

This Subjunctive Mood of Mine¹

If this were to be lost

These are the words that artist Jessie Brennan intends to write in timber words at The Green Backyard in Peterborough, a community garden threatened by a proposed redevelopment by its owner, Peterborough City Council.

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Brennan's phrase describes so succinctly my mood these days. I seem to be constantly plagued by the fear that something I value is about to be taken away from me. In writing I am overlooking Burgess Park, whose trees are just beginning to bud, but I feel so overcome by potential loss that I am unable to sense spring's uplifting air. I switch between Google searches for property values in Kent, the legality of Compulsory Purchase Orders, and the date the announcement will be made concerning the 100 estates to be 'regenerated' that David Cameron spoke of in January 2016.²

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In Islington first and then Southwark, for the past 15 years I've enjoyed many aspects of being a council estate resident. With the exception of the enormous major works bills (now clocking up at £50,000 between the two boroughs in which I have lived), it has allowed me to own a home in the heart of London. I never became a leaseholder to make money; I was not interested in bricks and mortar as property but rather as a place to live. I chose my new flat not because of its value as an investment but because I admired the social ideals of welfare state architecture. Despite the acts of aesthetic vandalism committed by Southwark Council when they removed the long-span picture windows and replaced them with tiny plastic ones, just months after I moved in, from a distance, across the park, especially at dusk, the point blocks still look visionary.

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Despite the meanness of those plastic windows, the views they frame, from high up on the eighteenth floor, can be a source of extraordinary exhilaration. From here I can literally see the history of London housing: different designs spread out to the horizon: from the Georgian townhouses of the estate agent's newly coined 'Walworth village' to the rising glass towers further out where the Heygate used to be, right as far as the pointed end of the Shard at London Bridge, where – soaring skyward – rumour has it that the penthouses contain private swimming pools and cinemas. A little closer to home are the new flats, in the insidious style of the 'London vernacular', being built along the southern edge of Burgess Park. At around £500,000–600,000 for a two-bed apartment they are the 'affordable' replacement of the social housing currently provided by the slab blocks of the Aylesbury, some of which have already been demolished, while others lie under threat. The judgement concerning whether they will be lost, to arrive, rather ironically, on what-was-once May Day.

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It was at this very desk, facing the same view over a year ago, that I wrote a book on transitional spaces in psychoanalysis and architecture, specifically social housing. As I drew the work to a close, I discovered that my own home was in Southwark's 'estate renewal zone'.³ Property consultants Savills had been advising the council of the need to 'unearth the potential' of public land, including 'brownfield sites', a term which for them included fully-occupied housing estates.⁴ According to Savills and others, like Create Streets, post-war 'point' and 'slab' blocks are not dense enough, and ought to be replaced by mansion blocks situated on re-introduced old-school street layouts.⁵ Although new research shows refurbishment has less social and environmental cost than demolition,⁶ the advantage of new build is that existing residents can be moved out, and in return, following viability studies, the developers can make their non-negotiable 20% profit while providing a small percentage of so-called 'affordable housing'.⁷ Following this economic short-term profit logic, tenants are being displaced from central London into other boroughs,⁸ and because the rates of compensation paid when the councils issue compulsory purchase orders are so low, leaseholders are being lost from the city entirely.⁹

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When I realised what was at stake, I became so angered by Southwark's actions, that I decided to use my professional skills to get directly involved in the fight for the Aylesbury. I turned my fear of loosing my London home into something more proactive by offering my services as an expert academic witness at the public inquiry into the compulsory purchase order at the Aylesbury.¹⁰ In the opening session of the public inquiry I presented seven reasons why these compulsory purchase orders were not in the public interest.¹¹ As I noted, a local authority can only exercise its compulsory purchase powers if 'it thinks that the development, re-development or improvement is likely to contribute to the achievement of the promotion or improvement of the economic, social and environmental well-being' of their area.¹² Witness after witness presented arguments, backed up with evidence, that this was not the case.

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The mountains of paperwork, the constantly shifting goal posts, the lack of fairness and transparency, the fact that only a legal argument can win, and that even when evidence is produced it is ignored by those in power – all this I discovered was part of the public inquiry. In researching this essay, and listening to the trustees of The Green Backyard argue their case to Peterborough City Council I was struck by the similarities of the two situations. As co-founder of The Green Backyard, Sophie Antonelli, points out so pertinently, under the General Disposal Consent (2003) of the Local Government Act (1972), local authorities have the consent of the Secretary of State to sell assets at below market value to a total discount of £2 million if the land is likely to contribute to the promotion or improvement of social, economic and environmental well-being.¹³ The Green Backyard is a community garden working with vulnerable adults and children: what better case can there be for contributing to the social, economic and environmental well-being of an area you might wonder? Their case is strengthened by the Localism Act (2011), which allows communities to ask the council to list certain assets as being of value. The Green Backyard has been, since 2013, an asset of community value, and as such, as current occupier, it is allowed to make an attempt to buy the land.¹⁴ And yet, as Antonelli notes, Peterborough City Council chose, in 2014, to put the land up for sale through a blind tender process that gave no opportunity for negotiation or for social and environmental benefits to be considered.

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Looking out at the Aylesbury across my desk, I can no longer see the remaining buildings. Instead I picture the scene of the public inquiry and think about the application of aggression through institutional bureaucracy. I feel for all the people I have met living in Aylesbury who have lost or who are just about to lose their homes, and are suffering daily from the 'slow violence' of it all.¹⁵ If I turn and look in the other direction, I see another high-rise council block; where one of the members of Southwark Notes lives. I think of the wonderful pamphlet 'Staying Put' that he co-authored and the brave fight led by Southwark Defend Council Housing that has been going on so much longer than I have lived here, to help people hold on to what they are now about to lose.¹⁶

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Loss must have been on my mind when walking past May Morn all those years ago, the decaying Arts and Crafts bungalow in London's green belt, that turned my attention to the demolition of council housing. Finding its white-painted wooden name plaque lying on the ground almost completely submerged by long spring-wet grass was such a meaningful moment for me. I had been drawn to the flaking letters, the rotting wood, the decaying architecture, and the slowly fading photographs of 1950s welfare state architecture that I found there.¹⁷ Was I then, and am I now, one of Sigmund Freud's nineteenth-century melancholics reborn in the twenty-first century?

The affect corresponding to melancholia is that of mourning – that is, longing for something lost. Thus in melancholia it must be a question of a loss – a loss in *instinctual* life.¹⁸

Freud first mentions melancholia in 1894, when, linked to mania, it is one of seven features in his morphology of the neuroses.¹⁹ Writing very shortly afterwards, in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud starts to develop his theory of melancholia,²⁰ and associates it with loss of instinct. But although much of Freud's conceptual thinking on loss took place during his research on hysteria in the early to mid-1890s, he did not return to address melancholia until over 20 years later. In his paper 'Mourning and Melancholia', written in 1915, Freud

defines mourning as a reaction to the loss of a loved person or ideal, but he notes that while there is nothing about mourning that is unconscious, 'melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness'.²¹ In Freud's later understanding of melancholia he differentiates it from mourning; arguing that mourning is a process where a subject comes to terms with the loss of a loved object despite having a strong unconscious attachment to it, whereas in melancholia the subject cannot integrate the loss and instead the ego identifies with the lost object, resulting in self-persecution. Today melancholia might be better described as depression, an emotional condition connected to a loss of self-esteem. In Freud's melancholia it is not so much that the subject is not able to mourn the loss of a particular person or thing, but rather that the subject becomes attached to the experience of loss itself.

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When I first wrote a response to the work *Spring* by artist Elina Brotherus, I placed her foregrounding of anticipation as a yearning that looks forward to the resurgence of new life, against my own fascination with the backwards gaze of nostalgia. My three site-writings connected Brotherus's landscapes infused with anticipatory longing to places tinted by nostalgia, setting up a tension between life and death, regeneration and decay, anticipation and retrospection, a looking forward and a turning backward.²²

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If Freud's melancholic senses loss all around, Brennan's phrase focuses on a loss anticipated, which started to reconfigure for me the apparent simplicity of a set of paired relations, with loss on one side along with death, decay, and retrospection, and on the other side life, regeneration and anticipation. The mood – *if this were to be* – is one that anticipates, but the anticipation does not look forward to new life, leaving the turning backward as the move which acknowledges loss as that which has gone before – rather the anticipation looks forward to loss itself.

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The losses I am anticipating are the result of profits. They are losses experienced as the direct outcome of acts of destruction to and theft of the public sphere. As such there are reasons to be angry, not melancholic. It is Owen Hatherley I have to thank for pointing this out to me: these things are not being lost he said, of public housing after I had presented a version of my work *May Mourn*,²³ they are being destroyed.

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At home the phrase comes to mind every time I look out of my window at the post-war housing estates facing me. I have been wondering for some time now if everyone else living in a council flat in England is anticipating loss right now too? And the experience of those at The Green Backyard makes me realise that since the enclosure of the commons (and before that too) this is an anxiety shared by all those who occupy land that they do not own outright.

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I go to work, and the phrase is back with me, again. Living through the process of losing the public university is making me into a melancholic even if I wasn't one before. At work, as at home, I try to challenge the process of destruction, which occurs when public finance is withdrawn and to critique the change in values that emerge when accepting cash donations from the private sector. Because I chose to publicly question UCL's decision to accept \$10 million of funding from the 'charitable arm' of BHP Billiton, one of the world's largest mining companies, to set up an Institute of Sustainable Resources, my research these days is no longer the 'pursuit of pleasure',²⁴ but focused on displacement, connected to housing on the one hand, but also now to mining, on the other. Here I encounter yet more loss, inflicted by global multi-nationals – the loss of homes, livelihoods, communities, rivers, forests, and finally, expectantly, of life itself.

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I go to the public swimming pool for some exercise and to take my mind off loss – anticipated and actual. Only to discover, that although it still looks the same, my favourite public swimming pool has also been lost. It has become a charitable social enterprise,

recently winning a Big Society Award, and working in partnership with a local council. Anyone who wishes to can now phone in and rent out part of the pool for an hour or two, even when those lanes have been pre-allocated as swimming time for the public. This afternoon a pair of investment bankers are the sole occupants of the fast lane, leaning back nonchalantly at the shallow end, they talk large numbers in Portuguese. So since it has become impossible to predict if I will or won't find a public lane lost to a banker pontificating on his own profits and losses, I decide, on balance, that it is better for my 'well-being' not to go for a swim afterall.

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But how many more losses is it possible to fret over? Apparently the list is endless, and under this Conservative government increasing on a daily basis. And these are not just minor selfish losses, like my peaceful Saturday afternoon swim; they include democratic processes, governance structures, and the public realm itself. To be anticipating loss from the direction of the future as well as the past means self-diagnosing as a melancholic. I gain little solace from grief counselors who advise that 'anticipatory grief is a way to prepare us emotionally for the inevitable'.²⁵

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Feeling somewhat desperate, I wonder whether through an act of creative displacement – a sublimation if you like – the words themselves in Brennan's phrase might offer me a kernel of hope. I think of our conversations, and her positive anger and energetic defiance, of us sitting together listening to the 'voices' of The Green Backyard, to those that have occupied this site for these past years. Each one offers a different kind of testimony, and listening to the range of timbres and tones is intensely moving. Many return to trauma, to tell how The Green Backyard has for them been a place of recovery. And as I blink back the tears, Brennan mentions, rather gently, that her words are intended to be a 'political provocation' rather than 'a melancholic anticipation'. I enjoy thinking again about the development of her artwork, of the relation of the horizontal to the vertical, and how her words of (not on) wood, will face outwards not upwards, offering a challenge rather than a site for mourning to those passing by.

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With a little help from that linguistic specialist, but also conjurer of the unexpected, Wikipedia, I realise that the phrase is written in the subjunctive – a grammatical mood described as unreal:

Subjunctive forms of verbs are typically used to express various states of unreality such as wish, emotion, possibility, judgment, opinion, obligation, or action that has not yet occurred; the precise situations in which they are used vary from language to language. The subjunctive is an irrealis mood (one that does not refer directly to what is necessarily real) – it is often contrasted with the indicative, which is a realis mood.²⁶

It turns out though that the subjunctive is not a very visible grammatical feature of modern English, since for most verbs, the only distinct subjunctive form occurs in the third person singular of the present tense, where the subjunctive shows itself by lacking the ‘-s’ ending. However, I discover that the verb ‘to be’ offers a special instance of the subjunctive as it not only has a distinct present subjunctive form, ‘be’, but also a past subjunctive form, ‘were’. And yet because most English speakers today prefer using ‘was’ to ‘were’, it seems, that along with a sense of how language can create possibility and conjure unrealities like wishes, the subjunctive mood is itself about to be lost.²⁷

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Brennan tells me that my text reminds her of how this phrase came to title her artwork: that it has surfaced from the voices of The Green Backyard and is adapted from the words of Chris Erskine, who said: ‘If this [GBY] was to be lost and if this was to be something that was to actually come to an end, it would be a complete abomination to this city to have lost such a precious resistance. We don’t have to live life always being dominated by money.’ How strange we agree that in Chris’s phrase the subjunctive has already been lost and that Brennan has unintentionally reinserted it.

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Luckily language offers other moods for dealing with the unreal – the conditional as well as the subjunctive; and in some languages, like Finnish, the optative and potential; and in others, like Arabic, the jussive; as well as other less common irrealis moods like the desiderative – for expressing hope, the dubitative – for doubt, the admirative – for surprise, and the hortative – a plea. Following the ‘if’ that signals the conditional, the ‘were’ indicates the subjunctive; and if the conditional is a mood that describes what ‘would happen or what one would do in certain circumstances’, then the subjunctive expresses ‘a situation that is uncertain, unreal, or just a wish.’²⁸ In this sense both the conditional and the subjunctive are moods that can be associated with the endless possibilities that speculative capitalism in general, and the current property bubble in particular, can offer, at least from the side of a wish; for those who seek to profit from a ‘what if’ situation, the condition of a wish is precisely the mood of the subjunctive.

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Which makes me wonder if there is something to be gained from Brennan’s phrase not lost, perhaps by focusing a little bit more on the ‘this’ and a little bit less on the ‘lost’. What is the ‘this’ that might be lost? Is it this special garden, this beautiful piece of timber, this precious blade of grass, this humble clod of mud, or this gentle time spent outdoors, this relaxing feeling that comes from a day digging, or this fruitful state of mind that only planting seeds can provide? And in this subjunctive mood of mine (in which spring certainly plays a role) I start to wish another kind of ‘what if’, along the lines of Rosi Braidotti and her emancipatory politics,²⁹ rather than the cash flow projections of a property developer, in the spirit of that special shared space which Mandy Jones, a trustee of The Green Backyard, describes as ‘a living example of what the world should be’,³⁰ where I can imagine

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¹ The title of this essay came to mind as I started writing it, but I had little idea of its emotional origin. On completing the final edit, and wondering whether the essay should be called ‘This Subjunctive Mood of Mine’ or ‘In This Subjunctive of Mine’, I consulted my partner, artist David Cross, who said instead why not remove ‘Of Mine’? Instinctively I replied ‘No!’. And in doing so I realized it was because of the famous Isley Brothers’ number ‘This Old Heart of Mine’. The song was released by Motown in 1966, in Detroit, today a city blighted by the sub-prime crisis of 2008, and for some the archetypal location of so-called ‘ruin porn’. It was this tune that I was humming

to myself rather distractedly when I starting writing this essay. A love song that deals with loss, the lyrics are intensely subjective, and like many other Motown classics of the time, turn their back on politics. Like the subjective, the subjunctive is an inner mood, where the fear of loss that keeps us awake at night, and which is not necessarily welcome in the world of academic rational discourse or even the upfront confrontational politics of housing and political activism, is kept alive. And like all good songs that bring a tear to the eye of the more romantic among us, the subjunctive is a mood that touches the heart.

² 'Estate regeneration: article by David Cameron', accessed 1 April 2016.

www.gov.uk/government/speeches/estate-regeneration-article-by-david-cameron. See also the related research by Savills, accessed 1 April 2016. pdf.euro.savills.co.uk/uk/residential---other/completing-london-s-streets-080116.pdf.

³ See, for example, '35 per cent blog', accessed 31 July 2015,

35percent.org/blog/2014/07/23/mystery-objector-1301/. As 35percent report, 'But more worrying is the Council's response on page 109, where it states that it has "recommended a lower CIL rate in the lower value area of the Borough, within which the majority of housing estates identified for Estate renewal are located".' 35percent refers to p.109 of 'CDCIL5 Appendix I of Regulation 19 Consultation Statement', accessed 1 April 2016.

www.southwark.gov.uk/downloads/file/10738/cdcil5_appendix_i_of_regulation_19_consultation_statement. CIL stands for Community Infrastructure Levy.

⁴ See 'Savills Research: London Regeneration Proposal', accessed 1 April 2016.

www.savills.co.uk/news/article/72418/175241-0/4/2014/savills-research-london-regeneration-research-proposal. For specific reports see, for example, 'Spotlight Public Land', accessed 1 April 2016. pdf.euro.savills.co.uk/residential---other/spotlight-public-land.pdf.

⁵ See 'Savills Research: London Regeneration Proposal', accessed 1 April 2016,

pdf.savills.com/documents/Foreword%20by%20Community%20Secretary,%20Eric%20Pickles%20and%20the%20regeneration%20research%20proposal.pdf. See also the report by Nicholas Boys Smith and Alex Morton, 'Create Streets; Not just Multi-Storey Estates' at

www.createstreets.com and 'Better Regeneration' and 'Why aren't we building more streets?'

⁶ For recent research on this contentious topic, see 'Demolition or Refurbishment of Social Housing?', accessed 1 April 2016. www.engineering.ucl.ac.uk/engineering-exchange/files/2014/10/Report-Refurbishment-Demolition-Social-Housing.pdf.

⁷ A good definition of social rented housing is given at 'Definitions of General Housing Terms', Department for Communities and Local Government, accessed 1 April 2016.

www.gov.uk/definitions-of-general-housing-terms#social-and-affordable-housing.

⁸ For a mapping of the displacement of tenants and leaseholders from Southwark's Heygate Estate, see Loretta Lees, Just Space and SNAG (Southwark Notes Archives Group), 'The Social Cleansing of Council Estates in London' in *Regeneration Realities: Urban Pamphleteer*, n. 2, ed. Ben Campkin, David Roberts and Rebecca Ross (2014). See also Loretta Lees, 'The Urban Injustices of New Labour's "new urban renewal" the case of the Aylesbury Estate', accessed 1 June 2016.

southwarknotes.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/lorettalees_pptx.pdf; Richard Baxter and Mark Davidson, 'The violence of urban regeneration: home and place unmaking in the gentrification of the Aylesbury Estate'; and Ben Campkin, *Remaking London: Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture*, (London: IB Tauris, 2013), especially 77-107.

⁹ Compulsory purchase orders are issued to those same residents that the Councils earlier sold 125-year leases to under the 'right to buy' scheme. See 'Right to Buy: Buying your Council Home', accessed 12 March 2016. www.gov.uk/right-to-buy-buying-your-council-home/overview. As one recent legal case shows, urban blight is currently calculated to reduce the value of a property for sale by only 10%. See, for example, 'Aylesbury Estate', accessed 31 July 2015, southwarknotes.wordpress.com/aylesbury-estate/; and 'Aylesbury Leaseholder Fights Incestuous Valuation', accessed 31 July 2015, 35percent.org/blog/2014/05/30/aylesbury-leaseholder-fights-incestuous-valuation/.

¹⁰ See, for example, the reporting by 35%: 'Aylesbury Estate Compulsory Purchase Order Public Inquiry', accessed 1 April 2016, 35percent.org/blog/2015/05/02/aylesbury-estate-compulsory-purchase-order-public-inquiry/; and 'Aylesbury CPO Inquiry Extra Time', accessed 1 April 2016, 35percent.org/blog/2015/05/16/aylesbury-cpo-inquiry-extra-time/. See also 'Assessing

Aylesbury: What's the True Cost of Demolishing Council Estates', accessed 1 April 2016, www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/assessing-aylesbury-whats-the-true-cost-of-demolishing-council-estates/8692267.fullarticle.

¹¹ See <http://crappistmartin.github.io/images/SummaryProfRendell.pdf> (accessed 11 August 2016). (accessed 11 August 2016).

¹² See <http://crappistmartin.github.io/images/SummaryProfRendell.pdf> (accessed 11 August 2016). (accessed 11 August 2016).

¹³ See 'The Green Backyard Volunteer Questions to Full Council', accessed 31 May 2016. www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA6a7keYg3k&nohtml5=False.

¹⁴ See, for example, 'Campaigners fight attempts to sell community garden', *Landscape Institute*, 5 December 2014; 'Race to find £750k to save pioneering Green Backyard project', *Peterborough Telegraph*, 11 September 2014; 'Trustees claim marketing move confusing as Green Backyard goes up for sale', *Peterborough Telegraph*, 21 November 2014; Peter Slinger, 'What is council's plan for Green Backyard site?', letter, *Peterborough Telegraph*, 20 November 2014; 'Campaign: Volunteers at Peterborough's Green Backyard want help to buy the land', *Peterborough Telegraph* 27 November 2014; and '[Peterborough's Green Backyard a "community asset"](#)', *Peterborough Telegraph*, 26 June 2013.

¹⁵ A term borrowed from Rob Nixon's work. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ 'Staying Put: An Anti-Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London', accessed 1 April 2016. southwarknotes.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/staying-put-web-version-low.pdf.

¹⁷ See, for example, Jane Rendell, 'May Morn' in *The Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*, ed. Di Robson and Gareth Evans (London: Artevents, 2010); Jane Rendell, 'Residues of a Dream World' in *To Have and to Hold: Future of a Contested Landscape*, ed. Gerrie van Noord (Glasgow: NVA, 2011); and Jane Rendell, 'One Way Street or "The Degeneration of Things"' in *Brutalist Speculations and Flights of Fancy*, ed. Julie Westerman (Sheffield: Site Gallery, 2011). See also Jane Rendell, *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition*, (London: IB Tauris, 2016).

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Draft G. Melancholia' in *Extracts From The Fliess Papers. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume I (1886–1899): Pre-Psycho-Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1966), 200–6.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Draft D. On the Etiology and Theory of the Major Neuroses' in *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁰ Freud, 'Draft G. Melancholia' in *Ibid.*, 202.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', (1915 [1917]), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 237–58, 255–6.

²² Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, (London: IB Tauris, 2010).

²³ See Jane Rendell, 'May Mo(u)rn: A Site-Writing' in *Essays in honour of Frederic Jameson*, ed. Nadir Lahiji (London: Ashgate, 2011).

²⁴ See Jane Rendell, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Gender, Space and Architecture in Regency London*, (London: The Athlone Press/Continuum with Rutgers University Press, 2002).

²⁵ See, for example, 'Handling Grief When Anticipating a Death', accessed 1 April 2016.

www.brightstarcare.com/san-mateo/2012/07/05/handling-grief-when-anticipating-a-death/.

²⁶ See 'Subjunctive Mood', accessed 2 April 2016. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subjunctive_mood.

²⁷ See 'English Subjunctive', accessed 2 April 2016. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_subjunctive.

²⁸ See, for example, 'Using Verbs in the Conditional and Subjunctive', accessed 2 April 2016. study.com/academy/lesson/using-verbs-in-the-conditional-and-subjunctive-moods.html.

²⁹ See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5–7.

³⁰ Quotation from an oral recording for Jessie Brennan's artwork *Inside The Green Backyard (Opportunity Area)*, 2015-16.