extremely insular and isolated from an early age:

> These are truly the saddest days of my life by a long way and I lived in my self-imposed protective prison for more or less most of my school life. Beyond that my childhood left me with an isolationist and insular personality as well as a real and subconscious fear of social situations.[57]

As I touched on earlier, Obree's book differs from the others in that he applies more of a reflective analysis of childhood; a re-telling in past tense rather than the present-tense method, which provides a distinctly different experience than that of the other two texts. It may be possible that Obree deliberately uses this style of language to distance himself from some difficult memories and life struggles. However, there is still a strong connection between childhood and future issues that arise later in the text. In her paper on memoir, Paula Fass writes: 'Like all forms of writing, memoirs are deeply implicated in complex issues of representation, and most of these writers use their reflections to deal with and overcome issues related to the authenticity of the self today.'[58] Certainly, this seems to be the case with Obree, as he outwardly expresses this ongoing conundrum throughout the book.

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[56] Beard and Paley, p. 92.
[57] Obree, p. 4.
[58] Paula Fass, 'The Memoir Problem', *Reviews in American History*, 34.1 (2006), 107-123 < https://search.proquest.com/docview/218140479> [accessed 13 April 2020] (p. 108).

Aside from the reflection on the impact his childhood has had on his personality, there are anecdotes that give the audience more of an insight into the traumatic events that lead to these feelings. One of these events occurs when Obree and his brother are ten and eleven years old:

> We were walking down a backstreet in the town when we were set upon by three older boys and taken at knifepoint into a derelict house. There my brother was urinated on while I could do nothing to help. We were taken into the basement, where other things happened. One of those was being made to touch each other's genitals at knifepoint while being threatened that they'd hurt the other brother if we refused to do it and vice versa.[59]

We are confronted with this incident just four pages into the text – a possibly calculated move to gain the audience's attention; certainly it is a technique often employed by writers to gain investment from the reader early on. This shocking incident in some ways echoes that of Agassi's father giving him drugs as a child. When coupled with a childhood voice or appearing in a childhood section of the book, such material provides significant impact.

Just as swimming offers Beard a means of escape from her childhood reality, Obree takes refuge in the quietness of cycling, the fresh air, the sense of adventure and release during his teenage years. This detail is perhaps overshadowed by his continual dealings with depressive episodes from an early age:

> I had already been taken to a child psychologist at primary school, but it was at secondary school that suicide seemed like a tempting idea. The language lab window was the biggest drop, and onto concrete, and at these times it was that window which seemed to be the passage to freedom. Ironically, having the 'big get-out' in the back of my mind gave me the flippancy to carry on regardless.[60]

As mentioned previously, Obree would go on to attempt suicide for the first time as a teenager. Placement of this example early in the text is the key component in prioritising this honest and often blunt tone. The reader is immediately shown that this is not a normal

[59] Obree, p. 4.
[60] Obree, p. 8.

teenager struggling to fit in or navigate puberty, but one whose mental health is already in a severely compromised and vulnerable state.

Each text presents readers with multiple voices: some express a childhood innocence; others give shape to negative inner narratives. Each has a role to play in the representation of relationships, an idea that Elise Lopez explores in her work investigating multiple voices in memoir:

> The functions of different voices help to create and shape different interpersonal relationships between participants within the text and outside of it, and were, in fact, found to be the linguistic expression of literary strategies which help the writer to create this range of interpersonality.[61]

These relationships are the foundation of many threads in each narrative: Agassi with his father and support team, Beard with not only the people around her but herself and her internal voices, and Obree with his family and support network.

Strategic beginnings

The opening of any book, but particularly an autobiographical work, can determine the 'rules of engagement' for the text and grip the reader early, whether it presents a comedic flashback into an experience from the narrator's past, a shocking incident that captures the reader's attention or a foreword from a respected and credible person. When writing on the beginning of texts with regard to literary theory and criticism, Bennett and Royle suggest that:

> [i]f beginnings always have a context and are therefore determined by what comes before, the opening to *Tristram Shandy* also makes it clear that, in turn, beginnings determine what comes after. This is true of literary as of other beginnings: beginnings augur, acting like promises for what is to come. Such is the force of many well-known literary beginnings.[62]

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[61] Elise Lopez, 'Locating Multiple Voices in Memoir: Modelling Voice Through Analysis of Interpersonal Linguistic Choices', in *Text-Based Research and Teaching: A Social Semiotic Perspective on Language in Use*, ed. by P. Mickan & E. Lopez (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 97-115 (p. 100).

[62] Bennett and Royle, p. 3-4.

Beginnings, then, may be thought of as promises: not only do they set the stage for what is to come with regard to content, but they also set the tone of the book. In her article on ethics in creative nonfiction, Lynn Bloom highlights the significance of tone:

> In creative nonfiction tone and voice are clear, conspicuous, unmistakable – and therefore an ethical expression of the author's attitude toward the subject. Stories that are written from the heart must be understood from the heart, and tone is a powerful index of that understanding.[63]

Each of the three texts I am examining begins with a specific scene, voice, tone or preface that links immediately to the narrator's sporting career and depression. Agassi, for example, begins by titling his opening section 'The End', which not only signals where he is going to begin his story, but also that this is an important part of his journey:

> I open my eyes and don't know where I am or who I am. Not all that unusual – I've spent half my life not knowing. Still, this feels different. This confusion is more frightening. More total.[64]

The language immediately indicates to the reader that this book is going to examine his identity struggle. Agassi continues to take us through the lead-up to his final professional tennis match, his pre-game routine and rituals, while also providing us with background information. Threading this information throughout such a gripping scene is a means of presenting the reader with vital information without losing the fluidity of the story. The skill and ease with which this is done is something I would like to emulate and learn from with regard to my own creative component: I would like to exhibit some flair and artistic prowess while ensuring I provide readers with enough vital information in the form of sufficient chronological cues to hold the story together. We see this, for example, at the start of Agassi's text:

> We live in Las Vegas, Nevada, but currently reside in a suite at the Four Seasons hotel in New York City, because I'm playing in the 2006 U.S. Open. My last U.S.

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[63] Lynn Bloom, 'Living to tell the tale: The complicated ethics of creative nonfiction', *College English; Urbana*, 65.3 (2003), 276-289 <https://search.proquest.com/docview/236930923> [accessed 30 April 2020].
[64] Agassi, p. 3.

> Open. In fact my last tournament ever. I play tennis for a living, even though I hate tennis, hate it with a dark and secret passion, and always have.[65]

Coupling information with insight lures the reader in, showing us not only the point in time, the significance of this point in time, but the internal conflict that is so heavily prominent throughout the text. The easy fluidity we see early in Agassi's *Open* continues for the duration of the book in terms of structure. Dates and indicators are woven in frequently in order to maintain basic chronology, however it is the free-flowing style of writing which retains the reader's interest and investment.

Beard opens her memoir with a graphic flashforward scene, foreshadowing what is to come. The negative tone and rapid pace lend it real intensity, and the language provides indicators as to not only the content of this ASW, but the style Beard is going to use:

> My heart pumped like crazy, and my breathing was heavy. Suddenly it was hot, too hot. *Let it out.* I felt like a cartoon character with steam coming out of my ears. *Let it out.* Something had to happen. Something had to be done to release the pressure, or it would be released by my exploding. I was going to scream my head off, smash the bathroom mirror, or grab one of those tiny little eyebrow razors and cut my arm.[66]

Just as Agassi signals a conversational tone to the reader on page one, we see Beard's deliberate use of the italicised voice. In this particular instance, the repetition of '*Let it out*' also pushes the pace and frantic energy of the scene. As the initial scene continues, we are provided with further clues or signals as to what Beard's struggles will be:

> The calm that usually washed over me as soon as I made my light little cuts with their delicate beads of blood was replaced by a new fear. In the moment when thinking was not possible and the energy took over, I must have applied too much pressure, because one of the cuts gushed blood. This was not control.[67]

[65] Agassi, p. 2
[66] Beard and Paley, p. 1-2.
[67] Beard and Paley, p. 2.

This is an example that demonstrates her self-harming behaviour to the audience, but she also uses language that immediately sounds as though she is justifying her behaviour. This could establish a level of doubt over the reliability in narration: 'light little cuts' and 'delicate beads of blood' indicate that Beard has rationalized this behaviour as necessary and justifiable, when in reality it is an extreme measure and an issue that will come to form an important focus of the text. This section is deeply tied to Beard's relationship with her body and identity, foreshadowing to the reader what is to follow; making a promise. In his study of ASW, Pipkin offers a slightly different analysis of this relationship between body and identity:

> The relationship between body and identity that these athletes describe reveals the tensions, ambiguities, and paradoxes found in their larger constructions of the world of sports. At their best, athletes speak with their bodies: the word is made flesh. They are all one energy. They claim the admiration of the fan in his armchair in part because they are not subject to the mind-body split that their marvellous performances remind him is too often his problem. Their testimony is that the mind's images work best when idea expresses itself in doing. On the other hand, their greater intimacy with their bodies leads them to read their bodies, and the very act creates a distance between self and body. The paradox is that the body is both a manifestation of identity and a medium or signifier of the self that bespeaks its separateness from the self.[68]

For some athletes, then, this unrelenting focus on the body allows them to achieve greatness and consolidates their sense of identity; in other instances, however, it can have the opposite effect. In Beard's case the intensity of this body-self relationship and the importance she places on it often leads her not to sporting success, but to self-harm and depression.

These texts use different methods for the same effect; they provide the audience with necessary background information, while thrusting them deep into the mind of the narrator without disrupting the narrative stream. Beard continues to use fluid language throughout her memoir, and like Agassi she follows a basic chronological order, with enough dates and time stamps to let us know where we are in her life. There are, however, distinct differences

[68] Pipkin, p. 57.

in the length of these sections; Beard's lasts only three graphic and intense pages, whereas Agassi uses twenty-five pages to take us deep into his mind and onto the court with him.

Flying Scotsman differs from the others not only in syntax, but in the method Obree uses to begin his book and the rigid structure he adheres to. The foreword is elegantly written by Olympic champion cyclist Sir Chris Hoy. Rather than setting a scene as Beard and Agassi do, this section gives us background on Obree himself from an outside perspective and contextualises his place in the world of cycling. It is also clearly part of the marketing strategy of this book, as the cover is labelled with 'Foreword by Sir Chris Hoy'; a quote appears on the back of the book from Hoy as well. The language Obree uses in his opening chapter of the book establishes the expectation that this will be a retelling in the past tense with direct and to-the-point language:

> My childhood is far more influential in my present than a childhood ought to be, so that is where my story begins. I was born in Nuneaton, Warwickshire on September 11, 1965 and came to Scotland shortly afterwards.[69]

As if laid out in bullet-point format, this is far more fact-oriented language and is distinctly different from the fluidity of Agassi and Beard. Obree entices the reader with the story itself, recounting events and anecdotes that jump off the page, sometimes at the expense of a flowing narrative style. Another element which sets *Flying Scotsman* apart is the use of chapter titles, all linked to a certain time in Obree's life and all foreshadowing the upcoming scenes and pages. He follows chronological order to the extreme, using informative but stiff language:

> I wanted to see the city for the sake of the Alhambra Palace, and the whole historical feel of the city itself, but Granada is very near to one of the highest roads in Europe – Pico Velata – in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.[70]

Obree also sticks to rigid dates, perhaps signalling an attempt to maintain control over difficult material: he wrote the book during a period in a psychiatric institution after multiple suicide attempts. Despite the rigidity of Obree's style, his openness about depressive

[69] Obree, p. 1.
[70] Obree, p. 70.

episodes is something that I would like to tap into with my own creative component, albeit in a more fluid way.

Conclusion

Autobiographical sports writing offers an insight into the lives and minds of athletes that would otherwise be left to speculation through consumption of mass media. When elite sportspeople engage with journalists who represent mass media agencies, they are often guarded, wary of providing ammunition for controversial 'click bait' headlines. This means athlete identities are often only glimpsed through a veil that maintains a level of distance between the athlete and general public.

Each of these three texts removes this veil to provide the audience with a far more detailed insight. I have first-hand experience of this type of filtering or censorship, which I will explore further in my creative component. However, the writers of these books do not stop at providing readers with a more nuanced look at their careers – they also offer us comprehensive narration of mental health battles via specifically linked anecdotes. The narration of these issues through carefully selected language allows for engaging, well-balanced stories. My close examination of this literature has informed my own attempt at entering the same field, particularly my findings regarding voice, strategic beginnings and the way in which each author frames depression.

These texts sit within a literary sub-genre that is gradually becoming a respected source among scholars and is providing a foundation for new academic research. Pipkin is not the only voice attesting that autobiographical sports writing can offer an informative and valuable resource in research. In their field of sport, exercise and health (SEH), Sparkes and Stewart argue that sports autobiographies should be taken seriously, explaining that:

> The important point for us is that sporting autobiographies are placed on the agenda and become one of the possibilities from which researchers make their

> choices. In becoming a possibility, a space for critical dialogue opens up that can only be of benefit to the development of scholarship in SEH.[71]

The increasing visibility of the kinds of texts this thesis has considered may allow for more in-depth discourse around the issues they raise. Newman, Howells and Fletcher, for example, draw on twelve sporting autobiographies, including the three primary texts this thesis has examined, as the basis for their sports psychology study: 'Through the analysis of autobiographies this study has enhanced understanding of elite athletes' experiences of depression, and the implications of its interaction with sport performance.'[72] The possibility that this type of literature can lay the foundations for psychological research further solidifies the place of these texts within academia. This may pave the way for future researchers in terms of using ASW as a pedagogical resource.

The significance of ASW is supported by numerous researchers and academic studies across various fields; however, it is the use of specific literary techniques from the authors which brings these texts to life for the general reader. These three books are written in first-person narrative style, which is very common in this field, and allows for a sense of deep personal engagement. In addition, each author carefully frames their own depressive episodes; sometimes this is brutally direct and honest, as in the case of Obree, who uses the word 'depression' frequently and provides graphic details of his suicide attempts. In other instances, this framing can seem guarded, as we see in certain moments within Beard's narration. Regardless of how each author approaches this territory, the fact remains that they are granting us exclusive access to their respective dark locker rooms. Voice is also a particularly important part of autobiographical writing in any context, and the techniques used in these texts reflect this. Beard uses italics to outwardly express her often dark and depressed internal voice, while Agassi works his differing voices through the book in direct speech. All three authors reference childhood experiences or trauma in some way, and the language chosen to bring these childhood voices to life creates still deeper engagement and

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[71] Andrew Sparkes and Carly Stewart, 'Taking Sporting Autobiographies Seriously as an Analytical and Pedagogical Resource in Sport, Exercise and Health', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 8:2 (2016), 113-130, <doi: 10.1080/2159676X.2015.1121915> (p. 127).

[72] Hannah Newman, Karen Howells and David Fletcher, 'The Dark Side of Top Level Sport: An Autobiographic Study of Depressive Experiences in Elite Sport Performers' *Frontier Psychology,* 7:868 (2016) <doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00868>

impact. A final common thread is the way in which each author begins his or her story by selecting a specific opening scene. In the case of Beard and Agassi, these scenes are high in energy and emotion; they set the stage, and make promises for what is to come.

All three of these chosen texts are therefore linked not only through content – they are all written by highly successful elite athletes who have suffered some form of depression – they are also linked through deliberately chosen literary techniques. This combination of content and literary techniques produces narratives that successfully address their stories of depression within elite sport. Whether it is the fluidity of Agassi, the italicised internal voice of Beard, or the brutal honesty and directness of Obree, all of these texts have provided me – as a first-time memoirist – techniques to consider and put into practice. Perhaps by reading these works, other athletes may find the confidence to document and share their own stories about similar experiences, and feel encouraged to lift the lid on their own struggles.

My analysis and close examination of these three primary texts along with related secondary readings has provided a foundation of knowledge from which I have crafted my own narrative. You will see the techniques I have examined at the forefront of my own attempt at giving you a backstage pass into my dark locker room. The following creative practice chapters are an excerpt from my own memoir which will, when complete, detail my experiences of battling with multiple bouts of depression while competing as a coxswain in rowing at Olympic level.

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Creative component:

The Other Games

Rio 2016

There's a moment at the start of every race, after the starter calls, "Poland, Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany, United States of America, New Zealand, attention." Everything goes silent, there's no crowd screaming, no chopper overhead, no creaking in the starting blocks, no grown men breathing out like steam trains, no water lapping under the hulls. Every athlete takes a breath, tenses their muscles, ready for the buzzer. Fifty-four people, six boats, six different countries, four years of hard work, thousands of hours, millions of strokes, all jammed into one single camera frame. In those few seconds, my mind goes so quiet that I can hear my own heart beating as if it's right up in my ears. I can feel the blood throbbing through my veins, down my arms, through my neck, even the balls of my feet pulse against the matte black carbon of the cockpit.

Beeeeeep

We shoot out of the start blocks, our black boat roaring to life; splits pop up on the speed-coach in front of me and I call them out: "1:12, 1:11, 1:12 THAT'S IT BOYS!" I glance across to my left through the 250, scanning the field, we're right in the mix, about a canvas behind the Brits and Germans. *Bronze*. I work through our race plan, the boat is running well, the boys feel strong and powerful, we hit the moves through the 500, "Let's fucking walk here boys," we're all over the Germans now, just clinging to the British stern. *Bronze.* As we come through 1000, I feel a wind starting to pick up on the stroke side, I steer towards the left-hand buoy line, trying to keep the boat straight, I look back down the boat and call the big middle move, "This is it here boys, the big D, let's go on the legs, NOW," I look across to the left again, but I'm not looking at the British stern anymore, I'm looking at the Dutch boat and it's walking away from us, so are the Germans. I call for the move again, "Let's go boys, I really need you to swing here, with me now, SWING, SWING," when I look left again, the Dutch have gone, the Germans have gone, and now the U.S. are right next to us and even the Poles, *the fucking Poles are you kidding me.* I look back in our boat, I know it's over, I keep calling, pleading, begging for more, but the harder we try, the slower we go.

As we cross the line, I can't even hear the thousands of screaming people in the grandstand, I can hear the British men's eight yelling, celebrating, they've just won Olympic Gold. I don't feel like crying, I don't feel like yelling, in fact I don't feel anything at all. Just blank. I make the calls to turn the boat around, and we row over in front of the stand where all the New Zealanders are, a sea of black shirts, flags, banners, and Tom yells from the bow seat, "We should stop and wave to our parents." I make the call, "Eeeeasy oar." We all turn towards the crowd, waving with both hands, trying to force a smile, maybe even show a few teeth. We row back to the pontoon; we get up out of the boat and bro-shake or hug each other. Stephen, Brook, Isaac, Joe, Alex, Shaun, Mike and Tom. Steve calls the boat to heads, and I reach down to pick up the oars.

It's like somebody has tipped a bucket of iced water over my head, punched me square in the nose and kneed me in the balls. *It's over, I fucked it up, four years, four more years for another chance. Shit.* I feel tears start to well in the bottom of my eyes, I let a few sneak out behind my glasses and run down my cheeks. I wipe them away with the back of my hairy arm and squeeze out a smile. The next few minutes are a blur, and after getting changed out of my race gear, skipping all the hygiene protocols, I meet up with the boys to head over and see our families. Along the blue carpets, around the side of the building, through the shadow of that giant grandstand, past the erg room, the bag drop, the medical centre to the media zone. *I swear if any of these reporters tries to interview me right now, I'm going to break their camera.* Through the maze of metal barriers, all signposted with huge Rio 2016 logos, is the family zone, finally. I hug my mum and then my grandparents, I can tell they all want longer hugs than I'm giving them, but I have bigger concerns. "I need a beer." Someone hands me a plastic yellow cup, the hard kind, perfect for beer pong. Within minutes it's empty. Then full again. Magic. I tell my family not to ask how I am or how it went, instead, "Tell me what you guys have been up to." I sink beer after beer, each Skol from those yellow cups turns things a little fuzzy, makes my cheeks feel tight and warm. The day continues in a hazy glow of smiles and "You guys were so brave" until we find ourselves at the New Zealand house.

The larger countries at the games have a 'house' – a place where supporters, family, friends, athletes can all spend time together. The New Zealand house is in the bottom of a flash hotel, it has a beach bar, a little private cove of Ipanema and big TVs playing highlights of the day's

success. I share an elevator with Valerie Adams, Mahé Drysdale and a couple of guys from my eight. As I step out of the elevator into the bar area, a roar of applause goes up. I sneak around the side as quick as I can.

I know it's not for me.

I find a quiet spot outside in the garden bar to share a drink with my family, but then the moment I've been running from sneaks up on me. Our media manager says, "Hey Caleb, TVNZ wants to do an interview with you and Francie."

"Okaaayyyy."

I chug my beer, the alcohol blanket sealing in my fears, *oh god what are they going to ask?*

I know the reporter, Abby Scott, from when I coxed the men's pair, and she can tell it's a sensitive interview. The light behind the camera is so bright I have to fight back the water pooling in my eyes. I give some bullshit answers about how we left it all out there on the water and unfortunately it just wasn't good enough, I lie and agree with Abby when she says how young we are and how exciting it is to just be competing at the games. *Please, please make this stop.* Finally, the noise from the bar erupts and we have to shut down the interview. *If not, I'll have to carry a rock into that fucking ocean and sink.* The men's pair have arrived, the legends, sixty-something races unbeaten, the longest record in the history of rowing capped off with their second consecutive Olympic gold medal. I take a second to think about how happy I genuinely am for them, having been in their boat just a few years back, winning the coxed pair in 2014. Seems like a lifetime ago.

I slip inside the door of the bar, trying to catch what's happening up the front, and find a gap in between some heads where I can see. Well kind of see, I'll be honest, everything is pretty hazy right now. Another beer please. Chef de Mission Rob Waddell is introducing our rowing medallists, the same Rob Waddell I watched on the TV in the Te Mata Primary School library when he won Olympic Gold in 2000. As we applaud our heroes, I think about how many of us were supposed to be up there; as a team we failed across the board. We decide to kick things up a gear and someone hands me a caipirinha, a fitting drink for the Rio Games, sickly sweet

with a layer of sugar coating the bottom of the glass, a zesty twist and then a hit of hard liquor to remind me of my current goal. *Get fucked up and forget.* The call goes out that the last bus back to the village is about to leave and after a quick goodbye to the family I find a group of stragglers and we pile into a lift. While we wait for the bus, I turn around to see my bow seat, Tom, being carried out of a lift by Rob Waddell. It seems Chef de Mission duties also include ferrying drunk rowers out of the club. Tom looks like a small child being carried from the car after a long drive home.

When I leave the bus at the village and pass through security, it's like I'm looking through a screen fading to black after a movie, the corners closing in and the picture blurry. I pull my hood up and stumble towards our apartment block. I grab a blue Powerade from the fridge on the way past the dining hall, trying to get ahead of the hangover. When I reach my apartment I pass out, face down, fully clothed on top of my hard bed in the maids' closet – the village was never finished so my room is the actual maids' closet. What used to feel like hard wooden boards now feels like a cloud that I sink into, melt into.

I wake the next morning around 8am to a throbbing forehead, eyelids stuck together and an oesophagus so dry it feels caked with dirt. I message a few of the lads to see what their plans are for the day, a few bings back and we decide to meet down in the New Zealand team hub and get some tickets. I try to swallow some water, turning my throat from dirt to mud, each gulp harder to get down than the last. After struggling through a can of cold baked beans I head down in the elevator and meet the guys. And that's how it starts: the other games. The games the media don't report. The games that lead to dark places.

I sleep in every day until after 8am, go down to the hub and find out what tickets are available. We spend the morning strolling the Olympic golf course behind the best players in the world, then grab a bus to Copacabana beach for volleyball. The next bus takes us to the hockey stadium – compulsory "O-li-vi-a Meeee-rry" chants and beers with the other members of the "Party bus" Facebook chat group (it's growing by the day). Then it's back to the village for a shower and a bite to eat, the dining hall home to roaring applause every time someone uses the condom dispensers stationed along the back walls. Next it's off to the Olympic stadium to watch Bolt run the 200m final. Then onwards to downtown Ipanema and Rio de Janeiro by

night – free drinks, food and the craziest of parties. From rave clubs by a pool in the Dutch house (sponsored by Heineken) to an organized 'Olympians only' party in a favela overlooking Ipanema beach and the city lights of purple and yellow. Eventually I get pushed into an Uber with some other members of the party bus and wander through the village with free McDonald's and Powerade to try and beat the hangover.

One night I stand on the footpath outside a mini supermarket in downtown Ipanema waiting for some members of my group to buy vodka. I look around the streets in a mildly intoxicated daze: taxis everywhere, yellow, brown, old and older. People in bikinis, people in suits, tropical juice bars on every street corner. Then I notice a pile of black rubbish bags that the mini-mart has thrown onto the sidewalk. A man and woman appear, hunching over the mountain of black bags with an empty sack of their own. They pick out slivers of food, filling their sack with scraps they deem edible. A mini-mart worker smoking a fag on his break says it's for their kids. *What the actual fuck is wrong with the world?* My friends come out of the supermarket and start spiking a bottle of coke with Smirnoff and passing it around the group for swigs of burnt throat. When I look up the man is in front of me, attempting to communicate across an ocean of language with his hands – he wants some vodka. I look at the group, my brain can't quite comprehend what the fuck is happening. We tell him to find a cup and he passes me an empty, secondhand can of Coke. He watches as I pour vodka into the dirty can and dances around. He waves his arms, like he's doing a ritual dance, grin growing between his ears. My heart breaks inside, I feel small, like the entire Olympic circus is just smoke from a world that's burning. I wonder how we're treated like these weird superheroes and there are still millions of people in the world scavenging for scraps of food and living in tin shacks. *What the fuck is the point*. But I return to the party bus and continue my routine of free McDonald's, beer and kissing random girls. Until one party tips me over the edge.

My Facebook messenger beeps: Party bus team meeting on level seven, NZ block. I ask, "What's our goal for tonight?" The hockey girls have just lost the bronze medal match in a close game, we belted out chants and yelled until we could barely speak. One of the sevens sisters replies, "Get the hockey girls drunk, get them dancing." It all goes tits up after Sophie shouts me a slippery nipple. Whispers spread through the horde of athletes at New Zealand

house, “There’s a favela party up the hill, we’ve bought enough tickets for all of you, but don’t tell management.” The security lectures we had at the start of the games get chucked out the window and we start to file out, a train of drunk Olympians staggering across the street to the base of the favela. I ask, “Is it safe?” Mahé Drysdale says, “Yeah it’ll be sweet!” The local taxi service is three guys on scooters, apparently, but we just jump on the back, it’s only ten Brazilian reals. I’ve got a can of Skol in each hand and tell my guy, “Let’s win this race bro, I ride motorbikes so go as fast as you can.” The battle begins and we start mowing through the field, passing the cyclists, the sevens girls and into the lead. I hang my legs out like a MotoGP rider and urge my dude onwards. There’s no chequered flag at the top but I jump off celebrating the triumph, or more importantly that I didn’t spill a drop of beer, and I skull both cans like a walrus.

The rave cave club is a concrete box with a dance floor that overlooks Ipanema beach, purple lights as far as my drunk eyes can see. After hooking up with a fourth girl in three days, I feel a wave of heat start to swell at my forehead. It washes over my whole body, until I’m convinced my brain is about to explode. A coughing fit rips through my core, each muscle fibre stripped, curling me over like a snail. *Holy shit I need to get out of here.* I link arms with some of the cyclists, form a swaying wall of sickness and stagger down the hill through the favela.

I sleep for twenty-three of the next twenty-four hours. Sweat through the sheets four times. My body shuts down and I gradually descend from bulletproof Olympian to empty-named nobody, the rings on my black shirt hollow, transparent. I drag my sick body to the closing ceremony, plastic ponchos and selfies from Joe’s shoulders as the rain pelts down, one last middle finger from Brazil. The Olympic torch gets handed to the Tokyo administration. Here’s hoping they don’t fuck the next one up.

As I sit there in the rain and wind, shivering next to some of the swimmers I made friends with, I think about the last four years. I think about the good times, pizzas with the lads in Varese or when the boat was truly humming, cutting through the silky Swiss water in Sursee. I think about the shitty times, when the boat felt like we were pushing it through mud, or when the guys were bickering like a bunch of teenagers. I think about all the fucked-up things

that led to this moment in time. I've spent four years – probably closer to ten – building up to the games, training two to three times a day, six days a week.

My routine used to start with an alarm at 5:30am, a spring out of bed and morning espresso while I read the sports news. An eight-minute drive to the lake where I talk shit with the boys until it's time to train on the sublime stretch of water we call home. The sun rises behind banks of ferns and flaxes, water like glass, the only thing breaking it is our boat. I drive my team to their limit every session, making sure they're efficient, powerful, mentally dialled in to every single stroke. Our crew debriefs after the session, discussing how we can get a more accurate catch and what else to improve on for next time before an hour's break and then a gym session. I push myself hard, try to do more muscle-ups than everyone else, getting a fix of endorphins and muscle pump for the day. A quick trip home for some study and much-needed brain activity, a balanced, calculated meal of poached eggs on rye bread with a side of rice and veges for lunch, before it's back down for the afternoon session. The water is slightly rougher than the morning, but dusk is closing in. The sun drops behind the trees, brown, red, yellow oaks and maples that tower over the High Performance Centre. The autumn air is crisp, a sky of red and orange. My routine repeats every day except Sunday: rowing may be our religion, but Sunday is still God's day.

Over the years I've put myself through endless testing and trials just to earn my seat. I have pushed people out of the way, leap frogged a few more experienced coxswains just to get a look-in. I missed my cousin Charles' wedding, my mum's birthday, multiple Kirk family reunions, and even skipped out on dates with that cute girl from uni because my eyes literally couldn't stay open. I spent months on end at training camps in Switzerland and Italy, which were amazing, but after four months of living out of a suitcase the novelty wears off. The Olympic bubble swept me up and sent my brain floating around the village, wondering if I even deserved to be waiting in the food line behind that marathon runner or that weightlifter. But I poured every gram of myself into that one race, five-and-a-half minutes of competition and now it's done. No heavy medal around my neck. No sponsored Audi Q5 with *Olympic Champion* plastered across the side. No routine. I don't have anything to get me off the Campbell Street couch or stop me watching Netflix and binge-eating Doritos.

When there are people around, which isn't often, they ask me how I'm going. "Good thanks, enjoying not getting up early." *I can't tell them that I fucking hate myself or that yesterday I lay on my bed staring at the ceiling for an hour wondering what it would feel like to jump off the Karapiro dam, to watch the concrete water get closer and faster and closer until I can't feel the sudden stop.*

2018

The Plummet

The last week has been like a dream, Ngaire makes me feel like I'm high all the time. Her granny brews black plunger coffee just for me every morning and I sit outside on the porch watching the sun hit the treetops and the sparrows chirp to each other. We wear double denim and do crosswords on the train into London, sharing headphones, listening to our playlist – but I feel detached, like I'm floating above and watching myself, the bubble of Ngaire the only thing keeping me together. It's the 26th of September 2018 and the summer squad team announcement is due any day. I've felt sick waiting for it, stone-cold last at the World Champs in Bulgaria has emptied any hope I had for my career, *this must be it for the eights programme, surely, they'll only keep a few in summer squad and drop the rest of us, no coxswains.* We're getting ready to head out to Hever Castle for the day with Granny, she says the grounds are beautiful and that it's a peaceful place. Then I get an email from Noel Donaldson, *fuck this can't be good*:

> Hi Caleb,
> I understand from the other boys that you're in the UK at the moment, what would be the best way to contact you? Whatsapp? Messenger call?
>
> Cheers,
> ND

My stomach felt twisted before, but now it's like someone elbowed me in the gut and I can feel breakfast trying to climb out of my throat.

> Hi Noel,
> It might be best if you just email what you need to say.
> Cheers,
> Caleb

Then I add:

Actually, you can call me on FB Messenger.

He says that due to the result of the eight and the whole team, they've had to make some decisions around the summer squad and the way forward.

"Unfortunately, your name will not be on the list that gets released tomorrow. Us selectors feel it's time for a fresh start with the eights programme."

I say, "Yeah I figured there would be some hard calls coming through given the results, I understand."

I feel empty, gutted, but also not surprised, until the next sentence crushes me.

"And I should tell you that we've offered two coxswain spots to Bos and Nat Bocock."

Are you fucking kidding me? I thought a lot of us were getting dropped and there was no money for coxswains, now you're telling me you've given Nat a fucking spot, she's shit, she hasn't done anything at all, my record is better than anyone else's in the country.

I say, "I feel like you're making a big mistake and that's completely unfair, I've got far more experience and a better record than her by a mile. That's pretty disappointing to hear." *You've had it in for me all year, you fucking asshole, I can't believe you're blaming this year on me, maybe if you had any sort of clue what you were doing, the programme wouldn't have been such a fucking disaster.*

He says, "If you want to continue in the sport then there is a pathway there." *So, you want me to quit, the door is shut, give up.* I hang up the phone, knowing the next words won't be pretty. *Slimy cunt*.

Ngaire walks into the room, she was listening to the conversation, she hugs me as the tears drip off my cheeks and onto her shirt. My head spins. *What the fuck am I going to do now, I'll have to find a job, I'm done with this fucking sport, what has it given me?*

The next few days are a blur, I feel foggy all the time, I can't cry, I can't feel anything but empty, worthless. *They were probably right, you've been shit for years, if you had that spark you used to have none of this would have happened, you should quit, you should walk away, nobody cares anyway, they won't miss you, people will blink and forget your name. Who even*

are you without rowing? You're nobody. I wander around London like a hollow puppet with nobody pulling the strings, limp. Ngaire does her best, she kisses me like I'm the only person in the world, she runs her fingers through my hair as I stare at the ceiling and watch it swirl. *There's no point to this life, you're bad for her, you should just hang yourself from that tree down in Granny's garden and be done with it.*

We arrive back in New Zealand and I'm completely aimless, the only thing that takes my mind off wanting to kill myself is when I'm with Ngaire or when I study. I have one final assignment to finish my degree and I immerse myself in it, *I want to finish something on a high, I have to do well in something, I'm a shitty boyfriend, a shitty athlete, pfffft athlete what a fucking joke.* I begin to struggle being around people, each set of eyes burns into me, *they must think I'm a piece of shit.* The next month is slow and boring. I struggle to remember the good days, getting stuck in my own thoughts, a vacant stare painted on my face. It starts to wear on Ngaire, but I can't stop it, like someone's pulling on a thread and unravelling me. When the marks come back from the final assignment of my degree, I don't feel a ripple of happiness, the A+ at the top hollow, like I am. I look in the mirror and I notice my ribs more, see the skin clinging to each bone, my shoulder blades poke out and the tattoos on my chest and shoulder don't show up, like someone has turned the contrast down to zero.

In between conjuring up the best way to end things, I swirl around pulling at my hair thinking about how the fuck I'm going to pay for rent, for food, for petrol, *fuck why would anyone hire me?* My phone rings – Glenn Ross, my old rowing coach and manager from school.

He says, "I heard what happened with NZ Rowing, they're just a bunch of assholes, it's absolute bullshit how they treated you. What are you up to over the next few days?"

"Nothing much, to be honest."

"Well listen, we're at camp in Mangakino, would you like to come down and have a chat about coaching? I think if I juggle things a bit, I can find some money for you too."

"Yeah I can head down this arvo if that works?"

"Yeah, no worries, Bruce and I are looking forward to seeing you."

Shit, what have I agreed to, all the boys are going to think I'm a loser, dead last, dropped, a nobody. I squirm at the thought of being around people, let alone teenagers, but I know it's a lifeline, I know I need to go.

It rains every day I'm there, Mangakino as dreary as ever, just like when I was at school, early mornings, numb feet and hands, wind that blows straight through me. I'm sheepish around the group, a walking embarrassment. Glenn says he has ten grand set aside for me, I can do as much or as little as I want.

"We'd just love to have you round again. The boys'll love it as well and it takes some of the load off Bruce."

Don't do it, there's no point, they won't want you around.

"That would be great, thanks so much, Glenn."

Stupid fucking idiot, why did you say yes? You're not any good, they won't want to listen to you, fuck I wouldn't listen to you.

I get another call two days later from Lisa Holton, she's been a manager at Rowing New Zealand for years and ever since I was a seventeen-year-old in the junior team she's been so good to me. We catch up for coffee at Paddock and she says she knows of a gardener looking for workers, that she'd happily work in around my coaching times. "Oh my God, Lisa, that sounds perfect, thanks so much." *You know nothing about gardening, you fucking idiot, she's going to realise you're useless straight away.*

Things are falling into place, despite the constant thought spirals of hating myself, despite looking in the mirror and watching the skin hang from my collarbones, despite my hip bones poking out, despite looking at the swollen veins running down my arms, picturing the first slice, the spurt of blood, the gush that follows. *Do it, make it all stop*. I take on a full-time workload, coaching 5:30-8, gardening 9-5. Long days, but my theory is that the less downtime I have, the less I'll think and the less I think, the less likely I am to kill myself. *Good luck, shithead.*

Janene the gardener is one of the sweetest people I've met. She asks me real questions about me, about life, and I ask her about plants, weeds, flowers, trees. Some days the plants seem

like they're healing me; trimming a good buxus or griselinia hedge, working for that perfect cut with nice square edges and straight lines, make things quiet in my head. I pack lunches, BLT sandwiches on thick grainy bread, muesli bars and lollies to keep the energy up – although I save all the yellow ones for Janene's husband Phil. When I get home to the flat, stinking of sweat and green waste, I crack open an ice-cold Sol from the fridge, the poor man's Corona. I exhale and feel my shoulders relax, my neck loosen and as I unwind, I also unravel. *What the fuck are you doing? You're going nowhere, nobody cares about you anymore. What are they going to say about your career? A failure. A quitter. You may as well just quit everything, check out, end it now.*

Things with Ngaire are up and down. She says I'm vacant most of the time, "it's like you're not even there, even when we have sex." She's not wrong. She knows what it's like to feel nothing, to just kind of exist for the sake of existing, to plot ways to make it stop, to dream of that final release, that long breath out and into the void. Each time we argue, I lash out, never in an aggressive way towards her, but in a way that makes me hate myself more, in a way that everything is my fault, a way that makes my forehead ache. *You're going to fuck this up too, she's going to leave you, fuck I'd leave you and I am you. Maybe you should just tell her what happened when she broke your heart in April. When you spent a month just trying to smile again. When you started talking to her best friend. When you slept next to her. When you kissed her. Fuck fucking fuck. You piece of shit. You can't tell her now.*

When I'm coaching in the mornings I get some respite, a bit of quiet. As the rowing boys work hard to push their red boat against the heavy flow of the Waikato River, the sun sneaks up over the banks and creates those flares of light that warm me up. The kids cling to every word I say, changing their technique instantly, pushing themselves further than before. They say thanks after every session. *Why are you thanking me? Don't you know I'm useless, no good at anything, I wouldn't listen to me.*

The Bottom

It's December 2018, I'm due to graduate in two weeks and then head away to the Gold Coast with the rowing kids. After coaching in the morning, I call in to my grandparents' house to have a shower before picking up my graduation gown from down the road. I knock and walk in the door; Nana hugs me and looks into my eyes: "How are you?" The words crumble my insides, I have no control over anything as I burst into tears, they stream down my cheeks, the kind of crying where my chin shakes and I get chills down my arms. *What the fuck is happening?* For the first time in months, the lies stop, sort of. "I don't know why I feel like this." I let down my fake smile and say: "Every day I wake up and I'm empty, I'm like a shell, like there's no point to any of this." As Nana hugs me tight I feel like a child again, like when she used to read me *The Little Yellow Digger* or *Hairy Maclary* at night in bed. She'd always fall asleep halfway through and when I said, "Nana, you're asleep!" she'd say, "No I was just resting my eyes, you should try it." She tells me that I need to take some of the load off, I'm doing too much and that after everything that's happened, it makes sense.

My relationship continues to get worse. I snap at Ngaire one night while we lie in bed, she bursts into tears and leaves, the sound of that door slamming shakes all four walls of my little shoebox bedroom. *Fuck her. She doesn't get it.* The next day I ask if I can pick her up, "Let's just head to the beach, let me make it up to you." As we drive out of Cambridge and onto the highway towards the Mount, the only thing breaking this desert of silence is the sound of my exhaust as I chop through the gears. Then come the words that I've been waiting for, *fuck here we go*. She says, "Pull in at Keeley's landing up here, we can't keep doing this." More silence, then she starts:

"What's going on with you, you've never been so distant. You snap at me for no reason. I haven't seen you truly smile in months. I can't be with someone like this, how can you love me when you don't love yourself?"

My eyes sting red and again tears gush down my face and drip from my chin. "I don't know what's happening to me. I wake up every morning feeling heavy, when I think about leaving my room it terrifies me. I think I'm depressed."

"You need to get help, I can't help you anymore, I've tried so hard."

"I know."

"Can you take me home now."

I cry all the way home. After dropping Ngaire off I retreat to my room at the flat, my safe space. Lying on my back I stare at the ceiling for hour on endless hour, I have no energy, no fight, *you're pathetic, look at you, fucking this up like you do with everything, you should just end it.* I stay in my shoebox room for three days, I stop eating, I stop talking, I stop going to work, I stop coaching, the walls blur into each other, my sternum bones almost poke through the skin. Until finally, I text my sports psych Jason:

Hey Jase

Can I book in to see you?

Things are not good

Can I call you now?

Um ok

He tells me to get my laptop out and write down just one thing I like about myself. I gaze into the whiteness of a blank document, my skin tingles, eyelids heavy, *good luck, there's nothing good about you, you're worthless, a failure at being a boyfriend, a failure at rowing, you should just open up your wrists and be done with it, you can't even do that, you're a failure at being a failure, fucking pathetic.*

I play music but don't hear a thing. It's just voices over voices, yelling louder and louder, telling me – *do it*. I stare at the empty document for three hours. I can't even pull the thoughts from my brain, they're trapped in my forehead, sending words spiralling around inside my skull, bouncing off my eardrum snares. Each egging the other on, until there's no voice saying *don't*, no compass, no me. We're just thundering down a gravel road with no headlights, no brakes, not even a steering wheel. The only thing I manage to write down is instructions. A note for the person who opens my laptop first.

Endnote:

I'm sorry it has come to this. But I can't find any way to make it stop. I've pretended to be good for so long, I've put up the front, the fake smile and I can't do it anymore. To all of you that love me, don't blame yourself, this was the only way for me. Continue to love, to grow, to learn from each other. And don't let the voices take over. I just need to be free. Make sure you use a carbon-free coffin. Cremate me on a pyre at Papanui Point, scatter my ashes from the top of Mount Karioi. But save some and plant a tree somewhere on Brandon's farm so you guys can visit. If anyone (except Ngaire, because she has amazing taste in music) plays anything but these songs at my funeral, I will find you and haunt you forever:

The Night We Met – Lord Huron

The Day I Die – ISLAND

Yellow Leadbetter – Pearl Jam

Have a Cigar – Pink Floyd

Your Song – Elton John

All I Want – Kodaline

Alesund – Sun Kil Moon

Stargazer – ISLAND

And all of you fuckers better dance to that last one. Drink until you re-enact stories and dress up in my clothes (they might be a tight fit). Smoke weed until you glow, and your ribs hurt from giggle fits. And would somebody please crack open that bottle of Blue Label I gave to Grandad years ago.

The official business:

I name Joshua Carl Olsen (half-brother) and Eilis Mary Yates (first cousin) to be executors to this list of wishes. All registered vehicles in my name are to be signed over to my brother Josh. All Olympic gear and rowing memorabilia to be donated to my mother's shrine for her perfect son. The funds in my Westpac accounts are to be collected and divided/dispersed by percentage. Seventy percent is to be donated to a charity of the executors' choice. The remaining thirty percent is to be withdrawn in fifty-dollar notes and placed in front of a family gathering to see what happens. All my other shit can be burnt, fought over, stolen, pissed on or thrown off the dam after me; honestly, I couldn't really give a shit.

Peace out bitches.

2019

The Comeback

After months of swapping between the men's and women's boats, trying to claim a seat back, I'm officially announced as coxswain for the Women's eight on the 13th of May. Just two days later our whole women's squad is called into an unexpected meeting with Rowing New Zealand management. We all start speculating as to what this is about. Kelsey pipes up, "Last time we had a meeting like this our coach left." *Shit that's a good point, Dan has been acting really weird the past few days.* Gary Hay, the head women's coach, comes into the board room, followed by the HP director and the other women's coaches. They explain that Dan Kelly has resigned, effective immediately. I glance around the room, Kelsey laughs out loud, but in that 'oh fuck' kind of way. *She was right*. They draw up the strategy on the whiteboard in front of us, under Gary Hay it now says Women's pair, Women's eight, Reserve pair. *What the actual fuck.* The stress of not knowing what boat I'm in has just washed away and now this! All of the girls look stunned. Before we have the chance to think too much, Gary says let's go rowing. We all take a deep breath, grab our boat and head out for our first training session with a new coach in charge.

Over the next month our boat speed continues to improve, each row shows glimpses of a rhythm that feels unstoppable, unbeatable, like the boat is running on a conveyor belt. I feel good in my new seat. I lead the girls every day, talk openly, ask for improvements, work hard on getting the stroke perfect, the catches crisp, the finishes quiet. They tell me when I'm doing well, "Yeah Caleb!" after I make a good call, or "Caleb that was epic." I never know what to say, the praise jolting me from my chain of thought, clamming me up, and the next sentences stick to my throat. But I feel like me again, as if the past three years are a faded canvas. The girls listen, they concentrate, they improve, and I can tell they want me around. When I'm not at the lake, loving the sport more than ever, I'm in my room writing. My creative brain runs rampant on white pages, poetry, prose, articles, I'm at my fluid best. Dreaming of Waioeka Gorge waterfalls and waves crashing against the rocks of Papanui Point when I was twelve.

Winter is creeping up on us. The mornings show a bit of sting, the southerly wind chills my bones and I dig out an extra layer or two from the wardrobe. The few days before we head to Europe are always tricky, tidying things up at home, getting appointments out of the way, a haircut, packing bags, ready for three months away. We get our normal leaving gift from Lake Karapiro, the foggiest morning of the year, one of those days where it doesn't lift until after lunch. We're forced to sit on the ergs and create our own mini climate in the gym, rivers of sweat pouring off the rowers. We catch shuttle buses to Auckland airport, the timer starting on our journey, the one that from the door of my flat to the door of my hotel room in Poland takes thirty-three hours. I want to say you get used to it, it gets easier after doing it so many times, but honestly, I think I always forget how much it sucks. My nose dries up and cracks from the aircon, my gut tightens from eating shitty plane food pumped full of preservatives and my skin feels like I've bathed in Rio water, sticky and grimy.

After arriving in Poznan, Poland, I'm excited about getting to race in a few days. The course always feels fast, like someone's plonked a concrete bathtub in the middle of town, just over 2kms long, only wide enough for one warm-up lane and big Pacman aligners that are meant to help people steer at the starting line. Our boat feels good straight away, Gary has nailed the set up and we can tell it's a good hull, the water bubbles underneath nicely and it sits true and level in the water. After our first row I feel my throat become scratchy, a bit like sandpaper, and my voice starts to crack. *Fuck off don't do this to me again.* In 2015 before the Windermere Cup regatta in Seattle I spent ten days in silence, laryngitis turning my voice box into a dog-toy squeaker. I get put in isolation from the girls when I'm not in the boat, I eat at different times, sit at my own table, walk to the boat park alone and lie in my room watching Netflix or staring at the ceiling. *Shit I can tell it's coming again. This is your fault, why the fuck did you get sick, you should have been more careful, you should have done more. What if you're not good in time for racing, what if you have to sit there and watch as they all row away from us, you're such an idiot, worthless.*

The day before racing starts I can talk again, but only when I'm coxing, I have to save it for when it matters most, and even after an hour on the water I can tell it's still not perfect. Finally race day comes and I write a list:

- Start well, front load
- Get length and rhythm
- Diamonds under pressure
- Stay calm, breathe
- TRUST

Our warm-up is solid, the rhythm feels good even without Kerri and Grace in the boat. As we row across into the starting blocks, I think about how amazing it is to be racing in this black row suit, with these girls. I thought I was done, I thought this would never happen again, I thought I would be just another name forgotten, another person spat out by the system. *Enough corny shit, come on, focus, get dialled in, this is IT.* As the starter runs through the roll call, my breath slows but my heart thumps a bit quicker. "Canada. New Zealand. Germany. Australia. Attention."

Beeeeep

We start strong, give away a few seconds to the young German eight beside us, but push onto a good rhythm through the second 250m. We walk out a few seats on Aussie through the thousand, sitting back on our strokes, levering well into the headwind. As we come into the third 500, I look across to the left and see the yellow boat start moving up on us, when I look back down the lane a gust has smashed us and we're nearly in the bow-side buoy line. *Fuck you weren't paying attention, get it back, smooth on the strings, call a move.* "Alright, ladies, Aussie is coming at us, we need to really swing into this headwind, this one, NOW!" As I get the boat heading straight down the lane again I can see the Aussies have moved away, *dammit you missed the moment.* We row home for second place, not a terrible place to start, but could be better. I'm livid at myself for missing that wind gust, but I catch the spiral. During our debrief I speak up: "Yeah listen girls, sorry, I think I missed a wind gust in that third 500 where the Aussies snuck away on us, I'll be more onto it next time."

The next day our repechage goes according to plan, we start well, get a good smooth rhythm and we're super brave and aggressive in the second 500, pulling out a few seats on the British

eight. I call big pushes into the wind gusts as the headwind hammers into the bow, trying to slow our boat, each gust and each push gives us a few feet and we edge away to around half a length lead. The Brits come back at us a few seats but I decide not to sprint, *we don't need to,* and keep the girls rowing long and strong down to the finish line.

It's finals day in Poznan, the wind continues to funnel down the lanes, gusty, nasty headwind. We prepare to step up on yesterday, find the same rhythm, be brave in the middle and never let up. Even as we back into the starting blocks, the boat holder can't grip us. "Hold on tight, with two hands!" *Ugh, stupid bitch!* We have to row away and reset, *breathe, it's ok, you've got this.* We are under the starter's orders again: "China. Great Britain. Australia. United States of America. New Zealand. Canada. Attention."

Beeeeeeeep

The first few strokes are heavy, it's like the girls are pushing hard but the boat takes a while to get the message, I can see through my peripherals the other boats have got a jump on us. I glance across to my left after a few hundred and see the Aussies have started like a rocket and shot out to half a boat length on the field. *What the fuck? Where was that in the heat?* As we come through 250m I call the transition, "Let's push for that rhythm, ladies, swing back and stand on it, this one, NOW!" We lengthen out our strokes, lean back into the headwind, but it's still not quite fast enough. We're bleeding seconds through the second 500 and the US and Aussies sneak out to a full length and clear water on us. Through the third 500 I'm on the lookout for gusts, *ooh here's one,* "Gust coming in, ladies, push through, this one, NOW." The girls push again, and we pull up and pass the Brits, "Fuck yes, ladies, that's it, keep swinging on those handles, swing, swing." We're coming up to that crunch point now, just before the sprint, and I can feel the legs starting to falter, the wind getting on top of us. I look up for gusts again, but they're just in our lane, I can see it on the water. *Are you fucking kidding me? This is bullshit!* I call the sprint, ask for more legs, plead for more drive, beg for a push, but we've lost the speed and I watch the three leading boats row away from us.

Fourth.

Nothing stings quite like fourth place, I mean obviously coming last is worse, but knowing you probably could have won a medal leaves you with that dry cotton mouth, rasping for better. When I get back to my hotel room I open my laptop and write, *I need to get these words out of me, I need to get it on the page, out of my head!* After lines and lines of anger: *unfair, bullshit, frustrating, fuck this*, I let it go, fill my ribcage with as much air as I can possibly squeeze in, like a balloon about to pop, and as it comes out, I loosen up*. It's just a world cup, we didn't even have our best combination out there, and now I know exactly what we need to work on before the next race, we HAVE to be better.*

After a two-week block in Belgium, pushing our swing back, improving our rhythm as we row up and down the Nete Canal, chewing up kilometres, getting better every stroke, we ship out to England and Henley Royal Regatta. It's like no other, with crews match-racing through a number of knockout races until only one is left as the winner, no points for second place. Henley is a bit like a circus; think horse racing meets rowing, compulsory formal dress code in most spectator sections, the more outrageous the suit combo the better. Jugs of Pimms everywhere you look, and all the rich British snobs moor their yachts and boats up alongside the course, glancing over their spectacles as a race comes flying past. This year Henley is our first competition with Kerri and Grace in the boat, doubling up and racing both the pair and eight, Gary says it's like bolting on a couple of turbos – the nick-name sticks. With a knockout race format, we're first up against a university crew, and dispatch them in a textbook performance. We move on to the Dutch national crew in the next round, preparing for a battle paddle, treating this like our biggest race of the season. As a team we speak about not fearing any of our opposition, but respecting them all the same, so we get ready for a tight one, a good chance to test that unbeatable rhythm. We execute a near perfect start and transition, the boat takes off like a rocketship, it's like the hull is repelling water, bubbles gushing underneath as we chew up the first part of the course. I look across after we push onto the mid-race beat and we have lengths and lengths on the Dutch boat, *what the fuck? How did that happen so fast?* As we pass through halfway and into the crowded part of the bank, I call the rate down – it's an unwritten rule at Henley that you shouldn't win by too much, because that wouldn't be good sportsmanship. "Let's keep some good push in the water, ladies, but ruuunnnnn the boat out, breeeeathe, give me another roll of the wheels into the front." Even as we take the weight off and the rating down, the hull keeps sliding like we're on ice, no

friction, no noise. It's the feeling we've been after, the rhythm, our rhythm, "That was exactly what we have been working towards, ladies, nobody can touch us when we get into that rhythm, that extra roll of the wheels through the front, those light hands. It was an absolutely clinical row."

Glowing from our semi-final race, we get ready to take on the British, the same crew that stole a medal from us in Poznan. We plan for a tight one again, but talk about trusting the rhythm, getting into the same flow we found yesterday. The pre-race warm-up is the same as the day before, the boat feels good, every piece in that rhythm and we head into the blocks awaiting the starter's instructions. It's a bit different at Henley, you have an umpire's boat that pulls in between the pontoons and they start the race by dropping a flag, rather than the automated system with a beep and light like we're used to.

"When I see you are straight and ready, I will start you like this: attention, go. Get ready please."

I can feel the tension; amid the chaos that is Henley, there is silence, it's like someone turned down the volume on all the drunk people lining the banks.

We shoot out of the blocks just like yesterday and take an early lead, a few seats up within ten strokes. But as we start to transition onto our rhythm, the girls aren't quite in sync, they're rushing off the back turn, the part where the boat really runs away. *Shit I can't stop it, call it again.* "I really need you to run the boat out here, ladies, trust it." But it's like a runaway train and I can feel myself starting to match the frantic stroke rate with my voice. I call for a roll out, the same call as yesterday, but nothing is stopping this. Yesterday we were on a conveyor belt, today it's like pushing the boat through silt. We still pull out a few lengths of clear water on the Brits, but I can tell we're working the tits off it to get the speed. We cross the line and I force a celebration, drag my hands in the water and splash a little bit, I know I have to out of respect, and I know it wasn't good, but we still got the job done. As we gather in the giant white tent where the boat racks are and debrief the race, Kerri says something that takes real bravery after a win: "That wasn't good enough, that wasn't our rhythm. We can't race like that when we come up against Australia and the US. I felt like I couldn't even work today, it

was so rushed, there was no rhythm." I watch a few of the girls, they're pissed at the comment, but she couldn't be more right. It's the mark of a real champion, in my opinion, to look past the result and understand how things must be done; even if the delivery isn't perfect, those conversations make the difference. The lesson is one that we desperately need, a lesson that doing things the hard way won't work when we face the best in the world in Rotterdam, the lesson that we need to trust in our rhythm, we need to trust in each other, and they need to trust me.

The next morning we travel straight to Rotterdam, eager to correct our Henley performance and prove to ourselves that we can do better. Heats day arrives and you couldn't dream of what comes next; the wind has been so strong and the lanes unfair, so FISA have called for a time trial format. On thirty second intervals, each crew races down one of two 'fair' lanes and the fastest times determine the results of each heat. This is perfect, a chance to test our rhythm and trust in our process, not worried about any other boats, not worried about winning, just us and the course. It's like we're back at Karapiro, no boats around, a clear track. As we come down the course the wind is so strong, I've got the boat drifting down the lane sideways, trying to keep it as straight as possible. We push onto that rhythm, our rhythm, and hit a consistent beat the whole way down the course, pushing to the finish. *I think it was good, it felt good, but fuck knows how we went.* We row back around the warm-down lane to the pontoon; Gary is there ready to pull us in. "Six seconds faster than anyone else." *Jesus Christ SIX SECONDS?* It's the perfect message and I can see the girls relax; each cheeky smile tells me they're starting to believe, just what we need. When we row as fast as we can we're better than anyone else out there.

Two days later we put that trust to the test and decide to treat the final like a time trial. Kerri and Grace were beaten a few hours ago by the Aussie pair in a super-tight race, but we all know they've been worked so much in the past two weeks, six races in three days at Henley and another four in the last two days, they're in a deep hole. Before our pre-race chat I talk to Gary to hatch a game plan. "I've been thinking of ways to frame it, since the Aussies are doubling up as well and they're so close with Kerri and Grace, we know that they basically cancel each other out. Let's say to the other six that they're the turbos today, they need to make the difference." He agrees and we bring the girls in for the briefing. "Trust in Caleb, he'll

have the race under control, just listen and imagine there's nobody else next to you," says Gary.

The race goes exactly to plan, we start well, transitioning into that rhythm that we know is fast enough. In the second 500 I see a gust coming in on the stroke side, "Gust coming, ladies, swing and push into it, this one, NOW!" The girls lean on the oars, powering through their feet and into the wind. I keep the boat straight with the rudder, drifting down the lane again and when I look across to my right, "Fuck yes, ladies, we took two seats on that gust, let's go again, another one coming, this one, NOW!" the rhythm feels unstoppable, the boat is cutting through the wind like it's nothing and we continue to move away through the middle of the race. "You're all turbos today, keep trusting that rhythm." Coming into the last 250 I can hear the Aussies calling for a sprint, so I call for one gear, I know they won't catch us, "Alright, ladies, they're trying to sprint, let's just change up one gear and hold, this one, now." One little point of rating and a few watts, we push away even more, I decide to hold it there and keep our sprint hidden, a little treat for World Champs. We cross the finish line over a boat length and clear water in front, it's like we've just been in a match race, we knew it was us vs Aussie. When I look around to see who came third, I see the damage we put on the field, the other crews still battling their way over the line, third place is over fourteen seconds behind. Jackie and I try to high five and miss both times, *rookies.* It feels so good, I feel good, that's what we were looking for, smiles on all the faces in front of me warm my cheeks. The girls throw me off the pontoon, the traditional dunking, a moment of stillness as I glide through the air and tuck up for a good splash. You couldn't have scripted the past few days, the time trial, the pairs race, the way we stormed down the course in that final race. We head into the next training block full of confidence, now we know that we're good enough, now we know that when we hit our rhythm it's unbeatable.

The Big Block

After our win in Rotterdam we're due to board a bus to Brussels airport at 4:30am, *who the fuck booked this?* I roll over and turn off my alarm, drag my pre-coffee self into the shower and pack my final things, worrying my bag will be overweight. These early transfers are the worst.

After a three-hour bus trip we roll into Brussels airport; the bombing was years ago but it could have been last week with all the armed forces patrolling the terminals. I pause for a moment, waiting for the rest of the girls' squad to check in, wondering how the next block of training will go, *will I miss the guys, will these girls drive me mental?* I'm snapped out of it by two little black kids cutting through the crowd. One, presumably the older brother, is dragging his sister along the ground by one arm. It's like he's towing a sandbag, she's not even screaming, despite him almost ripping her arm from its socket. I have a giggle to myself and resume travel mode, noise cancelling headphones on, Mako Road playing on Spotify.

A short flight to Ljubljana and the squad splits off into our holiday groups; Emma, Ruby, Grace, Kelsey, Liv and I pile into the van we've rented and set off on our way. Our Google maps lady takes us on some bypass mountain shortcut to avoid traffic, narrow roads that seem like driveways, no fences, just open farmland and rolling Slovenian hills. When we drive into Piran, my face goes all tingly and my jaw opens, "Wooooowww." A small old town set on the Adriatic Sea, a narrow sliver of Slovenia that actually reaches the coast, red tiled rooves, white stone paths set against the intense blue of the water. I love it instantly.

We walk in through the gates which are like a small border crossing, although the guards seem chill, and we exchange the universal head nod as we walk past. "Let's go for a swim on the way back!" I say as I run down towards the shore. There are ladders set into the concrete sea walls and a few people swimming so we all decide to get in for a dip. Emma films me as I run and leap through the air, I feel like a kid, stoked to be in the moment as I soar towards the water. When I come up for air I notice how salty the water is, I'm usually like a sinker because I have no body fat, but I'm floating around like a sea otter. The sun is crisp and warm, around thirty degrees, a nice change from the shitty Dutch weather we've just battled through. After

soaking in the sea and the sun for hours, we head into the main square to scope out a dinner spot. Liv finds a highly recommended seafood place thanks to Uncle Google, so we take the long way and walk around the end of the pier. There's a gentle breeze as we watch the sun turn deep shades of orange and red, our faces glowing as it drops.

The restaurant is set in a back-alley square, a small hole in the wall the counter.

"I'll have a Laško please."
"The large or the small?"
Pfffft. "Large please, mate."

We order giant platters of seafood. Grilled and fried calamari, baby octopus, shrimp and this weird mix of potato and spinach that dissolves in your mouth, amazing. Grape vines with great big green leaves twist their way up stone pillars and cover an archway over our heads. A sea breeze makes the candle on our table flicker and I feel warm across the bridge of my nose.

The next morning Ruby, Emma and I wake up early, body clocks still on rowing time, and head down for a swim. The town square and streets that were bustling last night are empty and the crowded rocky coastline peaceful, aside from a few squawking sea gulls. *How weird is it that seagulls are the same in every country, I wonder if they're different species, I wonder if they have accents?* The salty Adriatic shocks me to life in all the best ways. We climb to the top of the hill that overlooks the old town, steep cobbled roads that wind up to the original town wall. It's been turned into a tourist site, so we pay the five euros to get in and spend an hour looking over the city. The battered wall is medieval Venetian architecture, according to the signs, but all I know is that the entire town fits into one camera frame, the edge of the country, the furthest point before miles of sea.

We walk across the ridge of stony streets to the other peak of Piran to check out the cathedral and cliffs. We lie on the stone walls in the sun, warming up. There's a bunch of teenagers up here with what looks like a Christian youth group, all in matching yellow t-shirts, playing games on the grass, smaller groups sitting in circles, talking. We swing our legs over the edge of the stone walls, nothing but shrubby cliff face down to the rocks and blue water below. My

legs dangle and I feel the updraft making my feet light, I let my mind wander like the sea breeze, *if I curl my toes up, my Birks will be less likely to fall off my feet, right? But how would I ever get one if it did fall? Would I walk around with one bare foot, or commit to taking both off? Is that okay here?* And then it hits me, *this is the first time in a very long time I haven't sat at this height and wanted to jump off.*

After meeting up with Grace, Kelsey and Liv, we find a spot down by the water to post up for the afternoon. A European haze hangs over the horizon, Grace hides under an umbrella behind the stone wall we're leaning up against, trying to keep her skin white like the stone walkways instead of lobster red. "Anyone thirsty?" I ask, and when the waiter comes around we order Coronas and cocktails. I feel peaceful, my eyes aren't scrunched or squinty, my breath is deep and fluid. I stare out over the sea, salt drying on my cheeks as I swig on a sweating Corona. The afternoon washes me away.

We head out for another seafood dinner, this time at a restaurant right on the waterfront. Our waiter makes the same joke as a guy at our gym in Belgium.

"Is it just you and all these girls?"

"Yeah."

"You are the luckiest guy on the planet."

If only you saw them when they're hungry.

We order a bottle of the house red, a local drop from Slovenia. "Oooh that's not half bad," says Kelsey as we all take a healthy sip and agree. Kelsey shows us how to 'boof' a wine like a real South-Auckland girl. "Send this to the Snapchat group!" as she downs another glass. After a few more bottles of the house red we start making toasts with each new glass, "Here's to the seafood squad." When it's my turn I stand up at the end of the table. "A few months ago I didn't think I'd be here, doing this again. I just want to say that without great people around me like you ladies, it would all be for nothing. Here's to friends, this sport and this magical place we find ourselves in." I can feel the glowing smiles around the table, eyes glistening and big claps all round. I never used to like red wine, but it seems it brings out my mushy side. We start debating whether to get another bottle or not, but we don't even know how much it costs. Liv says, "Okay, if it's less than thirty euro, we'll get another." Sounds like a good idea

to us and as the waiter comes past we grab his attention. “Excuse me, we were just wondering how much for this bottle of wine?” “Seven.” We burst into laughter, so loud that all the other tables start laughing with us. We order another bottle and finish it in what seems like three minutes. As the group files out of the restaurant and starts to walk along the white stone paths next to the water, Ruby suggests we go skinny dipping off the end of the pier. *Me and four girls skinny dipping? Who am I to say no?*

On the stone pier I feel like a kid again, climbing up on the wall and walking across it, the red wine warming my salty cheeks and Rudolph nose. The wall is about half a metre wide and at least a metre off the ground. As we get near the end and close to the swim spot, I spy a gap in the stonework that looks doable. I fake a run and jump, and the girls all tell me not to, “Stop it, you can’t do that!”

Just watch me.

There’s a split second of bliss as I float through the air and I’m competing in primary school long jump again. I think back to athletics when I was seven, leave off the left foot, bring both legs up and throw myself forwards. As I land, I extend my leg to where the ledge is, I’ve made the distance ok, but when I come down I realise the ledge is lower than I thought. My left knee jolts and sends a shooting pain right through the joint.

Fuck.

“Oh great, you’ve bloody hurt yourself.”

“That’s it, let’s go home.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, I’m fine, I’ll walk it off.”

What a dickhead, fuck I really don’t know if I can walk.

All night long my knee throbs, breaking my sleep every half hour. We head back towards Ljubljana and I watch the world pass us out the van window. I can feel the black cloud of what I’ve done washing over me like fog rolling in over the mountains, sticking to trees and rocky points. *You’re a fucking idiot, why would you do something so stupid?* I see the team physio, Melissa, as soon as I arrive in Bohinj. The town, the lake, one of the most beautiful places I’ve

ever seen. Steep mountains surround the deep blue water like a bowl, tall pine trees and rocky patches tumbling down to the edge. The girls have told me how magical this place is, about the steep mountain banks, about the stony arched bridge and the cute little church behind it. They've told me about the walking tracks, the ones I've been dreaming of climbing for the past three weeks when I've been stifled in small hotel rooms and big towns, longing for a breath of that crisp mountain updraft. I want to sit on the lookout and watch the parasailers run down the steep hill and jump off the cliff below. *But you can't do any of that now can you? You can't even fucking walk. Because you're a fucking idiot and a showoff and that's what happens, you deserve this, you deserve to be stuck on this bed staring at the cracks running along the white roof.*

When Melissa tells me I've probably ruptured my PCL and strained my ACL, the words just slip through my brain and out the other ear hole. Even when I ask, "How long are we talking before I can walk again?" and she says at least six weeks on crutches, I don't believe her. "Nahhhh, surely it's not that bad, surely I'll be right after a few days' rest." My knee throbs and aches so much, I toss and turn that night, catching maybe a couple of hours sleep at best. I hobble down to the boat in the morning using one crutch they found at reception, each aching step feels like I'm dragging a sled with a weighted backpack on. Jackie sees me wince as I shuffle myself across the pontoon like a para-rower and into the coxswain seat. "Are you sure you're gonna be ok?" I turn on my best toothy fake smile. "Yeah it doesn't even hurt, it's fine."

After the session I hobble back to my room, along the stony path and up the lift. I think I prefer the battle with the stairs to the constant stares of every single person who passes me while I struggle. I stare at my laptop screen, open the list I made in January. I know the next few weeks are going to be a battle and I won't be able to use those old tools. There are no waves, surfboard, or chance of standing up in sight. Even if I had a motorbike here, I couldn't swoop through the corners, across the mountain passes, gliding on smooth seal, around alpine lakes and tall forests because I can't even fucking walk. I write down a new plan, I'm going to keep my mind good through this, I know it. *You're so full of shit, but good luck, if you change your mind there's a nice balcony to jump off, I reckon you could hobble to the top, then it's just an*

easy roll over the rail, it'll be over quick, one good whack on the pavement, like popping a pimple. No.

- Visit people, talk to them, really talk
- Write down the scary thoughts
- Message my family
- I can still do my job
- I can nail my rehab

I set a goal to be walking by the time we arrive in Linz for World Champs, that gives me six weeks, even though Melissa said it could take two to three months. *Nahhhh, she'll be right*. It's the biggest training block of the year, six weeks with three big build-threes, back to back, around 250km each week in the boat. *I'm still coxing well, I can do this, we can do this.*

My routine begins every morning by rolling to the edge of my shitty single bed, swinging both legs to the side and shuffling to the end. I reach for a pair of shorts, awkwardly scooting them up over my bad leg, being sure not to get caught on the tape. After pulling on a t-shirt I stretch my arms for the crutches lying alongside the bed, heave my body up and hobble to the bathroom. Taking a piss is awkward, full weight on my right leg, crutches usually slide off the wall and crash on the floor just so everyone knows I'm awake. The crippled boy with a beard. The trek to the dining room takes a few minutes, most of the girls overtake me in the corridor and say good morning. *What the fuck is good about this morning?* Breakfast is scrambled eggs on bread, I can't be fucked waiting for the toaster, the coffee is shit, I drink at least three cups before leaving and still feel like a zombie. I guess the tramadol hangover is real. As I hop out the door and head to the boats I always stop by the bridge, not to contemplate whether I'd survive the fall, or the best angle to jump from, but to stare out at the lake. The water is always glass at this time, the ducks still tucked up and floating on the lakeside. Fog clings to the rocky cliffs surrounding our fishbowl of greeny blue. The same guy passes me every day, out for his morning walk, *I wonder what his name is? Probably Frank but in Slovenian. Does he have a family? Maybe a wife named Karen and one daughter, Helga. I wonder if he ever washes that grey vest? It looks kind of like the carpet from my dad's house at Taksan Place*

when I was four. I say good morning and he says the Slovenian equivalent, *I should really learn it.* The exchange makes me feel human every day, like there is actually good out there, it clears the smoky lens this injury has forced me to look through. Feeling better from the acknowledgement of Frank, I hop down to the lake and post up on the big wooden bench near the boat, ready for our team talk. Gary's message is the same every day, "Keep it simple, let's work on that rotation and length out front, nice and set off the back." I generally speak up, something like, "Let's keep that good connection when we're long out front, feel the hold on the water, don't rush onto the feet."

I feel my best when I'm in the boat, no crutches, no hobbling, just a little uncomfortable in the cockpit, trying to brace with one good leg. We row up and down Lake Bohinj, kilometer after kilometer, the boat cuts through the glass water, ingraining that unbeatable rhythm, run after run. The girls are getting stronger, I can feel it when I call for a push, for a swing, the black hull almost lifts up out of the water. After the morning session I hop back to the dining room at the hotel, more eggs on toast, shitty coffee, before we head back for the second session. When I finally make it back to my room, I'm exhausted. My hands are sore from taking the whole weight of my body, I've got cramps in every finger and the pain shoots up my forearms. I flop onto the bed, try to write my thesis for about seventeen minutes, staring at a blank page, forcing out some bullshit that should be back spaced, then give up and watch a movie I don't have to think about, something that takes me away from this shitty, hot hotel room. I get a message from my mum about two weeks into the training block:

> I hate telling you bad news, but Uncle Fra has gone downhill
> Nana and Grandad have gone to Gisborne
> The latest scans showed the cancer has spread everywhere
> it's all through his spine and pelvis

Mum it's fine, I want to know what's going on
Have they given a time frame?
Like, what are we actually talking here?
How long has he got?

Nobody is really giving a time frame
But it could be weeks
Maybe a month at best

Shit

If you want to message him and say goodbye,
you should really do it soon.

There are only a few things that upset me beyond control, where no amount of talking or recipes or tools can do anything, where everything feels helpless and all I want to do is bury my head in the pillow, scream and cry. One of those is when shit's going on with my family and I can't be there. Fra is my grandad's brother. He's always been the life of every family party. He used to take us on holidays at Lake Rotoiti. We'd go out on the boat, biscuiting and fishing. The glow on his face always makes me smile. It's an odd feeling knowing someone you love is dying. My mind pools with memories, like the time he rescued my phone from the lake bottom when I was untying the boat. Or the time we went and bought $200 worth of fireworks and lit them in the middle of Earlswood Avenue. I know that if I don't tell anyone about this it will fester, it will boil and bubble inside me as the spirals start to come, that consistent slide downwards, when my thoughts answer themselves, talk to each other. I tell Grace what's happening back home, every word that leaves my mouth feels like a weight off, I feel my shoulders relax a little, and my eyes about to fill with water.

What do I even say to him? What do people say when it's the last message they'll ever send? Mum said cousin Tony will read it to him, but Fra's drifting in and out of consciousness. Knowing him, he'll want to hear what I'm up to, hating that he can't get up and do something with his hands, build something, fix something, help someone.

> Hi Fra. I've been kept up to date by the family on your progress and what you're dealing with. I thought it's only fair I update you from here. I'm currently on training camp in Bohinj, Slovenia in preparation for the world champs in a few weeks. Beautiful place here and we've been tracking well in training. It was a tough road back to the

team for me after last year but one that has been super rewarding. Our last World Cup regatta ended with gold and a few celebratory Heinekens since we were in the Netherlands after all. I hope things are as good as they can be given the circumstances, my thoughts are with you, Ally and all of the family. Here are a few photos of our campaign so far. Hope you enjoy. Caleb.

Fuck why did you say that? You didn't say goodbye. You didn't say how much you loved him. You didn't say how you miss fishing trips and holidays and beers on the balcony and paninis in the morning and visiting the houses he built and laughing at his jokes and how much you're going to miss him and how much you hate not being there.

I know it's the last contact I will ever have with him. And I also know that he wouldn't want pity, or sympathy, all he would want is for me to enjoy what I'm doing, love every single minute, and win the world championships.

The next few weeks continue in a similar routine: train, try to write, fail, watch movies, look at the mountains outside my window and dream of clambering up the goat tracks through the tall trees to sit in the clearings. I want lie there in the sun, watching the paragliders run and jump off the cliffs. My sports psych Jason Skypes me one night to see how I'm going. I tell him everything, I tell him how shit I'm feeling, how much it sucks not being home with my family, how I can't connect to what's really happening back there, how I'm terrified I won't grieve properly and what that will do to me. He asks me if there are any things that make me feel good at the moment, if there are even moments of the day where I feel immersed in that point in time, when I'm not thinking, just doing. He tells me to cling to those, that I'm doing an amazing job at processing all of the thoughts and still coxing well. He says to remember how I got out of the hole last time: remember to talk, to let things out and to keep forcing it when I'm embarrassed or when I don't want to. I wake the next day to a message from my Mum.

Hey. Just to let you know that Fra passed away just after midnight.
Give us a call if you want to or Nana and Gdad.
Grandad said a release for him.

Love you lots. Xx

I don't tell any of the girls about it, I don't cry, I don't feel anything. I continue my normal routine until we get on the water and Jackie says something to me about my coxing. Usually I would just nod, give a "yep" and fix it but instead I freeze. I can't think of words, can't think at all, my heart rate climbs and thumps through my ribs, my lungs feel like they're being squeezed so tight they can't expand. I sit in silence for a whole four kilometre run of the lake, anxiety swelling in my forehead, vision blurry and dark. I can feel the tears rolling down my face, dripping from my beard and onto my thighs. Jackie starts crying too, she didn't mean to upset me. When we get off the water, I know I have to speak up:

"Girls, I just want to put my hand up for what happened out there. I know I wasn't myself and it wasn't good enough. I found out this morning that my uncle has died overnight, and I guess everything just kind of overwhelmed me. I wish I handled that better, but that's what's going on with me, so sorry but I'm probably going to be a bit fragile and emotional for the next bit."

I visit Grace and Brooke's room after second breakfast, hobbling onto the couch and bursting into tears. We talk about Fra, what he was like, all of the things I remember. I keep visiting and talking to them over the next few days, every time feeling a little more normal, feeling like I'm grieving properly.

We're catching the bus to Austria in a few days, my knee is healing okay and Melissa says she'll let me ditch the crutches the morning we leave, but not before. On the last night as the sun sets across the lake I know there's one thing I need to do. I grab the greenstone I was gifted in Rio out of my suitcase, I haven't worn it because it hasn't been blessed and that's tapu. While I was on voice rest, sitting in silence in Poznan, I used an online dictionary to translate a blessing into Te Reo and wrote it in my journal. I know it's probably not the correct translation but I need to do this. I hobble down to the stream that flows out of Lake Bohinj towards Bled, the sun is setting behind the old stone bridge and the clear water trickles over rocks like mini rapids. Still on crutches, I hop into the stream, pull out the greenstone and speak the blessing out loud.

Kia whakawhetai atu matou ki a koe,
Ko te Papatuanuku, me te Tangaroa
Mo tenei taonga
Tiakina kia haumaru, kia mau te rongo
Hoatu ki a ratou te kaha me te maia
Whakapaia tenei pounamu me te tangata nana nei i uta
Amene

I bring the pounamu to my chest, my hand gripping it tight, and dunk my whole body under the stream. It's so cold it sucks all the breath from my lungs, but as I come up for air something strange happens. I feel tingly all over my body, down every vein, each limb full of sensation. As I blink the water out of my eyelids and wipe my face, I feel something I've never felt in my life. *Goodbye Fra, I'm going to do it for you, for both of us.* All the swirling spirals of thoughts wash away, my mind feels clearer than when I ride my motorbike on State Highway 22 back home and I know right then in that moment that I'm ready to nail the World Championships.

I've fucking got this.

The World Championships, Linz

The first world title I won was the under 23 men's eight in Linz, Austria. The first ever for New Zealand. Six years later and as I walk crutch-free into the boat park of the Linz course, with its long grass, its tall trees lush with green, the memories flood back like it's happening again. Consumed by our own little bubble, an unbeatable rhythm and crossing that finish line pumped full of ecstasy. *No don't think about that, think about the start, think about the process.* I snap out of my fairytale and we hit the water for the first time in the women's eight. Our silver eight combo, without Kerri and Grace, feels like it could win the world champs within the first lap, the black hull slipping through the murky Austrian water like we're skating on ice, no friction, nothing slowing it down. The glow on the girls' faces, the concentration, the balance of sting in the water and float up the slide, I know we all believe. The battles of the big block seem like a lifetime ago, and each row in the few days before racing instills the confidence and trust we've worked all season for. We have one slip-up during our pre-race primers where it doesn't feel good. The boat is a little heavy in the water, the timing around the catch not quite right, the rhythm not quite there. In our debrief Beth gets upset, I decide it's a job for Gary today and let him talk to her. I tell the crew, "We need to trust the rhythm, we showed a hint of chase today, where we didn't quite sit back and finish the stroke off. We've done so many good pieces and I know this is close to racing. But we just have to trust that normal rhythm, it will come, ladies, trust me."

Heats day finally arrives, and I've never felt better. I feel so clear about what I need to do, about what we need to do. After weigh-in I run through my new pre-race routine: extra strength Nespresso, find a yoga mat to stretch on, write a list.

- Start strong, push for rhythm
- Capitalize on momentum, if we get a seat, take two
- Breathe, stay calm under pressure
- Jet fighter pilot
- Feel the rhythm, trust the rhythm

- Trust me

Our normal race warm-up happens without a hitch, the boat is feeling good, the girls all tuned into me perfectly, ready to unleash. As we sit in the starting blocks waiting for the roll call, I run through scenarios in my head one last time, visualizing a see-saw race, nobody giving an inch, having to fight for every stroke, every seat. The starting sequence comes over the speakers: "Canada. Germany. Great Britain. China. New Zealand. Attention." My vision tunnels, time slows down, I can feel the inhales as the rowers brace for that first stroke, I tense my core, ready.

Beeeeeep

We blast off the mark, the Chinese are screaming in the lane next to us, we're flat, composed and instantly it feels good. "We've had an amazing start, ladies, let's hold this speed, 1:20 off the line." I keep seeing splits that I know are super-fast, 1:20, 1:22, 1:23 – *better than world best time pace.* I look across to the left through the 250m line of buoys and see the field is already dropping off the pace, "Outstanding, ladies, let's push onto that rhythm, this one, NOW." The boat continues to rocket along, slipping through the water, nothing slowing it down and when we hit that beat, "That is IT, ladies! That unbeatable rhythm, right there, let's swing on it, NOW." As we come through 400m I glance across again, "We've got half a length on GB, and clear water on everyone else, we've got momentum, let's squeeze here, ladies, just push it a little bit, turn the taps, this one, NOW." The move pushes our black boat further ahead again, it's like we're rowing downstream and the second quarter of the race flies by. We cross through the halfway mark, I know we've already done the damage, but I want a bit more, "Keep walking here, ladies, rolllll out and let that boat ruuuuun," and "Beeaautiful, ladies, that's it, keep setting the pace here." *Holy shit, I didn't think it would be that easy. Do we button off? Keep pushing?* I decide we just need to hold what we're doing. I can sense we've already relaxed a bit, but that's ok, "Let's just hold here, ladies, keep the pressure in the water, but let that boat run." Having been in the chasing pack so many times before, I know the best way to send a message, bringing the rate down as the others scramble, sprinting but not making any ground back. "They're sprinting at us, ladies, but I've got them,

we're holding them, just trust it." We cross the line and paddle to a stop. *Clinical.* "Outstanding race, ladies, ticked the box, let's just paddle out of here and recover."

During the post-race debrief we run through how it unfolded, a perfect start and transition, then we just kept moving. Another test of our trust in the rhythm, in each other, and we just need to keep the momentum through the next few days. Kelsey says, "Caleb, that was amazing, the best race you've coxed, you kept us calm and in the perfect space, amazing job." All the other girls say they agree and I clam up, unsure of how to react, it's still weird to get praise like this. "Thanks, it's easy to cox like that from in front, but I'll listen to the recording and take confidence into the final, thanks Kels."

One thing people say about world champs is that if you qualify early it's one of the most boring weeks of the year. Having made the final straight from the heat, we have four full days before we get to race again. We usually have a short row in the morning, navigating the hundreds of boats all sharing a 2km stretch of water at once, the wash is so shit it's hard to feel the boat. When I'm not at the lake I'm still on bed-rest with my leg up. I try to write, try to study during the days but can't concentrate, I'm so wired into my rowing brain. *Just give up, there's no point right now.* I watch some racing, keep tabs on how the team is going, girls are crushing it, we're on a roll. The first day of finals we have Kerri and Grace racing in the pair. About twenty of our New Zealand team all cram into one hotel room to watch it, we know it's going to be tight, but we know they have a plan, our turbos. Just as we thought, it's a tight race, our pair and the Australian pair going toe to toe down the course, nobody giving an inch – until right in the final 500m of the race, Kerri and Grace push a bit more through their legs, they lean on the handles, and start edging away. I can't hear myself think, the squad is cheering so loudly, white noise ringing through our hotel room. They've done it, World Champions in the pair, we all know how much it means to them and we feel a part of it, because they're in our boat too. One down, one to go. Tomorrow, it's race day.

Before our final I note down all the things I need to think about, get organized, prepare for:

- Composed in all scenarios, expect a tight race, prepare for some bolters
- Start well

- GET RHYTHM
- Champion 2%
- Momentum
- We set the pace!!
- Time trial mode

As the pre-race caffeine begins to kick in and my heart begins to thump, I find a stretching mat out the back of the tent, my new ritual. I'm thinking about the start, the buzzer, the first few strokes. I visualize the field popping out either side of us, I picture the worst-case scenario, just to check it off my list, breathe, get them tuning in on my voice, get rhythm and claw our way back. I picture the perfect scenario, like the heat race from Tuesday, but as I see the finish line, us crossing in front, a celebration, I stop myself. *No. Focus. Process.* As the girls finish their warm-up, I feel that hot Austrian sun beating down on my neck, sprinkles of sweat seeping through my pores. We gather around the back of a nearby trailer for our pre-race chat. Gary leads the way: "Don't worry about where you are in the race, Caleb will have all of that covered, just keep in our boat, each time you look out you might as well jump in the boat next to you and row a few strokes for them. Whatever happens with the races beforehand, the men's eight, the singles, don't let it into our bubble, focus in on our bubble." We head over to the boat bay; a few people scurry for a final pee-stop. We gather again and I speak up: "Let's do this, ladies, trust me, trust the rhythm and we'll be fine." The girls lift our black boat off the rack, and as we walk it down to the water I hang by the stern, making sure we don't hit anything. The men's eight race has just finished, I hear faintly over the speaker system "and New Zealand in sixth," *fuck, bugger, they missed out.* Lucy is on the other side of the boat so can't hear, she turns to me and asks, "Do you know how the men went?" "No idea," I lie, because it's a fragile time, even for us, and as much as we say we won't let it affect us, I know it will. As we push off the metal pontoon the heat bounces off like we're in a sunbed, and finally I can breathe. In my mind it's so clear what I have to do, *be calm, like a fighter pilot, believe.* I'm actually looking forward to this race, I feel it filling my lungs and my sternum with energy, I can't wait to be in the race, in the moment. This is what I'm meant to do. *I've got this.*

Our warmup is perfect, a little nervy at first, I'd be worried if it wasn't. But we smoothe it out, our practice pieces all above world best time pace. "That is IT, ladies, that's all we need to do, OUR RHYTHM." We sit in the starting blocks, I can feel the tension across the lake, six boats, fifty-four people breathing, all trying to stay calm, trying to relax, breathe, think clearly, convince themselves that they can do it. But I can sense my girls believe, I can tell they're relaxed, ready to pounce, nothing can stop us. I run through the scenarios one final time in my head, *prepare for them to jump out, to look across and see them in front, I'm ready for it.* The starting sequence comes over the speakers, I look forwards down the boat, the lane. "Australia. Canada. United States of America. New Zealand. Great Britain. Romania. Attention." The gap feels like forever, everyone holds their breath, I swear I can hear the blood pulsing around my body, the vein popping in my forehead.

Beeeeep

The sound of an eights race off the line is like nothing else, oars clunk in the gates, six coxswains scream, well five in this case, as I never say anything until stroke five. "Full slide, now! Roll, roll!" Our boat roars off the line, I look down at the splits and call them out, "We've had a great start, ladies, 1:20 pace off the mark, stay flat." I can feel Jackie's stare locked onto me, head still, face loose, *she's on it.* As we come through the 250 I glance across to my left, I can tell it's close, Aussie might be out slightly, "We've had a good start, ladies, all boats are in a line, get ready to push to rhythm." I call the push down and immediately it feels like an epic rhythm, the stern is running smooth through the water, I'm not getting pushed in my back at all, sitting still in the cockpit, "Beauuuutiful, ladies, that's our rhythm right there, breeeeathe and roll out, that's it, gooood." I look across to the left again, I'm just off the end of the Aussie stern, but I've got him, I know we're in the rhythm, the unbeatable rhythm. When I look back at the splits, I see the numbers 1:25, 1:27, *world record pace, if they can hold this then good on them, but this feels amazing.* I keep calm through the 500, calling for a push at the 750m mark, "Alright, ladies, we're in an outstanding rhythm, WE SET THE PACE HERE, let's squeeze it just ten watts, just push it a little," like we're just turning the taps, letting out a bit more power, "Yeeessss that's good." The girls are quiet, smooth, they're clinging to every word, *I've got them.* As we go through the thousand, I look across again to the left, that's where the real race is coming from, but it's us and Aussie, the Canadians and Americans are dropping back.

Shit, I'd quite like them to come back a bit now. We have the boatspeed and we're relaxed, *surely they can't hold this.* As we come up towards the 1250 I look across and see the faces of those Aussie girls, they're working hard, *ooh they're fucked,* I can tell our window is opening, time to let them have it. "This is IT, ladies, I want your champion 2%, right here, right now, let's WALK." The boat picks up a gear, I can tell it's working, I look across, I'm coming up alongside the stern of that yellow boat. "Good, ladies, we're coming through 600 to go, one more seat and they can't touch us, let's walk here, change up one gear, this time, NOW!" Another push and I can feel the boat really starting to move, the water bubbling under the hull, I can tell they're starting to open up, let loose a little, the rate comes up a point. My head is on a swivel now and I'm calling out our progress, "Up another gear, ladies, I'm on the coxswain, this is us, this is ours, let's walk, NOW!" I can tell we're moving well and I can tell nothing can stop us. "We're coming up to the 250 to go, let's go, ladies, for the line, this one, NOW!" Into the red buoys, the black boat is running so hot, I can feel the girls adding more and more power, nothing slowing us down, no friction, just pure will, belief. "Five seat, four seat, three seat, I'm on TWO, give me that bow ball, let's go again, NOW," around 150m to go, "Final push, ladies, for the line, let's go, NOW, and kick, kick, THAT'S IT!" It's like we're on a conveyor belt, rowing downstream, downhill even, "Two strokes left, EASY!"

I drag my hands in the water, making a giant spraying tail across the line, like a peacock. The feeling swells through me, all my muscles pump up as we celebrate. I reach forward to Jackie, who reaches for me, double high five and we link fingers, glowing together. I call, "Check it, check it, check it," out of breath. We're moving so quickly we're about to run the bow into the sand bank at the end of the lake. "Yes Caleb!" from Kerri, "FUCK YES CALEB!" from Emma. We turn the boat around and head for the podium, we've just won the world championships. Our results come up on the big screen, time of 5:56.91, just two seconds off the world's best time. Holy shit.

We row to the metal podium pontoons which are covered in thin blue carpet, the Aussies have docked first, Rosie grabs Beth's blade and helps pull us in, it's only fitting it's her, my magical friend. As we get out of the boat and go along hugging each other I get to Lucy, her glasses are on, but her cheeks are bright red, tears streaming down her face, it's been a long time coming. Then it hits me, I feel everything in that moment, that embrace, my last twelve

months, the mountain we've climbed together, how important these girls have been in my comeback, and now we're the first New Zealand women's eight to win. Ever. Every single one of my crew hugs me and says, "You nailed it," and "That was perfect," and "We couldn't have done that without you," and "Oh my god, Caleb, AMAZING." The words sink through my skin.

As the medals are presented, I look for my grandparents in the crowd but can't find them. *For Fra*, I think. 'God Defend New Zealand' echoes around the grandstand and across the water, through the swampy trees off the end of the finish line. Gary and Barrie climb across the jagged rocks in front of the grandstand to catch our eyes, to wave, we all point at Gary, YOU. Being the last race means we have to wait on the podium, baking under that sun, while they run through the formalities and close the regatta. I look to my right and see Kerri is concerned for Beth, who has turned deathly white, almost transparent. We tell her to sit down, I walk off to find some water, some sugar, anything. The FISA president finally announces, "I declare the 2019 World Rowing Championships closed," and we rush Beth to the medical tent. "Someone help, please!" We know she's just ended herself, left every ounce of energy out on that two kilometer stretch of murky water behind us. Once we know Beth is getting looked after we all hang out on the podium, soak everything in, wait for her so we can get more photos and row back together, there's nothing that can make us leave her behind.

Beth comes back from the medical tent looking human again and we get ready for the traditional dunking. The photographers get it all set up so they can capture it, and the girls grab a limb, Kelsey, Ella, Beth and Emma. I tell Kelsey to be careful with that leg. Flying through the air towards the sticky water I tuck in and spin, trying to make a good splash. When we get in the boat to row back, everyone decides to swap seats and sides, which is another fun little tradition reserved for the medallists. At the pontoons Gary is waiting, as always, and with him are Ruby and Goodg, our super-subs. Even Gary gives us all hugs, his social awkwardness disappearing for a moment. I hug Ruby and tell her we couldn't have done it without her. When I get to Goodg, she's already crying, she knows what I've been through these past twelve months, she whispers in my ear, "I'm so happy for you," as tears stream down her face, a few down mine as well. We run through the normal process, de-rig our boat with help from the wider team, everyone seems to be beaming from our win, they know what an achievement it was, history making. Kelsey gets taken away for random drug testing while we

all wait around for the team function. Gary wants to get a photo with us all, including Ruby and Goodg from the silver eight, so we sit on the perfect, thick grass and replay the moment. We watch the race footage online, talking about what it felt like, how it went, what people were thinking. In our little circle we pass around a bottle of champagne, taking swigs, smiling, glowing together. After an hour of waiting for Kelsey we decide to head up to the team function to see our families, we all agree to get a photo there.

I walk up the long wooden ramp to the bar on top of the grandstand. I weave my way through the crowd of people, looking for my grandparents, accepting congratulations and hugs from almost every person there. Finally I find my nana down the back, we hug for a long time, both crying, feeling everything without saying a word.

It's September 2019 and I'm a World Champion. People call me that now like it's an official tagline when they introduce me. My mum shows me off like I'm some sort of polished gold trophy. But in my own mind, I'm the most me I have ever been, I have a clear head and crisp vision, I feel good, really good.

I've got this.