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KATHLEEN O'CONNOR OF PARIS

AMANDA CURTIN

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Front cover: Kathleen O'Connor, 1920s, Kate's personal archive (family holdings), no. 51.

Front cover, Paris landscape (modified): ilolab/shutterstock.com.

Back cover: Kathleen O'Connor, *Two figures, Luxembourg Gardens*, 1910–14, oil on board, 47.3 x 55.2 cm (h, w), The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981.

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For Debi O'Hehir
1962–2015

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Ashes

It's October 2015, it's somewhere over the Middle East, it's the long way home. Dublin–Abu Dhabi–Phuket–Perth. Cheap flight.

I can't sleep.

Ten days ago, I was flying the other way, and I knew it was to say goodbye. I had no idea how to say it, how I would find the words. My friend had been holding them at bay herself, talking instead in language for the living—acupuncture, medicinal cannabis, reiki, meditation, and did I know about the cancer-healing properties of herb Robert and I should buy a pot for my father. I did.

My seat is near the rear of the plane. I walk to the back, past passengers wearing eyeshades or noise-cancelling headphones or with blankets over their heads. I am the only one awake. There is not much movement in the galley, either, as I lean against its frame, reach up to stretch my spine. There's a grip on my chest, a shirtfronting from the inside. I feel it when I breathe.

Six days ago I attended a funeral I had not been ready for. As if anyone ever is.

I touch the cold glass of the window beside the galley. Outside, nothing. Ashes of night, and we are hurtling through them, and I am standing still, scattered, arrested.

Four weeks from now I will sign a contract to write this book. That these things are connected is something I don't know then. It will take me two years to find out.

Approaching Kate

There are two photographs of Kathleen Laetitia (Kate) O'Connor pinned to the wall above my desk. The first is an iconic black and white portrait taken a few months after her ninetieth birthday. It appeared in a *Vogue* magazine feature to accompany a retrospective in 1967, and has since been used in publications such as the two monographs on Kate: *Kathleen O'Connor: Artist in Exile* (Patrick Hutchings & Julie Lewis, 1987) and *Chasing Shadows: The Art of Kathleen O'Connor* (Janda Gooding, 1996).

Tom Hungerford, at the time a press officer for the Commonwealth Department of the Interior, had been asked to organise the photographic session. He had known Kate for some years, well enough to realise that persuading the irascible and particular artist to agree to having her photograph taken, and then getting a decent result, would probably depend on her respecting and trusting the photographer. He wrote, choosing his words carefully. Richard Woldendorp, he assured her, was

an extremely able and sensitive *salon* photographer ... I would not recommend to you anybody of whom I was not absolutely certain in every respect of personal and professional behaviour.

After signing off his letter, Hungerford must still have felt the need for a few more words to seal the deal. He added a typed postscript:

The portrait I have in mind would be taken sitting in front of one of your big paintings, from the waist up, in a lovely soft defused [sic] light. It would be a beauty. I can see it already.¹

The references to the photographer's sensitivity and to soft, diffused light were calculated to appease Kate's well-known prickliness in matters relating to her age.

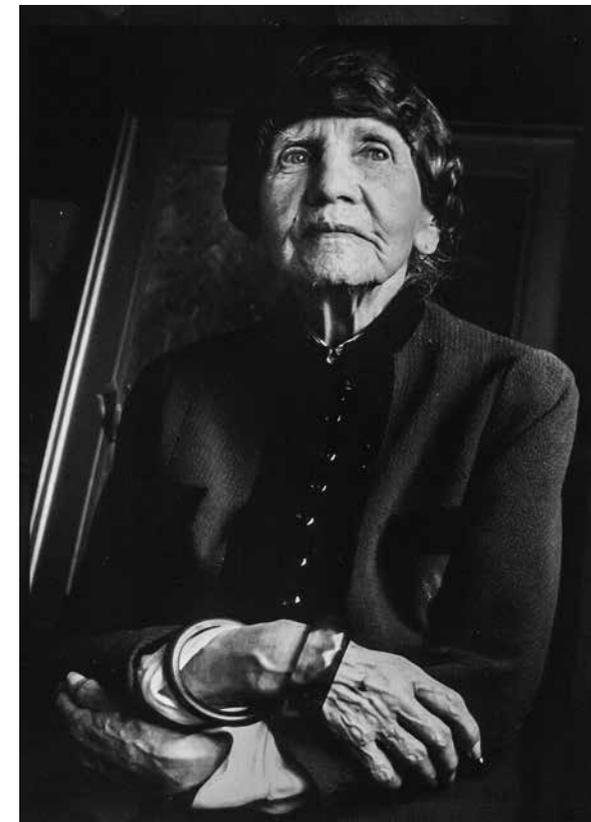
The session took place in her studio in Mount Street, West Perth. I wonder how it went. Kate could have made it very easy for Woldendorp

if she recognised in him a fellow artist, and allowed herself to become the subject of his artistic vision. Equally, she could have made it very hard indeed if she felt herself misunderstood or in the hands of someone who wished to replicate a stereotype.

I telephone the photographer to find out.

Richard Woldendorp is now the same age Kate was when he captured her on film, and one of Australia's most distinguished photographers. He remembers the session vividly, and says that while it was difficult to get her animated, he eventually took one he liked. There was no point, he tells me, in prolonging the session after that. 'She knew how far she would go.'²

I look at that portrait often—a strong portrait of a strong woman. Although the framing is much as Hungerford envisaged it, 'in front of one of your big paintings, from the waist up', nowhere here can I find a glimpse of his romanticised lady artist haloed in soft light. And I wonder, not for



1 Richard Woldendorp's photograph of Kate, aged ninety, 1967.

the first time, about the highly contingent nature of the *knowledge* that one person may acquire of another. From a friendship of years, Hungerford thought he knew Kathleen O'Connor. But I look at that portrait now and think: he did not know her at all. And I wonder what chance I have.

Her hair is dyed dark, set in place with a hairnet that gives it a slightly helmeted appearance—or perhaps it is a wig? I can't tell. One side of her face is illuminated, revealing the pleats and grooves, the fragile parchment, of her ninety years on this earth, but its architecture is sound and resilient, the plane of her cheek startlingly smooth. She wears a Chanel-style suit buttoned down the front—and here I pause. I recognise that suit from the family archive. I have photographed it, held the hand-sewn fabric in my hands. It's cherry-red wool crepe, which can't be seen in the black and white image, with black collar and front facings, and black wooden buttons fastened with loops. Also unseen in the photograph are inserts of black and gold lace on the underside of each sleeve, running from elbow to wrist. Probably very smart in its day, and Kate set a high value on smartness. Today the woollen fibres have softened with age; in places, ravaged by silverfish.

Two things stand out in this photograph, and it's the eyes that catch you first. People often spoke of Kate's eyes—their clarity, their brilliant blue, their frank, penetrating gaze. Here they look to a point off camera but it's no idle glance. They are focused, unflinching, *seeing*—self-aware, and equally aware of being seen.

The other prominent feature is her hands, one crossed over the other. The back of the one visible is deeply riven, watercourses on a map, thick thready veins carving out valleys and tracing their way into the fingers. A wide tortoiseshell bangle falls loosely across those veins; a thinner one is pushed further back on the wrist. I pause again. These, too, I have held, weighed in my hands, the larger one surprisingly heavy, with hairline cracks crisscrossing in a random pattern. They are famous in the memories of those who can still, at this temporal distance, summon strong, sensory images of Kate. *Those bangles!* they tell me, remembering how she would shake them noisily to attract attention, and how they would clack together at her wrists when she walked, a distinctive sound effect heralding the approach of Miss O'Connor.

Woldendorp accorded her respect, did her justice, in choosing where our attention would be drawn: to the eyes that took in the world, and to the hands that turned those impressions into art.



2 Kate, c. May 1968.

The second photograph on my wall is another taken in age, probably later, but this one is a casual snap. Kate is seated in an armchair, a wall of bookshelves behind her, one hand clutching a blanket pulled up to her ribs. She looks frail, unwell, a bone of a woman fleshed in thick winter clothing. A hat with a wide brim hides her thinning hair and casts half of her face in shadow. Her head is turned in a glance at the camera as though she has just become aware of someone's presence and is none too happy about it. It's clear what her next words will be: *What do YOU want?*



I became enchanted with the paintings of Kate O'Connor—works mostly in oil and tempera—when I first saw them in the form of a bundle of photographs and an old illustrated catalogue. It was the mid-1980s and I was in my twenties, working as a freelance copyeditor for Fremantle Press on Patrick Hutchings and Julie Lewis' *Artist in Exile*. This was the first monograph on Kate to be published, and—it seems shameful to say it now—the first I had heard of her or her work.

I try now to analyse what it was in those reproductions that made

such a huge impact on my younger self, but perhaps it is an impossible task to recover the rawness of a response that has been pulled out of shape by time and knowledge. Certain things seem to stand out in my memory. A squat white teapot with blue spots that appeared in more than one painting. The random arrangement (of course, not random at all) of objects on a table draped with wild fabric—a lamp, a catalogue, a clutter of onions and lemons and playing cards. Smoky pink Canterbury bells, dazzling sunflowers. And hats ... yes, I remember those, the crisply starched bonnets of nursemaids, the plumes and wide brims of elegant women, painted in dabs and strokes of deep colour and in a muted light that told me this was Long Ago and Somewhere Else.

How much of this represents the highlights of true memory I cannot say, but as I reach to reclaim that original response, the word that keeps surfacing is *intimacy*.

When I read the manuscript, I became a little enchanted with Kate, too. Here was a creative artist of substance who, as a young woman, had known what she wanted, and did not want, to do with her life and had struck out fearlessly to achieve it. I had taken a roundabout route of false starts before finding my way into the publishing industry, and it would take me another ten years to come even close to acknowledging in myself the kind of artistic drive that Kate had known instinctively and unequivocally from childhood. And she had claimed that identity for herself, insisted on taking that path, at a time when doing so was socially anarchic, entirely counter to expectations held for a young marriageable woman from a prominent family. I, lacking in boldness or self-knowledge, certainly in any species of self-belief in my mid-twenties, responded to those qualities in Kathleen O'Connor with admiration and awe.

Later, when I began to write and finally discovered what it was I wanted to do and to be, I never forgot Kate, and in one of my short stories I fictionalised an anecdote—perhaps a myth—that had puzzled and disturbed and enthralled me.

Kate left Australia in 1906 and, apart from two year-long visits, lived overseas, mostly in Paris, for more than forty years. When she returned in 1948, the works she brought into Australia, as an artist who had lived abroad for so long, were subject to a brutal tally of taxes. It was said that she was unable to pay the duty on all of them and that, in a gesture of frustration and despair, she had thrown many into the sea. My short story, 'Paris bled into the Indian Ocean', was an imaginative engagement



3 Jo Darvall in her Fremantle studio, 2018. Behind, Kate and her mother are depicted in *The Engineer's Wife* (from the exhibition *Walking the Pipeline to the Water's End*, 2014).

with that, woven into an invented story of a poet who has lost her creative voice.³

In 2015, Fremantle artist Jo Darvall undertook her own imaginative engagement with the same anecdote about Kate, producing an evocative and moving suite of watery images that seemed as though they had been recovered from the sea. Her exhibition, taking its title from my story, was held at the Merenda Contemporary Gallery in Fremantle, and was then rehung in the ArtGeo Gallery in Busselton alongside seven works by Kathleen O'Connor on loan from regional collections.⁴

Weeks before the exhibition at Merenda, at Jo's studio in Fremantle, we had talked about Kate's tenacity and her extraordinary body of work. We had also shared our dismay that her place in Australian art history often goes unnoticed. *Paris Bled into the Indian Ocean* was the second exhibition in a trilogy that Jo had embarked on partly with the aim of bringing the name Kathleen O'Connor to public attention again. The first, *Walking the Pipeline to the Water's End* (2014), had explored the story of her father, the famous engineer C.Y. O'Connor, and touched on the impact

of his death on Kate. The third, yet to come at the time of our meeting, *All That Is Changing* (2017), would be an international collaboration between Jo and Singaporean artist Yeo Shih Yun to celebrate, as inspirations for a younger generation of women artists, Kate O'Connor and Georgette Chen, who had been co-exhibitors at the groundbreaking *Les Femmes Artistes d'Europe* exhibition in Paris in 1937.⁵

Following the Darvall exhibition, when Fremantle Press suggested that I write this work on Kate, I put on hold the novel I'd been writing and rushed at this new idea with a rare certainty that surprised me.

What do YOU want?

It's a simple question, and at the time of setting out I have an answer that, if not simple, is at least uncomplicated: there are things I want to know, questions I want to explore. What did Kate want to achieve creatively? Why was someone so intent on being known so intent, also, on being unknowable? Who *was* this artist who threw her paintings into the sea? If, in fact, she did.

And that, Kate, is why I meet your confronting, slightly disdainful glance above my desk every morning. I am too quiet a person for you, but I think you would recognise in me a fellow observer of life and perhaps you might approve of that. Whether you would approve of the observing gaze being trained on you is another matter altogether.



I talk to Kate from the beginning of my research—to the images pinned up on my wall, to the photocopies and photographs of paintings and catalogues, to her scratchings in pen or pencil that I find in the archives at the Battye Library, sometimes written on used envelopes or paper bags or toilet paper, more often on sheets torn from cheap notepads—a chaotic patchwork of sloping lines and insertions written sideways in the margins. It becomes a habit, this talking to Kate, a necessary part of the process, and I come to realise that it is more specific than mere talking; it is a continual, inevitably fruitless but compulsive posing of questions.

I am a fiction writer, and by nature wary of absolutes; lacunae generally do not worry me—on the contrary, they give me freedom to invent, to play fast and loose with whatever I find. But as a researcher I am bedevilled by what no longer exists—the things that have been lost, destroyed, given away, obfuscated whether by intention or accident. As my research

progresses, I sense Kate has taken pains to leave an incomplete canvas of her life, a picture that can never be more than partial, drawn from impressionistic dabs and strokes.

It is a wastrel task, I know, to look for coherence in anyone's life, to expect to shore up gaps and silences, to shape a satisfying arc. Paradoxically, writers of fiction do this all the time in creating character and story: resolving jagged bits that don't work together, the inconsistencies, the contradictions. But I have shied from creating a fiction of Kate O'Connor to *avoid* doing these things. I want to approach her, approach understanding, without the need for resolution, resisting the impulse to fashion her into a character of my own devising whose desires I know, whose motivations are clear.

Given that I *am* a writer of fiction, however, I'm hoping that the instincts I've developed, the tools I've learned along the way, will offer ways of looking at a life.

And so I talk to Kate in questions, I ask and I listen, and I try to make peace with the only certainty possible: that what I hear when I listen, if I hear anything at all, will be my own voice.

Bravegirl

It's early 2016, it's the reading room of the Battye Library of Western Australian History, it's a desk piled up with acid-free folders of documents sorted into years and carefully tied with cotton tape. The staff here are a cheerful lot. I've been here every day for weeks now and have observed their patient dealings with academics and historians, corporate researchers and students, memoirists and family chroniclers, journalists and novelists. Members of the public with bulging ring-binder files tiptoe daily up to the desk with odd and earnest queries. And here comes another lost tourist looking for somewhere quiet to scroll through Facebook.

The Battye Library holds several archives of material relating to Kate O'Connor, and has been the obvious place for me to begin. I already know what I will *not* find, because others have been here before me: Kate has not left work journals or diaries of her thoughts, revealing personal correspondence, evidence of intimate relationships. I hear a deep chuckle, a raspy whisper: *Why should I?* But in among the catalogues and cuttings, circulars and articles, legal papers, financial records and official documents, there is a mass of personal material and the ephemera of a life, an identity—cards, receipts, telegrams, prescriptions, railway tickets ... It is not *nothing*, this detritus. What a person chooses to keep is a story itself, and Kate kept many of these things for decades.

I return to the stack of letters I'm working through, and it's easy to become engrossed, easy to slip into the speech rhythms of earlier times, the formality of informal correspondence ... *Miss Shenton is looking very well ... I read with interest your letter ...* It's easy to forget where you are.

Bastard!

I realise I've exclaimed out loud. A quick glance at the staff desk, but no-one has raised an eyebrow. I have a quiet voice; perhaps they didn't hear. Then again, over the course of these last weeks the library staff have probably observed, and discreetly ignored, a range of sighs and exclamations and facial expressions as I've worked my way through

archive boxes, turning pages this way and that to follow Kate's meandering words and decipher her handwriting.

Another glance behind me but today I'm the only researcher in the room. And I find myself almost wishing for an empathetic face, someone with whom I could share my outrage at John Winthrop Hackett.

Hackett was a pillar of the conservative, patriarchal society of Perth from which Kate made more than one escape in the first decades of the twentieth century:

... a member of the Legislative Council, Chancellor of the University, a confidant of premiers, a delegate of the Federal Conventions, president of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery, chancellor of St George's Cathedral, and a KCMG as well as editor of the newspaper.⁶

And the attitudes of that society are demonstrated in the letter on the desk in front of me, oddly the product of a bright purple typewriter ribbon, dated 4 June 1913 and addressed to 'My dear Miss Kate'.

I have read these words before. Julie Lewis quotes them in *Artist in Exile*. But seeing them there on the page hits me with the force that I've often found an original document has—something to do with its raw connection with the source. The invisible fingerprints. The signature in ink.

Everybody here says what a brave girl you are to attempt to carve out your own destiny this way, and I agree with them.

I saw your mother the other day before she sailed. Has she gone to look after you?

Were all unmarried women, in spite of evidence to the contrary, presumed to be in need of parental protection? Kate was not a *girl* in 1913, nor even when she had struck out on her own several years earlier, as has sometimes been claimed. At the time of Hackett's letter, this girl was thirty-six years old.

A brave girl, I write in my journal, underlining the words. And I pull myself up. Perhaps I am imposing a twenty-first century world view on this early twentieth century correspondence. Would Kate have been offended at Hackett's infantilising term, the *for-a-girl-ness* of his admiration? It might have been as nothing compared to the rest of his letter, which, in a similarly patronising way, praised her 'original mind and original pen'

but terminated her occasional contributions on art to the newspaper: ‘originality is not one of the things that a newspaper always goes in search of.’⁷ The loss of future earnings of the odd guinea or two might have distressed Kate more.

I glance down at the page, where, while thinking, I’ve been doodling in loops and swirls and words. *Brave Girl*, I’ve written. The capitals seem to restore a little of her identity. I join the words together.

Bravegirl

That’s more like it. *Bravegirl* turns Hackett’s demeaning *a brave girl* upside down. Warrior Kate.

I am projecting, I know, but perhaps it is inescapable. The bravery in Kate—her unflinching independence—was one of the things that drew me to her in the first place.



Weeks later, when I have finished reading and recording the last of the Battye Library’s archives relating to Kate, I realise how scant is the presence of *Bravegirl*, the younger Kate who flouted convention and forged her own way. The voice of the older Kate, although it does not tell me all I want to know, at least *does* exist in letters and notes and newspaper interviews. Later still, I will find more of her in private archives and those of the City of Fremantle Art Collection, and there is a single precious voice recording in the National Library of Australia—an oral history interview conducted in 1965—that winds back time to allow this older Kate a voice in the most literal way. But I am only too aware that when this Kate remembers, when she relates the past, everything she says is refracted through memory, with all its limitations and desiccations, interpreted through hindsight, and mediated through filters both conscious and subconscious—what she wishes to be known, what she wishes to remain private, what she cannot say.

The earliest known record of Kate’s voice is a letter written to her sister Biddy, with an added note to her mother, from Paris in 1909, when she was thirty-three. The bulk of the extant correspondence *from* Kate is from that older Kate, commencing in the late 1940s.

The voice of *Bravegirl* pre-1909 is irrecoverable.

YOUNG KATE 1876–1905