Biographical note:
Eugen Bacon studied at Maritime Campus, Greenwich University, less than two minutes’ walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. She is now a PhD candidate by artefact and exegesis at Swinburne University of Technology. Her short story ‘A puzzle piece’ was shortlisted in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013 and is published in Lightship Anthology 3. Eugen’s creative work ‘Being Marcus’ is published in New Writing. The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing.

Keywords:
Creative writing – short story narrative – first person plural – multiple narrator
We waved to Dora in her ladybird dress full of sapphire ribbons. She waved back, a tangle of African lilies from Lake Park bobbing in her combed-out hair. A thousand brushes, O always said as he tenderly drew out each strand with the vented radial brush from her princess dresser.

Mum smiled briefly at O, looked away swiftly and a frown replaced the smile as her sedan reversed out the driveway. There was no hint of softness on her face from just before, at the door, when she brushed O’s lips with hers, when she clung to him for no greater than a moment. He stood tall at the doorway, head almost touching the dome, and watched as we pulled into the road.

Mum stayed silent down the freeway, even as we nagged: Are we there yet? Are we, are we? Normally she’d say, Not yet, mate, or What’s going on? This time she didn’t notice. Her grip was taut on the steering, her stare ardent down the road as if fretful the lanes might melt in the shimmering sun of the Southern hemisphere. Jesus, she cursed a Subaru Brumby, or the woman in it, or the dog in it that was the ugliest we’d ever seen – it looked like it wanted to sneeze – when the Brumby swerved into our lane but drove on way too leisurely. Ugly Dog barked and nearly gnawed the window as Mum took the car off cruise and we overtook. She turned Nova FM’s countdown to full blast, bobbed her head to Uptown Funk, then Hozier when he sang Take me to Church, but her voice was wet when she asked if we’d like McDonald’s, and we said yes.

We got Maccas from the drive-thru – a Chicken McBites meal deal and a Mighty Angus meal deal, one with zesty Portuguese sauce, the other with whipped butter, both with large fries and a chocolate frappe upsize. Mum was clearly grumpy because she snapped, Keep it down, will you? in the car. We stopped pulling at each other and took from her our dinner boxes as the attendant with cat ears and a ruby Roland nose handed them over. Before we even asked, Mum said we could eat in the car. Soon as we got out, she spat on a face tissue and wiped grease off our faces, oh, didn’t we thrash! Before we stepped into the living room, Mum turned squarely to face us. She wore a brave face like she was about to take a needle, a flu jab or something, and said, What happened with O, it wasn’t your fault.

That summer at O’s wasn’t fun. He was self-medicating for his migraines, doubling doses of codeine, and his mood was getting more and more grotty. His voice still held a silk note for Dora but for us it was always the growl, a bigger growl. He barked when we set up accounts on the PlayStation – although it worked better, later he agreed, and Dora could still play all her favourite games. After he bellowed at us in the car, then turned the car round so we went back to his house instead of driving to Lake Park as he promised, Mum also saw he wasn’t fun. She jumped out the car soon as it stopped, marched fuming into the house, and – before we could do the same – O said, Children, stay in the car.

Who needed to get out to hear them tearing at each other? Horrible words from the sound of them, but what was actually said could have been worse.

When I say anything to them, you think I’m a bully!
Did I say anything when you jumped at them in the car? Sure, I was surprised when you turned round –
I’d had enough!
And I could see why their bobbing might annoy you –
And you did nothing!
Because you did something.
I had to!
What’s done is done. So what do you want from me now? Tell me, what? Already you’ve roared at them, and turned back the car –
I wanted you to do something!
But you’d already done something!
A whole 400 meters, I waited! And now you storm out of the car – clearly you’re upset I did something.
The only reason I stormed was because I was still mad at you for spoonfeeding Dora.
Christ, O. She’s not that little.
Mad? Why would you even say that? She’s never eaten so well!
Why don’t you just go ahead and put a nappy on her? A nappy!
Did you see how she ate all the peas?
Did you realise how it’s called double standards? Feed your little princess with a golden spoon! But my ones – well they are not your biological kids – but they can never do anything right, can they?
You can’t control them –
Put a nappy on her!
She ate the whole lot!
We watched them stare at each other in astonishment, shattered by their rage at each other.

They buried the fight and slumbered together and Mum went for a run in the morning.
At lunchtime she said, Kids? Cheese toasties?
But we’ve eaten, we said.
Eaten what?
Sausage rolls, said Dora.
Mum said to O, The kids say they’ve had sausage rolls.
For breakfast, he said.
How long since breakfast?
You deal with it, he said. If they don’t want to eat, they don’t want to eat.

Mum warmed the leftover pie and sat with O at the table. She raised her lemonade and said, Salute! It sounded like how the Italians say it but nobody answered. So Mum feigned more cheer. At dinner, she said, let’s indulge us voracious meat eaters – would you like me to get some barbie from the butchers?

What I would like, said O through gritted teeth, is for you to take your kids and go.

We didn’t leave straight away, perhaps because Mum packed all her stuff – everything, even the champagne from the fridge – and O said, kinder, Are you going for good?

Yes, said Mum.

I wasn’t escalating, said O. I just want to spend a few days with Dora. I don’t get her much from her mother.

Mum didn’t say, And who’s too tight to pay the lawyers? Instead she said, We’re struggling, don’t you see? That was when she pressed her lips on O, put the car in reverse, smiled and waved briefly before she frowned, and we were gone.

That night she sat up, startled, from broken sleep. She said it was a bad dream, something about AirAsia 8501 and too much news. We wondered what she had seen in her sleep, if there were bodies flying into space, gale and altitude whipping off clothes, bodies bloated in water tombs.

We stroked Mum’s hair with our fingers, not a brush, and told her we took everything from our room at O’s. Even Gods of War, we said.

I’m glad you took everything, she said.

O’s house was awkward, we said. Did you see how it was awkward, Mum?

She didn’t tell us it wasn’t O’s house that was awkward but that it was us who had turned awkward in it because everything was by then compromised, complicated. She didn’t say that all was lost, how could there be a future? How five gritted words, Take your kids and go, had put sand into whatever there was with O. She didn’t tell us how the swallowing pain of loss was inside out, how – if only O knew – she was a simple phone call away from restitution … But he never called.

The next day was forty degrees. Mum pressed the remote button and the air con coughed to life before it groaned and grunted all day. By the third nightfall, Mum had weakened and was reaching for the phone when she snatched back her fingers as if from a flame. For what? she said out loud. Indeed, for what? We also wondered because we didn’t want her driving back to O’s. But, you see, Mum understood what we didn’t at the time, that sometimes love is not enough.

Next day, she slept until noon – an oddity for one always up at six. But she wasn’t asleep, we knew. She lay with criss-crossed hands against her shoulders, arms that cuddled her head, as she stared at the silver on the door handle, at the white of the bedroom door, at a replay in her head of all the good memories (like how O drove barefoot all the way to the Boulevard lights), and too many bad ones (like how O got
mad because Mum bought ultrasabres that lit up with sound effects, at 18 bucks apiece from the roadside stall in Ivanhoe).

I feel like fish, she said when she finally climbed out of bed. After a 20-minute shower, a blast of it, she got smoked salmon from Aldi. She ate it with two boiled eggs and stank the whole house, but for us it was spirals bolognaise without parmesan on top, just how we liked it.

On New Year’s Eve we took blankets to Fed Square and joined throngs to face the sky, and Mum’s eyes were shining, shining … Fireworks squealed at us from the heavens and chased to the ground mouth open, but retched out a jazzy montage before they could reach us. Afterwards we were so tired but Mum said we were too big to carry and, soon as we got home, we slept the bottomless sleep of gods after war.

The next day was still blooming hot. So Mum gave us money to get paddle pops from the corner shop. We bounced off without wondering if she felt like we had when O sped off alone with his precious Dora in the back seat, off to Lake Park they went, after him and Mum had torn each other with horrible words, after he returned from his fight with Mum and kicked us out of his sedan. We forgot to ask Mum – how could we forget, but we did – if she wanted an icecream to cool the embers of her charred heart.

But we were young.
Research statement

Research background

In trialling first person plural for short fiction, I have applied multiple ‘I’s as a viewpoint of more than one to demonstrate the flexibility of stories told by ‘we’ – here used as a real multiplicity rather than as a collective voice showing distance (Nesbit 2014). ‘We were young’ is narrated by the compound child in a split family who experiences singular effects. I imagined the narrators as monozygotic (Fierro 2015a): twins, triplets, quadruplets, higher order multiples whose identical DNA afforded entwined lives, an inherent understanding of each other’s emotional state (Fierro 2015b).

Research contribution

This text demonstrates the short story as removed from the sub-genres of tale, where it is not a parable or a fable, not a creation myth, not a novella, not a fairy tale, and not an art-tale. ‘We were young’ steps into another world, a real one, showcasing the robustness of the short story as an immediate and accessible window into contemporary life. It highlights the form’s flexibility, which allows it to work in experimental form, where – in this story – the protagonists report collectively with little individualisation (Nesbit 2014), with both immediacy and retrospection.

Research significance

‘We were young’ is an immediate and accessible window into contemporary life, a brief narration of domesticity. The story has been accepted for publication in a reputable refereed journal.

Works cited

