

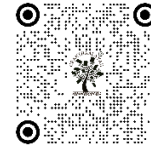


Original Article

THE LAST DESK: ZOMBIE WRITERS AND WRITING, AND THE ACADEMIC GHOSTS OF MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

Writing, including academic writing, exists in and from a place and a context. The writer's place, and the objects populating it, can be memorialized through tourism or discarded in a dumpster after death. This article probes 'the Last Desk,' the final writing location of a writer. A desk is the conduit for how a body writes. But how is this desk remembered or forgotten? Deploying Derrida's hauntology, this article offers a theorization of absence, loss, and the ghosts that dance around writing after the (post)Barthesian death of the author. The death of the author's body leaves fragments, shards, and scraps of zombie writing that are not alive, but continues to move.

Keywords: Writing, Hauntology, Jacques Derrida, Zombie Writing

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is difficult. Myriad phrases and syndromes are used to 'diagnose' difficulties in moving ideas to a screen or paper. From writer's block to imposter syndrome, an array of issues interrupts and challenges the movement of words from a writer's fingertips to the eyes of a reader. An intricate question swirls around such challenges. How does the place of writing impact what is written?

Such a question is provocative, and a provocation. I have written a book titled *Setting up your life to write a PhD* Brabazon, T. (2025). *Setting Up Your Life to Write A PhD: Building a Doctorate one Sentence at a Time*. Author's Republic.. Yet the book includes images or photographs of me writing. I write every day. In diverse locations. Yet this public academic writing is a shielded, private act. Public writing is born from private spaces and places. The impact of where we write on what we write activates a subjective discussion of motivation, inspiration, art and craft. The dance between valuing art, via inspiration, creativity and the muse, and activating craft, through hard practice, iterative learning, mistakes, exhaustion and embarrassment, offers great insights into theories of writing Gorky, M., Mayakovsky, V., Tolstoy, A., and Fedin, K. (2000). But when teaching writing, a focus on craft, practice, and behaviour provides both a methodology and an epistemology Myhill, D., Cremin, T., and Oliver, L. (2023). *Writing as a Craft: Re-Considering Teacher Subject Content Knowledge for Teaching Writing*. *Research Papers in Education*, 38(3), 403–425. . Indeed, part of that setting up of a life to write is thinking about the places and spaces that connect reading and writing, thinking and typing, creation and editing. All writing is re-writing Mayers, T. (1999). (Re)Writing Craft. *College Composition and Communication*, 51(1), 82–89. . There are scholars and writers who fixate on and narrate where they write. That is part of their process. The place is crucial

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to the practice. It is a determinant and a frame. Then there are the floaters, using the mobility of technology to write in coffee shops, train stations and hot desks.

Stephen King's great mantra is significant: all a writer requires is a door that they can close King, S. (2000). He recognized the value of predictability in the statement: "most of us do our best in a place of our own" Gorky, M., Mayakovsky, V., Tolstoy, A., and Fedin, K. (2000). King is a robust guide through the work of writing. He does not render it glamorous, but a series of behaviours. It is a craft, not an art. Throughout his career, he has described writing as hard, relentless work and effort Janeczko, P. (1980). In *Their Own Words: An Interview with Stephen King*. *English Journal*, 69(2), 9–10. , Hye-Knudsen, M., Kristensen-McLachlan, R. D., and Clasen, M. (2023). *How Stephen King Writes and Why: Language, Immersion, Emotion*. *Orbis Litterarum*, 78(5), 353–367. . But the challenge with his memorable statement about a writer requiring a door to close - a simple intervention - is that so many writers do not have that capacity or choice. For well over half of my writing career as a mobile and often precariat university academic, I have not had the ability to close a door, through living in shared, temporary or unstable accommodation. My research work was never completed in an academic office, as they were flooded by teaching, supervising, and consultancy time and tasks. This personal experience of instability is why my book *Setting up your life to write a PhD* did not celebrate a single way of configuring a physical space for writing.

This article explores the places of writing, how they are memorialized and forgotten. There is a focus, using Derrida's theory of hauntology Derrida, J. (1994) to explore 'the Last Desk,' the final location of writing shards and fragments that remains after the death of a writer. The zombie writing that remains has no resolution or ending. It is interrupted. Incomplete. Unresolved. Yet these scraps are a source of what could have been, a reminder to all writers to use time well, as we will all leave incomplete, zombie writing that roams without a destination or intellectual home. This article is organized into three sections. The first part explores why particular locations of famous writers are preserved and memorialized. The second section explores the Last Desk, and what happens after an academic writer's death and the intellectual scraps that remain. The article concludes what we as academics lose when we over-invest in writing places, rather than valuing the time available to us.

MEMORIALIZING PLACES OF FAMOUS WRITERS

Writing is an extraordinary act. It is a private alignment between a person's mind and fingers, separated from any reading of or by an audience for the resultant product. It has a mystery to it, and like all mysteries, researchers and citizens try to solve it through simplification, reification, and categorization, to understand why a particular human creates words that are meaningful, powerful and transformative. Writing researchers require a methodology to track how words move from production and into meaningful consumption. The writer as artist is one model for assessing value and quality. A variant of this model is to assume that writers have an extraordinary, creative place, where insight, wonder, and meaning are available to be extracted from a desk, chair, or view.

This intimate writing context has a role in building a reified relationship between the writer and the reader. If writing is an art, then special and gifted people hold a rare talent that they share with the rest of us. Whereas, if writing is a craft, then it is a set of skills that are developed over time. With persistence, writing is democratized. The elitism returns when the places for writing are celebrated and commemorated. A series of writer's houses are tourist attractions. Tourists visit the house to learn about the writer and writing. By experiencing the place, some of the mystery of 'great' writing can be shared, understood and experienced. Traces of the writing past (seemingly) remain in the furniture, wallpaper, and floor coverings. As MacLeod has so evocatively explored, there is a desire to locate the surviving sensory residue to shape and frame the reading experience MacLeod (2021). The archetype of this touristic search is Virginia Woolf's writing room in the house she shared with Leonard Woolf. The room of her own is now public, if 'protected' and hidden behind glass.

This mode of tourism organized around writers builds a narrative of distinctiveness and specialness. As Robinson has argued, the tourism created for, by and through literary writing activates a particular type of readership and audience. It is an attempt at "reading between the lines" Robinson, M. (2002). *Reading Between the Lines: Literature and the Creation of Touristic Spaces*. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 14(1), 1–28.. The differences that separate writers from readers are reified, and similarities are marginalized. With attention on objects and a building, the goal is to understand, solidify, and visit what is actually intangible and ephemeral.

Visiting writing places attempts to organize and frame how writers work. These constructed touristic spaces of writers include the desk, the chair, the personal library, and the filing systems. After a writer has died, there is an assumption that a fragment or shard of them, and their work, remains in that space, place, and furnishings. Such assumptions activate Derrida's theory of hauntology.

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt the reassuring orders of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth. There is first of all the doubtful contemporaneity of the present to itself. Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must ask oneself whether the spectrality

effect does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other. Derrida, J. (1994)

It is the subjectivity of displacement that agitates accepted and acceptable modes of organizing power, meaning, and reality. The present is not sufficiently saturated. The reading of writing in the present is not enough. It must be drenched by the past and the future. Charlotte McPherson described this as a “pantemporal approach” McPherson, C. (2025). *Haunted Aspirations and Youth Transitions in the Contemporary Context*. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 8, 517–533. . But further, Derrida confirms that every concept and trope is haunted. They exist in the present but are not of the present. This inversion is productive: existence (and presence) is confirmed through a series of absences. The intelligent, consistent and cogent only exists because of unintelligibility, inconsistency and incoherence. The writer is absent. The writing remains.

Language labels what exists. Taxonomies organize and categorize objects and entities in space. How is the absent described, expressed and ordered? This unknowing is also unknowable Wrethed, J. (2023). *Gothic Hauntology: Everyday Hauntings and Epistemological Desire*. Palgrave Macmillan. . How are the stories told of what is gone? Objects attempt to anchor and stabilize the unsettled and unstable ontologies. The complex and multiple stories of a lost past are simplified, codified and narrativized in the present Rahimi, S. (2021). *The Hauntology of Everyday Life*. Palgrave Macmillan.. Whenever stories are told, particularly through literary tourism, the lies, fabrications, shadows and doubt are bled from the objects maintained and presented for viewing.

Such re-cuttings and excesses serve the purposes of tourism. But as with all tourism, there is the MacCannell-infused “staged authenticity,” invented for consumption MacCannell, D. (1973). *Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3), 589–603., MacCannell, D. (2013). *Staged Authenticity Today*. In *Indefensible Space* (259–276). Routledge.. This is a simulacrum, a re-representation of a representation Brabazon, T., Redhead, S., and Chivaura, R. S. (2018). *Trump Studies: An Intellectual Guide to Why Citizens Vote Against Their Interests*. Emerald Publishing. , Brabazon, T., and Redhead, S. (2013). It is disconnected – de-anchored – from the real, building a writer’s room for the consumption of tourists. As Katie da Cunha Lewin stated in her book, *The Writer’s Room*, “I have an image in my mind of the place where writers work” Da Cunha Lewin, K. (2026). *The Writer’s Room: The Hidden Worlds that Shape the Books We Love*. Princeton University Press. . This supposedly simple statement captures the challenges with writers, writing, and context. Writers write alone. Mostly. Readers read alone. Mostly. Meaning is created independently and is (only) aligned through shared grammar, semiotic codes, and the collective, if staged, authenticity of a writer’s location and context. A writer’s meaning is not poured into readers. Writing and reading are separate experiences, and separate processes for meaning development. The image – the imagining – of how and where the words were written becomes one framework to build a writing world for the reader. Tourism, as an industry, invents a place for consumption. When writers, writing and tourism combine, particular objects, rooms and spaces frame, shape and filter the interpretation of words in worlds.

We have writers in our imagination. When we write, we compare ourselves to these writers of imagination. While writing is punctuated by high cultural assumptions about struggle, quality, elite education, and specialist communities, writing also peppers popular culture Marsh, J. (2009). *Writing and Popular Culture*. In *The SAGE Handbook of Writing Development* (313–324). SAGE. . Tourism is part of this desire to render the unfamiliar and extraordinary domestic and understandable. The online environment, with the proliferation of blogs and microblogging, Substack posts, and social media oversharing has both proliferated and democratized writing, and perhaps also rendered it banal Zinsser, W. (2009). *Writing Places: The Life Journey of a Writer and Teacher*. HarperCollins.. These re-representations, while ambiguous, proliferate, from filmic interpretations of Truman Capote to the reconstructed and re-represented lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Joan Didion, Margaret Atwood, George Orwell, Jules Verne, Henry James De Biasio, A. (2013), and William Wordsworth.

These narratives focus on the place of writing, where a writer aligns material and imaginative words. That is why the desk matters, because it grounds and anchors words and images, the past and present. The location of writing – the place of writing – provides one explanation to understand the origins of wor(l)d views. Through such simplifications, what is actually learned is information about the readers and fans: what we want or need to create a meaning system for a writer and their writing in our present. These assumptions organize what is preserved in these houses: libraries, desks, and chairs. But only certain writer’s places are preserved in this way.

What is important about these places of writing is what is masked, marginalized or forgotten. Ghosts dance around the desk. The work of writing remains displaced. Indeed, Lewin described it as “hidden labour” James, S., and Cronin, J. (2026, June 2). *Backrooms: The Unsettling Reason this Horror Film Resonates with so Many People Right Now*. *The Independent*.. Instead of exploring the often unpaid or underpaid work of writing, it is necessary to preserve objects and then build a narrative of success and achievement around objects. These writing rooms, desks and chairs are constructed, curated, and commodified.

The problem is that such curation renders writing a middle class act: stable, ordered and organized. For working-class writers, writing is precarious and liminal labour, written on a cleared kitchen table or during a lunch break. Instead of celebrating writing places and commemorating them for tourism, a greater question remains: how working-class writers and their lives are rendered visible and meaningful. Pauszek, for example, explored how the precarious labour of working class writing is located, recognized, and archived Pauszek, J. (2019). *Writing from "the Wrong Class": Archiving Labor in the Context of Precarity*. *Community Literacy*

Journal, 13(2), 48–68. . Precarity is difficult to research because it is defined by absence: an absence of security, items of material culture, and time to capture textual records of daily writing life. Derrida's hauntology returns as a spectre in the keyboard.

Writing is precarious, unsafe, and unsecured work. It exists around daily life and responsibilities. It hovers in the early morning or late evening. It is scribbled on scraps of paper or typed in a note application on a mobile phone. Inclusive writing cultures must incorporate public libraries, where there are books to borrow, resources to use, computers are available, and there are desks and chairs to sit on, use and write. These are shared stories of writing that are unpreserved, and under-told. However, there are millions of writing stories and writers that are erased through death that do not hold the grandeur or importance to be commodified through tourism. What remains is zombie writing: the fragments and scraps that – like a ghost – walk in the present, de-anchored from the desk at which they were written.

THE DEAD. THE ABSENT. THE LOST.

When writers are connected to particular places, it is a way to construct and maintain a controlled and controllable legacy for their work that is available for commodification through tourism, special editions, and screen-based commemorations. But – perhaps – the most meaningful stories are invisible or, indeed, erased. Yet they continue to haunt the present. To exemplify this argument, I present a story that I have never shared. My late husband, Steve Redhead, created offices in every house we shared, spanning from our house in Kardinya in Western Australia, to Eastbourne in the UK, Bathurst in New South Wales, and Adelaide in South Australia. Two writers in one house is unusual, but also meaningful. He always described how much he appreciated the Australian light and the view. He was writing on Virilio after he migrated from the United Kingdom, so the space – he argued – helped him with that work. He also shared with me the vicarious writing periods of our lives on wonky tables, and in one case, a kitchen bench, when we were working and living in unstable and precarious academic positions in Oshawa in Canada and Manchester in England.

The office he created in Adelaide was special to him. It was a productive time. He filmed the introduction to his YouTube channel in this space.

Figure 1



Steve Redhead welcome message

Figure 1 Steve Redhead in his Adelaide Home Office (Photograph by Tara Brabazon from an Original Video Recorded by Tara Brabazon)

This joyful and excited scholar, welcoming viewers to his writing space was – within a year – diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. This space therefore housed what I describe as the Last Desk. All the photographs that follow were taken by me on the day after his death. The rationale for taking these photographs was not clear to me then. They are not clear to me now. But these slices of time, space, horror, and mourning raise questions about how to narrate objects in this room. What is the meaning of a desk or a chair when the writer who occupied them has died?

Figure 2



Figure 2 The Last Desk (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

He had established his workspace overlooking the ocean and a golf course at Seacliff, when we lived in Adelaide.

Figure 3



Figure 3 The Ocean View from the Last Desk (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

A Balcony Led from His Office.

Figure 4

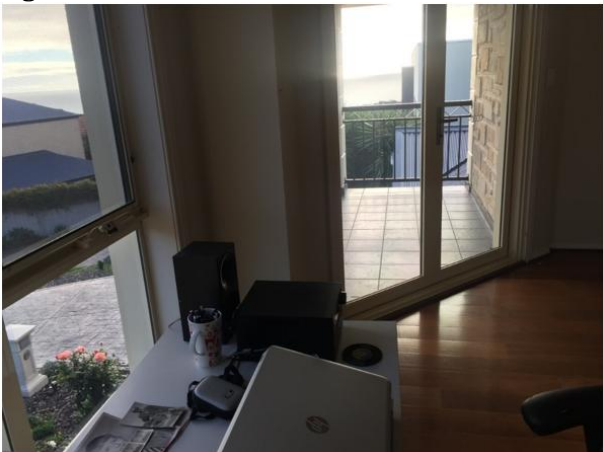


Figure 4 The Last Desk and the Balcony (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

Looking down on the front garden, flowers were in bloom, offering a glimpse of the world outside his office. This was his final view as mobility reduced in the last weeks.

Figure 5



Figure 5 A Room with a view (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

He wrote new work in this space on post leisure studies, claustropolitanism, and his last book *Theoretical Times* (2017), which was published just before his death. After he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he worked every day at this desk until three days before he died, when suddenly he could no longer stand, and therefore could not climb the stairs to his office. The paramedics lifted him into an ambulance. He died three days later, in hospital, at 2:20am on March 8, 2018. I was the only other person in the room. I walked away from his body, carrying his watch and wallet

The drive home was hyper sensate. I walked into the kitchen, knowing the man I shared it with was now a body that would not return to this location. I removed my wedding ring. I knew through the shock that removing it would only become more difficult and complex as the minutes, hours, and days continued. As after any death, there are thousands of crucial decisions to make in these first few days. Most importantly, I had to work out if I would continue to live or die, and make that choice. From that determination, others followed. Could I stay in Australia? Would I remain in this job? Would I be able to live and survive in this house?

The dance between the living and the dead, the present and the absent, activates a life of haunting. As James Hollis recognized, ghosts “run our lives” James, S., and Cronin, J. (2026, June 2). *Backrooms: The Unsettling Reason this Horror Film Resonates with so Many People Right Now*. *The Independent*. We must negotiate with the invisible. Speak with the silent. In many ways, the absences wound more than that which is present. Hollins realized that, “the past is not dead; it is not even past. And what we resist will persist – as haunting” Hollins, J. (2013). The house we shared was haunted. Steve was present in every room. On every shelf. The only absence was his body. If I resisted the scope and scale of this reality through absence, then I would not survive.

The widow(er)↔writer and writer↔widow(er) is an intricate space and existence, only intensified when the house that was shared was with another writer. Powerful memoirs have emerged to story this reality, including Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* Didion, J. (2006), Lewis, C. S. (2014), Brooks, G. (2026), and Hustvedt, S. (2012). All these writers sat with the artefacts of their partner’s writing/life, bumping into memories, tragedy, sadness and loss. When Siri Hustvedt’s husband Paul Auster died, his writing spaces revealed challenges. She stated,

We did not disturb each other’s workspaces. They were sacrosanct. He never touched my desk. I never touched his. I had no idea he owned so many pens, ribbons and notebooks Hustvedt, S. (2012).

Steve and I did not maintain such a separation. We owned over 10,000 books in our combined library and they were organized by topic around the house. Steve’s office housed Marxism and French theorists. My office included higher education studies, technology, and regional and urban development. Our shared printer room contained sport, leisure studies and work theory. The bottom story held music, art, architecture and popular culture. Each room had a theme. So while we wrote in a particular location, our reading spaces permeated the house. If we were stuck with our writing, we would walk to a bookcase to activate writing through the connection with reading. Therefore, even with his office and desk removed, and Steve’s body gone, the books remained. The sensations remained. Ghosts moved around the house. Shadows cast their indeterminacy on the light.

Unlike this famous widow(er)s↔writers and writers↔widow(er)s, I did not have the opportunity to take time off from my job. To mourn. To grieve. I returned to work the morning after Steve’s death. I was a dean and on a contract at a university where restructures were and are as common as buses during peak hour. Most importantly, I was the dean of graduate research. I did not matter. My feelings. My hopes. My body. None of that mattered. I existed to ensure that students completed their doctorate, and

quickly. Everything about my life and identity existed in displacement. In absence. I was never centred. I existed to enable the lives and research of others. Therefore, quick decisions had to be made.

I had to make our house into my house if I was going to survive. Therefore, I had to remove and change anything that was a memorial to him. In opposition to these tourist houses that place a writer's career behind glass or are used to build a memoir for the writer↔widow(er)s, I did not want my house to be a monument. We organized the house so that Steve would have a glorious office, with brilliant light, a fabulous view, and to make sure he could see the world while he was writing. He could walk to the golf course or to the coffee shop. It was an evocative academic writer's life. But then, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. All our hopes and aspirations for this time in Adelaide were destroyed. Our lives were destroyed. Steve wanted to continue writing and told no one except me of his illness or prognosis. We managed the illness together, with a monthly doctor's appointment, steroid patches for the daily discomfort, and OxyContin for breakthrough and uncontrollable pain. This office became even more important, as he committed to completing the writing of a book, without telling his publisher that he was unwell. Therefore, the office and daily writing routine became the pattern for this, the final stage of his life.

Returning to this space the day after his death was the deepest pain I have ever experienced. Indeed, this was the archetype of Derrida's hauntology. This space and place was created through absence. The angle of the chair remained, without a body to mould its shape. The closed computer lid would remain closed, rather than ready to be opened to begin work. The coaster was positioned ready for a cup of coffee that would never be made or drunk.

Figure 6



Figure 6 The Coaster Awaiting a Coffee Cup (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

The pens in the coffee cup were ready to write and be used. The stereo was waiting to erupt with sound. Instead, the space had lost its purpose with the writer no longer at the writer's desk. He would never return. For Derrida, in *Spectres of Derrida*, J. (1994), this haunting demands justice, or at least a response Del Pilar Blanco, M., and Peeren, E. (2013). Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities. In *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (1–27). Bloomsbury.

Ford, C., and Cameron, J. M. (2003). *Julia Margaret Cameron: A Critical Biography*. Getty Publications.

Gorky, M., Mayakovsky, V., Tolstoy, A., and Fedin, K. (2000). *On the Art and Craft of Writing*. The Minerva Group.

Hollins, J. (2013). *Hauntings: Dispelling the Ghosts Who Run Our Lives*. Chiron Publications.

Husserl, E. (1997). *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*. Springer.

Hustvedt, S. (2012). *Living, thinking, Looking: Essays*. Picador.. But what is the possible response after the death of a husband, an academic, a writer, a body in this space? Amidst this haunting, what is the next step or stage?

Figure 7

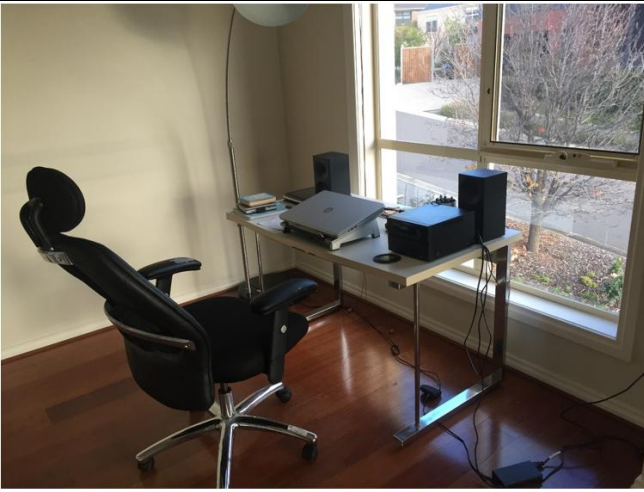


Figure 7 The Writer's Desk Without the Writer

I could not live in the space where, whenever I would walk to the front of the house, the absence would be obvious and the loss a continual catastrophic, looped re-remembering. A memorial to his life and death would kill me. That is neither hyperbole nor a metaphor. Joan Didion stated that, “we tell ourselves stories in order to live” Didion, J. (1990). Leaving this office to remain as a ghost down the corridor from the bedroom that we shared did not create a space to live. It provided a propulsive magnet to death.

Before I changed his office, where he had produced so many magnificent pieces and books even when he knew he was dying, I needed to photograph it. Living with it was too much. Losing it without a record was too horrific to consider. I captured what Bretton Varga described as “social imaginariums” Varga, B. (2025). *Hauntological Social Studies: More-Than-Human Deviances, Imbrications, and Proliferations of Possibility*. Springer. . That is, the past returns – with indeterminacy – in the present, and is known through what is absent, as much as present. I needed something of the absent in the present. I needed a record of the positioning of the table and chair. The ornaments on the table.

On that table were two photographs of his grandfathers, and photographs of his younger self. His grandfathers were meaningful to his life. One was an Art Deco furniture designer, the other was a goalkeeper for Preston North End Brabazon, T., and Redhead, S. (2012). *Morecambe and Modernism* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/XQFqHY_AOmI

Brabazon, T., and Redhead, S. (2013). *Baudrillard in Drag: Lady Gaga and the Accelerated Cycles of Pop*. *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900–Present)*, 12(2), 1–13.

Brabazon, T., and Redhead, S. (2020). *Digital Dylan: High Popular Culture and the Digital Modern Times of Bob Dylan*. *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900–Present)*, 19(1).

Brooks, G. (2026). *Memorial Days: A Memoir*. Penguin Group. .

Figure 8

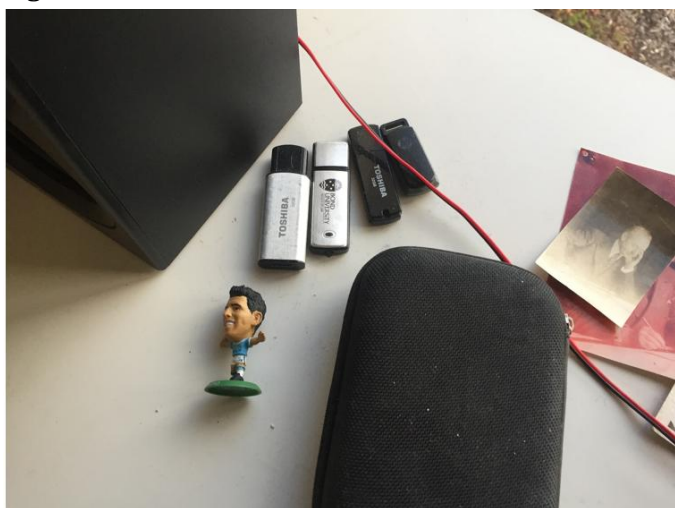


Figure 8 Two Grandfathers and Steve Redhead's Younger Self (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

Photographs summon slices of the past into the present. Steve was dying, and while he was writing, he wanted to remember his earlier self and his grandfathers. The book published four months before his death, *Theoretical Times* (2017), was dedicated to these grandfathers. Noting this context and content carried on the surfaces of the desk, the resonance between past and present, photography and writing, ensures that the resultant meaning system agitates and unsettles linear time and the singularity of place.

These photographs convey the working desk of a dying man, right until the end of his life. The USBs are poignant and – for me – disturbing. He did not want the work to be lost. I preserved all these documents on my own hard drive, encased in a Steve Redhead folder. That folder will be carried by me on computers for the rest of my life. Where it has been possible to publish those fragments in some form, I have done so Brabazon, T., Redhead, S., and Chivaura, R. S. (2018). *Trump Studies: An Intellectual Guide to Why Citizens Vote Against Their Interests*. Emerald Publishing. , Brabazon, T., and Redhead, S. (2020), Brabazon, T. (2022). *Claustropolitanism at the end of the World: Rethinking Post-Pandemic Globalization and Higher Education*. *Journal of Languages and Translation*, 3(2), 1–14. .

Significantly, there is a sporting intervention in his *Sporting Life* Redhead, S. (2015). "This Sporting Life is Going to Be the Death of Me": Sport As a Cultural Industry. In *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries* (163–172). Routledge. . Manchester City won the championship in the year of his diagnosis and death. On his last Saturday night in the house, he saw them win once more. But on this last desk, there was a talisman to fandom, to Manchester City, but also to a sporting life that was ending. He would not see his team win the Premier League in 2018.

Figure 9

Figure 9 Manchester City and the USBs (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

The desk is dominated by digital platforms. The iPad in particular was heavily used to ensure that digital materials, including online articles, social media posts, footage, and music, were available to him while he was writing his final publications. This was convenient and useful, as he was unable – and perhaps unwilling – to travel to libraries or leave the house as his illness progressed. Steve kept his diagnosis secret, giving me instructions about how his death was to be announced. He gave me many reasons for this decision. Firstly, he wanted to live his life until it was over. He wanted to complete *Theoretical Times* (2017), and for it to gain an honest audience, rather than a pitying one. Steve was also a private man, and was inspired by the examples of both David Bowie and Alan Rickman. Both kept their cancer diagnoses secret until their deaths. But the challenge is that the ravages on his body become obvious and clear, and Steve avoided online meetings and outings of any kind that did not involve a doctor's appointment. These decisions made the iPad in particular crucial to his research, and a window to the world.

Figure 10



Figure 10 The IPAD as a Window to the Research World (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

Digitization enabled a sick man's body to still live in, watch and listen to the world. But the paper-based materials carry a different shard of memory.

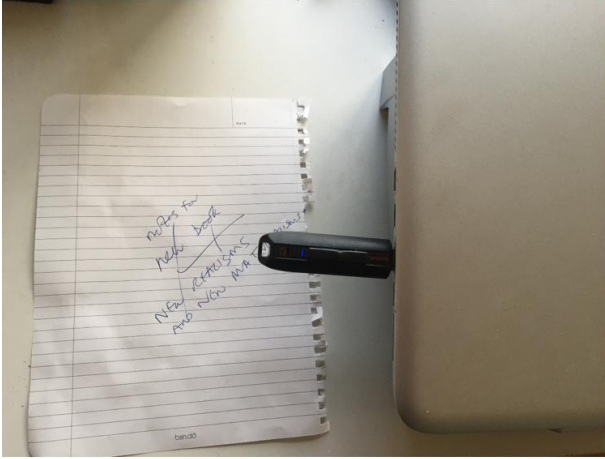
Figure 11



Figure 11 The Notebooks (Tara Brabazon)

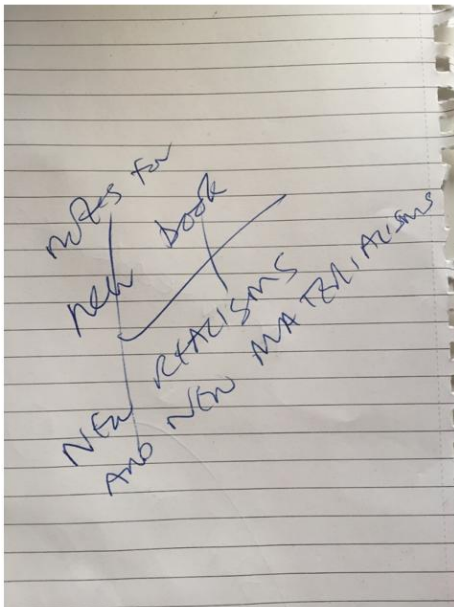
Steve used the notebooks in different ways. He wrote notes and then tore the pages out of the covers and embedded them into digitized writing. But there were pages left that were ripped out of the books and not yet written into digitized academic prose.

There are tragedies weeping from these photographs, revealing the pieces of paper that capture his ideas for future pieces. Indeed, one of the pieces of paper had a phrase that appears to be a new book title and an entirely new project, following Theoretical Times (2017). His handwriting confirms, "Notes for new book."

Figure 12**Figure 12 Notes for the New Book (Tara Brabazon)**

This paper was positioned on the left-hand side of his computer, under his USB stick, when he died.

Obviously, there is horror in all deaths. Pancreatic cancer is so catastrophic because the first symptom – jaundice – is a death sentence. It is diagnosed at stage four. The pain is debilitating. Lives are lost at speed. When Steve was diagnosed, he informed me with the phrase, “I’m a dead man walking” Brabazon, T., and Redhead, S. (2020). Still, as a dead man walking, he kept writing, and finished an array of articles and the book *Theoretical Times*. There were projects that I completed for him and with him even after his death, including *Trump Studies* Brabazon, T., Redhead, S., and Chivaura, R. S. (2018). *Trump Studies: An Intellectual Guide to Why Citizens Vote Against Their Interests*. Emerald Publishing, and the article on *Digital Dylan* Brabazon, T., and Redhead, S. (2020). But the desk showed that a new book was being planned. Titled *New Realisms and New Materialisms*, these handwritten notes are all that remains of this project. Searching the USB or his hard drive provided no clues. The title is all that remains.

Figure 13**Figure 13 New Titles that Ran Out of Time (Tara Brabazon)**

There were other clues. They provide resonance with a cultural life beyond this Last Desk, view, and house. He remained – even in the Southern Hemisphere – a Northern man. Summoning Elvis Costello and the Beatles, with an odd twist through the Old Testament, his phrasing captures a strange brew of sentiment, laughter, and horror. But little hope. Perhaps this was a prospective article title or book chapter. Unusually, these phrases were not crossed out, but remained active until the end.

Figure 14

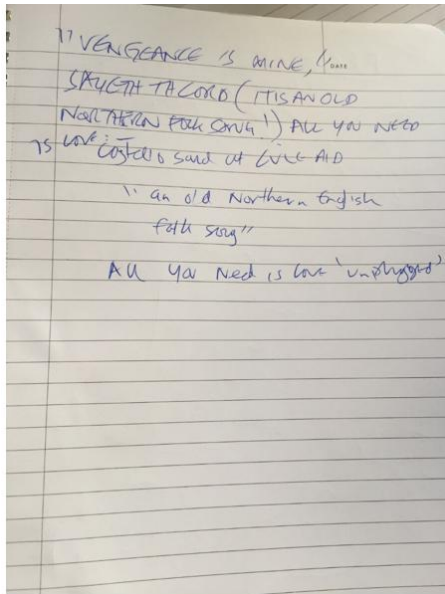


Figure 14 An Old Northern Folk song (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

The connotation and direction of these notes and titles are unclear. Yet there is one more page of ideas and crossing out that is even more disturbing and desolate.

Figure 15

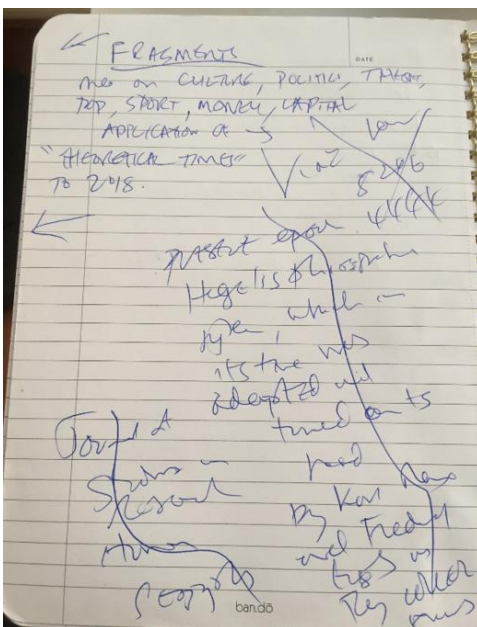


Figure 15 Fragments (Photograph by Tara Brabazon)

Again, it appears another book is sketched out on this page. "Fragments" is the focus, capturing his work from 2018, and after Theoretical Times. The topics included sport, capital, culture, and offered an application of the Theoretical Times project.

Phrases. Notes. Crossing out and rewriting ideas. This is zombie writing. Dead ideas that walk, but without content or context. Of all the tragedies in my life, it shattered me to see these notes of future work that a brilliant man could never complete. It still shatters me. I have never transcended this deep tragedy. It is visceral. All he wanted was a little bit more time. It was not granted.

All that is left of this potentiality and possibility are photographs. Siri Hustvedt confirmed that, “images are not words,” (2012, 232). Photographs have a role in preserving what is not present. Photographs capture ghosts. They present what has disappeared. Death matters to photographs. Roland Barthes looked at pictures of her dead mother, hoping that she was alive Barthes, R. (1980). John Berger reminded us that, “photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning” Berger, J. (1972). They require a clock and a frame, a time and a place, a story and a trajectory, to matter and to move.

Photographs carry more than meaning. They convey saturated emotion and recurrent regret. The longing for a different outcome. The writing place – that desk – remains a talisman in my life of tragedy, despair, and loss. It is also a reminder (a warning?) to use the time well. From this tragedy, it is clear why writing places are preserved. It is inspiring. We want to believe that all of us can write well if we can find the appropriate location. These writing places bring us closer to a person who we admire, but have lost. The writing room remains when they do not. We are, as Katy Shaw has described, “the haunted subject” Shaw, K. (2018). *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan..

Holding onto the papers, the desks and the chairs of lovers, partners and spouses who were writers denies the ghost. Denies the absence. Denies hauntology. Joan Didion confirmed the lie of presence.

I no longer want reminders how what was, what got broken, what was lost, what got wasted ... A period during which I believed that I could keep people fully present, keep them with me, by preserving their mementos, their ‘things,’ their totems. The detritus of this misplaced belief now fill the draws and closets of my apartment in New York. There is no drawer I can open without seeing something I do not want, on reflection, to see (2011, 43).

Memorials to the dead breathe through sights, smells, and textures in drawers, in wardrobes, and on desks. This is zombie writing: alive but dead. Unchanging but mobile. This detritus crushes the living. The absent cannot be fully present. Instead, the absence activates what is hollowed out, withered, and cut out of culture. They are gone. A writing room is only created because a writer is in it. But are there lessons to be gained from the ghosts and their totems for those who continue to live and write?

WHAT WE LOSE WHEN WE OVER-INVEST IN WRITING PLACES RATHER THAN WRITING TIMES

Writing guides proliferate in the releases from publishing houses. Skilled writers are often flippant about the places and spaces of and for their work. For example, William Zinsser in his book *Writing Places*, stated that,

Writers can write anywhere. Some writers think they can only write in a cabin in the woods; others think they can only write within the sound of human activity. But finally, all of us will write wherever we need to write to pay the bills (2009: 5).

This statement demonstrates the relationship between motivation and writing. The place where we write becomes a mitigation – a blockage – to justify why we are not motivated to sit in a chair and write. Zinsser wrote in North Africa and Italy during the Second World War. If it is possible to write in a war zone, then it is possible to write anywhere. Zinsser’s description is important to remember. He activated, “a life of writing in odd places” Zinsser, W. (2009). *Writing Places: The Life Journey of a Writer and Teacher*. HarperCollins.. Too often, the middle class ideologies of writers and writing predominate. It is repeated in memoirs, autobiographies, and writing guides. It is preserved for tourists. Instead, writers are alone in a room for an extended period.

Technology has been transformative of writing and this ideology, but not always usefully. Through the distractions of the dopamine economy, writers are never really alone in a room until the Wi-Fi is disengaged. Only then can writing begin with honesty, rather than pretending to write while actually buying an eyeliner on Temu. What is important is how we understand our body as an instrument for writing. Husserl, E. (1997) is the origin and fuel for much of this theorization, focusing on how objects move around our body.

This lecture series is complex, probing how the “sphere of things” is “still not exhausted by the most universal terms of identity and non-identity, whole and part, subject and determination” (1997, 51). Sensations are clustered, regardless of actuality or non-actuality, the object’s existence or nonexistence (1997, 27). He places attention on tables, and how our bodies orient around them. Indeed, “each body is constituted in an orientation” (1997, 258). Husserl has inspired many of Sara Ahmed’s books, including *Queer Phenomenology* Ahmed, S. (2020). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press.

Barthes, R. (1980). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Bell, D., and Valentine, G. (Eds.). (1995). *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. Psychology Press.

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin.. Like Husserl, she explores how we are oriented towards certain objects. Husserl termed this the “living body” Husserl, E. (1997). Ahmed argues that the table matters because, “the table is the object nearest the body of the philosopher” (2020, loc 71). The table is significant because philosophy is written on it. The table orients the body so we can find our words, our beginning and our ending. Such theorizing is the foundation of phenomenology. The turn towards objects grants researchers (and citizens) a consciousness of our bodies, our selves and our world. Therefore, instead of mythologizing particular places of writing, particular objects orient us, activating intention and consciousness.

Yes, such an orientation can be sexualized. Bell and Valentine’s research confirmed this trajectory Bell, D., and Valentine, G. (Eds.). (1995). But orientation logs the clustering of bodies, sites, spaces, places and times. Sara Ahmed stated that this is, “a world

organized around the form of the heterosexual couple" (2006, loc 395). This article shows what happens when one part of that heterosexual couple dies. The domestic lives of two academics are rarely viewed, discussed or photographed. It is part of the "two-body problem" Wolf-Wendel, L., Twombly, S. B., and Rice, S. (2004). *The Two-Body Problem: Dual-Career-Couple Hiring Practices in Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins University Press. , where married couples offer challenges, difficulties and discomfort for universities and their leadership. What this article reveals is not the orientation of the desk, but the disorientation when the writer leaves it. The disorder. Not knowing where we are. Not knowing when we are. When the body at the table, the body sitting at the chair has gone, what happens to the knowledge formed in that location?

All objects hold a history beyond their commodification. The relationship between a / the body and writing has provoked feminist scholars, particularly Cixous, H. (2009), and Ahmed, S. (1998). *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*. Cambridge University Press. . The slippage between a body writing and the body of writing is profound and important. Theoretical ambiguities haunt these slippages, including embodiment and subjectivity. What is the relationship between "the subject who writes and the social function of authorship" Ahmed, S. (1998). *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*. Cambridge University Press. . But more poignantly, what happens to this subject↔social function, when the subject is dead, and the social function continues? How is this zombie writing to be corralled and framed without damaging other writers and readers?

A writing table matters because it grants familiarity, and Husserl argued that a clear desk is ready for writing Husserl, E. (1997). In other words, our bodies are organized for writing through the surrounding objects: "one's belonging to the sphere of things, which are still not exhausted by the most universal terms identity and non-identity, whole and part, subject and determination" Husserl, E. (1997). The clustering of kinaesthetic sensations shapes, structures and configures a body. But also, while this orientation matters, so does disorientation. If we disorient our bodies, our writing transforms. Our bodies – in health, sickness, stress and excitement - are the engines, the fuel and the power of writing. How this self is located and rendered conscious in and of a body remains a potent stream of post-Husserl phenomenology Serino, A., Alsmith, A., Costantini, M., Mandrigin, A., Tajadura-Jimenez, A., and Lopez, C. (2013). Bodily Ownership and Self-Location: Components of Bodily Self-Consciousness. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 22(4), 1239–1252. , activating "embodied intentionality" Wehrle, M. (2020). Being a Body and Having a Body: The Twofold Temporality of Embodied Intentionality. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 19(3), 499–521. . The notes that Steve left on his desk remain his embodied intentionality, even when the body is lost.

While recognizing the importance of the body, writers are also more than the body. Zinsser has stated that, "I've never let my writing define my life" Zinsser, W. (2009). *Writing Places: The Life Journey of a Writer and Teacher*. HarperCollins.. He confirmed that he did not work at night or on the weekends. While valuable in building a life beyond work, such demarcations are also a great privilege. For those with a life of competing responsibilities, a difficult day job that spills into weekends and nights, and caring responsibilities for partners, parents, and children, writing has to exist in what is left from a life. That is where aligning task orientation, time orientation, and place orientation can be transformative.

To find thirty minutes in a day to write involves creating time when it – seemingly – does not exist. In other words, rising thirty minutes earlier and reducing sleep. Then it is necessary to align this thirty-minute window with task orientation. It is crucial to be clear about the task to be undertaken in that thirty minutes. In practice, that means, ensuring a document is open on the computer at the point where the work commences. Open the lid of the computer. Start writing for thirty minutes. That is the task and time orientation, but they are best aligned in a particular place. When a body and mind associate a particular place with writing, then there is no confusion or ambiguity. Sit. Open the computer's lid. Write.

An alignment of time, task, and place will deliver writing. This geocultural alignment particularly matters when writing in a home, or some form of temporary accommodation. We cannot rely on the public and private divide, that writing work is public, and family work is private. Most writing exists in the spaces of the private family home, on kitchen tables, outdoor furniture, or in a television room. As Tanya Ann Kennedy has argued, with a particular focus on women, it is valuable to build a geocultural environment for writing and know the paradox of this life: that our public work – our writing – takes place in a private location (2006). This contraction is managed through a specific alignment of task, time, and place. Creating a geocultural environment for writing that is temporary – the kitchen table will be used for something else - but while that alignment is in place - it becomes a functional working space.

Writing places summon nostalgia, inspiration, and hope. Hope is the most insidious of emotions, because it offers the assumption that if we can configure an inspirational environment, then we will be able to write. Stephen King's famous simplification of writing spaces – all that is required is a door that can be closed King, S. (2000) – is often not possible. We are living with other people in crowded conditions, including unstable and temporary accommodation. In these environments, if we waited for a door to close, then we would never write

Writers write in tough conditions, when there is no door to close, where there is noise, instability and discomfort. I wrote *Digital Dieting* on a wonky desk (2020). I was living in a room at a bed-and-breakfast in Canada, working in a toxic university that was unstable and frightening. We lost so much through that job, and I did not want to give up on our writing and research. On this desk, with one leg shorter than the others, that rocked and bounced and bobbled, I wrote a book. I did better out of that deal. I took the desk. Steve wrote in the small kitchenette down the hall, using a kitchen chair and putting his computer next to the sink. These liminal places are lost. They survive through the words written in those places, transcending what Valentine described as "the life-

death boundary" Valentine, C. (2008). *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing Bonds in the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge. . Memory making emerges from the loss, the storying of that loss, and how to make sense of the absence.

Each desk carries past desks into the present. Currently, in another temporary location, my table is stable, but I have a wonky chair. I hurt at the end of the working day. Romanticizing a peaceful writing location damages productivity. When understanding a context, it is possible to weave task and time orientation. The gift of this strategy is that we – as writers – fuse the memory of particular articles and books to the location they were written. I always connect Digital Dieting to that wonky desk in Canada. The click click click of my typing meshes with the bang bang bang of the leg on the wood floor. That book is one of my more melancholic and gentle publications. Context always matters to writing as a marinade, obstacle, or challenge. The terrible academic job, the daily bullying and the unstable 'home' and writing surfaces shaped a book of despair with – perhaps – a slither of hope.

There are happier memories, too. When I worked in the North of England, there was a lag in the sale of our house in Eastbourne. For eight weeks, I commuted early Monday mornings, to return late on Fridays. I made a deal with myself that I would enjoy that Friday commute, no matter how exhausted. I had to catch a train from Bolton to Manchester Airport, a flight from Manchester to London, and a train from London to Eastbourne. I used the time to write my sections of the book *Digital Wine* (2014), with Bryn Gandy and the late Dr Mick Winter. When I think of this book, I remember writing it on cafe tables at Manchester airport, and on that long train trip home to Eastbourne on Friday nights. I finished my component of that book during those eight Fridays. I remember it as a meaningful time, aligning the writing of that book with this liminal time of my life.

Celebrating mythical writing locations of writing heroes does not help us. This is not our destiny. This is not our future. When we build writing from struggle, an incredibly productive inversion occurs. The place does not create the writing. The writing creates the place. Whenever we remember a piece of writing, we carry the context with it because the writing actually creates the place. It is a capsule carrying its context.

CONCLUSION: WRITE KNOWING IT WILL END

In the movement to the last part of this article on the Last Desk, I transcend beyond third person. I move through the second. To the first. Many of us in the humanities and arts in higher education are located in profoundly volatile situations, lacking resources, Support, support and stability. We are the metaphorical Obi Wan Kenobi on Tatooine. But Obi Wan – even Ben – Kenobi was still a Jedi, even when exiled on Tatooine.

You are a writer. Wherever you write is a writer's place. Julia Cameron stated that, "writing is how, and it sometimes seems why, I do my own life" Cameron, J. (2017). *The Write to Write: An Invitation and Initiation Into the Writing Life*. Hay House. Cixous, H. (2009). The Laugh of the Medusa. In R. R. Warhol and D. P. Herndl (Eds.), *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (417–431).

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Didion, J. (1990). *The White Album*. Macmillan.

Didion, J. (2006). *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Harper Perennial.

Didion, J. (2011). *Blue Nights*. Fourth Estate.. It is the action, or the process of writing that creates a place, a space and meaning. Because the act of writing is so extraordinary, with humans being the only animals on this planet that write, we create shortcuts and justifications to explain why we could write but choose not to.

This is the current view from my desk.

Figure 16



Figure 16 A Room Without a View (Tara Brabazon)

I am living in temporary accommodation with all my books and scholarly artefacts in storage. This period of my life is compressed, closed and claustropolitan. Most of us will never have Virginia Woolf's writing room, spaces, and choices. We do not have Emily Bronte's vista of the moors. As Julia Caeron realized, "the trick" and the gift is finding writing time, not a writing place (2017, 22). With all the focus on finding a place, writing requires finding time. That is the difference between Virginia Woolf and Stephen King. Virginia Woolf famously stated, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (2015). Conversely, Stephen King argued that, "Amateurs sit and wait for inspiration, the rest of us just get up and go to work." Waiting for a peaceful moment or a great location for writing means that we never write. There is an alternative. Appreciate this day. This hour. This minute. This time is a gift to writing and alters our approach to language and the world. Writing exists between the dead and the living, the being and the non being, the present and the absent, activating "epistemological desire" Wrethed, J. (2023). *Gothic Hauntology: Everyday Hauntings and Epistemological Desire*. Palgrave Macmillan. . There will be a Last Desk for all of us.

Those last scraps of writing from Steve Redhead mattered. They continue to matter. As I wrote and edited this article, a review appeared of a film that cited his research on claustropolitanism as if he were alive. In the present tense. Present. And tense. Reviewing the horror film, or – indeed – 'horror film' *Backrooms*, Redhead's research on claustropolitanism was summoned as the key reference to decode this strange and remarkable film James, S., and Cronin, J. (2026, June 2). *Backrooms: The Unsettling Reason this Horror Film Resonates with so Many People Right Now*. *The Independent*. . They did not mention that he was dead. The theory, concept and trope live, and he remains living through these ideas. When I read this reference and his name and ideas framed in the present tense, I felt comfort. What followed was compressing, constricting pain. Joan Didion offered one justification for this pain jutting from hope. She stated, "I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us" (2006, 225). But they are not with us. There was a Last Desk. Their words, however, remain as fragments, zombie artefacts, that haunt the living.

Writing is always in the present tense. There is no past in the history of ideas. But those last scraps of writing from Steve Redhead were important. Some were published. Some survive as photographs in this article, to welcome a next innovation from researchers. He remains a ghost to us, and this zombie writing must be decoded by others. What the Last Desk captures is the distance and the dissonance between what Siri Hustvedt described as "the person in the room and the person on the page" (2012, 63). The person in that room has died. That house has been sold. The desk and chair were placed in a skip and taken away. But the person on the page still lives, "shimmering at the edges" Wolfreys, J. (2018). *Haunted Selves, Haunting Places in English Literature and Culture, 1800–Present*. Palgrave Macmillan. . Zombie writing lives, outside the margins, where important and difficult ideas remain just beyond our grasp.

How we write changes as we change. How we live changes as those around us die. There is a gift in mobility, knowing that as our circumstances change, our writing changes with it. That fusing of place, task, and time builds a bespoke and meaningful context for writing. Do not wait for the right place or the right time to write. It will never happen. Writing is a process. It is behaviour. It is an act. It is an action.

Do it. Do not wait. Do it. Any desk may be the Last Desk. Make a decision to wake thirty minutes earlier than your normal pattern and write. Yes, it may be on a kitchen table or sitting cross-legged in front of an occasional table. There will never be a better place and time than now. Please do not lose this moment. Remember those remarkable notes that sat on Steve's desk at the end. We have lost those words. We have lost those ideas. Steve worked hard, right to the end of his life, on that Last Desk. But he did not have enough time. You have today. Make it count.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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