

Alice Bishop, *Woolgathering*, National Gallery of Victoria, 28 May 2021



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Woolgathering By Alice Bishop

Flecks and fleece, on the nourishment of taking notice, again.

Melencolia I, a 1514 engraving by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, offers a sixteenth-century interpretation of daydreaming, showing a melancholic, brooding figure lost in thought. But for many creative people, including writer Alice Bishop, daydreaming is all about finding solace in life's everyday details. Colours, slowing down and daydreaming are necessary to reconnect with ourselves, and to make sense of the world around us.

'Woolgathering' was a sixteenth-century term for the trade of collecting loose tufts of wool caught on thorns and fences by passing sheep. Later, it became a phrase that embodied daydreaming. The word's association with dreaming and aloofness can be traced back to the reputation of woolgatherers for having trivial livelihoods that 'necessitated much wandering and little purpose'.¹

But maybe there's a lesson in this old profession, especially during the increasing uncertainty of 2020. Daydreaming is barely prioritised in modern city living, but studies repeatedly show that regular sessions of wandering and wondering can build connection between people and their surroundings, and scaffold our senses of self.²

Research has shown that we daydream less as we age, yet that our brains are more active when we let our minds wander, sharpening them as essential, lifelong tools. Whether it's simply noticing the sun-faded signage of your local cafe, or walking the city streets at dusk observing the recently bushfire-tainted, lavender glow of Melbourne's city sky, or the telling new quiet in once-bustling places because of COVID-19, taking notice can be pleasurable, calming and educational. Sometimes all three.

In a culture obsessed with efficiency, taking notice can be both nourishing and political, especially amid changes to the environment and the white-noise panic of the unprecedented health and economic fears of 2020, when our days often seem shortened by constantly sharing, forwarding and following on all kinds of screens. But this distraction can be dangerous. As Jenny Odell asks in her recent book, *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, 'What does it mean to construct digital worlds while the actual world is crumbling before our eyes?'³

The marmalade-gold of winter sun hitting the bathroom tiles, an evening magpie learning to warble from a powerline outside – despite the clag of rushed traffic below – these are the smaller moments we so often miss; details that can anchor us in time and place. French painter Pierre Bonnard has good advice for us all, whether writers, baristas, petrol station attendants or bar workers (all jobs I've been lucky to have): '[The artist] spends a great deal of time doing nothing but looking – both around him and inside him'. Maybe it's the soft neon hum of a shop's street light, or the smell of fruit toast cooking for a customer, or the new shape of a sentence, colour or word: taking notice and slowing down makes us all feel more connected and at ease. The South Australian government even released a recent mental health and wellbeing campaign titled 'Take Notice', which encouraged 'forest bathing', looking up at the night sky and noticing the breeze.

Mint-greens and rusty mustards, mauves and oatmeal blues: the turn of the twentieth-century domestic settings of artists such as Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Mary Cassatt or Pierre Bonnard and his fellow artist and long-term partner Marthe de Mèligny are anything but greyscale. A crumbling Thornbury apartment could never have as many colours in the walls and curtains as there are in a bathroom painting by one of these artists. If you look up from my bath you won't see peacock teals or terracotta tiles, pale pinks or shimmering anything. But if you can be still enough, there is colour to be found in the detail:

cardboard- coloured towels and walls thick with a shade of paint that could only be classified as 'sand' or 'dove'; maybe 'vanilla' or 'crème'. Even the quieter details of ordinary bathrooms, if properly noticed, can bring us back to the moment. These are the daily pleasures we take for granted, the reassurances of colour showing us that in any setting, whether a simple bathroom, an empty coffee shop or busy street, a Northcote garden or a friend's kitchen, there are stories waiting.

There is a comforting recognition, and hope, in art about the everyday. Modern realist short-story writers like Lucia Berlin, Richard Ford and Tony Birch show this through deceptively simple and finely crafted observations. Whether it's captured conversations in the late-night coin laundries of West Texas for Berlin, the sharp smell of liquor-on-breath in the ordinary bars of Montana for Ford, or the hum of working-class streets and kitchens in Carlton and Collingwood in 1960s Melbourne for Birch, the most affecting literature, art or music comes from the ordinary: from snapshots of our domestic lives that highlight broader loves, struggles, inequalities and joys.

Another artist who powerfully paints the everyday is Melbourne-based Prudence Flint. Her pastel-lit women, often shown thinking in bathrooms, bedrooms or kitchens, are illuminated in a deceptively simple, geometric and unique style. 'All my best ideas for paintings come from actual places and moments in life that trigger some unexpected feeling,'⁴ Flint comments. **The pink-hued paintings of contemplative women bathing and showering in her Bedsit series of 2018 remind me of my own ordinary apartment setting: of my own bath and my relatively new love of it – of finally knowing my body enough to now sit still with it, in it. Grounding myself in details lets me be still enough to notice the lilac polish of my toes poking through the cheap Radox bath bubbles. There's something freeing in feeling the weight of my tall body lighten in the water. These moments, like stray streaks of cloud-like fleece found strung along fences, keep me going. Hopefully, in these moments we can set aside the loneliness we humans sometimes find in always having to be looking: for something new, something bigger, better and more.**

For me, like most people who have felt the constant crackle of anxiety – and there are so many – thinking about your senses pulls you back into the present. Whether in the pads of your fingers sensing the pulse of your heart in your wrist, the continuity of your breath, or the steady blue of the sky, your body and the world goes on, even when the white-noise distractions of bills, work deadlines, myki top-ups and mindlessly shovelled muesli before work feel like too much.

In a recent City of Melbourne report, over half of the adult population of Greater Melbourne (54.4 per cent) felt they have a poor work-life balance, 42.8 per cent reported feeling time pressure, and 28.3 per cent reported getting inadequate sleep (less than seven hours per weekday).⁵ Furthermore, a growing body of research⁶ suggests that exposure to sunshine, colour and greenery improves both mental health and learning capacity, immediately and over time, by reducing stress and encouraging individuals to actively take notice. Trees and plants boost our attention spans by calming the nervous system and creating a state believed to be ideal for learning. By contrast, screens, whether on an iPhone, a TV or an Apple watch, deplete attention by pushing up stress-based alertness.⁷ Considering I accumulate an average of 3 hours and 59 minutes of screen time on an off-work day, I really need this reminder to look up, take notice and be present, again.

To woolgather is to meander or wander about in quiet calm, but the term also sparks memories of Patti Smith's 2012 book *Woolgathering*, in which her daydreams are knitted into misty but muscular writing. There is a quiet power to Smith's sketch-like memoir. Her careful use of the detail of daily living – her written imagery of coffee-cup rings on placemats, fresh linen, paper prints and dusty golds – brings you back to yourself, to the world, where again, taking notice is an act of defiance. As American poet Eileen Myles writes:

I hope you like your work, I hope there's mystery and poetry in your life, not even poems, but patterns. I hope you can see them. Often these patterns will wake you up, and you will know that you are alive, again and again.⁸

If you close your eyes under fluorescent bathroom lights or while turning your face to the sun you might see patterns (or phosphenes, as I recently learnt they are called) appear and colours bloom through the closed lids.

Although everything has changed this year, also, not much has. There is still the knowledge that things often happen beneath the surface of deceptively calm settings. The colour of the sky might remain blue above a pandemic, and across a whole area of a country burned into colourlessness, green shoots stoically appear. It is colour that lets us know that yes, things go on, whether or not we are ready for them to.

Changes to the weather, colour and birdlife, as Odell notes in *How to do Nothing*, can be essential in acknowledging the climate emergency: 'There is a kind of nothing that's necessary for, at the end of the day, doing something,' she writes.⁹ While technology can offer us important scientific insights and essential information, maybe the changes in our landscape

caused by the climate emergency – perhaps the lilac of a smoke-heavy sky, or a bushfire-blood moon – are the details and colours we need to see, in person, in order to finally take the urgent action that's needed. It's often art, too, that encourages us to step back, to look out, and to look up.

I've spent the last decade looking back on the colours of the 2009 Victorian bushfires in my latest book – the rained-on-rust hues of burnt-out cars, petrol-shiny remains and the shimmery silvers of melted tyre rims. For me, it was the recolouring of a desiccated landscape and colour-prompted storytelling that helped me make semi-sense of an event that was, as it certainly felt at the time, senseless.

Instead of remembering the colourless Cormac McCarthy-esque scene we returned home to find on Black Saturday, I was able to (much later) look at the damage in a different way. The following excerpt came out of standing in the place where our house used to be, just weeks after bushfire:

People think it takes away everything, but the colours were unlike anything I've ever seen: greys stronger than railway steel, blue-black charcoals and oranges like tangerines – baked rust by dashboard sun.¹⁰

The good parts were also heightened by colour and detail: the birds hidden in the tacky print of a borrowed couch, the first green wattle shoots in our garden after ash. These are small, domestic stories that link to ones much bigger than us. Threads of connection, travelling between the daily and bigger commentary on the world, are what I've always loved – and strived towards – through literature and broader art.

Etymologists, or word historians, can't pinpoint the exact time woolgathering became an unfavourable word, but it's suggested the shift happened before the seventeenth century. From this time, it began to appear in phrases like 'my mind went a-woolgathering'.¹¹ In modern terms it might be translated to 'I blanked' or 'zoned out'. The term, as negatively hinted at here, makes me think of hours wasted down Instagram black holes, or the likely accumulated weeks – months even – I've spent checking and refreshing Twitter on autopilot.

It has likewise been recorded that woolgathering became a derogatory term as these collectors of stray fleece grew a reputation, whether accurate or not, for wandering aimlessly in their poorly paid efforts to retrieve lost wool across wide areas of freezing, rocky and muddy farmland. In terms of sixteenth-century life, to be a woolgatherer was likely not a widely respected career option.

The modern version of that classic stereotype might be today's construction worker – extremely hardworking but sometimes assumed to be taking extra 'smokos' or slacking off. Artists, writers, photographers and other creative workers are also sometimes seen to be meandering aimlessly or indulging in unproductive, absent-minded daydreaming.

When thinking about woolgathering – about patience and storytelling, daydreaming and art (and all things sheep) – the ancient Greek myth of the Golden Fleece might also come to mind. The origins of this famous story of a golden-woolled, winged ram stem from daily practices and routines. In fifth-century BCE in Georgia, east of the Black Sea, communities used sheep fleeces to collect flecks of gold from water flowing through their land from upstream. Wool would be carefully stretched over wooden frames and lowered into the stream to catch the valuable metal. These fleeces would then be gathered and hung in trees to dry before the gold was shaken or combed out.

If there is a more fitting metaphor for the flecks of value to be found in the fleece and dreams of our everyday lives, I'd be surprised.

Productivity. It's a word that haunts so many of us, whether measured in KPIs (Key Performance Indicators); Facebook likes and shares; retweets and various 'outputs'; or whether or not you've started a family, been promoted, got married or signed up for a mortgage by the age of 30, 35 or 40 – depending on who you're talking to. Productivity isn't always a bad thing, but our modern obsession with it is. As Odell comments: 'In a world where our value is determined by our productivity, many of us find our every last minute captured, optimised, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily'.¹²

Behind the smokescreen of always having to be busy, we're left with little time to really think. It is art, anchored in the often-missed details of the everyday, which offers us shelter from this.

Prudence Flint's paintings of peach-skinned women surrounded by millennial pinks and oatmeal blues may seem too

lovely at first glance, but sit with the domestic interiors she depicts – the bathrooms and kitchens, the windowsills – and you're made to look up and out, to take notice of the pleasures and just-submerged complexities of ordinary scenes. These hidden complexities can be seen in the women bathing or showering, eating and driving – their crackling inner lives bubbling just below each calm, sugary surface. In *Blue cotton dress, 2017*, a young woman daydreams on her bed, to me emblematic of a life in COVID-19 lockdown. For those of us privileged enough to have more time to think and dream come new worries, hopes, fears and dreams.

There is something very timely about taking notice of what's happening out our windows and beyond our screens: changes to skies and foliage and place. With climate change threatening us more than ever, we should be listening to nature. In *How to do Nothing*, Odell writes about her new-found appreciation of birdwatching, and how taking notice of shifts in populations has helped her understand the urgency of the climate emergency: 'If more people identified with non-human communities around them in that way, then climate change might be felt and talked about in a different way,' she says.¹³

Think back on your life in colour. Maybe it's the honeyed hues of first love, before the hangover. Maybe it's the colours of the hangover itself: the sun-yellow yolks of that festival egg sandwich, or Sunday dusk and lights flickering across the city as the night folds in. What if being more present was the beginning of the solution to the huge mess we've ended up in?

But back, as always, to Patti Smith. In a review of *Woolgathering* for the Guardian, critic Helen Zaltzman writes:

Capturing moments of her adult life, Smith pares down her prose to a state of vivid impressionism, so enigmatic that even ordinary acts – preparing mint tea, nodding off while sewing – take on spiritual weight.¹⁴

Smith's devotion to the ethereal is anchored in the everyday. In her work, the ceremony of morning coffee is almost spiritual; small, everyday things have stories and histories which flow out behind them.

Look at a Pierre Bonnard painting of a windowsill, a Patti Smith photo of black coffee or a Prudence Flint print of a woman gently lighting her stove, and let yourself first float and then be nudged, even if gently, by something nostalgic – maybe for a life you've lived, never had, or one day hope to. Whether you are 13, 36 or 93, there is a grounding in everyday scenes, along with a quiet assuredness that our ordinary days hold so much wonder.

We all need to be reminded to take time to experience, to let ourselves think of the bigger picture and to relish in colours and sensations again. With the world rapidly warming and with so much else suddenly shifting in 2020, it is all of our responsibility to take stock: notice the terracotta trace of bushfire smoke across the sky; slow down our endless obsession with rushing and consuming and sit with the colours of quiet from this new, often frightening, frontier. In these times we have the freedom to woolgather: to plot and hope, reset, learn and dream.

As Smith writes, 'I was not at all sure what a woolgatherer was but it sounded a worthy calling and seemed a good job for me.'¹⁵

I agree.

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Notes

¹ Anatoly Liberman, 'The last piece of wool: the Oxford etymologist goes woolgathering,' Oxford University Press Blog, Oxford University Press, 8 Nov. 2017, <<https://blog.oup.com/2017/11/woolgathering-word-origins>>, accessed 11 March 2020.

² Ferris Jabr, 'Why walking helps us think,' The New Yorker, 3 Sep. 2014, <www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/walking-helps-us-think>, accessed 24 Mar. 2020.

³ Jenny Odell, *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, Schwartz Publishing, Melbourne, 2019, p. xiv (introduction).

⁴ Rebecca Fulleylove, 'Artist Prudence Flint paints "powerful and mysterious" female protagonists in oil', *It's Nice That*, 4 July 2017, , accessed 29 Mar. 2020.

⁵ City of Melbourne, *Urban Health and Wellbeing Profile*, City of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2016, p. 21.

⁶ Jennifer S. Doxey and Tina Marie Waliczek, 'Greening university classrooms: adding plants increases student satisfaction', *ScienceDaily*, 6 Sep. 2009, <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/09/090903163947.htm>, accessed 11 Mar. 2020.

⁷ Ginni Harrison, 'Stress and anxiety in the digital age: the dark side of technology', updated 1 Mar. 2019, *OpenLearn*, , accessed 9 Nov. 2019.

⁸ Elizabeth Bachner, 'The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art by Eileen Myles', Aug. 2009, <www.bookslut.com/nonfiction/2009_08_014912.php>, accessed 26 Mar. 2020.

⁹ Odell, p. 22.

¹⁰ Alice Bishop, *A Constant Hum*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2019, p. 127.

¹¹ Liberman.

¹² Odell, p. ix (introduction).

¹³ Ellie Shechet, 'How to do nothing: the new guide to refocusing on the real world', 2. Apr 2019, *The Guardian*, , accessed 8 Mar. 2020.

¹⁴ Helen Zaltzman, 'Woolgathering by Patti Smith – review', 13 May 2012, *The Guardian*, , accessed 11 Mar. 2020.

¹⁵ Patti Smith, *Woolgathering*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2012, p. 11.