

## Biography & Memoir

### Proxies by Brian Blanchfield – tumbleweed trajectories

A poet's fragmented memoir reflects on language, identity and modern transience

10 HOURS AGO by: Houman Barekat

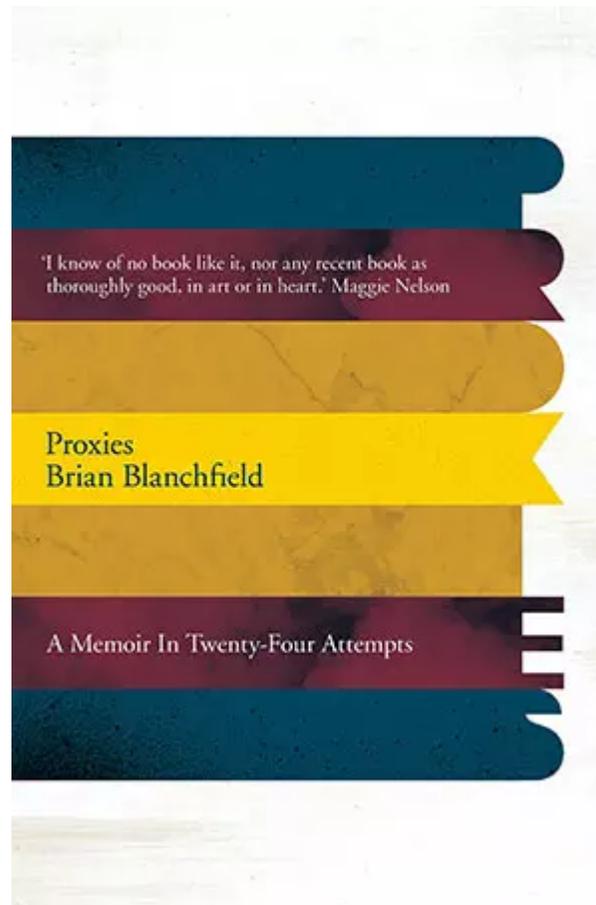
At the height of the Aids crisis in the late 1980s, the American poet Brian Blanchfield was a teenager coming to terms with his sexuality. His sense of his emergent identity became bound up in the suffering of the gay community at large — “not just their appreciable agony but also their leprous toxicity”. Sexuality and group solidarity feature prominently in the essays comprising his prose debut, *Proxies: A Memoir in Twenty-Four Attempts*. Blanchfield recounts his fraught relationship with his deeply religious mother, who refused to accept his homosexuality and was affronted by the personal candour of his first, critically acclaimed poetry collection. Years later, while composing his second book of poems, Blanchfield noticed he was writing in the first-person plural by default; he had found, in his network of friends and lovers, a surrogate family.

The author's romantic life seems to have mirrored his professional trajectory. In these recollections he is inveterately nomadic, moving from one temporary teaching post to another, and from one relationship to another. Often a break-up would coincide with a change of job, the latter necessitating or hastening the former. So Blanchfield is understandably unnerved when, hours after rejecting a teaching post many miles away in order to remain with his current boyfriend, he has an inauspicious collision with an Arizona tumbleweed: “What does it mean when the universal symbol of itinerancy knocks into you the day you committed to stay awhile?” The couple insert a disco ball into it and use it as a chandelier.

Blanchfield stewes with weary, sardonic humour over the vagaries of the applications system for academic positions. He recalls excelling himself during one particularly convoluted interview process, only to discover he had missed out to an internal hire. The outcome was predetermined; the entire exercise had been a pointless charade. (“It made sense of the unnerving disengagement I had perceived from the faculty . . .”) He cuts a despondent, rankled figure in these passages, admitting that “hurt and cynicism have . . . compounded the basic demoralization of spending the effort against such odds and in a climate with so little transparency”.

Several of these essays explore the numinosity of language, and how this is reflected in the instability and malleability of identity. “[L]yrical speech,” Blanchfield observes, “is always, rather

mysteriously, someone else's." He remembers his childhood aversion to the "verbose musicality" of church diction, yet concedes that he has recreated, in his own writing style, "the immersive experience of enigma which so repelled me as a child". This is not false modesty: there is indeed, in the homiletic pacing of his prose, a discernibly churchy whiff. But this does not extend to the content. In his colourful essay "On Frottage", Blanchfield celebrates the subversive creativity of non-penetrative sex in all its "busy reciprocity". It represents, for him, the promise of sexual mores "more supple and adaptive to the precariat fluidity of contemporary living" than conventional intercourse.



Packaging essay collections as single texts — eschewing the functional but commercially dubious “selected writings” format — is not without its risks. Too often such volumes raise expectations of thematic unity, only to fall short. But the essays in *Proxies*, which have appeared in magazines such as Harper’s, Guernica and BOMB, hang together remarkably well. Collectively they constitute a rich and compelling personal account.

At its heart is a search for permanence in a life defined by transience, a concern that resonates far beyond academia. The straitened employment market in the humanities is, in its short-termism and uncertainty, no different from lots of other industries; the increasing casualisation of working life in

the 21st century means, for many people, the perpetual deferral of happiness to some chimerical future point when everything has fallen into place.

*Proxies* ends, however, on a hopeful note: the closing essay finds Blanchfield at peace with himself, happy enough in his work and very much in love with his partner. They live in Tucson, where he presents a college radio show about experimental literature. “I carry poetry to the radio station. We write our books. We pay the dollar, swim at Himmel Pool.” It sounds like bliss.

**Proxies: A Memoir in Twenty-Four Attempts**, by Brian Blanchfield, *Picador*,  
RRP£9.99/*Nightboat*, RRP\$15.95, 192 pages

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