

From time to time

“How long does a butterfly live?” asks David. I respond with a question, “Tell me, why do you think constantly about mortality?”

A week has passed. Arms outstretched, fingers clamped to the edge of my desk, I’m purposely wheeling my office chair in figure eights, trying to pinpoint David’s references to butterflies. They elude my orbit. There haven’t been many butterflies this summer. Have you noticed?

Yesterday at 3:32 pm, in future memory of this exhibition, I started to grow cabbages. I’ve never grown cabbages, but I’m hopeful and can already see myself harvesting a crop of tight crisp heads in David’s honour later this year.

I smell cabbage rolls. I have prepared them only once — far above the Arctic Circle — carefully blanching and retrieving each billowing ribbed leaf. Lost momentarily in northern latitudes, I resurface to David’s week-old voice fondly reminiscing over his mother’s Polish/Ukrainian heritage, his Nanna’s earthy, soul-sustaining cooking, his savoury encounters with goulash and cabbage rolls, and later, plerogies and very old family friends in Canada.

A 25 watt light bulb is a poor substitute for sunlight. On the top shelf of my fridge, fifty cabbage seeds have long anticipated freedom from the confines of a mail order envelope. They have an expiry date of 2004. I’m ashamed for wasting their life force and ashamed of my excuses. I enthusiastically heap, mix, and mound black beds of poo-inspired earth. I survey my efforts and consider broader circumstances should my life suddenly depend on the successful germination and maturation of these seeds. Everyday people are forced to leave their homes and gardens, racial and political intolerance hot on their heels.

I’m thinking of Guillermo Kuitca’s beds; painted map mattresses. Six billion individuals and more expelled into unfolding journeys that revolve around the clock and the geographies of family life, school (if you’re lucky), work, friends, lovers, distant relatives, and family stories. We shed a lifetime of over- or under-nourished cells, fantastical thoughts, regrets, and memories. David, are you showing us how and what we search for between our first bed and our last?

Did you know that cabbage is a ‘Cole crop’ and part of the *Cruciferae* family because its flowers are cross-shaped? You tell me you were an altar boy, using services as an excuse to get out of maths. Then your

Nanna died and this changed your life as you pondered why her body, her life, is so different from the next. What makes us feel for some and not for others?

You, the caretaker of fragments of other peoples' lives, ask me big questions. Working at Coles stocking shelves, selling cabbages and so, so much more, you collect the littered lists of the living, the ever, ever wanting; more bread, more milk, more toilet paper, more, more, more. You pick through verge collections, lament about the waste, and wait patiently at auction houses in the quiet hope of giving discarded clocks, photos, music, letters, bills, and books of the nearly dead, and the never quite forgotten, a little place in your heart and in ours. "When one dies", you muse, "What lives on in others?"

Our conversation shifts to music, its importance to our families and the space between notes cupping powerful emotions and memories. The discarded messages by others that you find and memorise make me gasp. "Dorothy would you help your Dad choose his meals for the week" and "I love seeing my ring on your finger — 3:00 am". David do you want to love forever? I meant to write "live", but I let the typo sit because I suspect for you there is no difference between love and live.

Grocery lists and clothes hangers; codes to contemporary survival. I recall a d&k exhibition with hundreds of alarm clocks and another in which you dug a grave-like hole in the ground and lay in it for ages. Only the children came very close. Tonight you showed me a stonemason's record of engraved texts for headstones. The dates recorded for job completion range from "soon" to "very soon". Every day you take a photo of your face and of an urban sunset. Are you prompting us to wake up too, David? I am reading the Book Thief by Markus Zusak. The first book stolen by the malnourished girl is The Gravediggers Handbook. "I am haunted by humans" is the concluding sentence uttered by Death. I will loan you the book.

In the shadows (of my memory), I now recall your hands describing a compact form that releases layers. I suddenly remember your story about the butterflies! You've found a pile of old water-damaged photos (I think of the city of Prague) and are separating partially cemented layers. What is revealed in between are successive butterfly shapes. Landfill-destined flights of memory, half a world away. You find it incredulous and mutter half under your breath "how can somebody throw out their life like that?"

David did you know that the water in our eyes could be as old as the Earth?

Dr Nien Schwarz, 2007