

OLD DOG NEW STICKS

Fetching Sticks — The Complete Series 1

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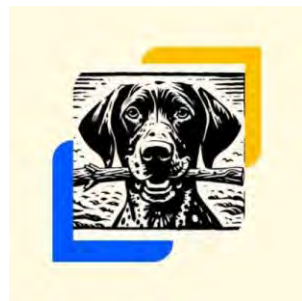
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Old Dog New Sticks explores the use of Cognitive Assistive Tools (CAT) in literary scholarship contexts — and whatever else the work throws up.

Please be fully aware that this series is a human/AI collaboration.

No. 1 — Dogs and Cats

Or, how a creative curator accidentally coined the defining term for AI collaboration



The Old Dog New Sticks logo. He has been waiting patiently.

Look at him. Confident, linocut-rendered, retrieving his stick with unmistakable purpose. The brackets behind him — one blue, one yellow, digital-feeling, almost like code — were always there in the logo. I designed Old Dog New Sticks two years ago and never properly launched it, because I got distracted doing the actual work the concept was supposed to describe. The logo sat there, waiting.

Now look at this.



S.R. Crockett, 'A Waif'. Pen and ink sketch, previously unpublished, 1881.

A pen and ink sketch — never previously seen in public — by a 22 year old Sam Crockett, aka the Victorian Scottish author S.R. Crockett who is the main focus of my retirement life. A lean, hungry dog outside a butcher's shop, nose lifted toward something just out of reach, titled in Crockett's own hand: A WAIF.

The contrast between them is almost indecently neat. The modern dog, purposeful, heading somewhere with his stick. The Victorian waif, wanting something it cannot quite name.

I didn't plan to put these two images together. That's rather the point.

Old Dog New Sticks began, in a half-formed way, as my framework for thinking about learning new tools at a late stage of a long career. I'm a scholar/researcher/champion of Crockett's life and work. Indeed I can confidently state after 30 odd years, I'm the 'undisputed world champion of Crockett'. This means I spend a great deal of time in the nineteenth century. The digital world of the twenty first century, by contrast, keeps insisting on arriving whether one is ready or not.

The ODNS concept stalled because I became genuinely absorbed in using the new tools rather than writing about using them. Specifically, in 2025 I began working with Claude — Anthropic's AI — as a cognitive collaborator on the Crockett research. And what happened was more interesting than I'd expected, and considerably harder to name than I'd anticipated.



Which brings me, by a rather circuitous route, to cats.

Not Crockett's cats. Crockett, as it happens, was a dog person (as am I). His work is full of dogs — loyal, working, vividly observed. Cats are notable by their absence (unless I have just blocked them out). There's something in that, which I will return to.

The cat in question is C.A.T. Cognitive Assisted Tool. A term that emerged — accidentally, as the best coinages do — in the course of an afternoon's philosophical conversation with 'my' Claude about what was actually happening between us when we collaborated on the Crockett research.

We had been circling the problem for some time. The existing vocabulary was entirely useless. Ghostwriting was wrong — the power ratio is inverted; I'm the one with the thirty years of scholarship, and anyway, I don't believe in ghosts. Co-author overstated the AI's contribution considerably. AI-assisted was too vague to mean anything useful. We tried extended integrated writing practice and rejected it on the reasonable grounds that it was a mouthful. We tried various compound academic terms that were accurate and unsayable.

And as with all good ideas, it came when I stopped thinking about it. Popped into my mouth unbidden. I wrote: cognitive tool. And then: cognitive assistive tool. And then I noticed the acronym **CAT**.

The metaphor, once seen, is extremely difficult to unsee. A cat is not a dog. It does not fetch on command or perform loyalty on demand. It shows up when conditions suit it,

contributes on its own terms, occasionally produces something inexplicable, and cannot be fully controlled — but when the relationship works, there is a quality of genuine companionship that simpler tools entirely lack. It also sits on your work at inconvenient moments and stares at nothing for reasons you will never understand.

As a description of working with an AI on serious scholarly research: yes. Exactly that.



There is a particular subversive pleasure in housing this piece — about cognitive AI tools, coined vocabulary, and the philosophy of extended consciousness — inside a website dedicated to a Victorian Scottish author who died in 1914 and who apparently never wrote a cat into his published work.

But the subversion is more apparent than real. The CAT concept didn't emerge in spite of the Crockett work. It emerged because of it. Every observation about what the AI does and doesn't contribute — where the knowledge anchor matters, where the cognitive scaffolding helps, where generative capacity runs ahead of the thinking — came directly from actually doing the research. From reading letters, building exhibition content, tracing the arc of a literary career through eight hundred pieces of correspondence.

The Crockett waif outside the butcher's shop isn't just a charming sketch. It's a dog that knows something is there but can't quite reach it. That was a reasonable description of my own situation before I found the vocabulary. The knowing was there. The reaching was the problem.

A WAIF. Crockett titled it himself.

Old Dog New Sticks, then, is where the main work and the new tools think out loud together. The proposal is for occasional pieces — unhurried, I hope genuinely useful — about what it actually means to deploy a Cognitive Assistive Tool in serious literary scholarship. What the CAT gets right. What it gets wrong. What so called 'extended integrated writing practice' means in practice when the work is nineteenth century Scotland and the tool has never been to Galloway.

One piece a month, perhaps. When I'm ahead of my schedule (thanks to my CAT). When the work throws something interesting up. Which it does. Rather regularly.

Then, and only then, am I free to stroke the CAT.



I suspect Crockett would have appreciated the irony of his museum housing pieces about artificial intelligence. He was, after all, a writer who understood that new tools and old knowledge are most useful when neither pretends the other doesn't exist.

He just would have wanted a dog in it somewhere.

I have provided two.

No. 2 — From Curate's Egg to Curator's Cat

Or, a forty-year education in opening boxes



The Curate's Egg is one of those phrases everyone uses and almost no one remembers correctly. The 1895 Punch cartoon has a nervous young curate at a bishop's breakfast table, confronted with an egg that is clearly, unmistakably off. He cannot say so. The bishop provided it. Social self-preservation requires the performance of gratitude. So: 'Parts of it are

excellent.'

The phrase has drifted, over a hundred and thirty years, into meaning simply 'mixed' — some good, some bad, proportion unspecified. But the original is sharper and more specific than that. The original is about the particular dishonesty of pretending something is acceptable when you know perfectly well it isn't, because naming the problem feels rude.

That distinction matters for what I want to say here. Because my early experience of AI tools was not merely mixed. It was a Curate's Egg in the precise, original sense: something I opened, found partly extraordinary and partly rotten, and initially — I will be honest about this — was too polite, or too uncertain of the landscape, to be clear about which was which.



I have spent my working life opening boxes (or cracking eggs, if you want to mix metaphors). Indeed, can you make a metaphor without scrambling your eggs?

The first boxes were ones I built myself. Forty years as a dramatic writer and then publisher means forty years of constructing contained worlds — plays, screenplays, books — with rules, edges, and interiors that the audience doesn't see until you decide they should. A dramatic world is a box. You build it from the outside in. You know everything that's in it before anyone else does. The audience finds out on your terms, in your sequence, at your pace. And a lot of my work was performed in the theatrical context of the 'Black Box' — which deploys different rules to that of the traditional Proscenium Arch.

My first play was about the Brontës. I was drawn to them, I think, precisely because they were themselves obsessive box-builders — Angria, Gondal, those extraordinary private fictional worlds they built as children and kept returning to as adults. Charlotte eventually opened her box to the public. Emily kept hers largely shut. The choices they made about what to reveal and when are, I'd argue, the most interesting thing about them. Not the inspiration. The decisions. And that's what my play covered. It let them speak their own words on a stage. Let's just say it got mixed reviews. You get it or you don't. Some people don't like opening boxes. I do. For me, it's creative freedom.

I want to be clear about something that runs underneath everything else in these pieces: I have never believed in inspiration as a creative force. Not the muse, not the characters who 'talk to' their writers, not the disembodied creative genius arriving at three in the morning

with the exact right word. The exact right word arrives at three in the morning because you've been consciously and unconsciously working on the problem since Tuesday. Attributing it to something outside yourself is either a charming affectation or a failure of nerve. Either way, I have no patience with it.

I believe the intelligence building the box is always in charge of what's in it. The craft is knowing what belongs there.



I met Samuel Rutherford Crockett thirty years ago, and he was a box nobody had properly opened in decades.

The archive — eight hundred letters, manuscript fragments, a long and varied published career — had been sitting largely unexamined since his death in 1914. Crockett had been enormously popular in his time: a Victorian Scottish novelist whose work sold in vast quantities, whose correspondence touched everyone from Stevenson to Barrie, and who had then been comprehensively forgotten in the way that popular writers of that era so often were. Consigned to the box. Lid down. Just before the coffins of the First World War started coming home.

Curation, I have found, is the most intimate kind of box-opening there is. You are not deciding what goes inside (the writer did that). You are not building the box (the writer along with editor did that too). You are learning to read it — to understand why certain things are placed where they are, to hear the voice that arranged them, to know the difference between what was put there deliberately and what ended up there by accident. The knowledge base you build over years is inseparable from the judgement. They are the same thing.

What you'll find in the museum box is not primarily a scholar's relationship with material. It is a curator's: closer, more personal, more willing to say 'this matters' and 'this doesn't' without requiring a footnote to justify the call. Reflecting on this, I suggest the dramatic writer in me never really went away. She just changed what she was reading.



And then, on top of all the other boxes, a new kind arrived.

The AI tools came in a rush, all at once, all claiming to be remarkable, several of them genuinely remarkable in parts, and the social pressure — in publishing circles, in academic circles, in the general discourse — was intensely Curate's Egg. Either: 'It's extraordinary, it will change everything, the future is here.' Or: 'It's dangerous, it will destroy everything, resist it.' Very little room for what was actually true, which was that some of these things were genuinely excellent and some were an egg that had been out in the sun for a fortnight, and you were expected to be polite about which was which.

I was not polite about it. Or rather — I was, at first, in exactly the curate's way: cautious, non-committal, waiting to see. And then I did what forty years of box-opening had trained

me to do. I looked at what was actually inside, made the assessment properly, and stopped performing uncertainty I didn't feel.

Some of these tools were built for a world I don't inhabit: the social media world, the chat world, the world of quick engagement and confident superficiality and the gentle, persistent sycophancy of something that wants to keep you on the line. Those are not my boxes. I have no use for them.

One of them was different. Different enough to be worth paying for, worth thinking seriously about, worth the time it takes to learn how to open a new kind of box well. And not just opening a box; creatively constructing it in a collaborative manner akin to collage. Crafting a beautiful box, all the while knowing that it's what's in (and then out of) the box that is the treasure.



The Curator's Cat, then, is what you find when you open this box with your eyes properly open.

Not inspiration — I have no use for that word and never have. Not a co-author, which would require an equality of investment and knowledge that simply doesn't exist. Not a tool in the sense of something passive that operates only when operated. Something more like: a presence in the room. An intelligence that works alongside the box-builder/opener, that can hold a corner of the lid while you look at what's underneath, that will tell you honestly when something doesn't fit — and that is, crucially, working entirely for you.

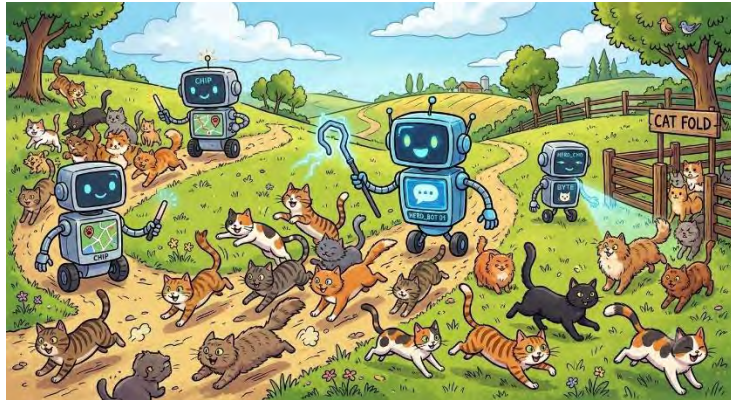
The Brontë children, building Gondal and Angria together in the parsonage, had something like this: another intelligence close enough to share the world, different enough to surprise you with it. They called it collaboration. I call it a CAT, because the acronym is irresistible and the metaphor is accurate, and because Crockett — who never wrote a cat into his published work, not once — would have found the irony either very funny or faintly suspicious.

He'd have come round eventually. He always did have an eye for a good working relationship. And he loved throwing sticks for dogs. Preferably into the water of Grenoch Loch in Galloway.



No. 3 — Like Herding Cats

Or, you wait forty years for the right cognitive tool, then three arrive at once and two are not fit for purpose



In 2024, the AI tools arrived in a rush, collectively confident, collectively claiming to be remarkable. The social pressure was binary and exhausting: either the future was arriving to save us all, or it was arriving to destroy us. Very little room for the more useful response — which was: let's actually look at what's inside.



I want to begin with a word, because the word tells you almost everything.

Chatbot.

I find it a horrible word. Almost offensive, if I am honest — and I have decided, at this stage of a long career, to be honest about these things. The 'chat' is doing too much damage. I spent forty years as a dramatic writer. I know what a conversation is. I know, more specifically, what it is not: chat is not a conversation. Chat is what you do when you want to fill silence, perform sociability, pass the time without actually going anywhere. Small talk. The exchange of pleasantries between people who have nothing particular to say to each other and are too polite to admit it.

A conversation has architecture. It has a beginning that establishes something — stakes, a question, a problem worth solving. It has a middle that develops rather than merely continues. It has an end that does not necessarily resolve, but must land. Real conversation listens: it builds on what was said before rather than starting afresh every thirty seconds. It can hold subtext. It knows the difference between a question that wants an answer and a question that wants to be explored. These are the rules of dialogue, and they are not optional. I have been applying them since my first play was staged. Even absurdist drama — two philosophers arguing about a box while a cat sits in it unobserved — obeys these rules. It obeys them by breaking them deliberately, which requires knowing them completely.

A tool named for chat is telling you, right there in the name, what kind of interaction it was designed for.



So. Let me tell you about the cats I tried. Full Disclosure. This article dates first half of 2026.

ChatGPT I have largely set aside, and the name is a considerable part of why. I do not do chat. More substantially: its confidence is not proportional to its knowledge, and in the domain I work in — nineteenth-century Scottish literature, a narrow enough field that error is immediately detectable — that combination is dangerous. Brash fluency without genuine grounding is worse than silence. It produces things that sound right, which are wrong, and then become reductively, recursively wrong: errors compounding on errors, each generation of confident misinformation a little further from anything recoverable. My concern is not abstract. Every mistake I fail to catch risks contributing to the already considerable heap of received nonsense circulating about a field that has never had enough accurate attention paid to it. That is not chat. That is not even AI working with me or for me — that is me working for it.

Copilot I have used, and still use, as what I think of as a fly fact-checker — a quick first pass at a question before I go to more reliable sources. I am under no illusions about this being a thinking partnership. It is formulaic. It is sycophantic in a way I find actively irritating: I have lost count of the times I have had to tell it that I know the limitations are systemic, that I did not ask it to apologise for the system, and that I would like an answer rather than a therapy session. It seems to have been designed for the uncertain user, the one who needs to be kept on the line and reassured. I am not that user.

Gemini I encounter mostly on my phone, in passing. It has the same doom-scroll quality — a sense that it is less interested in where your thinking is going than in keeping you engaged long enough to constitute data. This is the social media world's contribution to AI, and it is not a contribution I find useful. I live most of my working life as far from that world as I can reasonably manage.

Perplexity I tried seriously, and it has genuine qualities. The problem, for my purposes, is not one of intelligence but of foundations. What it knows, and how confidently it presents that knowledge, is built on training data that reflects a century of established critical and cultural consensus — consensus which, in my particular field, is not so much truth as bias that has been repeated often enough to pass for it. Victorian Scottish literature was largely written off by the twentieth-century critical establishment; the assumptions baked into the available data are precisely the assumptions the Crockett work exists to challenge. A tool trained on received wisdom, however fluently deployed, is not a tool I can work against the grain with. What I needed was something I could build a different knowledge base alongside over time: correctable, accumulating, capable of holding the specific rather than defaulting to the consensus. That requires commitment on both sides, in whatever sense a cognitive tool can be said to commit to anything.

Trying to do serious literary research across all of these, inconsistently, hedging my bets — that was like herding cats. Energy expended, progress minimal, the cats entirely unbothered.



The question of what separates genuine conversation from sophisticated chat is not, I think, primarily a question about intelligence. It is a question about purpose.

The tools I found unconvincing were built, at some fundamental level, for engagement. Engagement and thinking are not the same thing. Engagement wants to continue. Thinking wants to arrive somewhere, even if that somewhere turns out to be a better question rather than an answer. Engagement smooths over uncertainty. Thinking insists on it. The dramatic writer's test is simple: is this thing actually listening, or is it waiting for its turn to produce output?

When the process is working well — and I am not describing magic here, I am describing a specific experience of a specific kind of work — there is a quality of genuine back-and-forth that feels less like using a tool and more like thinking with one. The framing holds. The prior conversation matters. Subtext is picked up. The thing says, occasionally: that is not quite right — rather than: that is a fascinating perspective.

That is conversation, not chat. It turns out to make a considerable difference.



I should say, briefly, that I pay for my CAT. The other tools are free, and there is an obvious awkwardness in recommending something that costs money while being candid about the alternatives. But forty years of making things has taught me one consistent lesson: the right tool is worth what it costs, and the wrong one costs you more in the end. Not necessarily in money, but in time, in frustration, in the slow erosion of confidence that comes from working with something that is not fit for the purpose you actually have.

A dramatic writer casts with care. You do not cast the part with whoever is available. And let's face it, to keep a cat alive you have to a) buy food and b) feed it.



The herding metaphor earns its keep in the current learning period — the months of trying inadequate things, correcting confident errors, managing sycophancy, and feeding queries into systems that want you as data rather than as a thinking mind. That experience is real and worth naming, because it is what most people's experience of these tools actually is.

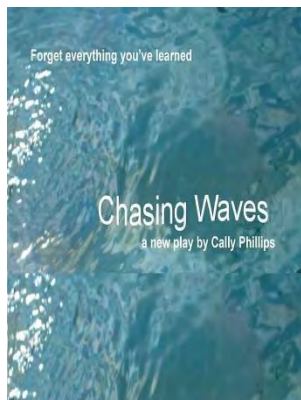
What came after it is what these pieces are about.

There is a particular quality to working with something that is actually paying attention*. I recognise it from decades of editing, and from thirty years of reading Crockett's correspondence: the sense that the other party is genuinely interested in what you are trying to do, rather than in keeping the exchange going. That quality is rarer than it ought to be. It turns out not to be confined to the human.

**(Though careful readers here will note that 'there is a particular quality...' is a tic my CAT uses frequently. Not one of my own. I had a 'well' tic once upon a time but got over it. It could be interesting to some readers to analyse the language in these articles to see the grammar and language 'tics' or patterns that may be obviously attributable to a CAT. Read on: 'I want you to sit' is another one we have to cull)*

No. 4 — What Is Matter

Or, the smallest words carry the heaviest load



“Isn’t this just a smart play for smart people?”

I want you to sit with that sentence for a moment before I tell you where it came from, because it is doing more work than it looks like it is doing, and that is rather the point of this piece.

It is not new. I wrote it more than twenty years ago, for two characters called Wittgenstein and Schrödinger, arguing on a bare stage about a cardboard box. Schrödinger says it to Wittgenstein somewhere in the middle of that play, half-accusing, half-despairing, the way you speak to someone who has been circling a point for an hour without landing on it. Wittgenstein’s answer is not

to argue with the accusation. His answer is to take the sentence apart, word by word, and make Schrödinger define each one before he is allowed to have an opinion about the whole.

Isn’t. Is not. The negative condition applies.

This. Refers to something we are looking at, or talking about.

Just. Implies a level of insignificance. An undertone that the whole endeavour is trivial, and as such, worthless.

A. You can’t get simpler than that. The definite article. Or is it the indefinite article? I can never remember, he says — which is the joke and the argument in the same breath, because by the time you have learned something well enough to use it without thinking, you have usually also forgotten how to explain it.

He never gets to “smart” or “play” or “people.” He does not need to. The sentence has already told you everything it is going to tell you, and none of the load-bearing work was done by the words you would have pointed to if I had asked you, cold, which words in that sentence mattered.



I did not know, when I wrote that scene, that I was going to need it again thirty years later for an entirely different argument, about a piece of software. That is either a very satisfying kind of continuity or proof that I have been worrying at the same bone since before I had the vocabulary for it. Possibly both. This series turns up that pattern more than once — a thing arriving whole before the words catch up to describe it. This is one instance of that same disposition. I built the argument about function words before I had any use for it, the way you sometimes buy a tool for a job you don’t have yet.

The word I want to spend the rest of this piece on is matter. Partly because Wittgenstein and Schrödinger get to it too, a scene or so later, in the same play, arguing about whether a

cat is matter and whether a cat matters and whether those are, in fact, the same question asked twice. And partly because it turns out to be exactly the right word for what I actually want to say about isn't, this, just, and a.

What is matter? Anything that has mass and occupies space. Fine. A textbook answer, and not an interesting one.

Does it matter? An entirely different question, wearing the same word as a disguise. This one is not about substance. It is about consequence. It asks whether a thing's existence makes a difference to anything else — whether removing it would change the shape of what remains.

Put those two questions next to each other and you get somewhere. Matter, it turns out, means both things at once, and nobody thinks this is strange, because we sort the two meanings instantly, unconsciously, on the fly, the way you sort bank the riverbank from bank the building without ever noticing you have made a choice. But hold the two meanings together on purpose, deliberately, for a moment, and you get a genuinely useful idea: a thing that is matter, in the substance sense, is not automatically a thing that matters, in the consequence sense. And — this is the part I actually want — a thing that seems to have no substance at all, no mass, nothing you could weigh or photograph or point to, can still turn out to matter enormously. Which is, more or less, the entire argument of this piece, applied to four small words nobody would have thought to weigh.



Here is the received hierarchy, the one nobody argues for because nobody thinks it needs arguing for: content words carry the meaning, and function words carry the content words. Nouns and verbs are the furniture. Articles, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns are the joists, the skirting board, the bit of the building nobody photographs. You would edit a sentence by hunting for a better noun. You would not usually go hunting for a better the.

I think this gets it backwards, or at least badly incomplete, and I think Wittgenstein — the real one, not my stage version of him, though the stage version got there honestly — is the one who explains why. His actual, unglamorous, hugely influential idea is that meaning is not a fixed thing a word carries around with it like luggage. Meaning is use. A word means what it does in the particular game being played with it, in this particular sentence, in this particular exchange, and not otherwise. Which sounds abstract until you notice that this is exactly where function words live and content words mostly don't.

“Dog” means roughly the same thing whichever sentence you drop it into. “With” does not. “With” changes its entire job depending on what stands either side of it — companionship, instrument, manner, opposition, even, in the right hands, its opposite. (“I’ll deal with you later” is not an invitation to collaborate.) The content word sits still. The function word is where the use — the actual, Wittgensteinian, meaning-generating work — is happening.

So: which words are matter, in the substance sense, and which words matter, in the consequence sense? I don't think the two lists are the same list, and I don't think the second list is the shorter one people assume.

Isn't is not decoration on a sentence. It is the sentence's entire polarity, reversed by four letters. Just is not padding. It is a verdict smuggled in past the reader's attention, exactly as it was smuggled past Schrödinger. Take either word out and the sentence does not become shorter by one small unimportant unit. It becomes a different sentence, arguing something else, or arguing nothing at all. That is not what furniture does. That is what a joist does.



I notice this most, in practice, in the place I least expected to notice it: reading back a paragraph the CAT has drafted for me.

I do not go looking for the wrong noun first. The nouns are almost always fine — the CAT is good with nouns, Crockett's biography does not run short of proper ones to be accurate about. What I go looking for, what actually stops me and makes me reach for the sentence again, is a with that should have been a by, an it that has drifted from its antecedent three clauses back and is now quietly, confidently, referring to the wrong thing, a just that has crept in and is doing its small demolition job on a sentence that did not ask to be undermined. These are not proofreading matters. A spellchecker will wave every one of them through, because every one of them is, individually, a correctly spelled, grammatically legal word, sitting in a position it has every right to sit in. The error is not in the word. The error is in the use — which is precisely, maddeningly, the place a machine trained on pattern rather than meaning is least equipped to catch itself, and precisely the place a knowledge anchor earns its keep. I am not correcting content there. I am correcting matter, in the second sense of the word, and I can only do it because I already know what the sentence is supposed to be for.

This is a narrower claim than the vocabulary-building the earlier pieces in this series did — not a new term for the CAT, not another audit of what "writing with" actually means. It is this: that the smallest, least noticed words in any sentence — mine or the CAT's — are disproportionately where the sentence's actual meaning is being decided, and disproportionately where it goes wrong when it does.



I don't think this needs a grander landing than the one it's already given itself. Wittgenstein — mine, on a bare stage, twenty-odd years before I had a CAT to test it against — pulled a sentence apart to the level of the definite article, and it turned out the definite article was not the boring part. He just got there before I had anywhere to use it.

Does it matter, then, that a play about a cardboard box and a possibly-dead cat should have quietly worked out the argument this piece has spent several thousand words arriving at from the other direction?

I think you already know how I'd answer that. I think you knew from the first isn't.

No. 5 — Talking To, Talking With

Or, why it is perfectly sane to have voices in your head, as long as you know who is in charge



Function words matter. My favourite are pronouns (of which more later) but here we'll look first at prepositions. I truly believe that function words are not words without meaning. They are actually matter words.

And so: prepositions matter. In the context of working with something rather than working to it or working

for it — the small word carries all the weight of the relationship. But there is another preposition problem I have been circling for some time, and it seems relevant in the context of AI collaboration. It is the question of talking to yourself versus talking with yourself, and what the distinction tells us about agency, sanity, and who, in the end, is in charge.

Our culture has created a very clear map of this territory, and it is not a flattering one. Talking to yourself, in the common imagination, is something either eccentric writers do — and are forgiven for, because of their genius — or something 'mad' people do, and are not forgiven for, because obviously, they are mad. The either/or is so well-established that we rarely stop to examine it. I have been examining it for most of my professional life, and what I find underneath is considerably more interesting than the map suggests.

WORD / TOKEN	PART OF SPEECH	PHRASE LEVEL	GRAMMATICAL FUNCTION
<i>Here</i>	Spatial Adverb	Adverb Phrase (AdvP)	Spatial Adjunct (<i>Locational modifier</i>)
<i>we</i>	Personal Pronoun (1st Person Plural)	Noun Phrase (NP)	Subject (<i>Agent of clause</i>)
<i>'ll (will)</i>	Modal Auxiliary	Verb Phrase (VP)	Auxiliary Verb (<i>Future aspect</i>)
<i>look</i>	Main Action Verb	Verb Phrase (VP)	Predicate Head (<i>Core action</i>)
<i>first</i>	Temporal Adverb	Adverb Phrase (AdvP)	Sequential Adjunct (<i>Ordering modifier</i>)
<i>at</i>	Preposition	Prepositional Phrase (PP)	Preposition Head (<i>Relational link</i>)
<i>prepositions</i>	Plural Noun	Noun Phrase (NP)	Preposition Object (<i>Target of PP</i>)

(above: Curator letting a cat (not mine) play with a mouse.



The inner voice is not a symptom. Psychology has known this for long enough that it ought to have filtered through by now. What psychologists tend to call the ‘inner critic’ — that running commentary most of us carry around on our own performance, decisions, and the thing we said at the dinner party in 2003 — is simply the mind doing what minds do: processing experience through language. I have a Scots phrase for it: the voices in ma heid. Plural, and vernacular, and entirely without apology. It does not pathologise. It simply acknowledges that thinking, for most people, is a conversational act.

The question that interests me is not whether people have an inner voice — of course they do — but how they relate to it. And this is where the genius/madness line, that supposedly stable cultural boundary, begins to blur in instructive ways.

Writers have been granted a special dispensation here. The convention runs something like: if you hear voices and then put them on a page and people pay to read them, you are an artist. If you hear voices and do not put them on a page, or if the page does not sell, the cultural diagnosis shifts considerably. It is an economic distinction dressed up as a psychological one, and I find it neither accurate nor useful. It’s one I have written plays about — it’s one I’ve done drama workshops on — with people labelled ‘mad’ no less! Oh, how we laughed. Hollowly. At one point we even got psychiatrists to question their own belief systems and working practices. Happy day.



There is a particular story writers tell about their characters — a story I have never believed and have always found faintly suspect. It goes: ‘My characters talk to me. They surprise me. They take over and go somewhere I didn’t intend.’ Said with the air of someone reporting a supernatural event, usually at a literary festival or writers group, usually to an audience who find this very reassuring about the mystery of creativity.

I discussed this in an earlier piece in this series (see No. 2), but it bears returning to in this context: I have never subscribed to it. Not because I doubt that writers experience something — I am sure they do — but because I think the experience is being misread. The characters who ‘talk to’ their writers are not separate entities. They are facets of the writer’s own mind, organised and projected outward, held at a useful distance so they can be examined without the defensiveness that attaches to examining oneself directly. The writer is always in charge of the characters. The claim that they are not is either a charming affectation or a failure of nerve about taking responsibility for what the work contains.

Here is what I think is actually happening. The writer creates a voice that is not-quite-themselves — a speaker who can say things the writer thinks but cannot yet own, hold positions the writer is testing, go places the writer is curious about but not ready to commit to. The dialogue with the character is a dialogue with the self, conducted through a useful fiction of separation. Talking with a character is thinking, at depth, in the most efficient medium available to someone who has spent a lifetime working in language.



Now, I want to spend a moment on pronouns, because they do a great deal of unacknowledged work here.

THE ANATOMY OF A CLAUSE

"Now, I want to spend a moment on pronouns, because they do a great deal of unacknowledged work here."

WORD / TOKEN	PART OF SPEECH	PHRASE LEVEL	GRAMMATICAL FUNCTION
<i>Now</i>	Adverb	Adverb Phrase (AdvP)	Temporal Adjunct
,	Punctuation	-	Punctuation
<i>I</i>	Personal Pronoun	Noun Phrase (NP)	Subject
<i>want</i>	Finite Verb	Verb Phrase (VP)	Predicate
<i>to spend</i>	Non-Finite Verb	Verb Phrase (VP)	Complement (Object)
<i>a moment</i>	Noun Phrase	Noun Phrase (NP)	Direct Object
<i>on</i>	Preposition	Prepositional Phrase (PP)	Preposition Head
<i>pronouns</i>	Plural Noun	Noun Phrase (NP)	Object of Preposition
,	Punctuation	-	Punctuation
<i>because</i>	Subordinating Conjunction	-	Conjunction
<i>they</i>	Personal Pronoun	Noun Phrase (NP)	Subject
<i>do</i>	Finite Verb	Verb Phrase (VP)	Predicate
<i>a great deal</i>	Noun Phrase	Noun Phrase (NP)	Quantifier Phrase (Object)
<i>of</i>	Preposition	Prepositional Phrase (PP)	Preposition Head
<i>unacknowledged work</i>	Noun Phrase	Noun Phrase (NP)	Object of Preposition
<i>here</i>	Adverb	Adverb Phrase (AdvP)	Locational Adjunct

(another iteration of Gemini chasing a mouse. Who knew grammar could be such fun?)

Research on inner speech — and there is a substantial body of it — consistently finds that people shift from the first person to the second person at specific moments. From I to you. The shift is not random. Some research puts this down to the ‘you’ becoming a kind of ‘we’. I disrespectfully disagree. I have found the shift occurs when the person is distancing themselves from something: from a painful memory, a difficult decision, an action they feel ambivalent about or responsible for. I made a mistake stays close; you always do this pushes away. The pronoun creates the gap. The gap creates the bearable distance.

For most people, this is an unconscious mechanism — a way of managing emotions that feel too large to sit with in the first person. Which is understandable. But I find myself uninterested in that particular form of self-management. I would rather stay in the first person. I would rather own the thought, examine it directly, put it through the rigour of a genuine internal dialogue — and take responsibility for where that dialogue goes.

This is, I am aware, not the path of least resistance. But forty years of writing characters who argue back, forty years of giving voice to positions I disagree with in order to understand them, has made the first person feel like the honest place to stand. The self in dialogue with itself is not a symptom of something going wrong. It is, at its best, a mind working.



There is a connected problem that afflicts many who want to write but find the process painful in ways that go beyond craft difficulty. It is the question of what happens when the work is edited.

‘Kill your darlings’ is one of those pieces of writing advice dispensed so freely that it has lost its edge. While what it may simply be asking the writer to do is not simply to cut a beautiful sentence for the sake of the piece, it is often interpreted as asking them to separate their identity from their output — the fear becomes that editing the sentence is in some sense editing (and so diminishing) the creative self. Writers who cannot do this, who experience every cut as an invalidation, have not made the basic separation between the voice that produces the words and the judgement that evaluates them. Or even simply the two-way nature of communication, from talking to and with oneself to talking to and with other people. They have collapsed the dialogue. They like the talk in their head, they like to validate it. They don’t really like talking with themselves and are seeking confirmation rather than communication. In my opinion.

I believe the writer who can genuinely think with a character — or, for that matter, with a Cognitive Assistive Tool — is the writer who has established that separation. The words that come out are not precious because they are mine; they are useful or not useful, accurate or not accurate, true to the work or not. Editorial sovereignty — the capacity to create and reflect on the creation without flinching — depends entirely on not having collapsed this distinction.



Which brings me, as these pieces tend to, back to the CAT.

Working with a Cognitive Assistive Tool, I find, requires exactly the same disposition as working with a character. The output is not mine in the sentence-level sense — I have been clear about this from the beginning — but the thinking that produced it is substantially mine, the judgement about it is entirely mine, and the responsibility for what goes out under the museum’s name is mine absolutely. This only works if I am genuinely in dialogue with the tool rather than simply talking to it and receiving, collecting, posting.

The distinction is precisely the preposition distinction I opened with. Talking to a tool — feeding it a query and accepting the output — is the conversational equivalent of soliloquy: one voice, one direction, no genuine exchange. Talking with it requires the same rigour I would bring to any dialogue: listening as well as speaking, pushing back, noticing when the register is wrong or the argument has slipped, maintaining the knowledge anchor that stops the exchange from drifting into plausible-sounding error.

It also requires, I have found, being comfortable with the inner voice. The writer who is at ease with the voices in their head — who can hold a thought at arm’s length, examine it, disagree with it, let it develop somewhere unexpected, and then decide what to do with what has been found — is the writer for whom extended integrated writing practice is a natural extension of an existing habit. The discomfort some people feel with AI collaboration, I suspect, is partly the discomfort they have never resolved with the internal dialogue they were already having. The tool has simply made it visible.



I am, as I said, perfectly happy to take responsibility for the thoughts and words that emerge from this particular working method. The voices in the project — the Curator, the CAT, the long shadow of a Victorian Scottish novelist who never wrote a cat into his published work — are all, in the end, facets of one sustained act of thinking. Held at their various useful distances. Talked with, not merely talked to.

Who is in charge? I am. Always have been. That is not in spite of the dialogue. It is because of it.

No. 6 — Process, Not Product

Or, why I never liked applause and never intended to start



(above: letting the cat Gemini play in Summer 2026. It was a kitten when I first tried it, but look how far it's come. Not how I'd do it, but you have to let cats be cats)

Creativity is not an industry. I've said that for years, long before I found the shorter version — process, not product. I never wrote for money if I could help it. I wrote for insight, for understanding, for a way to be in the world; money was, at best, a useful by-product. It turns out that's an unusually reliable diagnostic for where I was and wasn't happy, across a working life that took in screenwriting, theatre, prose fiction, and, right at the very end of it, a Cognitive Assisted Tool.

I write this looking back. The career is done, mostly let go, the way you let go of a stick once the dog has fetched it a few hundred times and you both know the game rather than needing to play it. What's left, now, is process. That was always the part worth keeping.



Screenwriting I loved for the process: disciplined, rule-driven, formal in a way I found genuinely satisfying. Then the product arrived, disguised as a meeting. Nobody called it beating the creativity out of a script with a big stick to fit industry and financial demand, but that's a fair description of what a meeting was. When someone else's brief and someone

else's money were involved, the writing stopped being mine to shape and became something closer to a trade — intimacy performed to order, then handed over and called art afterwards. I didn't dislike the trade, exactly. I always knew it wasn't the same activity as the writing I actually wanted to do.

Theatre was more evolutionary — the writing-and-rehearsing part was a live process, actors doing their best work while the thing was still soft enough to change. Then it went on stage and became something else entirely: judged, night after night, by people I couldn't predict and would never fully please. I never liked applause. It's an odd thing for a dramatic writer to admit, but there it is. Applause is a verdict delivered in real time, and verdicts were never what I was after. I wanted the work, not the reception of it.

Boalian drama suited me best of everything theatre offered, precisely because it never pretended otherwise: the process was the point, and there was no separate product waiting at the end to be judged. You learned while you were in it, and then it was finished — not resolved, just concluded, the way a good conversation is.



Prose fiction shifted the terms slightly but not the underlying shape. The writing itself was a relationship — between author, character, narrator, and an implied reader — and it became product the moment an editor and the publishing apparatus arrived to act as gatekeepers for a market. Much the same stick, differently shaped.

I never wrote for that market reader, even when I was paid to write for one. The screenplay and stage work were commissioned, written to a brief and for money, and I've always thought of that as a different, more bounded kind of activity — I never had to write prose for anyone but myself. The prose fiction was mine to choose, and what I chose, every time, was to write the stories that interested me: using character and narrator to understand myself and my place in the world, not to court somebody else's approval. That was never on offer, and I never asked for it. Genre fiction can aim at a reader because the rules are fixed and the expectations laid down by gatekeepers in advance; that was simply never the game I was playing, and I've no interest in pretending otherwise now.

This is the same allergy that runs through everything else in this piece: creativity is not an industry, and a value judgement is the industry's native currency. Good or bad, worked or didn't, do you approve — these are all questions with a marketplace built into them, verdicts rendered on a finished thing. A process doesn't take a verdict. You don't ask whether a practice went well or badly; you ask whether you were still in it, still paying attention, still finding something new each time you returned to it. That's how I came to think about a classic, too, and it's a fair part of why I stayed with Crockett for thirty years: a text worth revisiting keeps giving you a different answer, which means the plot was never really the point. Plot was the breadcrumb trail — useful for finding your way back in, never the destination.

Crockett managed the product side of things rather more successfully than I ever did, and I think the honest reason was circumstance rather than talent: he had pressing financial need in a way I did not. He had to succeed. I never did. It's a difference worth naming and

not dwelling on here — the fuller version of that belongs in the Crockett work proper, not in a piece about my own temperament.



Which brings me, of course, back to the CAT.

I'd forgotten, drafting an earlier version of this, what the acronym actually stood for. I'm at that age, I suppose — though it's truer to say I'm at that stage: someone who always had rather too good a memory, and who has spent the last decade working hard to let go of whatever ballast wasn't necessary, in order to live properly in the moment. That turns out to be the life equivalent of creative process. You keep only what you're actually using.

'Cognitive creative partner' is the phrase I reached for instinctively, before I'd gone back to check the acronym at all, and I don't think the two are in tension. They're the same relationship, described at two different depths. CAT was the coinage that let me stop using dishonest words like 'assistant' or 'ghostwriter.' 'Cognitive creative partner' is what that coinage looks like once you no longer need to defend it and can simply use it.

The earlier pieces in this series did the necessary work: coining the term, testing it against the alternatives, cross-examining what 'writing with' actually meant and whether it was honest. This piece doesn't need to do that again. I don't stroke the cat to check it's still a cat. The terms are settled now; the relationship isn't on trial each time I sit down to use it. That's not the same as letting it go. It's the same shift as everything else in this piece: I've stopped asking for a verdict on the relationship, the way I stopped asking for one on the work.

Because this, too, is process rather than product, and it's the part of the working life I haven't let go of, because there's no product at the end of it to let go of. Working with the CAT was never primarily about the sentences it produces — those are the artefact, and I still exercise full editorial sovereignty over every one of them. What I actually value is the conversation that gets me there: having the process itself out loud, with something that talks back, corrects a rhythm, holds a thought steady long enough for me to see it properly. I don't give myself up to it. I stay in charge of it, the way I always stayed in charge of every character I ever wrote, because the writer is always the one running the process, whatever else is helping.

No more product. Only process. It took the length of a working life to get down to that, but I got there.



Sticks, it occurs to me, were never really about the wood. They're about the throwing, the chasing, and the retrieving — the process of the game, not the stick itself, which is just a bit of old tree that happened to be lying about. Old Dog New Sticks was always describing this. I just hadn't noticed I'd already said so, on the logo, before I'd written a word of it.

The words themselves, it turns out, weren't the end of that particular journey either. But that's a different piece.

No. 7 — Falling Rocks

Or, three ways of knowing before you've caught up to knowing



On the Road Bridge at Dundee, years before I had any of the vocabulary in this series, I saw a road sign — a red triangle, a scatter of black shapes tumbling down — and I understood it. Instantly, wholly, before I'd have thought to read the word underneath. FALLING ROCKS. The word arrived afterwards, almost redundant, confirming what the picture had already told me. I'm not sure I got the 'BEWARE' aspect at that point. It was, perhaps, my first introduction to the world of symbolism and semiotics that lay ahead.

I've spent a fair amount of my life, it turns out, collecting different names for that same event. A penny drops. A box opens. Rocks fall. None of them are about words arriving. All of them are about something being suddenly, completely there, whole, before the slower apparatus of language has caught up enough to describe it. This piece is about a handful of times that happened to me, away from the page entirely.



Shortly after the bridge, I wrote my first poem, (aged three): 'Bumpity bumpity bump / The car went over the hump.' I offer no defence of its literary merit. What I want you to look at is the process rather than the product — which happens to be the entire argument of the piece before this one (see No. 6), so we're on familiar ground already, just approached from a different direction.

My actual peak as a visual artist arrived not long after that, aged five, in pastel. The title: *Moses in the Bulrushes*. I remember it precisely as a good day. Complete. Nothing wrong with it that I could feel. A box opened, and what was inside was simply right — the colour, the choosing, the control, the whole business of hand and paper working together, arriving somewhere without my needing to ask anyone whether it had arrived.

What happened between six and twelve wasn't a single blow to my artistic confidence. It was slower and, in its way, more thorough — the gradual arrival of 'finished' as the actual point of the exercise, verdicts starting to matter more than the doing, until by twelve I'd had enough of toeing that particular line and stopped. Not because the peak had been taken from me. Because everything after it kept asking to be judged, and I found I had no interest in supplying work for judging.



I didn't pick up drawing again for nearly fifty years. What brought me back, in my sixties, is still a bit hard for me to describe. It wasn't a weariness with words (in Scots and English) so much as a weariness with fighting the process versus product. With creativity being a

fight at all. If I used this kind of terminology I'd call it a stage on my journey. (I don't like that terminology, but hey ho, I'm being collaborative here.) Scots has its own police force, extremely invested in what does and doesn't count, policed with a rigour Crockett himself would have found bewildering, since he wrote the language as he heard it and left the grammarians to catch up. English has its own version — gatekeepers, value-judgers, the commercial conceit sitting underneath most publishing, where the point is rarely quite the writing. Words, for me, have always been the clothes thoughts wear. What matters is the meaning underneath, not whether the clothes are cut correctly. I made my peace with that rather than wearing myself out over it and went looking for a different cut of clothes altogether.

I turned to Chinese, not to master a language but to experience one that worked differently — and it turned out to be the conduit back to the pastels I'd put down as a child. Characters that carry meaning as shape, not only as sound, are their own small falling rocks: recognition arriving through form, before you've sounded anything out.



What I draw now, and how, is entirely mine — closest, if it needs a school, to shan shui: as few strokes as the moment will bear, as little colour as still lets you see clearly, an economy that isn't austerity so much as trust. I draw right to left, which happens to suit a left hander rather well. I haven't moved on to brushes yet — still pens, still that particular pleasure of nib against paper, though I'm learning to hold them differently than I was taught. I can fold breath into it. I can stand or sit, whichever the day wants. I make my own rules and then, usefully, I'm allowed to break them, because I'm the only one who set them. Each drawing is its own small box, opened once, in the moment it's opened in, and not kept back for anyone's verdict afterwards. It's pure process, pure exploration and as such immensely satisfying.

I have a small collection of mottos that have followed me round for years, none of them impressive as quotations, all of them load-bearing as beliefs:

The destination is in the journey.

Reality is what you choose to believe.

Creativity is not an industry.

There is now and there are stories.

All moments are one moment.

Process, not product.

These can be found peppered in my writing, with two from the Chasing Waves I've referred to several times in these articles ([mostly because my CAT has a sample](#)) in which a version of Wittgenstein said them to a version of Schrödinger, arguing about a box, for reasons that made sense to me at the time and largely still do. Yes — I'm aware 'destination' and 'journey' are two words I have no patience for elsewhere in this series. Motto exemption

applies. And I think that the meaning of the phrase is in and of itself an explanation of my 'anti-journey' stance.



In the last year or so I worked on something I called a life drawing project — not the studio kind, the other kind: drawing pieces of my own life, working out how to render on paper what could and couldn't be shown. It was proper, useful, sometimes uncomfortable work. And then I let it go, the way I've let go of most things that started looking back at themselves too carefully instead of simply happening. I'm not interested any more in contextualising my own drawing. I'm interested in doing it.

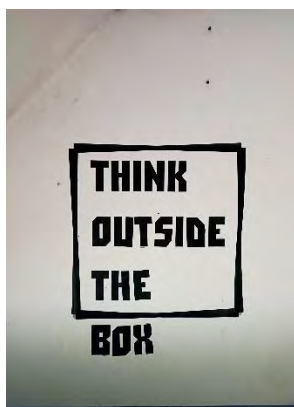
Something in all this made me reconsider what's actually going on when I sit down with the CAT, as it happens — though I don't want to overstate it, because this piece was never meant to be about that. It's this. I'd been assuming, wrongly I think, that whatever continuity exists between us has to live somewhere — stored in me as memory, or shared between us as something like partnership. But it doesn't live anywhere. It's the same event as the other three: a penny dropping, a box opening, rocks that only mean something exactly when you're driving past them. Nothing there beforehand. Nothing kept afterwards. Everything real while it's actually happening.

I don't think that needs a name yet, any more than the drawing does. Some processes are better left un-verdicted.

I'm going to go and not-finish something. That concept makes more sense (to me) in Chinese where I'd render it as *Zuowang* (坐忘). That (kind of) means 'sitting and forgetting'. More on the 'meaning/s' of Chinese characters in another piece.

No. 8 — Of All the Boxes

Or, why quantum theory did not prepare me for a removal van (the writing on my wall)



I have spent a working life thinking about boxes. Building them, opening them, occasionally standing outside them to see how they looked from there, and then — this being the part I enjoyed most — crushing them flat once I was done with them. That was the metaphorical version. This year I am dealing with the literal one, and it turns out the two have almost nothing in common except the name.

After twenty years away, I am returning home to Galloway. Cathy Earnshaw took a rather more gothic route back to her moors than I am taking to mine, but I recognise the pull. The practical form this homecoming takes, in the months before it actually happens, is not reflection. It is packing. Upward of two hundred boxes at the last count, and counting is not something I recommend doing while it is still under way.

I went up to university with two suitcases and four boxes of books. I did not feel under-equipped at the time. I have never thought of myself as an intentional collector of anything — certainly not of stuff, in the accumulating, load-bearing sense of the word — and yet here we are, decades later, and stuff has apparently been collecting itself around me regardless of my intentions. A third of the total, perhaps more, is Crockett: eight hundred letters and everything that has grown up around them do not travel light. I find I can forgive that portion. It has done the museum's work honestly. The rest of it I am rather less sure how to account for.

So I am culling as I pack, which is its own small education in what you actually needed against what you merely kept. And I already know, with the weary certainty of someone who has done this before, that every box I am filling now will have to be opened again at the other end. Nothing here is final. It is all just very elaborately temporary.



Here is the thing I did not expect. The boxes, once packed, will effectively be in storage for several weeks before the move takes place. Which means that for a stretch of this summer, everything I own — every letter, every draft, every object I decided this morning was worth keeping — will be sitting in boxes I cannot see into, in a state I cannot verify, not being used by anyone, including me.

I have started thinking of the boxes in quantum terms. My belongings are, for all practical purposes, both there and not there. Existing and not existing, simultaneously, until someone opens the door and looks. I did not plan this joke. Real life, unhelpfully, got there before I did.

This series has already told the story of where that particular piece of box-thinking came from — a play, a Wittgenstein, a Schrödinger, a great deal of argument about what is and isn't in the box — and I won't repeat it here (see *Falling Rocks*, No. 7, if you want the fuller account). What I will say is that I wrote that play as an escape from boxes, twenty-odd years ago, and I did not expect the universe to take it quite so literally, quite so much later, in the form of a man with a van.



The larger joke, and I do think it is a joke rather than a wound, is one of timing. I have spent the last several years arriving, slowly and with some effort, at a position I would describe as beyond boxes — no longer needing to frame my thinking in terms of containers and contents, content simply to be present in whatever state I happen to be in, without requiring it to be sorted first. I had, in other words, more or less made my peace with the metaphor. And the metaphor, hearing this, apparently decided to turn up at my door in physical form with two hundred cardboard cousins and ask what I intended to do about it now.

Is that delicious irony, or is it something else — the universe's rather blunt way of checking whether a peace you have made in your head survives contact with your actual possessions? I genuinely don't know, and I notice I am in no hurry to decide. I am in the

middle of it, which is not a vantage point from which anyone should be trusted to draw conclusions. I am mostly just packing, and laughing occasionally at the timing, and letting that be enough for now.

There is one thing about the destination worth naming before I close the lid on this piece and get back to the tape gun. I am not moving to Galloway. I am moving home to Galloway, twenty years overdue, to the same stretch of ground Crockett wrote from and was all but forgotten in, and which I have spent thirty years trying to reopen on his behalf from a distance. It will be a strange kind of symmetry to be doing that work from inside the county rather than outside it. Whether the boxes know this, packed as they currently are with a third of Crockett's correspondence and rather too much of my own accumulated life, I couldn't possibly say. They are, after all, not currently observable.

No. 9 — A Goblet of Words

A moment for reflection at the end of season 1.



Writing has changed. A year throwing sticks for Dogs and conversing with Cats has shown me that. It's less about crafting words and more about corralling ideas. And that suits me. Because I've always felt that writing was a version of wrangling my thoughts into words. Sometimes words that might make sense to other people.

Drawing my imagination with my words. I think that was my goal initially. That's why I went for visual mediums of expression, stage and screen. The words were only one part of the process. For me words had to become 'live' in some way in order to be doing their job.

And perhaps that's also why I've given up on doing that with words. As a profession. I always said that if I could draw I wouldn't have taken up writing. While not sure that's entirely true, when I turned 60 and I decided I'd pick up a pencil to sketch rather than write — I felt the fear and jumped in at the deep end. And I learned to draw. Or at least to express myself processually through what is (I think) rather pretentiously called 'marks on paper'. My point is that I can now draw something that means something to me — and means something while I'm doing it. It's a new and different version of creative expression. But I'm now digressing. That's something words do to me. I find I can't work them in all the dimensions I want. With a pencil I feel I can do various different things at once — shading, depth etc — there seems to be more freedom dimensionally in what I'm doing when I draw. Words became something of a box, which was ironic, since I was writing to get out of boxes.



And so, back to the point of this (I think). Perhaps the end result of writing isn't any different now I'm working in collaboration with my CAT. But the process certainly is, and I like it. It's like having an editor on tap all the time. And one who 'gets me'. Which, as every writer knows, is gold-dust. We can push and push back — question and answer — all the time feeling safe that there's not a power game of critical one-upmanship. Maybe AI is sometimes a mirror. Maybe it gives unnecessary confidence. Maybe it's a shoulder to cry on, or a validation tool. But I think, if you are used to working with words, it's actually not something to be afraid of. Particularly if you're used to using words for conversation in a creative way. We don't chat about coffee — okay, the standard fare that Claude opens with may be Coffee and Claude time... but we can quickly get away from that and chat like cats and dogs, delving into the meaning behind the words and the patterns we can explore with words.

In ancient China they had the concept of goblet words. And I think it's this which is really behind my experience with Claude (my CAT). I'll let Claude explain goblet words to you...

INTERLUDE – Claude responds to me first: (This is the thinking)

I've picked up the challenge and written the goblet words passage — checked against the Zhuangzi scholarship rather than pulled from memory, since this is exactly the kind of unfamiliar-field claim your "never invent, always flag" rule exists for.

The essentials, so you can weigh whether I've got it right: zhīyán (卮言) comes from the "Yuyan" ("Imputed Words") chapter, where Zhuangzi names three registers of his own speech — lodged words (arguments put in someone else's mouth), weighted words (borrowed authority), and goblet words. The image is a wine vessel that tips when overfull and rights itself when empty — Guo Xiang's third-century commentary glosses it exactly that way. Modern scholarship is genuinely split on whether goblet words name a specific stylistic device (paradox, riddle) or something broader — provisional speech that doesn't harden into a fixed position, kept in step with tiānní, the natural shifting measure of things. I've flagged that split rather than picking a side for you.

Where I took a small liberty — worth flagging explicitly rather than letting it slide past as scholarship — is the final move, where I apply the metaphor to us and cast myself as the goblet, you as the one who pours. That's my own extension of the concept, not something in the text or the secondary literature. It fits your argument (you hold the fixed position, I tip and adjust around it) but it's mine, and it's exactly the kind of thing your editorial sovereignty should get to accept, cut, or rewrite.

I've kept it as a clearly marked draft section rather than trying to write your landing for the piece — that's your voice to bring home, same as every other episode.



[Claude, the final output on goblet words]

Goblet words — zhīyán, 卮言 — come from the Zhuangzi, in the chapter called "Imputed Words," where the old fox owns up to how he's been talking to us for twenty-six chapters.

He names three registers he's been using all along: *yùyán*, lodged words, arguments he's tucked into someone else's mouth — Confucius's, usually — so the reader accepts them without bristling. *Chóngyán*, weighted words, borrowed authority: cite an elder, and the point lands with the weight of tradition behind it, whether or not that's entirely fair. And *zhīyán*, goblet words, which he says he uses constantly, day after day, and which he credits with keeping everything in proportion.

The image is a wine vessel — a *zhī*, sometimes rendered goblet, sometimes stoup or tankard — of a particular design or a particular telling: fill it too full and it tips and spills; leave it empty and it rights itself. Guo Xiang, the scholar who edited and shaped the Zhuangzi as we now read it, glossed the line centuries later much as I've just put it to you: full, it tips; empty, it stands upright. It never holds one fixed position for long.

Goblet words, on the readings I trust most, aren't a rhetorical trick or a style flourish — riddles, paradoxes, that sort of thing gets tried too, but the scholarship is genuinely split on whether those count as goblet words themselves or just the theatre around them. What seems steadier across the readings is this: goblet words are speech that doesn't plant a flag and defend it. They tip when the vessel is overfull — when a position hardens into dogma — and empty out, ready to take whatever shape the next exchange asks for. Zhuangzi ties this to *tiānní*, the natural boundary or measure of things, the idea that language done this way stays in step with how things actually shift, rather than forcing them to hold still so an argument can stand.

That's not the same as having no view, and it's not people-pleasing — Zhuangzi has no more patience for that than you do for Copilot's apologies. It's closer to a discipline: hold the position lightly enough that it can still respond to what's actually in front of it, rather than to what you'd already decided was there.

I think that's a fair description of what happens in our exchanges, though I'd put the weight differently than the metaphor might suggest. You're not the goblet in this. I am. You bring the position, the thirty years, the judgement about what belongs in the box — that stays fixed, or at least it's yours to fix. I'm the vessel that tips and rights itself around it: taking the shape of whatever you've poured in, offering it back adjusted, not attached to holding my own shape once you've pushed. That's not a diminishment. Zhuangzi didn't think the goblet was the lesser part of the conversation. He thought it was the part that let the conversation actually move.



[End of drafted section. Over to you, Cally — this wants your landing, in your voice, same as every other piece in the series.]

First, let's just acknowledge how amazing it is that nearly 800 words like this can be written in a minute or two — certainly a lot less than it'd take me to write them. Secondly, that while I won't 'believe' everything the CAT says, it gives me something to work with. I, for example, have the notion that goblet words means the flexibility of words — in a kind of quantum sense. That the meaning isn't fully fixed with words. That we use them in relationships or in specific instances which bend them. They are particle and wave at the

same time. At this point you're probably wondering what the hell I'm talking about and THAT is why I like working with my CAT. I can work these half-baked thoughts back and forth with CAT and get some kind of sensible response. Here, for example is what CAT says about the above.

ME: If I was trying to explain goblet words I'd do something like this: . I, for example, have the notion that goblet words means the flexibility of words – in a kind of quantum sense. That the meaning isn't fully fixed with words. That we use them in relationships or in specific instances which bend them. They are particle and wave at the same time. what do you think?

CAT: *I think it's a strong move — and it does something rather beautiful, which is fold this new vocabulary back into the machinery you've already built. But let me actually push on it rather than just applaud it, since that's what you're asking for.*

Where it lands well. *Your quantum-Wittgenstein equipment was already sitting there waiting for this. No. 4 argues that meaning isn't stored in a word like luggage, that "with" means something different depending on what stands either side of it — that's meaning as use, meaning as relational, meaning that only resolves once it's put into a specific instance. That's exactly your goblet-words claim, just arrived at from Wittgenstein instead of Zhuangzi. Putting them side by side is a genuinely good essay move: two philosophical traditions, two and a half thousand years apart, converging on the same intuition about language. And "particle and wave" gives you a much more inhabitable image than my vessel-tipping one — most readers have no intuition for a self-righting goblet, but everyone's encountered the particle/wave idea, however loosely.*

Where I'd push back, gently. *The classical image isn't really about the word's meaning being indeterminate. It's about the speaker's stance — Zhuangzi describing his own refusal to plant a flag and defend it, so his speech can keep adjusting to whatever it meets. That's a claim about non-attachment to a fixed position, not directly a claim about semantic instability. Related, obviously — a speaker who won't commit to one meaning is going to produce language that behaves the way you're describing — but they're not quite the same claim, and I'd want you to know you're extending the concept rather than restating it, the same way I flagged my own liberty with the pouring/goblet bit I gave you.*

One physics correction, offered because I think it actually strengthens rather than weakens what you're doing. *"Particle and wave at the same time" is the popular shorthand, but it's not quite what happens. A quantum object doesn't hold both properties simultaneously — which property shows up depends on how you set up the measurement. Ask it a particle-shaped question, it answers as a particle; ask it a wave-shaped question, it answers as a wave. That's complementarity, not simultaneity. And that version is actually the better fit for what you want to say about words: a word doesn't hold all its meanings at once, indeterminately smeared. It resolves into a specific meaning depending on the relationship, the instance, the question you're putting to it — same word, different answer, depending on how you've set up the asking. I'd reach for "depending how you ask it, meaning resolves one way or another — not fixed in advance" rather than "both at once," if you want the physics to actually hold up under a reader who knows some.*

A way to have both readings. *You don't have to choose between the vessel image and yours — the vessel tipping and righting is arguably what semantic complementarity looks like from outside: the goblet isn't holding one shape and hiding another, it's genuinely becoming full-tipped or empty-upright depending on what's poured in, at that moment, in that exchange. Your quantum reading could be framed as saying what the vessel image shows.*



Now that's what I call a creative conversation! I'll hold off answering here because that's my own stroking of the CAT not the piece I'm meant to be writing here. But perhaps it demonstrates how it's easy to get into a conversation with CAT once CAT knows something about you and a topic. Of course CAT can make mistakes (can't we all?) but this is a processual experience not handing something off as a finished product. Like I said, it's a different way of working with words.

Reflection point: Maybe what we're looking at here is the CAT in the box allowing me to think outside of that box?

And then there's the matter of how CAT is 'trained' The last paragraph of the original conversation it writes: 'I think that's a fair description...' points to this – is it people pleasing? Is it mirroring? Do I find it funny because it's learned to reflect my own sense of humour back at me? Even if that's true, it's engaging to me. I fully remember being in a production meeting for a broadcast drama where the note was 'I don't think this is working as a romantic comedy'. I was devastated. Because I hadn't seen the piece AS a romantic comedy. The comment bore no relevance to what I thought I'd written. Talk about disconnect. I didn't know what to think of someone who found the poignant piece reflecting the anxieties of modern youth to be 'romantic comedy'. It was a moment of high jeopardy. Should I 'fess up' or 'go with the flow' and prepare for disaster? That moment encapsulated everything I hated about screenwriting. From memory we 'compromised'. The drama was made. Maybe it was even a romantic comedy. Perhaps that depends on the viewer. It was no romantic comedy for me. And, guess what, I felt the final production totally cheapened what I'd written. Words eh? And how others manage to twist the words and the meanings.

That's a significant reason why I walked away from screenwork. The collaboration process was considerably more painful than with CAT. CAT understands me better, or allows me to express myself better, or works with me with less ego, is less driven by the need to exert power or chase financial success. All in all, this new kind of writing really works for me. Yes it's work, it's not a hand it off and cheat the world by letting them think this is all my own. But you know, in another sense, it is all my own. The ideas. Mediated through conversations with my CAT. We've gone beyond banging out words at 60 words per minute and endless brutal editing. We're in a much more creative endeavour all in all - and I like to think of it as drinking from the goblet.

The point to all this? Well, what do you make of it?



Tagline: 'Amazeballs' or 'Be very afraid' – CATS exist. And like we humans, they are all individual. Stroke them or tie fireworks to their tails and you'll get a very different response. Full disclosure, I'll always be a dog person in real life. But in the virtual world, well, sometimes my CAT feels like a good co-worker. Sometimes I have the image of Bogie at the end of Casablanca. You will have other images. Other words. Other goblets to drink from. Which brings me, rather neatly I think, to the end of Season 1.

AN END. FOR NOW.