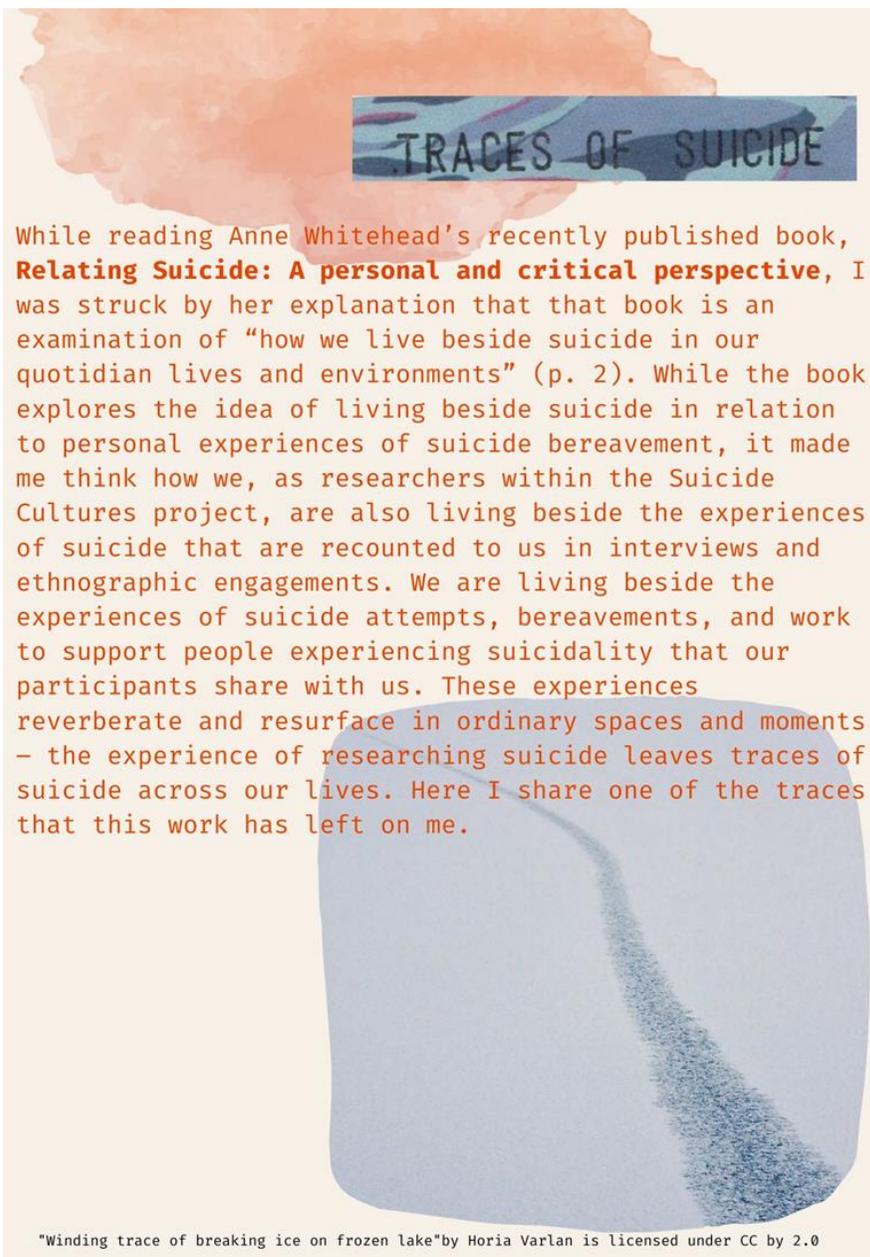


# SUICIDE CULTURES





## TRACES OF SUICIDE

While reading Anne Whitehead's recently published book, **Relating Suicide: A personal and critical perspective**, I was struck by her explanation that that book is an examination of "how we live beside suicide in our quotidian lives and environments" (p. 2). While the book explores the idea of living beside suicide in relation to personal experiences of suicide bereavement, it made me think how we, as researchers within the Suicide Cultures project, are also living beside the experiences of suicide that are recounted to us in interviews and ethnographic engagements. We are living beside the experiences of suicide attempts, bereavements, and work to support people experiencing suicidality that our participants share with us. These experiences reverberate and resurface in ordinary spaces and moments – the experience of researching suicide leaves traces of suicide across our lives. Here I share one of the traces that this work has left on me.

"Winding trace of breaking ice on frozen lake" by Horia Varlan is licensed under CC by 2.0



In a photovoice interview that I did with someone whose son had died by suicide, they shared some pictures of the place where he died – an enormous and beautiful tree, which stands alongside a bend in the road. While notions of place have been central to the conceptualisation and development of the Suicide Cultures project, being able to see the place where this young man died was a jarring and painful experience. The photos capture some of the ways in which the marks of his death remain present.

But simultaneously the photographs capture the place where he died as a place of immense peace and stillness, as the tree stretches its branches and leaves to the sky.

Strangely, the evening after this interview the yoga class I attend was focusing on trees. The class ended with a visualisation of being in a forest. During this time, I returned to the tree where this young man had died. I reached out to touch its bark and to feel its solidness, while subsequently feeling a hollowness in my chest.

Sometimes I am caught off guard when I see a big tree and this recalls the young man and his mother, a jarring in the ordinariness of my life. Perhaps this is a tiny glimpse of the traces that his suicide has left for those that knew and loved him.

## Suicide as Natural Process

By Joe Anderson

Within the first week of moving to a small coastal town in a remote area to begin ethnographic fieldwork I heard that a young man had taken his life in the local forest. Stretching for over 8 square miles this is no patch of trees, but a deep, dark woodland where it is easy to feel and be alone. The first time that my partner and I walked into this forest we came upon an area of trees that were thinner. We were drawn to a tree decorated with bright rainbow ribbons that were wound around its branches, as well as photos of a young man with friends and family pinned to the bark alongside symbols and items that must have been important to him.

Unintentionally stumbling across this memorial triggered a heaviness in my body generated in sober reflection on a young man's death. I had moved here to uncover and understand suicide, yet I didn't expect it to emerge so organically, nor that I would find it woven into the landscape in such a visible and striking way.

Ever since that first trip to the forest, my partner and I have been creating murals made out of materials collected from the surrounding area. This is an ongoing artistic practise that we have performed all over the world, but we decided that

our art may allow new meanings and ideas to become attached to this vast natural resource which has become associated with suicide. In particular, I am interested in how natural forces act on our art work over the course of the year. The vibrant colours of flower petals and green pine collected in summer stand out against the forest floor, slowly fading into the deep red-brown of Autumnal decay.

Working with natural art materials evokes the cycles of growth, flourishing, and decay that we are all inevitably defined by. Nature doesn't lie. It doesn't tell us that everything will be fine or that a suicide is just something we have to get over and recover from. Instead, as the seasons slowly march by the forest teaches us truthfully about how life blooms in colourful shapes before dying, melting back into the Earth for repurposing within an interconnected eco-system.

Suicide, like death more generally, is less commonly represented in art and culture. Often we display our best face to the world. We show our blooming and thriving, but hide our pain and the shedding of layers. This absent presence of death in our cultural space seems to push people to commemorate suicide in natural settings, where our monuments and tributes are drawn back down into the scraps and detritus of the forest floor to fertilise new forms of life.

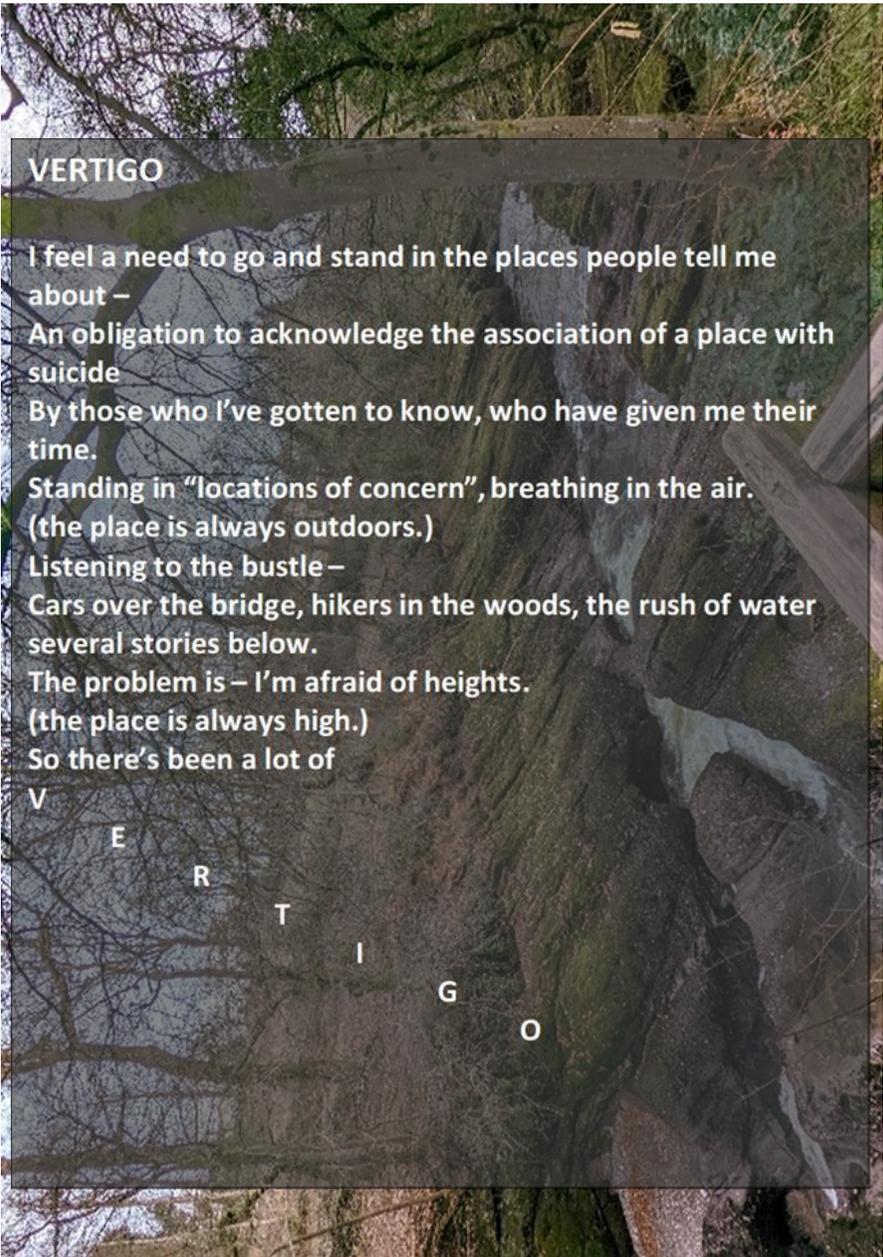


1. *This piece shows the passage of the seasons arranged around the trunk of a fallen tree*



2. *This second piece used materials including stones and shells from the beach, as well as bark, leaves, and pine from the forest.*





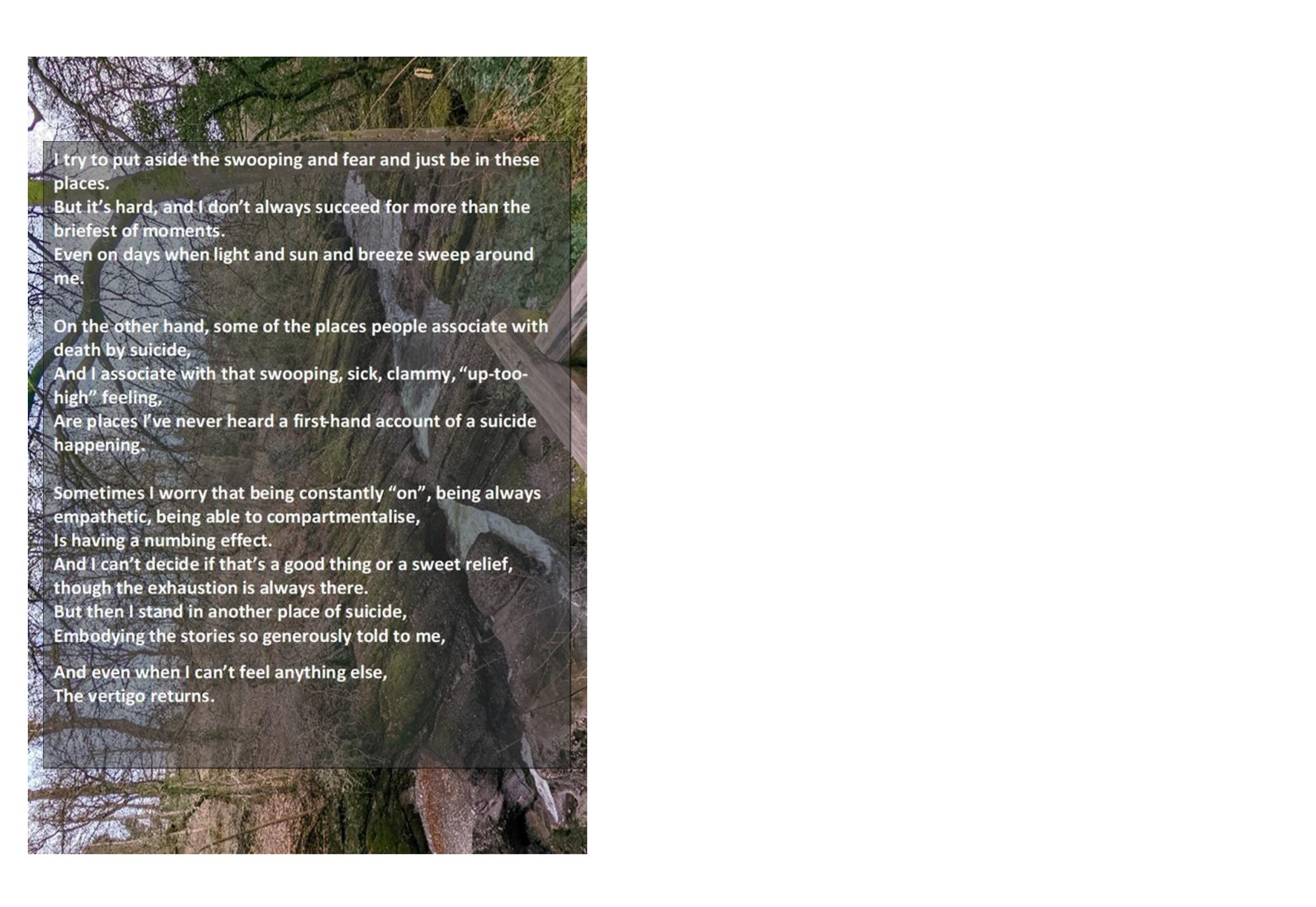
## VERTIGO

I feel a need to go and stand in the places people tell me about –  
An obligation to acknowledge the association of a place with suicide  
By those who I've gotten to know, who have given me their time.  
Standing in "locations of concern", breathing in the air.  
(the place is always outdoors.)  
Listening to the bustle –  
Cars over the bridge, hikers in the woods, the rush of water several stories below.  
The problem is – I'm afraid of heights.  
(the place is always high.)  
So there's been a lot of

V  
E  
R  
T  
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O

It's odd. These places of suicide that are not unexpectedly called so,  
but that are also ordinary.  
Full of everyday sounds.  
I'm not scared of these places as sites of suicide,  
though some of the people I speak to are.  
(Which I can understand.  
Fear of heights is also often fear of everyday places.)

But I still feel sick visiting them, the swooping of my stomach,  
the clenching of my toes.  
I stay as far back from the edge as possible.  
I race across bridges (pausing to photograph the Samaritans posters and life aids -  
Barely noticeable things meant to preserve life.)  
I stand in the discomfort, because it feels important to be there.  
To see what these places feel like, to acknowledge the role of place in the diverse push and pull, struggles and joys and what ifs of people's lives.  
To visit the places people have told me they almost died, that their loved ones have died.  
It feels important, even if it's not.



I try to put aside the swooping and fear and just be in these places.

But it's hard, and I don't always succeed for more than the briefest of moments.

Even on days when light and sun and breeze sweep around me.

On the other hand, some of the places people associate with death by suicide,

And I associate with that swooping, sick, clammy, "up-too-high" feeling,

Are places I've never heard a first-hand account of a suicide happening.

Sometimes I worry that being constantly "on", being always empathetic, being able to compartmentalise, is having a numbing effect.

And I can't decide if that's a good thing or a sweet relief, though the exhaustion is always there.

But then I stand in another place of suicide, embodying the stories so generously told to me,

And even when I can't feel anything else, the vertigo returns.

Working Together: Scotland's Social Protection Strategy 2018-2022

It's okay  
not to  
be okay

DON'T SUFFER IN SILENCE.  
GET SUPPORT FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Present a list of all deaths that have occurred within Scottish prisons in the past 12 months by suicide, as investigated by The Scottish Sun newspaper.

WALKING TALKS

