I had her novel, the bookmark somewhere in the middle, in my handbag as though I were going to some open-book English exam. Warmed by a whiskey, my mother and I climbed the stairs to the auditorium slowly, shuffling along among the winter-dressed crowd.

She wore a black, just-above-the-knee, dress with red details around the collar and she had one of those sharp, almost metallic, Irish accents: curled ‘r’s; a tight, round-mouthed way of saying the ‘o’ in ‘oppressed’; and open-ended way of saying the first syllable of her main character’s name, ‘Veronica’, so that it rhymed with how an Australian would say ‘air’. You could hear the ‘h’ in when and who, which gave these words a precision that was both exact and debonair, as though the wind were choosing a particular leaf to pick up and swirl around before dropping it back to the ground.

In the scene she read, the narrator Veronica returns to her childhood home to tell her mother the news of her brother Liam’s death. In this scene there is a memorable image of Veronica’s mother bent over, arms stretched out – ‘playing aeroplanes’ – between the sink and the kitchen table. When I read that scene I’d been sceptical about whether a mother would actually make this move when confronted with such bad news. I know mine wouldn’t but they do things differently in Ireland.

What I didn’t realise until the author’s public reading was that the image I remembered, described from above, is actually the third time the narrator Veronica describes this particular motion of her mother’s. The language circles around this picture not once but twice. It returns with no sense of repetition, not even a sense on the first reading of the same thing being re-described. The picture of Veronica’s mother’s strange stance is built up, overlaid, inlaid, with other pieces of the pattern, other pieces of the Hegarty family story. While she read I was carried past the point of disbelief. The stance is such a centrepiece and so gratuitous, and who can say how some people might behave in such a situation?

After she read, the author spoke of many things. She talked about wanting to write about siblings’ horizontal relationships rather than the vertical parent–child relationship that might be more usual in novels, about putting sex in her books because sex is about birth and life, and as a woman she was determined to write about sex from a woman’s point of view. She laughingly said sex was a bit like swimming – sex being mostly a pleasurable experience, a physical thing, but what’s important is who goes swimming together and what they do before and what they do after.

She also spoke about an English teacher she had had as a teenager – she had dedicated her most recent collection of stories to him and his wife. She described how he was an exacting teacher of writing. He was emphatic about punctuation and very firm about the way paragraphs should be structured: clear topic sentences, no unnecessary words.

In her focused and lively way she described the school where he taught: ‘a well-endowed school with very small classes’; ‘We were going to save the world’. And she talked about his ironic approach, such a revelation for her at the time. Convent educated before she arrived at that well-endowed school, she had been...
shocked at her teacher’s ‘low treatment’ of the ‘little moan’ in Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’. After the class she told him that he had ruined the poem for her, though little did he know, she said, how low her concerns would go.

Unlikely, but maybe, from the stage in the auditorium at the writers’ festival, the author felt a dot in the audience, intensely concentrated and beaming towards her. ‘I was there too. I remember.’ She had left that school, ‘college’ it was called in North America, just before I arrived but she was already famous then. For being brilliant. And, if my memory serves me well, merciless.

I thought of her approaching our English teacher after the class, wisely one on one, with her opinion – the beginning of their friendship. I remember our class’s conversation about ‘La Belle Dame’ – snide insinuations about the knight’s ‘pacing steed’ and the lady’s ‘elfin grot’, and our teacher’s expression – slack-jawed, waiting-to-be-convinced, his irreverence for the chivalrous world of the poem. The most seriously addressed question that I can recall was why four kisses?

I didn’t enjoy our class’s conversation much and I didn’t like the poem either. There was the doomed knight, ‘alone and palely loitering’, bad-mouthing the woman he had once loved. You make your bed and then you lie in it, I thought. It all seemed to be infuriating misogyny to me. Why was the knight the innocent one? Why was the woman the manipulative one? And, more of a crime for a poem, it didn’t move me.

So unlike Dylan Thomas’s ‘Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night’. I cannot for the life of me remember what the class said about this poem. I cannot remember the look on our teacher’s face or the tone of his voice. I couldn’t look at anyone after I read this poem and I didn’t hear anything. I wasn’t in that room of unfamiliar scholarship students anymore. Across the Pacific, at home, my boyfriend’s father was dying of cancer. What was there to say? I could only howl. In silence.

How do you leave behind what you bring from the outside to a piece of literature? All the experience, all the inchoate, formless feelings? The particular, the personal, the small, the irrelevant? How could I shed my private and utterly subjective world to enter a common world? How could I become part of the civilised world? How could I learn to talk?

I was mute in most of those English classes. If anything occurred to me to say I felt vertiginous. I knew if I spoke self-consciousness would eat my consciousness; I wouldn’t be able to think and it would be just noise coming out of my mouth. The photocopied poem sat on my lap, I sat on one of the lounges in a room that was both living room and class room. There was sunshine that day, rare sunshine, before the damp and grey of late fall set in. I was missing spring at home and the smell of jasmine and my boyfriend and my brother and my family.

And there was Dylan Thomas, resonating like a bell. That direct address, that impossible exhortation. Is the poet talking to himself just as much as his once-tyrannical father? Thomas (do we ever distinguish Dylan Thomas from the narrator of this poem?) imploring his father to ‘rage against the dying of the light’.

It could be anybody’s father, anybody at all – though it does seem to be about men – the good men, the wise men, the wild men. The poem, so unstoppably, inconsistently human, straining against the belief that we are the masters of our destiny. The poem trying to resist the subjugation that is death.

Would it have mattered if Dylan Thomas’s father wasn’t really dying? If he had written the poem as an exercise as, it seemed to me, Keats wrote ‘La Belle
Dame’? It’s an impossible question to answer and some would say an irrelevant one. I have always believed that the author’s intention is not important when I read published, or finished (as much as it can ever be), writing. It’s the text that’s important and how a reader interprets that text. Author’s intentions come and go. The text remains. Why am I so disturbed then if a poet writes a poem about their dog dying if their dog hasn’t died? Writers do it all the time!

What’s it for, emotion in literature? Is it the beginning or the end of writing? I’m mistrustful of the manufacture of emotion. Wary of my emotions, as a reader, being manipulated for the sake of it. But literature is manufactured, it’s constructed, composed. It’s a basic question with perhaps as many answers as there are seconds in a day: why write?

Would analogies help my analysis? Emotion as quackery, false medicine; the writer as snake oil merchant who will take not your money but your trust. Is that too paranoid? Or experiencing emotion like picking a scab, a habit, not allowing an old sore to heal.

But there is something more basic than healing or even exchanging trust. Something more basic, even, than expression. I want a poem to be necessary. Not a trick, an exercise or a technical–emotional sleight of hand. I want to feel a writer is inhabiting an emotion unselfconsciously because they need to. Because pre-language there is something that needs to get to consciousness. Noise not sense? Revelation not technique? Is that what I really want? I don’t suppose this criterion results in fine poetry all the time.

And why, reader, (I ask myself) do you entrust your feelings to these writers? Seek out these writers? Revel in the emotional highs and lows, return to the places they create? Because I feel. I need writers to sing and give shape to things inside me that otherwise would remain formless.

I read about humbug and bullshit and come to the conclusion that a great deal of literature is a form of humbug made with the complicity of the reader. But I’m still looking for a way to explicitly gauge the emotional authenticity of a piece of writing. And wondering is this all the truth one can seek? A piece of writing’s emotional effect on its reader? Which changes constantly.

And how, if I chose to, would I convince others about the emotional authenticity of a piece of writing? Because to talk about a piece of writing, teach it, edit it, appraise it or publish it a reader needs to get past that gasp of grief and recognition (or whatever emotion it is) to be able to articulate the relationship of that line of words to a world that other people can understand. To connect the known world with the inchoate space in a person that such writing goes to and comes from.

Years later, when a college friend and I visited Dylan Thomas’s house in old south Wales we sent our English teacher a postcard. I wasn’t sure whether he liked Dylan Thomas or not. My friend said, ‘Of course he did.’ Perhaps I was too in thrall to the poet’s words to gauge our teacher’s opinion. Perhaps he was being dispassionate so that we would form our own opinions. Then all he had to do was needle us until we articulated them.

As my mother and I left the auditorium after the visiting writer’s talk, I remembered a comment our teacher had made on my essay about Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. My mother knew that play. I remember, perhaps misremember, a film of it: Nora in a red dress – saturated colours and cluttered interiors – with her hair in dark

‘Coming Full Circle.’ Rowena Lennox. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 3 no. 1, November 2010. 
shiny Victorian ringlets standing over the cots of her sleeping children, planning to leave her marriage and her children.

My mother was unhappily married and, though she would never have left us, her children, A Doll's House became symbolic of the anguish she felt as she prevaricated for years about whether or not to leave. So for us the play was not just a play – it was shorthand for the strictures and hypocrisy women endure in marriage.

I wish I could remember what I had said about Nora that prompted our teacher to write on my essay ‘How would you like to be taken metaphorically?’ I guess it was something about a metaphor. When I read the comment I felt a bit indignant. I thought he was being lordly and irreverent. I didn’t talk to him about it. ‘What do you mean?’ I would have had to ask. But I would have needed to already know what he meant before starting a conversation with him about it.

It wasn’t much good trying to tell my mother about my Doll’s House essay, I thought, if I couldn’t remember all the details. We were walking down, negotiating, the stairs, as you do when you walk with someone who has recently had a hip replacement. I was trying to let my mother have the rail, trying not to go too fast, or too slow, trying to stay beside her in the drift of all the other members of the audience walking down the stairs. I had laryngitis that night. I had to lean in close to my mother to make myself heard. It was too much effort to relay a faintly remembered and inconclusive anecdote.

Looking down the stairs I recognised the visiting writer’s distinctive dress, and then the top of her head. It’s not the most flattering view of women of our age, the crown of the head, generally unseen by its owner, the part where dead-coloured undyed hair meets the hair that its owner usually sees, the hair around the face. For a moment she was alone before she was ushered past the scrum of the bookseller’s table to the sausage factory of the book signing. A long queue was already forming.

A day or so later, still buzzing from the visiting writer’s talk, I realised I could have said hello, could have said, ‘he was my teacher, too’. I could have welcomed her to my city and told her that I had heard of her before she was a famous writer. We could have talked about mutual acquaintances, or swimming, which she’d so buoyantly likened to sex during her talk.

The pool at the college was encased in a huge plastic dome. It was always what I considered cold during the school year on that damp-forested island off the west coast of Canada. The water in the pool was heated and the atmosphere under the plastic dome was warm and misty and mysterious, especially at night. Many an evening started or ended or changed direction when we went swimming in that pool. You didn’t know whom you’d bump into. It seems obvious to me that the visiting writer’s analogy about sex and swimming started there. But you can never say these things with certainty.

Because you never know what’s beginning, or how long it’s going to last. Almost thirty years later, with her explanation, I realised that our teacher’s comment on my Doll’s House essay had been tongue in cheek not rude, he had been starting a conversation not making a judgment.

And it never stops, this thinking and rethinking and trying to articulate what it is about a poem or a play or a novel that we respond to.

Both of my brothers have died since I read ‘La Belle Dame’ and ‘Do Not Go Gentle’ for the first time as a teenager. After the visiting writer’s talk I read ‘La Belle
Dame’ again and liked it much better. What’s different about it? It’s still the poem that didn’t move me when I was sixteen. But this time I moved through the poem, its language simple and portentous, its images lingering and its rhythm as infectious as a nursery rhyme.

Now I read it as a poem about doom and the muse, whatever that muse may be an embodiment of – art, sexuality, the way we would like life itself to unfold. And the price life exacts is never deserved or fair, and the muse never cares. She’s not a woman, she’s a process.

In that half-life from which the knight will never return I see my brother’s gaunt form in hospital wards. His was a relatively slow death. His dying made him ghostlike. I could only re-flesh him, return him to health, after he had died. Parts of me remain in the grey world where the sedge is withered and no birds sing. Now it’s the poem’s stasis that is frightening: still, after all this time, la belle dame indifferently letting the life seep from her knight. I’m railing: Don’t sacrifice so much. Don’t, in blind faith, give it all away – as you must, as you must. What ails him? Does it matter? He’s never coming back.

And ‘Do Not Go Gentle’? I’ve returned to its emotion, its ambivalence, its ambiguousness, its shining impossibility many times without even knowing it. But, for all its grandeur, I think the poem is a nonsense. That’s part of the reason I like it so much – it sings from a place that makes no sense but it sings anyway.

Because now I know you can’t do anything but go into that night, whether you’re gentle, whether the night is good or not. And when it comes to it we, who think we are masters of our destiny, are more like woodland creatures needing a place to curl up. A place where it’s not too cold and our dignity is not too tattered and we can leave, quietly, detach ourselves from the loved ones who can’t bear it, can’t bear the going or the world without us in it. And in the end we neither go to nor run from. We simply drop down spent.

It turns out poems are less fragile than human beings.

With effortless loquaciousness the visiting writer spoke about the dance between language and the facts that is commonplace in Ireland, how it is considered, maybe, rude to state things too frankly. And dance her language did, spoken and written, not too fast, not too slow. So instead of a conversation in the foyer, here is my thank you: for the memories, for shifting my memories, for the inspiration and for returning me to a time before.

Notes
Dylan Thomas, ‘Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night’ can be found at http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15377.

Writing that inspired and provoked my thoughts on emotion in literature includes:

‘Coming Full Circle.’ Rowena Lennox.
Transnational Literature Vol. 3 no. 1, November 2010.
Sophie Cunningham talks to Nam Le, ‘The Friction Zone’, *Meanjin*, 68.1 (Autumn 2009)
Anne Enright, ‘Come to Read Alice, Not to Praise Her’, *The Globe and Mail*, 28 August 2009
Rosalie Higson, ‘Stellar, Stellar’, *The Weekend Australian Review*, 5-6 September 2009