

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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## What Dreams May Come

Fiona Murphy  
Queen's University Belfast

**ABSTRACT** | *What dreams may come* is a piece of ethnofiction that tells the story of a young girl and her grandmother, displaced by the climate crisis and conflict. The story centres on the strong, abiding relationship between the girl and her grandmother. Their relationship is the anchor point for their survival in the new unhappy world that they find themselves in. As an anthropologist of displacement, this short story is an attempt to tell the story of climate crisis, displacement and conflict through a fictional lens, a place where fable and reality coincide and collide.

**Keywords:** Ethnofiction; Climate crisis; Displacement; Creative writing; Anthropology.

### **Reflection: The Power of Ethnofiction**

*This short story is a meditation on the intersections between the climate crisis, displacement, and loss. The story is told through the lens of a girl and her strong relationship with her grandmother. It is intended as a reflective piece, with the girl musing on how the dystopian world she now lives in has come to be shaped. This dystopian world could be ‘anywhere’ and the piece never fully comments on the where (it could be another planet, it could be a detention centre, etc). Deploying this idea of a politics of everywhere and anywhere in this short story is an attempt to evoke how the impact of conflict, climate crisis, and disaster in the form of forced displacement can cast its net far and wide. The characters in this story are nameless, the borders they have crossed hard to pin-point, their personal histories are left somewhat vague and open, though it is, nonetheless, clear that they live with the shadows of previous displacements and catastrophes. Nameless and ageless, these characters live with and alongside particular kinds of historical continuities. These temporal and geographical ambiguities work to decentre and recentre in the same moment, an effort to place human connection and sociality at the heart of a tale that is both fable like and starkly realist. Central to the girl’s reflections are issues of ethical responsibility and human failing. It is ultimately strong kinship ties with both the living and the dead that see her through her lived experience of loss and displacement. However, hopelessness and despair remain core to her way of inhabiting this world in crisis. As an anthropologist of displacement, I developed this piece as a creative articulation of the links between the climate crisis and forced displacement as a contemporary universal issue that calls out for a politics of everybody.*

*In my anthropological studies, I have worked on a number of different projects: with Stolen Generations in Australia (Indigenous children forcibly removed from their families); asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland, the UK, Turkey and France; and also with ethical/sustainable consumers during the economic crisis in Ireland. Loss and crisis are cohering threads in many of these projects and subsequent long and engaged ethnographic encounters. Displacement, especially in my work with Stolen Generations and asylum seekers and refugees, casts a long shadow into the lives of those I work with – framing, altering, interrupting, and disrupting in ways that are obvious but also quite often unexpected and imperceptible. In the doing of these different kinds of projects, I have often turned to literature, film, and music both as a form of escapism and release, but also as a way of bringing new understandings and conversations into my anthropological research and writing.*

*Eventually, experimenting with new forms and genres in my own writing felt like a natural lead on, but it was something that I had to give myself permission to do. Being, until relatively recently, a long time precarious academic also meant that finding the space and the courage to write differently was simply too challenging. Finally being able to step off of the precarity rollercoaster has brought a kind of freedom for me in terms of the professional directions that I want to move in. This is coupled with my growing discomfort and unhappiness with/in the neoliberal University. As such, my desire to carve out a different kind of writing life and collaborations/networks with academics thinking and writing similarly has grown. This has been particularly so during the pandemic, where as a mother, the demanding juggling of home-schooling and online teaching (as well as increased levels of pastoral care for students) was a catalyst that forced me to*

*think through what really sparks joy for me both personally and professionally. So the decision to experiment with different writing genres and forms – short stories, personal essays, and poetry – is anchored in a capacious sense of the power of the creative to bring new understandings beyond the boundaries of anthropological theorising.*

*In combining the creative and the ethnographic, a multi-directional conversation takes place. One influences the other, one remakes the other – recasting, refreshing, and re-engaging. This, I see, as a kind of ethnofiction, a concept rooted in visual anthropology, borne from the work of the well-known anthropologist Jean Rouch, where the participants in his films moved between scripted representations and creative improvisations. Today, the term has much wider coverage anchored in different genres of collaborative storytelling and creative arts practices. Through ethnofiction, alternative and alternating forms of world-building and the everyday find a rapport. It is this ability to inhabit and then reinhabit both imaginative and ethnographic worlds that underpins my desire to write more creatively. Voice, character, story find dialogic depth in this back and forth. In this in-betweenness, there is a freedom, a different kind of ethical imagination, and a new analytic – a confluence that ultimately contributes, I personally believe, to better anthropological thinking. Hence, my writing life/lives has acquired a new hue, one revitalised by creative endeavour and new anthropological perspectives. This short story, 'What Dreams May Come,' sits at the nexus point of my creative and anthropological work providing a short insight, I hope, into the power of ethnofiction to bridge many different kinds of worlds.*

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### **What Dreams May Come**

'What is a border, dear Grandmamma? What are those lines that seem to reach the firmament, so deeply praised as they seem to be? Should I learn about this alchemy of division so embedded in the crevices of those human hearts? What is a border, dear Grandmamma?'

'My darling,' Grandmamma's sage voice rushes towards me. The mid-point of her sentence is all I can grasp, 'my darling, borders are why we are here.'

My grandmother has always struggled most with me at night. Too often I canvass her to stay awake late into the night. Her response is always, unsurprisingly, an unfavourable one. Sleep does not come easily to me, you see; indeed, it never has. Every night, in the first lull of early sleep, I am haunted by the ghosts of our former life. In the darkness, I often lose my breath. I think of my mother. I think of my father. No, sleep does not come easily to me, I imagine it never will.

'How did they cross it, dear Grandmamma?' I ask with hopeful enthusiasm. 'Can we know what happened to them?' I beg impatiently, almost every night. 'Hush, hush, my darling,' her voice much sterner now. 'Sleep you must, my darling.' With barely a glance towards me, she grimaces and sighs, 'Sleep, my last port of peace.' A long lingering sigh. I can almost grasp the fullness of it with my small, anxious hands as the darkness hovers over us. A darkness that could almost split open a sky heavy with my parent's absence. My grandmother's breathing eases into the lull of a place where she dreams of my mother as a child. I lie restless, each and every night. We live in a house of glass,

one darkly lit, a warren of unlived rooms. Outside my window, nightly, the same scrap of red material quivers on a dying, thirsty tree. Almost always, it entrances me, begetting some hours of fitful rest.

Our mornings are coloured by the yoke of hopelessness in what is truly an experimental landscape. Why we were chosen to be amongst the first to come here, I will never understand. I would have preferred to have stayed 'behind,' even amidst all of the destruction. There, at least, I might eventually have found my parents. Here, my grandmother makes tea first thing in the morning, just as she did when we lived there. It is still the same ritualistic experience that it has always been. This is our one constant. Warm reddened tea in a shiny glass redolent with my grandmother's strong presence. The first taste momentarily slackening the tightness of this place. That sip, a kind of warm pleasure, enjoining me to inhabit my grandmother's daily stories as profoundly as I do. A time to get lost in tea and story. I make the most of this simplest of pleasures each and every morning.

My grandmother works hard for us. She is a survivor of all kinds, her head always calm and cool, her gaze deft and reassuring. I wish I could bring her flowers to thank her, but roses do not grow here. They have always been my grandmother's favourite. Someone tried once to seed and plant here, but they didn't quite take to this scorched unfriendly earth. Like so much else here, they withered, sequestering all of our hopes. Far to the East of here, a neighbour tells us, a beautiful beam of light allows for some growth. I wish I could go there and bring her back those flowers, but I can't. Travel alone for someone like me is impossible in this place. So instead, I describe them to her from what remains of the vague patchwork of my early memories. How to evoke the scent of the richness of roses as my grandmother eases into her long afternoon nap becomes a challenge that I set myself. How does one remember with certainty the slowness of natural life? 'Can you recall the swoop of a sparrow in the freshness of bright sunlight or the incandescent green of the grass that swept across our homeplace, Grandmamma?' I whisper. 'Should we hold tight the memory of what it was like *before?*'

The air in this place reeks with artificial smells, a mixture so strange that one can hardly make things out at all. 'With God's help, it will be well someday soon,' Grandmamma tells me. She knows no God and nor do I, yet she invokes him regularly, casting the words over her solid shoulders as she makes busy. Grandmamma tells me that they said technology would save us from ourselves. Somehow, people, of all kinds, believed it could replace everything, a salve of sorts. 'But here we are,' she says, 'unfree, un-enamored with this new world, technology is what has brought us here to this point.' Grandmamma holds her peace as she reflects, seemingly unperturbed by what her long lifetime has witnessed. A short smile grows on her face, eyes raised, her calm an assault on all that we have suffered, an affront to the bitter reckless tongues we have become so accustomed to in this place.

It is from Grandmamma that I have learned everything. 'I need you to learn, to grow,' she tells me regularly with an acute studied look in her stark eyes. 'But Grandmamma,' I implore her all too often, 'learning like this through screens is so very stifling.' Our arguments about the nature of my schooling here are plentiful. She agrees too that it is more akin to a stoppage of thought than a growing. There are days when I feel I cannot breathe, saved only by my

grandmother's storied histories. 'Tell me the story about,' I insist. She has never once deferred the pleasure.

Grandmamma has a frightening aptitude for truth-telling. She does not go to the trouble of sparing anyone through falsehood, superficial or otherwise. 'Stories are how we are made,' she says with a forceful certainty. Her tales, so entwined with experiences of loss and suffering as they are, communicate a complex world. I try to understand, to inhabit these otherworldly complexities, travel beyond this place, ultimately travel beyond myself. 'I tell these stories to restore, to bring hope to those who have so lost their footing in this new place,' Grandmamma repeats almost daily. 'But Grandmamma, these are our stories, not theirs,' I argue, puzzled and unsettled by her determination to renew in a place so utterly forlorn.

Our days are long, afterworlds no longer exist in my imaginings, so life now seems short and spiritually bare. Grandmamma still professes her faith, but only on what seems to be the longer, darker days. I do not believe in anything, only in my grandmother, this world has ensured that. Some days, I run my fingers across Grandmamma's numinous rosary beads, glossy and smooth still, a hardly tarnished Jesus on the cross. They belonged to her great, great grandmother, a family heirloom. 'Rosary beads,' she tells me, that helped her large family pray through famine and emigration, a dazzling outwelling of their faith, 'a kind of magic,' Grandmamma almost whispers. Their praying whilst clutching these beads, they believed, would help them out of their misfortunes. These beads hold no such magic for me, even though in my grandmother's hands they give her an appearance of a priestess of sorts. I still cannot sense such possibility in them. Grandmamma tells me that robed men and women would knock on their doors right before the war professing that, 'The meek shall inherit the earth.' But it was ultimately the meek that lost their place in our world. I can't quite get over that fact.

'Please Grandmamma, do not pray around me,' I cry as tears flow down my reddened face. 'Why do you carry so much hate in your heart?' Grandmamma replies, her annoyance clear. I feel momentarily contrite. Yet, I find this question hard to answer. This place so empty of vitality would once have been the stuff of my nightmares. Now we live it, stifled by its contradictions. If I carry hate, it is surely between me and that world long past. My parent's absence too, the invisibility of their lives in mine, have placed a stranglehold on my every-day. It is only through my grandmother's stories that I can partially inhabit their worlds each day. At least, to some degree. She tells me that in this way, through these entanglements of memory and story, they continue to exert their influence on me. 'They will come when we whisper them into being,' she almost sings. I believe this to be true. My grandmother has this magical way of speaking. I can clearly see my mother and father when she speaks about them, as if they are right here. My mother, elfin like and strikingly blonde, her Sargasso green eyes relentless in their gaze. My father, ruddy-faced and always gleeful, as if mischief was his sole right. Grandmother's words bring them into plain sight.

Mapping my parents' absence has become a way of suturing time for me. The gaps in their story have become about trying to imagine what happened to them when they made the decision to go ahead of us. Grandmamma tells me we will probably never know. I make up hundreds, maybe even thousands of stories in my head about how they disappeared. It was Christmas when the first incursions

began, even though the world was already truly in ruins. I remember the way that the dangling, glitzy strings of gold tinsel and silver dressed in plastic, shiny baubles fell to the ground when the apartment door fell inwards. The smell of a cinnamon candle lingering in our living room. It is pretty much all I seem to remember on the day that Christmas, and indeed our entire lives as we knew them, came to such an abrupt ending.

‘How does one piece the fragments back together to make a life, Grandmamma?’ I wonder out loud. ‘How can we both live with the force of such loss, Grandmamma?’ ‘There is no possibility to sense-make here, we must live well through memory,’ she responds, melancholy underlying her lyrical tones. My grandmother weaves a distinct kind of world from our losses, within which I partake. This world anchored in the past helps us survive the present. Every day we enter into my grandmother’s memories, it is a dreamworld in which we want to dwell in forever. Any efforts to remake our past world all failed, utterly. I often reflect on how it all went so wrong, so quickly. My family and I lived on a self-sustaining farm until we no longer could, a city centre apartment being an unhappy and choiceless replacement. It was a garish and glaring place to live, in stark contrast with farm-life. Usually too busy to be the kind of people who dwelled upon things, city life unsettled my parents. It was not too long after our move that my father complained of feeling trapped. My mother, the type of woman who always concerned herself with a certain urgency about the well-being of her child, slipped into stoicism. I was too young to sense any of those sharp shocks, enfolded as always in the enduring comfort of my grandmother’s arms. This new urban world weakened my parents long before their disappearance. As the weeks passed, through nothing stronger than habit, despondence became their way.

We weren’t able to bring many of our things here to this place. All Grandmamma and I could carry was a small backpack each. Mine, faded blue with excess pockets and a large patch on the side, carried nothing but fragments and memories. My mother, having inherited the magic of my grandmother’s way with words, used to keep a diary as a child. I packed it and carried it with me even though it meant leaving a favourite book behind. I occasionally read her diary out loud. Her words sit like sweet caramel on my tongue, confusing time and place. Suddenly, I am with her in a place where daffodils labour through hardened earth or we are sitting together under a lush pink cherry blossom tree. Her diary though, like my grandmother’s stories, cannot cure us. This lurking in the past can only bring but the briefest of respites. My grandmother denies this, but for me this is mere fact.

My grandmother tells me to dream more. In dreams, she tells me, lies the possibility of hope. ‘Daydream, sit and travel within your imagination,’ she urges me, especially when I complain of boredom or of sadness, or of both. I do as she bids, but an intense sadness seeps into my attempts at reverie. Dreams do not come at night, nor can I slide with ease into them on a reflective afternoon. I do not yet have the same power that my grandmother has. I ask Grandmamma how we can hurry towards the world we really want to live in. She tells me that once she believed in anger and activism, but then the borders started to close in. She tells of a world that multiplied and shrank at the same time. She tells of how people’s circumference of care narrowed and so did their sense of communal responsibility. She tells me this again and again.

One day I will learn to dream, of that I am almost sure. These dreams might bring a kind of freedom, especially if I am to believe in them as my grandmother does. For now, I must make do with this callow, burdened landscape that keeps me from myself. Grandmamma tries one more time to plant some roses. Her hands are tired and grey as she attempts to fold back the scorched earth. As she plants, she tells me that she once owned a harvest moon dress, it was ox blood red and she danced in it as if there was no tomorrow. As if there was no tomorrow, I repeat to myself.

**Fiona Murphy**

School of HAPP,  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast BT7 1NN  
United Kingdom  
f.murphy@qub.ac.uk