Hide:

A 21st century woman's response to the first person in poetry

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Abstract

This thesis, titled ‘Hide: A 21st century woman’s response to the first person in poetry’ is a creative and critical examination of the challenges and benefits of the first-person approach in poetry. It is in two parts, consisting of a collection of sixty poems and a critical investigation into the research leading to, and engendered by, the poems.

Hide is a place from which to observe, hide is skin, hide is deliberate concealment; all of these meanings can be seen to reflect some of the concerns examined in both the creative and critical parts of the thesis. ‘Hide’s’ layers of meaning directly engage with what 'I' we choose to conceal and what 'I' we choose to show, as well as residing on the boundaries between privacy and exposure. The poems spring from investigations of my central concerns of autobiography, family history, the workings of memory, and ancestral knowledge in the form of ‘cunning’. The poems are an active investigation into the challenges and benefits of the ‘I’; the approaches and techniques for using it as well as the reasons for, and strategies involved in, avoiding the ‘I’.

The critical part of the thesis is an auto-ethnographic study of the poems in the collection, together with examination of the difficulties faced by women writing in the first-person. The research includes thematic analysis of published reviews, and examination of the critical landscape within which women are writing.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other educational institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author alone and in no way represent the views of the University of Gloucestershire.

Signed: …… ……

Date: ……30th January 2015 ……..……

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Thanks are due to Jane Commane of Nine Arches Press, for publishing the greater part of the poetry portfolio as a collection, *Hide*, in 2013. Thanks are also due to the editors of the following journals and ezines in which some of the poems have been published: *Poetry Review, Agenda, New Writing, Raintown Review, Brittle Star, Dream Catcher, Acumen, Under the Radar, Abridged, Domestic Cherry, About Place, Angle, Wales Arts Review, The Flea, Ink Sweat & Tears, Open Mouse*, and anthologies *The Price of Gold* (Grey Hen press), *Poetic Pilgrimages* (Poetry Salzburg), and *The Book of Love and Loss* (Belgrave Press).

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Introduction

This thesis is a creative and critical examination of the challenges and benefits of the first-person approach in contemporary poetry. It consists of a creative portfolio of sixty poems, titled *Hide*, and a critical reflection on the research which informed and drove the poems. This study brings new knowledge through both critical and creative exploration of the approaches through which the personal first-person may be used effectively, as well as enquiring what poetic reasons there are for avoiding the 'I', and the strategies employed to do so. It also brings new knowledge to the field through an investigation of the critical bias against women's poetry, especially that which has apparently autobiographical elements.

The poems in the portfolio use a variety of approaches and techniques to examine the workings of memory, personal and family history, and the influence of ancestors. 'Cunning', in the sense of old knowledge, is an important theme that emerged during the research of writing the poems and became significant both for its featuring in the influence of ancestors and for its place in my making of poetry and how it relates to my reservations about the use of 'I'.

The critical part of the thesis consists of auto-ethnographic study of the poems in the portfolio, textual analysis of other poets' relevant work, and thematic analysis of the language of a small sample of negative reviews published about contemporary British and North American men's and women's poetry. Stacy Holman Jones, in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research,* asserts that writing is performance in a public space and shows how 'autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement—between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement.' (2005: 764). In approaching the first person through auto-ethnography, I have been able to create opportunities for a more multi-textured, multi-layered experience in which the lyric is not only reflexive of a more complex self but also reflexive of the community and the self in the community.

Sarah Wall, in her article 'An Autoethnography on Learning About Autoethnography', states the intent of autoethnography is to 'acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression' (2006: 146). I considered autoethnography an appropriate method for this study because it is difficult to imagine being able to effectively examine one's own creative work without acknowledging the links between the cultural and the personal. Acknowledging these links proved to be essential for me in approaching the research because

my difficulties with autobiographical material are rooted in my upbringing as a white, working class woman of a particular generation and place; and because it is important to acknowledge that my interpretation of the research is necessarily rooted in that perspective. A further point of interest is that Wall suggests autoethnography is of particular benefit to women and other more marginalized groups, in that it gives them a voice:

> As a woman in a man's world, a nurse in a doctors' world, and a qualitative researcher coming from a positivist discipline (health services research), I find that the relentless nudging of autoethnography against the world of traditional science holds wonderful, symbolic, emancipatory promise. It says that what I know matters. How much more promise could it hold for people far more marginalized than I? (2006: 148).

I found that the way Wall explains her discoveries about the use of autoethnography resonates strongly with my experience in working on both the creative and critical parts of this thesis, in that she also had to overcome discomfort with using the 'I':

> I asked my supervisor if I was "allowed" to write that kind of article, given that it was not research. Originally coauthored, that article was written in the first person plural, the use of "we" somehow symbolic of corroborated and therefore more legitimate knowledge than just something "I" had to share. This is the first article I have ever written in the first person, so difficult is it to break away from long-held beliefs about the legitimacy of what I know (2006: 149).

Wall's 'long-held beliefs about the legitimacy of what I know' seems to me to be remarkably similar to Helen Farish's assertion, below, about what women have

internalised (thesis, p. 14)[1]. These connections and resonances convinced me even more that autoethnography is an appropriate research method for this thesis.

The thematic analysis of reviews was an important element in my understanding of the personal barriers I needed to overcome as I worked with the poems. I believe reviews were an important area to investigate because, for most poets, reviews represent the first public, critical engagement with a poet's work. The methodology I used for the thematic analysis is described in context (pp. 94-97).

The impetus for this study was my own discomfort with writing poems in the personal first-person. I am an experienced and well published poet, yet I have avoided the personal first person in my work until this project because of personal barriers which made writing autobiographical material intensely uncomfortable. My published work before this project included dramatic monologue, poems written in second or third person, poems written as instruction, the use of myth, surreal imagery, and fantasy. I have used all of these techniques as strategies to achieve a distance between 'I' as a person, 'I' as

[1] Throughout the rest of this thesis, where page numbers alone are noted they refer to pages within this work.

a poet, and the persona on the page. With the informed hindsight that this study has afforded me, I now consider these techniques as another form of 'cunning', a shapeshifting. My poetic development, as I researched and wrote the poems in the collection, has involved a shift from using cunning to avoid the 'I', to integrating it into my practice as a way to negotiate the slippery territory of the 'I'.

While I am aware many of my barriers are complex and partly external, I am certain that my strongest barriers are internal and created through my background and upbringing as a white, working class, Englishwoman. I was born in the mid-fifties to a working class family; both parents left school at fourteen, my father to the army and my mother to work in a shop. No member of the family had ever been in further or higher education and my maternal grandfather was an illiterate gardener who would not allow books in his house. Both sides of the family had a tradition of Wesleyan Methodism with its emphasis on service and community, albeit blended on my mother's side with a strong thread of folklore and clairvoyance. All of these factors led to a family ethos where the community was held to be more important than the individual and the wish to be seen as 'decent' people was the strongest driver of taste and

behaviour. Promoting one's own needs and desires or talking too much about oneself was frowned upon, as was anything that could be seen as boastful. Plainness was valued as decent and the fussy or fanciful was seen as untrustworthy. As with most lessons learned in childhood, these messages burrowed deep into my psyche and became the strongest barrier to writing the personal first-person. These barriers do not seem to be uncommon in women of my generation and background; poet Helen Farish noted in an essay for *Life Writing* journal, 'women have internalized fears of being and saying themselves' (2009: 145). In addition to these messages the emphasis on community created in me, as an imaginative child with a rich inner life which would have mystified those around me, a need for privacy so that writing about myself, my thoughts and feelings, became something I instinctively recoiled from.

As I began to pay attention to the effect of these barriers on my writing, and acknowledged my dissatisfaction with repeating the distancing strategies I was using, I became more aware of other women poets' attitude to, and use of, the first person and found that I was not alone in my avoidance of it, especially among women of my generation. Kay Ryan, former U.S Poet Laureate, said 'I don't use 'I' because the personal is too hot and sticky for me to work with. I

like the cooling properties of the impersonal' (2010: online) and poet Sheenagh Pugh stated on her blog 'I've almost given up using the first person. We all write to some degree from experience but it can be concealed if we want to, in personae or third-person narrative' (2011: online). I became aware of how many of the women's poetry collections I was reading avoided the personal first-person, often using dramatic monologue or third-person pronouns. It may be reasonable to assume some commonalities between women which create problems with the first-person, rooted in the way girls tend to be raised. However, it would not be reasonable to assume that all women poets share those issues or that personal barriers are the cause of all avoidance of the first-person.

The recognition that I was not alone in finding the first-person problematic, together with the realization of how many contemporary, British, women poets of different backgrounds, education, and socio-economic backgrounds, appeared to avoid the first person, engendered a need for research into the issue. An investigation into the critical response to women's poetry, and what affect it may have, is explored as the context for the project in chapter 1. The research into the critical context was crucial to my understanding of my

difficulties in approaching the 'I' and chapter 2 details the different strategies and approaches I used to come to terms with writing the 'I' in the poems. Chapter 3 includes examination of the reasons, and techniques, in those poems where I consciously chose to avoid the first person. Chapter 4 is an exploration of 'cunning'; the central role it played in the development of the poems, the influence of ancestors through cunning, and the recognition of cunning as an essential element in my poetry writing.

The poetry portfolio follows this introduction, and precedes the critical chapters, because the poetry is central to the whole project, being both the reason and driver for the research and the culmination of it.

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Hide

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Ursa

At first just a blur of outline, then sprouting
to shaggy brown. The knarl of exposed roots soften,
flatten to wide feet, pushing against the earth

to straighten the bowed back.
A stub of fallen branch
lengthens to a broad muzzle and a lightning-struck
split in the bole forms front legs with strong,
round paws. She shakes free

of the last branches and drops
to stand on all fours, yawns a long-toothed roar
and stretches sinew and bone awake.

She steps away from the litter of twigs,
her must gathering strength to rise;
pine and oestrus, sweet and pungent.

She ambles down the slope, deliberate, unhurried,
muscles sliding under her hide,
paws heavy on the ground and the curve of claw
tearing through turf.

She turns her head to look over the arc
of her shoulder, knows I'm watching.

I don't have cunning enough
to follow her, not this time,
not in this place.

Sightlines

I who is not-I bolts like a day-caught fox
from the path; a fire-streak across the field
taking my breath to ground.

It settles here, between my eye
and a bank of dead nettles where brambled
lines spin a loose weave of risk.

I write of cloud leaving the hill,
how it straggles in tree-tops,
tattered fleece on a fence.
I slip into skins and stretch
inside disguises or practise voices
with my tongue folded.

I should be facing back through stories
of shortening days and wind-chime bones,
leaving the rain to wash a year's dust
from the leaves or turning over stones
in a bowl, finding unexpected glints.

The exit wound appears after
a moment of change
like a paper-cut, unseen
until blood seeps along the line,
or a bruise blooming
with no memory of pain.

I who is not-I slips into Jackdaw skin,
shrugs grey shoulders, sleeks black hood,
cocks a pale eye.
This I rattles feathers,
steals scraps of song, trills phone tunes
and a builder's whistle, free-falls from a tree-top,
tumbles to stir a cloud, flicks a wing-tip.
This I stores pretty things,
pecks a split or turn, makes patterns

on beech bark to twist in the wind.

Jackdaws chuckle into high branches
for the night, leave I who is not-I
to scratch jagged lines
on the ground.

From my shoulder, a susurration
in doppler effect, directing focus
to a vein on a leaf, a hilltop tree,
a half-heard conversation:
Just this, just this.

I who is not-I knows what stirs at 3 am,
waits outside to watch bats
wink flickers of absence from air.
Turns away from night-scented blooms,
follows lanes clouded by blind walls
to shadowed corners where fears
take icy forms and town foxes skulk
behind bins.

This I knows back ways
into the churchyard, hears tilting stones
breathe worn names and picks through grass
for lost bones. This I knows thistles grow
on newly dug ground.

All the 'I's line up
striate the landscape.
Hard rain on a window,
split sunbeams on a floor,
cracks on a mirror,
multiple and refracting.

Hide

The wallpaper peeled easily;
long strips fell away, weighted with dust
and lime. Near the top of the stairs
a half-door appeared, its latch removed,
its shape disguised between panels
of lath and plaster. It opened
to an angled space, loose boards
for a floor, sacking tacked to roof beams.

> I have always craved secret places:
> rooms within walls, smugglers' tunnels,
> the bookcase that glides sideways
> for a knowing touch. I tap on trees
> hoping for hollows and slip behind
> garden shrubs, seeking a path
> to snake across boundaries.

I crawl into that place
under the eaves, lie on the boards
to feel their edges rib my back;
stretch a measure of length
then bend up my knees,
span my arms, palm to brick,
fingertip to rafter.

> I fray hessian away from a nail,
> chip a corner, spy a crack or slipped tile
> to claim a slice of sky.
> I wait out seasons for a day
> when clouds bloom into stories
> or scud before the wind; watch
> swifts skirl overhead, oblivious
> to my hungry eye.

Hoard

Berries blacken and gloss in the late sun,
tempting past any memory of thorns
or scratched shins and my urge to pick them
is sharp as hunger; I need to collect
the mushrooms that glimmer like small moons
in half-light, newspaper-wrap apples
to layer in a tea chest, bottle, blanch
and freeze until it no longer matters
how long, or cold, the winter to come.

Getting Here from There

I name where I tread
grass, rock, mud
to fix the ground beneath me.

A door ajar.
Inside, a smell of emptiness,
a taste of waiting; logs stacked
by the grate, blankets folded on a bed.

On the mantelpiece, a cracked mirror
and a bottle holding a curl of dark hair.
A book lies on the table, my name
on the cover, its pages blank.
The wall opposite the window
has nails knocked into a beam
to hold a map
of my skin.

I stay the day, studying the map.
And I stay the days after,
learning the setting of each mole
and freckle, rebuilding
an inch at a time.

When the hair in the bottle is streaked
with grey, I wash and fold blankets,
sweep the grate, chop logs to stack.
I take down the map, roll it
to fit my backpack, pocket the bottle
leave the door ajar.

Wild Seed

Sweet Escape playing on the radio starts the dog
howling. He lifts his muzzle to the ceiling and makes
that shape with his mouth you see no other time
as if only the sustained *baroo* of his howl can speak
to what tone, what note, reaches deep
into his core to pull out this ancestral cry.

You laugh and the dog wags his tail as he howls
but amusement only disguises the itch inside, to know
what he hears, what old demand draws this from him,
what longing. You want to feel it; the imperative
bred in the bone, blood-seeded. You want to be driven

to run through the woods uncaring of hawthorn's rip
or nettle's sting; you want to grow old and mad,
to scare children with your nocturnal walks
and sly curses. You want to be anti-social,
to answer an irresistible demand to squat naked
on the grass and straighten your open throat,
to throw a wordless challenge to a distant voice.

Canzone: Cunning

My marrow is veined with cunning;
history is written in our bones.
Not sneaky, like a fox, sort of cunning
nor a neat design sort of cunning;
not an adjective, but a title given
or grown into. A different cunning
which forms in the gut; a cunning
earning a capital over hard-worn time.
A woman, or man, doesn't count time
until someone calls *Hey, Cunning!*
It's not me they call but an old woman
who runs in my veins, a cunning woman.

You always knew what you were, old woman.
I grew knowing the wink of your cunning,
the cackle and knock of a comfortable woman
who had aged past appearances. Oh, woman,
your grin seeded such an itch in my bones
to plant my feet on dark earth, to be a woman
who lives in her own skin, a woman
who pricks importance with profanity. It's given
a sense of the lightness that held you, given
me the weight of what it means to be woman,
to skate before the pressure-wave of passing time,
to harvest and hoard the gathering marks of time.

When everything was beginning, time
was a kaleidoscope. Becoming a woman
seemed just out of reach, fragments of time
spun away by wishing. Naïve of the tricks time
plays, it took years to match it in cunning;
stretching when I wanted it to shrink, time
raced on when I wanted to hold it still. Time
teases with knowledge growing as bones
weaken; by the time I felt in my bones
who and where I needed to be, time
had already taken more of the years given
than there were years left still to be given.

It's too easy to forget what we're given
by old women over the cradle, betting against time.
But I recall the nudge, wink, and grin I was given
when you won at cards or your steady look, given
to me when you saw shade over a man, or woman,
and knew they'd come to the end of the time given.
You never told what you'd given,
left in trust to mature into cunning.
Before I could name it, I knew your cunning
had come to me; knew something had been given,
passed down. I knew it in the grinding of my bones
but had no word for it until it had worn my bones

to creaking. There's little spring left in my bones,
lines map my skin to trace all I've given
and I feel my flesh hang heavy on my bones.
In the mirror, I see you in the shape of my bones,
in the length of my nose, in the weight time
leaves on me. I hear the rattle of your bones
and feel you chuckle when I see you in my bones;
when I was young, you were always old, woman,
but I'm where you were and don't feel an old woman.
Years slip through my fingers, gravity drags at bones;
I don't fear getting old if it comes with your cunning;
your shape, your heft, your cunning.

Not an adjective, not sneaky like a fox cunning;
but the cunning in the sight of a comfortable woman
who has accepted her indenture to time,
who has lifted the lid on what was long given,
who knows what quickens in the marrow of our bones.

Doppelgänger

She is anywhere before me
tying thread on significant twigs
or following behind
leaving trails of white pebbles
like landing lights
or paper lanterns marking a garden path

I see her slant a flicker at the edge of vision
when I'm alone a hint of shadow in company

She scratches at my window when I'm working
grins out from behind the eyes
of the woman I pass on the hill who holds a gate
and smiles me through
grey hair wiry below her hat
a collie at her heel
and in the sharp glance of a crow
rag-tagging down from a tree

I hear her mutter as she titivates memory
gathers snatches of conversation watches
the street

Anagnorisis

Connective tissue creaks between ribs
and marrow shudders in long bones,
shy of the narrowing search. It's not there,

among the rigid and gristle of skeletal frames
nor under locked skull-seams; not nestled
in a palm, though my fingers curl into shelter.

My belly's complacent spread has room
to offer soft harbour and the careless attitude
of years; my spine feels shifty, stiff with suspicion.

My only surety is carbon and water, ashes;
language as sensation,
no words.

Scapula:

I like the shape
of the word in my mouth.
The sharp angle of its beginning,
its fulsome end.

I like the planes of them,
the sigh of their support as I relax
against a wall, the flat surface
they offer to the sun.

I like the way they lie,
mirrored either side of my spine,
how they slide under my skin
as I move, how they quietly
hold the potential of wings.

Naked

The mirror surprises me still.
So many years of lean-legged jeans,
hip bones and thigh-gap; years
when shirts draped from my shoulders,
fell loose around my waist.

I can't get used to the shape
of my body in its third age,
how it has settled, complacent,
into softer, thicker lines,
how it has spread to fill spaces
and hollows, how formless
my belly in my hands as I cradle it.

Yet something in this silhouette
is familiar, comfortable;
I see my grandmother in the shape
of my face, great aunts in the width
of my thighs, feel my mother in the heft
of my feet on the ground.

The Visit

Brown is the colour of waiting; a wainscot in a dingy room,
straight-backed chairs against the wall, tweed coats

on old women whose felt hats nod in approval and tilt
towards each other. They lean together to whisper

lineage, connections; which daughter, whose son, what cousin
is parent to the child who holds her grandmother's hand

as she's led through to the inner room. Beyond the door,
an old man leans from a narrow bed and the colours of dying

are yellow and white. A sheet winds round him, rumples
to leave a scrawny leg exposed, jaundiced against the linen

and his stained beard quivers as he mumbles over the bowl
held by a shadowy woman who counts his golden breaths.

How to Make Paper Flowers

Sit in a garden, wait
until nothing is happening.
Practise amnesia for latin names.
Bury the memories of your grandmother
pointing out windflowers, love-in-a-mist,
palsywort, gillyflowers and ox-eye.

Don't think of your grandfather's
chrysantheums, cradled in newspaper
and tied to his bike's handlebars
as he rattles home from the allotment,
or of the daisy-chain you hung
round your father's neck.

Only study shape, measure leaf length
against your palm, petals by your fingers.
Don't name colours or compare them
to anything live, forget sonnets on roses
and nursery rhymes.

Choose paper by its texture,
pick cool shades,
light against your cheek.
Smooth it on your lap.
Let your fingers show you
what they've learned.

Family Visits

Quiet now. It's their turn to visit;
the old aunts and uncles, the great
and grandparents. They visit as we did
—rarely and politely, quiet as we were
in their musty houses where
we were fascinated into silence
by great age, a pendulous lip
or skin like crumpled tissue.

They come singly, slipping in
unnoticed, content to perch on a bed
or lean on a mantelpiece
until they're seen. They don't speak,
don't change position, only nod
or gesture at a picture, a fireplace,
or a vase of flowers, seeding.

Last Summer

Not just summer, but one of those perfect summers
that you might say is faulty memory.
Blue sky, wisps of white cloud,
some nights washed with enough rain
to keep the grass live and waving.
My knees were brown and scabbed; I called my bike Helen
and talked to her on long rides to visit the horses
on the hill and the kittens in the barn.
The hollow in Steward's Wood, where my climbing tree
overhung a grassy dip was for special days,
when I sat on the wide branch for hours,
peopled glades and paths with a kingdom,
saw stardust in the light-filter of leaves.
Secret, until that last time when I heard steps
breaking twigs on the path, a scrape of something heavy.
My legs stilled from their swinging, pulled up
into the canopy's shelter, my breath stuttered
and slowed as I tried to be silent.
A man followed the sound into my place,
dragging a lumpy bag like dad's army kitbag
I sometimes climbed inside. I saw him in spaces
between green, like the flick-books I made
of horses running. He paced around the hollow,
long grass bending and silvering in his wake.
He stooped and cut down, rolled the ground back
like when I saw Aunty Silvia roll down her stockings.
He dug and huffed and muttered, pushed the bag
into the hole, covered it and stamped unrolled ground
into nothing-happened-here. He stretched his back
and I saw his face, held my breath while he left.

Last year I saw his face in the newspaper.
Rows of photos; young women in grainy monotone,
hairstyles stuck in my childhood.
I could feel bark under my hands,
smell ripe grasses,
freshly turned earth.

Some of These Things are True

I learned about waiting, the sour taste of it
I had long conversations with my bicycle
I lived in a cave, learned the rhythms of bats
I stopped whispering, tongued the roundness of breath
I discovered a mad child and held the door open
I spoke a long truth and lived with it

I discovered an ocean with too many waves and no shore
I built a shelter in the valley, roofed it with paper
I wore khaki and army boots, but couldn't keep in step
I learned to walk on stilts, saw a different horizon
I found a new land with no borders, no checkpoints
I told a lie and gagged at the lingering taste of it

I learned about weight and what I could carry
I swam a sea and found a lake within it
I counted rats running from a dog in the stable
I cut through strands and tangles, took longer strides
I lived on a cliff-edge, looked down every morning
I made a people, named each one a colour

I sipped at displacement, rolled it round my mouth
I watched a fox stalk a goose, counted leaves on clover
I found a hidden door, felt a songbird fly from my hand

Living with the Sooterkin

Every home has them, nesting in dark corners
or playing in the rafters; dusty grey faces
peeping from under beds and round chair legs.

Sooterkin are sly, secretive about their long lives,
their complicated families. No-one knows
why they migrate at random times of year

or why they breed in some houses, congregate
in others. I'm on to them; I glimpse their sharp faces
at dusk as they slip along the skirting, see glints

from black eyes on my back seat when I drive
at night. Sooterkin are bold in the dark;
anxiety excites them; they chitter in packs,

sliding over and under each other, claws tapping
a tarantella on the floor. They grow strong on insomnia;
slither over the bed-head, under the covers, tangle

my hair with their long toes, tease bare skin
with soft whiskers. They communicate in scuffles
and squeaks at the edge of hearing; I am learning

their language, studying scratches on the floor
and recording nocturnal creaks. I can read
their discomfort growing; they don't like to be known.
I think they'll leave.

Homecoming

Some of our dead return, they must.
An old woman won't leave her cunning;
she clings to the hearth, the smoulder
of soot on the fireback as it catches
and shifts in ragged lines.
She comes to creak
the door of the kitchen corner cupboard,
sustained on the breath of cold stone,
the slab where marks hold a memory
of skinned conies, the high shelf for jars.
She'll bring the cards to the top of the deck,
the flinch of superstitions, the sigh in the night.

The old man stays in the garden;
rustles the apple tree for pruning and blows
leaves around a fork left outside. He measures
digging to a spit and a half, calls for potatoes to plant
at new moon and counts seeds in threes
to give Old Nick and the birds their dues.
At night he's a crackle of paper he couldn't read,
the tap of a pipe, the grumble of poor coal on the fire.

Not madeleines,

but damp bricks in small spaces,
light rain on rusty tin, coal-dust
in the kitchen, good earth
on potatoes in the sink.

The front door opens—
a pig's head grins from the table,
blind to the budgie cage and china
horses on the sideboard.
Brasses hang on the chimney-breast,
details rubbed to soft focus.
A snaffle bit dangles in the alcove
by the 1914 tobacco tin,
a biscuit tin of buttons, a kilner jar
of bolts, buckles and old keys.
Wooden-armed chairs, straight backs
pressed to the wall, leave room
to sidle around the table to the fire
with a bucket of coal.

There's no lounging;
only space to sit up straight, upright
as the ladder-steep stairs which climb
between two rooms; as the sun-denying
brick wall around the yard; as the old man's
suspicion of book-learning.

But would you go back?

Would you
button up your coat and go back
to the house with the blue door
to sit at the drop-leaf table
where you must temper
the Sunday treat tinned fruit
with bread and margarine.
Would you lie in a narrow bed
and listen to coals being raked
downstairs, knowing you're late,
you'll miss the early bus that would
get you there in time to claim a space
in the corner of the schoolyard
where girls lean on the coal bunkers
and watch the gates for targets.
Would you return to the mirrors
in the town hall cloakroom, look
sideways at what the others do
with make-up while you fiddle
with your hair and all the time
know that it's never enough,
not ever.

Spy

The top class's cloakroom
was best, where the coats were long
enough to skim the bench.
I squatted behind them,
breathing a fug
of duffel and gabardine,
listening for codes.

I practised whispering silently
into my walkie-talkie.
In the corridors,
learned to walk quietly,
finger-tipped the wall,
reported the ebb and flow
of allegiances.

I moved among them
to learn playground games
and language, overheard
some boys
she's mad, she is, talks
to her rubber all day!

I radioed that my cover
was secure;
they think I'm mad;
didn't wait for an answer.

Private View

Faint shapes flicker behind the glass;
a baby in a coach-built pram peeps through spots
in the silvering, a solemn child with cropped hair
fades behind a mist of dust. Jagged cracks disrupt
rows of desks and hard faces; a birthday party
passes an endless parcel; a teenager staggers
from a club, swaying in and out of focus
and a bridal veil webs
a shattered surface.

All the mirrors are in a room with no windows
hidden in the centre of the house, the door disguised
with paint and shelves. They hang on every wall,
lean in stacks at the skirting and cluster on tables,
no two the same. Plain wooden frames, ornate squares
with gilded, dusty curls, silver ovals, full length
and hand-sized.

Some gleam in soft focus, polished with each glance;
a beribboned bunch of flowers on a doorstep,
a golden-haired child on a lap, rows of smiling faces,
clapping hands. In every corner mirrors reflect
each other, refract distorted glimpses to repeat
and reprise but some mirrors are empty,
unmarked.

To Whom it May Concern

Please find enclosed a key;
it will unlock a door in every house
I've ever lived in. You can try them all
in turn, ticking them off a list,
or pinball between them,
holding your breath at each one
to hope for the snick
 that will let you in.

Please find enclosed a strip
torn from the centre
of a diary page. You can find
my diaries on the bookshelves,
in a box under the bed,
and crated at the self-storage
depot. You can look for half-words
to match, the same shade of ink.
A lot of the pages are torn
and crumpled; I don't remember
how, or when.

Sam Browne

Brasso-silky fingertips, a metal tang in the throat;
tiny circles on the buckle and tongue-tip between my teeth

to guard against marks on the leather. He smiles
at my effort, shows me how he buffs to perfection

and I watch him thread the strap under an epaulette,
fasten the buckles so it sits high on his waist,

his jacket smooth beneath it and close on his wide chest.
I breathe *my dad* as he straightens his cap over his eyes.

He takes as much care with a security guard's uniform;
irons a shirt, makes knife-edge creases on trouser legs

with wet cloth under a sizzling iron, polishes each button
to mirror the sun. He reaches for the clothes brush

from a hook by the door, kept for rebel dog hairs,
turns and laughs loud to see his Sam Browne

a perfect fit on my teenage hips. I scowl, flounce
through the door, the belt snug and heavy on my pelvis.

I don't remember when I saw it last,
tarnished and cracked for lack of army discipline;

Tan leather and the smell of metal polish bring it to mind
with broad shoulders, strong hands, a sad falling in.

Fishing

He holds it by its tail
scrapes a knife down to the dull eye

Silver showers to grass
catches sun
vanishes—
blood and slime on the table

Scales clung to hairs on his brown arm
float on the air
fall from my eyes

and I am not five
a long way from his garden.

I see him now
through this cracked
mirror—distorted
silvered

What is Hidden

So many small lives, pushing through
soil below our feet; cogs within
clocks; wintering bees; the black skin
of polar bears; the missing screw;
the way I still feel about you.
How swifts live a whole life in flight;
the words in a book when the light
is out; squirrels' hoards; the odd sock;
the sculpture in a rough wood block;
what terrors wake me through the night.

Counting the Cunning Ways

Corpse-hounds, he calls them or *lych-birds*,
turns away from their churring call. He curses
a white moth in the house, slaps at its blunder
against a dusty bulb. He'll take a long way round
to avoid meeting a hearse head-on, shudder
to see a child point at the plumed horses.
He won't take the ashes out after sundown,
always comes and goes by the same door,
shouts at ravens to chase them from the roof.
He won't wear anything new to a funeral
and covers his head by an open grave.
The bird in the house, the left eye's twitch,
hawthorn indoors, a mirror cracked
—so many ways to foretell death and disaster;
it came for him while he wasn't looking.

Saving the World

She keeps Barbie heads
on her fingertips at night.
If they twist around
to look at her in the morning,
she knows asteroids are coming.
She counts her steps
to the bathroom, crabwise
by the door to make them right;
If there's an 'r' in the day
odd numbers play,
if there's an 'n' in the day
even holds sway.
But if it's Tuesday,
hop all the way
She holds her cereal spoon
up to her mouth and waits
for the clock's second hand
to reach *1* to take it in
takes it out on *3*.

Deep in her pocket,
Malibu Barbie-head
pinches her fingertip to remind
her to look away from the dog
at the end house; she can't rely
on seeing the one-legged
homeless guy by the corner shop.
She hops down the curb
on her left foot,
hops up on her right
at the other side.

She feels the warmth
of Secretary Barbie's approval
spreading from her pinky
because she got to school
with no mistakes.
Looking at the kids
in the yard, she smiles;
They don't know they're
saved, again.

Roots

I have earth under my nails,
grimed into knuckles and lining my palms
as a benediction. My back aches
with the memory of digging,
resists the instinct to stand tall.

Raw holes colander the garden,
gape, ragged-lipped at the house
where boxes stack in place of curtains
and charity bags muffle the door.

I carry uprooted flowers
to your house; bend with the weight
of the message you didn't read in the books,
the discs or the old photographs. I don't know
if you can understand
the generation in absence.

The Way it Goes

I joined the circus for the spangles
and the smell of sawdust,
auditioned for the high wire.
I was rescued from the platform
by a laughing funambulist, my skin
tingling with vertigo, my closed eyes
pulsing. I'm not built for flight; the trapeze
was a non-starter, the aerialist shaking
his head as he looked me up and down.
I came down from the hemisphere,
tried contortion and got stuck,
discovered new allergies to horses
and elephants, watched the morning
crowds of circus people grow
as they watched my daily try-outs.
They sent me to the clowns,
said I was a natural. I thought white-face
or Columbine; didn't have the authority
for one, the figure for the other.

You'll find me in the alley;
I'm the one in the spangled tutu
and rainbow wig, standing in line
with my crooked pram, waiting
my turn to fall.

Lăo tóng
For C.

I loosen the earth with a fork,
bend to pull weeds, grub my fingers down

to find roots but I'm impatient, slapdash,
don't pick out all the white threads

that hold the promise of next year's weeds.
I think of you, telling me you liked kneeling

by your long border, seeking out every blade
of grass, every weed and fine root.

In your studio brushes bloom from a pot,
graded from broad strokes to barely visible

sable, just enough for you to paint a hair
on a poppy stem or a cell in a moth's eye.

For all we shared, all the ways we were alike,
it is the opposites in you I miss the most

and I can't help wishing you more careless
with roots, that you'd left a thread

to bring you back next year.

Lăo tóng is an archaic Chinese word for form of eternal friendship between "heart sisters"–two women who were closer than husband and wife.

Slow ways

Early this morning, a slow-worm,
a bronze coil shining through the dense
ivy tangled beneath a fence.
At my slightest touch it moved, firm
and cool, more like a wheel's turn
than a slither or slide. I drew
the leaves aside, watched it slip through
snarls of vine as if a clear trail
formed where it chose to go, its tail
a last flick as it passed from view.

Thinking back, it's years since I've seen
those smooth coils, that muscular form,
though I often walk where gnats swarm
while high umbels nod and trees lean
over the cut, a stencilled screen
for the sky. An age since I'd play
with such creatures, make bouquets
of cow-parsley and willowherb
with no sense of time to disturb
the slow worm of long green days.

Petrichor

The door stands open to stillness and heat.
Only gnats move, ghosting under trees
and dipping over the pond. Birds murmur
in the hedge, flutter and settle; leaves droop
under the weight of air and so do I.

Rain spots the path, penny-sized, darkening.
A lock falls away from a crowbar,
 a crack splits a geode's dull crust,
a caul tears from a new calf. It breaks.
The earth breathes and so do I.

Rough Sleeping

Now, in the almost-light of 6 am,
in this field bounded by bird-full
hedge and scribbles of winter-bare

willow, I could sleep. I lock my knees,
think myself anthracite, carborundum,
let my feet settle into muddy ground

for wind-blown twigs to pile against.
I let my eyes close, my head dip, set
my back against the slow glimmer rising

from the hill's dark curve. I'll be stone
while skies circle overhead and birds
forget I ever moved. I could sleep

now, in this field, in the almost-light.

Growth

Cow parsley, mallow, and campion
narrow the path. Blackthorn chokes
the stile, spatters petals on the ground
like leucocytes.

Everything blooms in May,
everything grows. I could bury my face
in the white and purple froth of flowers
at the field's edge, walk through thigh-high
stems damp with cuckoo-spit and dew,
watch the bees gorge on comfrey.

I could sink into the heady scent,
lie below high umbels while chiff-chaffs call
from a scribble of young willows
but a mild winter forced blooms too soon,
too soon, and the bluebells are over;
barely standing, frail and spindly,
only a shrivel of blue on show.

At ground level, brown leaves droop,
meld into mulch, green stems drive
upwards. Ground elder and creeping thistle
rampage under the canopy, their roots
spearing through the soil. I can almost
hear them, like cells drumming through
the earth's veins. Relentless.

Spatial Awareness

In the space before sleep you learn
I has no voice.
You reach for a tongue,
find it split into ribbons, slippery
tangles with no ends;
thoughts dissolve
into the thump and rush of arteries,
settle on to the heaviness of bone.
Only the body doesn't lie.

To preserve this space
you must feel, but not notice
mahogany bedposts soften and curve
as the bed's corners curl up and in,
a cradle
or a boat
or a falling leaf; don't acknowledge
the way it rocks, don't recognise
the voices that sometimes call
your name.
To stay here, in this space,
practice the art of slovenly attention.

The Evolution of Insomnia

Men don't tend the fire;
they follow their spear-points
to the hunt's rank heat and fury,
limp back to fall into sleep
filled with fight and fear.
They don't make old bones.

Younger women are busy
with breast-suck or belly-weight;
their gaze on the seeking and keeping
of a mate. They watch the fire
between other demands, attention
like sparks from green wood.

Past child-bearing, past mate-catching,
older women give their nights
to the fire, stare into the flame
and serve its sullen greed. They learn
to doze and wake through the dark hours,
leave behind the feel of long sleep.

Awake in fidgety heat at 3 am,
I know it started with fire, the mystery
and need of it, its fickle demands;
I know it's my place to foster the blaze
and watch the coming dark.

Late bus

The shiver-chill and diesel stink of the late bus;
the taste of a dull day in my mouth

and the lights tinting road-grime on the windows
to yellow. Outside, stores close and shutters rattle

From the lit bus, everything looks darker
and where it stops, damp paving seems to shudder.

Seats empty as it nears the end of the route
and streets quieten so that it's forty years back,

trailing home after a detention,
not wanting to arrive.

Window Seat

The local train rattles
along a wide bend;
half-term children cluster
to windows on the left
where a dull sea grumbles
at the rocks below the wall.

Electric ribbon flutters
on drunken spikes,
ponies dot the ground;
piebald, skewbald, shaggy duns,
stand with their tails to the wind
or pull at scrub.

Five railway carriages;
liveries of faded green and cream,
each standing on rails
cut to carriage length.
I can see through the windows
most of the seats removed;
a cooker, a bed, a man busy
with wood and tools,
a woman sitting at a table,
watching us pass by,
life framed in a train window
as if always travelling.

Cunning

The potatoes planted on a new moon. New shoes
never on the table. The colour green kept from the house.

A coat never laid on a bed. White lilac held separate
from mauve. The luck that shouldn't be named.

The handshake away from the table. The china horses
turned from the door. The broom never leant on a bed.

Fingernail clippings always thrown on the fire. Breath held
at the cemetery gate. The doors unlocked for a death.

The trick on the doorstep. Pepper under a pillow.
The cards that always turn up in time.

An unseen gesture. The string on the banister.
Ashes in the graveyard. The wink at church carvings.

    The wind you can't stop from blowing,
    how you say it always sobs your name.

Stolen

Someone took my name today.
I heard her speak it at the ticket window
while I stood in line. I saw her on the train,
facing me through glass, across the buffers,
watching me watching her.

She's getting off at the same station,
steps down with her right foot
as I lead with my left;
follows me up the steps
but a shimmy through the cab rank
and a risky dash across traffic
loses her on the street.

All through town I jitter
at reflections, listen hard to words
surfacing in fragments through engine-revs
or music leaking from noisy shops.
A dozen times I glimpse a part-profile,
a way of walking, and side-step into doorways
or turn down alleys.

I try the taste of my name
in my mouth as a child knows a thing
by naming it.
The doorbell shocks
my breath short; the handle rattles.
I turn the key.

Other Tongues

When I say I'm alone, I'm lying.
My mother tongue sleeps under my skin,
bred in the bone, colouring my blood.
I speak from an echo chamber
where the walls pulse with whispers,
familiar cadences rising and falling
at my back. I speak from a limestone floor,
as familiar to my feet as are the bones
of the hill creaking between the roots
of great beeches. I speak with multitudes
in my throat, their round vowels
vibrating in my stomach, their pitch
and tone stiffening my spine.

Placement

Immersed in writings of diaspora, of displacement,
I sip at not-belonging, roll it around my tongue,
swallow it down and let it lie heavy in my stomach.
The taste is familiar and strange, comfort food
with exotic spices and the sting of hot peppers;
indigestible, irresistible.

I could wear a shirt of nettles,
a skirt of thorn; I could stumble with my shoes
on the wrong feet or dress in winter wool
in a heat wave. I could practice braiding my words
with accents, learn to forget names, traditions,
places of family.
My step reads the path as it spells out
You only have one country.

School for Identity Thieves

Expression is forbidden.
First years struggle to flatten smiles,
freeze brows; admire the seniors
whose faces have perfected vacancy.

History lessons list great imposters;
Princess Caraboo, Sidney Poitier's son,
and the man who sold the Eiffel Tower.
Students research family trees,
copy birth certificates, tour graveyards.
Their own family histories
are discouraged, visits forbidden.

Invisibility must be achieved for success;
classes in stillness, shrinking and fading
into backgrounds begin each day.
New students watch a graduation ceremony
as a teacher talks to a room of shadows.
Some have a natural talent
for not being noticed.

Dogma

The things he held sacred:
a drilled rank of bean-sticks
potato mounds in die-straight lines
clean tools stacked in the lean-to
shed on the allotment.
The doorstep of the tiny house
shined cardinal red
the fire well banked at night
gleaming windows and door-brass
children inspected before school
neat, respectable.
The Kings Arms on the corner
the racing pages in the newspaper
a pint of dark ale in his tankard
the company of other men
who believe a man's worthy of his hire
and what he earns is his to spend.

Scapegoat

turns away from pastures
pulls at bitter scrub & yellowed grass
limps over sharp-edged stones
& shifting shale He backs from
clean waters mumbles cracked lips
at stagnant pools where sulphured
bubbles rise to release miasmic gas
Scapegoat trails his shaggy coat
through swamps & noxious bogs
braces his knees against the weight
of drying mud & caked slime
turns away from sheltered caves
and soft leaf beds lies on a jut of rock
above the canyon where icy wind
buffets & blows grit into his eyes
bows his head

Thumb-Pricks & Eye-Dazzles

Peeling boiled eggs; the prick of eggshell
on my thumb warns of warts, of witches
sailing away on half-shells, of the dangers
in egg-water, of *the pricking of my thumbs.*
It's like the stretch of my hand around
a too-big potato and the feel of the waxed
twine on the peeler handle; the sink
I lean on becomes deep and square,
cracks spidering from the drain, the scent
of damp earth rising from the peelings.
Or it's like the sudden dazzle of autumn
sun which sends me back in to a dream
I had once, of a songbird trapped
in my house, the frantic soft flutter
of it in my hands; of opening a door
to release it and being blinded by light
so that all I could see was my hand
fading into white and the pomegranate
squint of my eyelids. As the small weight
left my hand, I couldn't see
whether it flew or fell.

Windfalls

Autumn brought apples. Green bramleys
for cooking, stewed with blackberries
we gathered in a stain of pricked fingers
and nettle-stung shins. Our favourites
always the sweet Cox's, red-streaked
and crisp. All picked from the ground,
the good ones on the tree kept for market.

Small holes made by beaks or wasps
could be cut out easily; a shallow slice
or a knife-point circled through the skin
to remove a perfect cone. Without a knife,
they could be eaten around, nibbled close
to the edge. The damage didn't go far.

Tiny grub holes hid a deeper harm;
their tracks winding through the flesh,
evading the slicing blade or digging point.
You could cut away half the fruit, chasing the trail.
It wasn't the little tunnels that worried me
but what lay at the innermost end of each one.

Today, I pick up windfalls, fill a bucket and tip them
into the compost. I'll climb a ladder for the ones on the tree;
give away bags full of them to friends,
leave a boxful by the gate with a sign to Help Yourself.
I'll store the best, wrapped in newspaper,
gentled into a carton in the shed. All I keep,
I'll quarter before biting, always wary
of what lies near the core.

Card Sharp

Cunning, we never caught her cheating
at cards. No aces up her sleeves nor tucked
in the leg of her bloomers; no mirrors
at sneaky angles nor thumb-nailed corners.

Rummy in the evenings and cribbage
with the old man, used matchsticks
marching along holes on the worn board.
On Boxing day, always Newmarket,
old pennies and ha'pennies saved
for betting on the picture cards
from another pack laid out
in the centre of the drop-leaf table.

Calls of *Nanny! You're cheating!*
made her grin or cackle
as the pennies piled up at her elbow
and her glass of stout emptied,
creamy froth making patterns
like tea-leaves for reading.

Remonstrations of *Really, Mother!*
brought winks and gurning,
her sideways twinkle at us
making sure we knew she cheated
when it didn't matter.

Decent

All are welcome at the altar
of the small god of decent people.
Cloakrooms in the entrance hall
are provided for coats and shoes
which are not plain and sensible.

Customary segregation
offers entry through appropriate
vestibules; the women's has water,
coal-tar soap and rough towels
to ensure clean, shining faces at the rail.
The men's has a barber-attendant
to offer shaves, hair-length check
and smoothing of unsuitable styles.

Our temples contain no distractions;
magnolia walls and frosted windows
discourage cloud watching, wondering,
or wool-gathering.

The small god of decent people
is not against recreation;
our summer picnic in the country
is popular for wholesome games,
fishpaste sandwiches and Madeira cake.
Well-behaved children may get a portion
of ice cream, served with bread and margarine,
to reinforce their parents'
training in decent living
without fanciful ostentation.

Reasonable

The Man on the Clapham Omnibus, to a lawyer, is synonymous with the pinnacle of reason in humanity: an ordinary London transit rider as representative of all rational thought and action. — Gray's Law Dictionary [2]

The man on the Clapham omnibus is tired
of being reasonable. He is bored
with his average intelligence and sees little use
for being moderately educated.

From the window he can see tidy houses,
rows of cars parked at the kerb.
He wants to jump from the bus while it's moving,
run along the roofs and bonnets,

tap-dance to feel the satisfying dint and ping
while he yodels a rebellion. He wants
to leap over hedges and walls, bang on every door,
laugh from the far side of the road.

Tomorrow, he will wear an eye-patch and fix
a stuffed rat to his shoulder.
He'll stand on the bus to declaim Shakespeare
on his way to the library

to become an expert on *New Guinea Tapeworms*
or *Fungi on Stamps*. He'll share
his knowledge in the café for several hours
before he goes home to rest

on his doorstep with a beer bottle in his hand
and Handel's *Messiah* at full volume.
He'll shout occasional phrases from *Zadok the Priest*;
no-one will interrupt him

[2] *'Grays Law Dictionary'* appears to be a myth. The only reference to it is a blog called 'Grays Law Dictionary' (Ryan 2007) and there is no trace of a physical book in the British Library records. 'The man on the Clapham omnibus' can be found in court records and references in case law; there is a reference to it in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Room, 2001: 739) which suggests the phrase's first use was against the 'Tichbourne Claimant' in 1871-4 but its common quotation from *Grays law Dictionary* appears to be apocryphal.

Deleted

She starts with the photos; albums
and shoeboxes from the back of a cupboard,
a collage under glass in the kitchen,
studio-posed smiles in wood frames.
The bin swallows the white-bordered
monochrome grandparents, Polaroids
of college friends, holidays in paper wallets.

Cartons of sentiment follow; keepsakes,
letters, estate agent's details of the house
she didn't want to sell, a wedding ring
from the big mistake, pearl earrings
and a silver bangle from smaller ones.
She sweeps the house of old gifts,
sifts through her books and music,
resists any tugs at memory,

On her laptop, she scrubs her CV
of dead-end jobs, of career positions
with bullying managers or bitchy peers.
She deletes emails and contacts,
trashes letters and documents that carry
disappointments or conflicts. She clears
her wardrobe; tosses the suit from a bad
interview, a dress from the date she left
at the table. Undressed, she lies on her bed,
naked, virginal. In the morning
someone wakes, stares at the ceiling.

.

Tailor's Chalk

She presses her finger along the edge, over the rounded apex,
smoothes her thumb over the waxy plane of its side as she spreads
her dress on the table. She stands back, looks at the paper pattern,
crumples it, lets it drop.
The chalk jumps in her hand, she slashes bold lines
down the neckline, across the hem, through the darted sides.

She sweeps the dress to the floor, zig-zags the chalk over the door,
steps through. Roses and shrubs along the path splinter,
whirl leaves and twigs as she runs her chalk over them, scatter
behind her as she walks . She doesn't look back.
In town, she slices plate glass,
rattles the chalk through railings and shutters, deaf to crashes
and clangs as she passes. She lets herself into the office, scribbles
the shrinking chalk over desk, keyboard, monitor, crumbles
it over her diary and bulging files.
In the cloakroom, she draws a chalky finger
over the mirror, around the oval of her face, her curve of arm.
She traces her shape on the mirror over again, looks at her fingers,
licks them clear of chalk, steps through.

Hide and Seek

As a child, I hated the foolish feeling
of being found; the too-narrow tree
I stood behind, the cupboard door that wouldn't close
from inside though my fingertips gripped
to whiteness on a slim batten, the shudder
in my chest when I suppressed noisy breath.

I worked at being lost, taught my joints to fold
and squeeze in small spaces, schooled my breath
to ease, my heart to slow. It took years
to train my blood-flow to thin or pool under my skin,
to shade and pattern the surface.

I hide as a party trick, challenges strangers
in bars to find me; vanish at work, disappear
on dates. I was filmed for a documentary,
shut in an empty room, slowly fading into wallpaper.
I hide from taxes and utility bills, civil suits
and parking tickets.

My house is riddled with small spaces
under floorboards, hollows in cavity walls,
false walls in alcoves. I've perfected the art
of cupboard backs; *trompe l'oeil* on high shelves
with dusty suitcases, sports equipment
and a carefully woven cobweb of nylon fibre.

The fit is perfect, handles on the back
to pull it tight, a can of silicon sealant
stops even my scent from betraying me.
I make my muscles relax, my limbs
settle into their contortions. I wait
for someone who'll seek.

Laundry

The washing line stretches from house to tree,
tented by a wooden prop, slack coiled
from a stubby branch.

She steps out, laundry basket balanced on her hip,
looks at the line, the trees, the high fences,
puts the basket down.

She roots through the shed, discards a pruning saw,
secateurs, takes the shears and slices
through the taut line,

feels the satisfying swish of the recoil and snake
across the ground. One piece at a time
she pulls clothes from the pile,

finds a jump-and-fling can snag them on tall shrubs
and climbers that top the fence. Her red shirt
with coffee spills on the jasmine;

a long nightdress with wine stains drapes over honeysuckle;
underwear on the pink rose and t-shirts on the lime,
marks and stains facing outward.

The catalpa tree droops a low branch to dip over the fence;
displays the volume of her favourite indian skirt,
its badges of blood and semen.

She pulls a chair onto the lawn, pours a drink and settles
to listen for footsteps on the pavement; for voices;
for the chance of rain.

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to listen for footsteps on the pavement; for voices;
for the chance of rain.

Learning to forget

the dog I once saw running on the motorway
when I could see no way to stop and catch it,
its desperate gallop and white-ringed eyes
circling my sleepless nights.
                The volume
of a private comment, confided to a friend
just as the music stopped and the echoes
of laughter that rang in the distance for years
or being caught by a period starting
wearing a white skirt and no coat
                I don't know how I forgot
the fear of being lowered from a balcony
at seven years old, the rooms behind full
of smoke and fumes, the wait for someone
to climb up, the dangle and drop. I only knew,
caught in my daddy's arms, I'd already forgotten.

Nanna's Luck

The rabbit's foot in her pocket
was capped in silver, grey fur
sleek from fingering; the four leafed clover
in her purse flat and paper-thin.
She refused to call it luck or cunning;
only winked at her cronies
when they called her a *jammy beggar.*

I'd sit with her at the curved counter
in the holiday camp, sliding plastic shutters
as she pointed to numbers when they came up,
waiting for her to shout *House!*
Mum sat there too, listening to the caller
legs eleven, two little ducks, key of the door,
and grumbling that the numbers didn't come
for her. Nanna told her to concentrate;
you ent thinkin' right!

There was a day when I spent hours on my knees,
counting leaves on clover, looking for the one
which would lend strength, bolster radiation,
shrink tumours. I found one; perfectly shaped,
each leaf the same size and set at ninety degrees
to its neighbour. She tucked it in her purse
and grinned. It didn't work; we weren't
thinking right.

Forgotten Trails

The things I have forgotten accumulate
with the years. A favourite scarf on a park bench,
umbrellas in cabs, books loaned
to too-casual acquaintances and left
on trains. The coat left in a restaurant,
sunglasses on a beach, hairbrush
in a hotel bathroom.

They trail behind me, ghostly
outlines in a fading contrail,
skittering on sharp turns,
stretching thin when I travel fast.

I could follow the trail back to rented rooms
where forgetting has leached to grey
or steamy kitchens where the cook shouts
order numbers; I could track it to school buildings
where the smells of chalk and fear blend
to cloy in the throat, or to small churches
-dark and bible-dusty.

Along the trail, figures stand, still.
Some are complete, a few are vague shapes,
others have faces blurred by the mist.
Voices weave between them; detached,
rising and falling, occasional words
suddenly clear; bubbles rising in a swamp;
sparks from logs shifting on a fire.

Willow

won't die.
Felled by lightning-strike or chainsaw,
split by weight or wind, bridged
across a stream or logged and piled
in a farmer's field; it lives.
Willow drives roots down
from bleached and crumbling flesh,
sends slender shoots up to jostle
for sun, to grow lusty leaves
that tremble with the force they hold.
Alive, it insists when the wind blows,
alive.

I could burrow
into willow's charcoaled heart,
draw deep of its smoky breath,
bend to follow the split where it arches
over the stream to bury its head
in the muddy bank.
I could settle into its deep creases,
slow my breath in time to its growing,
could learn the rhythms of crumbling
into earth and feel the force of new shoots
driving upwards to insist
a*live!*

Blink

My dad sits cross-legged on the floor in the circle
of small girls passing-the-parcel. He plays the fool,
making my guests giggle and shriek, winks at me
and I can't find the words to say how good this is
but I'm lit up like the candles on my birthday cake.
I close my eyes to make a wish,

open them at the school gate; my skirt is shortened
by rolls at the waist, my stance consciously casual.
My dad's not as wonderful now as the man I wait for
and I hope he'll come while other girls are still there
to see me put on the tossed helmet and take my place
on the pillion. Out of town, the wind hurts my face;
I tuck my head down, shelter behind his leathered back,

look up from my seat on the doorstep. I watch my child
playing in the long grass, think about my dad as granddad,
if he'd lived longer. I twist my wedding ring, not ready
to take it off; try not to think about the fuel bill,
the fences that need mending and the bank's pressing calls.
I know we'll have to leave this place soon and I lean my head
back against the door jamb, let my eyes close

and open them in a jazz club, the band singing
Happy Birthday. My friends round the table warm me,
surprise me, clink glasses and join in with the band.
My child is an adult, my house all mine, and I want
to go home where a poem waits in a notebook
and mutters in the back of my head. Words clamour
for notice, won't let me close my eyes.

Chapter 1: The Context

While poetry institutions and journals, literary history, criticism and reviewing are male-dominated, women's poems will receive resistant readings. These accrue the value of an apparent consensus (Dowson 2001).

As noted in the introduction (p. 9) some of my difficulties with writing in the first-person can be attributed to personal history, but the personal barriers would have been easier to overcome had it not been for my awareness of the critical response, or lack of it, to women's poetry with autobiographical elements. Jo Gill and Melanie Waters in 'Poetry and Autobiography', the introduction to the journal *Life Writing*, suggested that the critical reception of women's 'confessional' poetry has come to mean that 'to label a [woman's] poem as 'autobiographical' or to identify autobiographical sources or voices is tantamount to denying its creative or aesthetic value' (2009: 3). This has been perfectly illustrated recently by the magazine *Private Eye,* whose literary reviewer seems to be annoyed by Sharon Olds winning the prestigious T S Eliot prize for *Stag's Leap* (2012). The reviewer's approach is to wonder 'whether she's really a poet at all' and to say that Olds 'merely cuts up and shapes her chatty memories on the page so they resemble poetry' (2013: 27). This sort of prejudice against domestic, confessional, or autobiographical poetry does not seem to apply to male poets; Christopher Reid's Costa Prize winning collection *A*

Scattering (2009) was about his wife's death and Don Paterson's acclaimed collection *Rain* (2009) includes intimate poems about his children; Jan Schreiber in the *Contemporary Poetry Review* called the Paterson collection "a poignant and remarkable book" (2011: online). While birth and parenting surely belong with the great poetic themes such as love and death, it seems women can only be accepted as narrators when it is going awry. They can write about miscarriage or death, they can write about failing and being inadequate (and preferably also be suicidal) but a straightforward poetic exploration of the miracle of creating a human being is regarded as something akin to grabbing a stranger's arm, fixing them with a glittering eye, and forcing them to look at family photos. Emily Nussbaum's review of Deborah Garrison's collection in the *New York Times* complains that 'these poems are simply anecdotes of children being adorably profound' (2007: online) and ends with an inevitably mismatched comparison with Sylvia Plath:

> it's unfair, of course, to expect Garrison to be like Plath. She has her own gifts and an audience sure to appreciate them. In real life, I'd rather have a likable next-door neighbor than a bipolar goddess as a confidante. But in writing? Give me the strange mother over the sweet one any day (2007: online).

Kate Clanchy's book, *Newborn* (2004), was a Poetry Book Society recommendation and is a collection of fine poetry about childbirth and

motherhood from a skilled and experienced poet. Her earlier collections won acclaim and prizes yet *Newborn* met with very mixed reviews including an online one reportedly of such misogyny and venom directed at the poet herself that it was taken down as potentially libellous. A few isolated quotes survive the deletion of the review within Neil Astley's 'StAnza' lecture: 'all the flaws in Clanchy's "craft" multiply beneath her consistently patronising tone'; 'another poem was said to be 'worth citing if only for the encased moment of self-confession to the vanity and vacancy of Clanchy's entire poetic enterprise'' (2005: online). I cannot relate these quotes to the quality of the poetry I find in *Newborn*. For example, a short poem 'Rejoice in the Lamb' (the title is a translation of Christopher Smart's title 'Jubilate Agno') juxtaposes allusions to madness and religious vision with childhood innocence to create a taut lyric which is both celebratory and unsettling:

> At night, in your shift, fine hair upright,
> you are my tiny Bedlamite,
> admonishing the laughing crowd
> with your pale, magisterial hands,
> or roaring out like poor Kit Smart
> how blessed, electric, all things are (2004: 15).

The critical reception of any women's poetry that can be labelled 'confessional' has engendered a self-consciousness about the 'I' which significantly contributed to my own discomfort in writing poetry in the first person. I am

apparently not alone in feeling a need to distance myself from the I in poetry; Deryn Rees-Jones, in her critical work *Consorting with Angels* (2005), analyses some of the distancing strategies employed by British women writing today to deflect

> a direct relationship between the 'I' of the poet and the poetic 'I'' including Carol Ann Duffy through myth and monologue, Selima Hill through surreal imagery, and Alice Oswald by a coalescence of body and nature through multiple voices (2005: 148).

While there are plenty of sources to be found of women writing *about* the dismissal of any women's poetry with autobiographical elements, direct evidence is more difficult to track down. In some ways, this is not surprising; it is known that women's poetry is in the minority on the review pages and also proportionately less published. Publisher Neil Astley, in his 2005 'StAnza' lecture surveyed the *Guardian Review's* poetry pages:

> I went through a pile of over 70 Reviews collected over a two-year period from 2003 up to last weekend. Even I found the statistics shocking. [...] I counted full-length reviews of 66 other new poetry books, but only 10 of those were by women writers. Those 66 books were reviewed by 38 different critics, but only four of those were women (2005).

Blogger Fiona Moore has done a more recent survey of the same publication and, while there has been some improvement since then, there is still gender disparity: from March 2012 to April 2013 the poetry books reviewed were 75%

by men and 25% by women (Moore 2013). Both Astley and Moore chose the *Guardian* to survey; it probably covers poetry more thoroughly than the other UK broadsheets and has a reputation of being left-leaning and politically correct so that it could perhaps be assumed that the paper would have less gender bias than the more conservative publications. In addition, as Fiona Moore says,

> because the Guardian is mainstream, reaching a far wider audience than any poetry magazine. People whose acquaintance with contemporary poetry goes no further than skimming the [Guardian] Review's reviews will have no idea of its diversity (2013: online).

'VIDA' counts gender disparity in reviews across a range of publications in the USA, collecting similar results as above with a few notable exceptions (<http://www.vidaweb.org>).

Given the difficulty of finding reviews of women's poetry to sample, and given that work dismissed as 'confessional' is often rejected, primary written sources of the critical response to such work are extremely difficult to find. Where reviews do show distaste for women's directly autobiographical work, it is often stated obliquely. A review by Adrien Grafe praises Helen Farish's poetry for being 'subtler, more objective and distanced, and therefore ultimately more moving, than that of some of her sisters and contemporaries' (2008: online) thus apparently offering a pat on the head to Farish for being 'distanced' while, by

using the politically loaded 'sisters', taking a sideswipe at women's poetry which is more direct.

Another reason it is difficult to find very much explicit evidence is that the poetry world is small and bears grudges; women who stand up to bring attention to any disparity are usually attacked, often viciously, for daring to question the status quo or cast blame. Neil Astley's *StAnza* lecture details examples of such responses (2005). Any discussion there was to be had about this issue had to offer safety and confidentiality.

I wanted to know whether I was alone in my perception of bias so informally approached experienced, published, women poets, and asked them to share any direct experiences of negative responses to autobiographical work. I assured them of confidentiality and that I would neither name nor quote them in any subsequent articles or papers without permission.

The reported negative experiences ranged from tutors refusing to critique work that was too 'female' or 'domestic' to an editor of a well-known journal stating they didn't publish 'confessional' work; this is an interesting position to take, given the importance to contemporary poetry of the first 'Confessional' poets such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. The conflation of the

terms autobiographical and confessional has become problematic for reviewers and readers and it is difficult to make any clear distinction between the two terms. Andrew Mulvania, in an essay on the work of Charles Wright notes 'Nearly all writing on the confessional literature acknowledges its relationship with autobiography, though there appears to be little agreement about the nature of this relationship' (2002: online). At the time Lowell, Sexton, and Plath were publishing and being categorised as confessional, readers understood what the term was meant to signify. Poetry defined as confessional could be expected to express personal conflict and emotional turmoil through using highly personal details of the poet's life and family. Poetry readers cannot be as clear in current times. 'Confessional' and 'autobiographical' are used interchangeably, with 'confessional' often being used pejoratively. Regan Good, in an article which attempts to unpack the term 'confessional' suggests that 'more often than not we mean to imply that their work amounts to nothing more than an artless retelling of personal material capped off with a tidy epiphany' (1998: online). I have chosen not to use the term 'confessional' in this thesis, except when referring to others' use of it, because of the lack of clarity about its use and because of its associations: confession implies wrongdoing and I have nothing to confess. In her essay, "Family Talk: The Confessional Poet? Not Me," Colette Inez has a similar view: 'I'm not confessing. I don't extol

wretchedness. I'm not after absolution for, or remission of my sins as in the confessional booth of my childhood' (2001: 119).

While it is difficult to convey the negativity of the reported experiences without breaching confidentiality, some of the language used by the critics was repeated in several women's stories: 'personal' and 'of no interest' was the most common, 'coy' appeared a few times, one woman's work was described as 'fluffy' in a review while any assertiveness or hint of anger in the poems was described as 'shrill'. While the responses collected were necessarily anecdotal and informal, the experience confirmed to me that I was not alone in perceiving a biased response to women's poetry with autobiographical elements.

I found the responses so interesting that I wanted to discover whether there is any correlation with published negative comments about women poets' work, and for comparison, about male poets' work. Published discourse about poetry can be largely divided into two areas: that of critical discourse and of published book reviews. I decided to examine reviews for two main reasons. Firstly that critical discourse has an accepted tone and format and is often subject to peer review, thus is less likely than reviews to overtly demonstrate bias, while

reviews are written by a wide variety of people with diverse experience and prejudices. The second reason for choosing to examine reviews was that critical discourse only engages with a small cross-section of poets who are established, whose reputation and development is already secured; reviews are often the first public assessment of an emerging poet's work. A negative review of an emerging poet's work, which does not engage critically with the text, may not only influence future readers and editors, but may also have a limiting effect on the poet's creativity and productivity so they have less chance of becoming established. Kate Clanchy has not published any poetry since the potentially libellous review of her work in 2004 (pp. 86-87). Teresa Amabile's research, detailed below, demonstrates how the expectation of evaluation or judgement impacts on creativity (pp. 103-104).

I looked for recent published reviews of poetry collections which were negative; I identified seven reviews about male poets and seven about female poets. Ten reviewers and nine publications were represented in the fourteen reviews, spread between the two groups so that analysis would not be skewed by an individual reviewer's or publication's style. I conducted thematic analysis on the reviews in both groups While it would be interesting to take this a step

further and examine the language and reviewers' approaches in positive reviews and, also, to analyse male and female reviewers, cross-gender and same-gender reviewing; there is not the space or scope here to do so although I intend to do so in the future.

I used the methodology described by Victoria Braun and Virginia Clarke in their article 'Using thematic analysis in psychology' (2006). I considered thematic analysis to be the most appropriate way of processing the responses because of its flexibility and because interpretations could be drawn from the data, rather than seeking to fit the data into a pre-determined theoretical framework. Braun and Clarke describe it as one of the 'methods that are essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches' (2006: 78). To begin the analysis, I treated each review as a data set from which I could select data extracts for coding. Braun and Clarke stress the importance of getting to know the data thoroughly in order to decide on the most appropriate codes through looking for patterns and issues of potential interest:

> Analysis involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing. Writing is an integral part of analysis, not something that takes place at the end, as it does with

> statistical analyses. Therefore, writing should begin in phase one, with the jotting down of ideas and potential coding schemes, and continue right through the entire coding/analysis process (2006: 86).

I had to make some decisions at the outset in order to set the parameters of the analysis and be clear about its focus: I chose to use an inductive, as opposed to a theoretical, approach. Inductive thematic analysis is data driven, described by Braun and Clarke as 'a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions' (2006: 83). This approach meant that I identified codes as I worked through the texts, rather than setting codes in advance and looking for data extracts which would fit them. I also had to decide at what level to analyse the responses, on a semantic or a latent level (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). This meant deciding whether to approach the data at a semantic level, identifying themes only from what was presented on the surface, or whether to attempt to interpret underlying assumptions and ideas. I chose to analyse at a semantic level because I was more interested in what was said, and the language used, rather than the underlying ideas. Approaching the analysis inductively and semantically involved reading and re-reading the data sets, identifying significant phrases or sentences to extract and generating however many codes as may be identified from the extracts. Once the initial coding is set, themes are

identified by further examination of the data extracts, looking for connections and patterns which can enable codes to be collapsed or combined. Braun and Clarke are clear that prevalence alone is not enough to identify a strong theme:

An important question to address in terms of coding is what counts as a pattern/theme, or what "size" does a theme need to be? This is a question of prevalence both in terms of space within each data item, and prevalence across the entire data set. Ideally there will be a number of instances of the theme across the data set, but more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial (2006: 82).

The themes are identified through analysis and interpretation, which is based on a thorough understanding of, and familiarity with, the data. It seems inevitable there are pitfalls in this approach in that the analyst's preconceptions and prior experience could influence their identification of themes. I was anxious that my expectations, springing from my own experience, should not colour my interpretation of the data but I found that repeatedly reading back and forth between the data sets and the coding made the themes I identified seem the only possible ones. When I had completed the analysis, I used Braun

and Clarke's '15 Point Checklist of Criteria for Good Thematic Analysis' (2006: 96) to check my method and results.

I found Braun and Clarke's method of coding the scripts particularly helpful because of the form of the data, which made it difficult to find the connections and patterns while it was presented as an assortment of written reviews with all the different semantic styles one would expect. Having taken the first step of sorting individual extracts into a coding table, it became much easier to identify connections and patterns; a diagrammatic representation of the results is in appendix II.

Negative reviews are a small pool; while it is easier to find reviews with just one or two reservations or criticisms, those reviews would not have provided enough data extracts on which to conduct any meaningful analysis. Because the pool of reviews was so small, it was not possible to limit them to reviews of poetry collections with autobiographical elements. I anticipated that I would be able to generate the same codes for the reviews of both male and female poets but that was not wholly possible. There were some commonalities; the codes for 'content' and 'failure of craft' were generated from both data sets but other codes would not work across both sets. For example, I identified a strong code

of ‘gender-specific language’ in the reviews of women poets but there was only one instance of gender-specific language across all the male reviews. The code tables can be seen at appendix I.

For clarity, in discussing the analysis of the two groups I will refer to the reviews of male poets’ work as group 1, and the reviews of female poets’ work as group 2. The thematic analysis of the published reviews (diagrammatic representation at appendix II) shows a clear divergence between groups 1 and 2. The strongest themes from group 1 are those of ‘lack of originality or creativity’, closely linked to ‘failure of craft’. Some of the critical comments are specific, at the level of word choice, for example ‘“larynx” feels both distancing and clumsy, as do “lips un-puckered”, and “with the introduction”’ (Moore, 2014), but more of the comments are quite general such as; ‘a reliance on existing texts betrays an absence of imagination unless you do something imaginative and interesting with them’ (Stannard, 2014). However, whether the comments are specific or general, the content and tone are mostly what might be expected from critical reviews. While there are a small number of personal comments about the poets, they are connected to the tone or content of the poems and, unlike those in group 2, not gender-specific. For instance, in a review of the poet

Robert Hass, the reviewer observes 'the poet is so enamored of himself and his sincerity that he is rendered quite tone-deaf to the comic pseudo-profundity of his lines' (Robbins, 2010). This comment, while unpleasant, is not aimed at the poet for being a man, nor for writing about men's concerns. A minor theme for group 1 is that of subject matter, which leads in some instances to criticisms about the poets' personality or moral judgement such as 'There's no excuse for deploying ethnic stereotypes for comic effect' (Coates, 2014).

Conversely, by far the strongest theme from group 2 was 'subject matter', with the data extracts often linking to gender-specific language. A notable sub-theme within subject matter was political correctness. This is something that does not appear in the data sets for group 1, except for the quote above about 'ethnic stereotypes', which could be seen as a criticism about lack of political correctness. Political correctness features strongly in group 2, both explicitly and implicitly. Examples such as 'the whole collection reads very much like a handbook for the politically correct' (Milne, 1995) and 'perhaps they thought the drearily PC subject matter was enough to warrant its inclusion' (Holland, 2007) demonstrate that 'political correctness' is used as a negative charge. The 'PC' criticism carries an implication that the poems' content and themes are chosen

only from some misguided sense of what should be written about, rather than any genuine impulse of the poet. There are correlations between the leading themes in group 2 and the responses to the informal survey discussed on pages 90-92 ; quotes from the group 2 coding including 'misery memoir', 'uncomfortably vivid', 'overly intense' (Floyd, 2010), 'we're in the territory of public breast feeding in a restaurant, flaunting underarm hair' (Sutton, 2013), and 'highly personal and domestic poems written so flatly and repetitively' (Holland, 2007), clearly correlate directly to the 'too personal' criticisms of the informal responses. Where the criticisms of subject matter were not about being personal, they were aimed at content that was concerned with aspects of the feminine such as 'Goddess-bothering' (MacEochaidh, 2010) and 'so perfect for *Women's Hour*' (Sutton, 2013).

When I compare the analyses of the two groups (diagrams at appendix II), the difference between group 1 (reviews of male poets) and group 2 (female poets) are obvious and striking. The main difference is based in where the criticisms are focussed. In group 1, the main focus of criticism is craft and creativity; the minor theme of subject matter links directly to a perceived lack of creativity or originality. The few personal comments about the poets lead directly from the

content or tone so that they can be seen to be about the quality of the poetry. In group 2, which is about female poets, the primary focus of the criticism is about the subject matter or theme of the poems. Group 2's theme of 'politically correct' does not feature at all in the reviews of male poets except by the implication of its absence in criticism of 'ethnic stereotypes' (Coates, 2014). 'Subject matter' does feature as a theme in both group 1 and group 2 but it is a minor theme in group 1, closely linked to criticisms about unoriginality, while it is the strongest theme in group 2. The analysis confirms my feeling that women's poems are judged more often on content, instead of poetic qualities. I find this confirmation disturbing and believe it is an issue which needs to be confronted in poetry criticism. A focus on content precludes the possibility of a response which closely examines form, language, rhythm and other elements of craft in a way which may be usually expected in poetry criticism.

The other major difference shown by the analysis of the groups is in the language used. Across all of the data for group 1, there is only one instance of language which could be considered specifically associated with men, 'macho pomp', but gender-specific language is ubiquitous in group 2. Some of the criticisms were couched in terms that would not be used about men:

'overblown, dippy-hippy, Gai/Goddess trip' (MacEochaidh, 2010), 'Poems to be printed on Cath Kidston merchandise' (Coates, 2013), 'as if some particularly over-enthused middle-class coven' (MacEochaidh, 2010). Classics professor Mary Beard, in her lecture for the *London Review of Books* 'The Public Voice of Women' (2014) described how women's voices have been disapproved of in public speech since the classical world. The way women's voices were described, when they spoke in public forums, was similar in tone to the language found in the analysis of group 2. Mary Beard shows a Roman from the first century AD describing a woman 'who used to initiate legal cases herself and was 'impudent' enough to plead in person, so that everyone became tired out with her 'barking' or 'yapping' (LRB 2014). In more recent times, Beard describes a campaign for 'proper standards in American speech' in the late nineteenth century, in which the writer Henry James was prominent, where 'there was plenty of thundering about the 'thin nasal tones' of women's public speech, about their 'twangs, whiffles, snuffles, whines and whinnies', dehumanising language which is very similar to the 'whinging' or whining' often used about women's writing (LRB 2014).

The results of the analyses shows women writers' perceptions are well founded; they cannot assume their work will be assessed or critiqued equitably with that of their male contemporaries. As a writer, I may try to ignore such concerns but the reality is that the expectation of evaluation in the form of reviews and critical reception can affect our creativity. Teresa Amabile describes a number of research projects in her book *Creativity in Context* (1997) which demonstrates how the expectation of evaluation or judgement impacts on creativity:

> the prospect of threatening critical evaluation often co-occurs with low levels of creativity (Amabile & S Gryskiewicz, 1987). However, these same studies show that informative, constructive feedback and evaluation that conveys positive recognition of creative work often co-occur with high levels of creativity (1997: 152).

Much of Amabile's research is concerned with the relative robustness of motivation, dependent on whether an individual's creative motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic, a theoretical framework she explains and updates in chapter 4 (1997: 107-127). Intrinsic motivation to be creative is shown to be usually more robust and sustainable than extrinsic motivation. However, Amabile has found that even intrinsic motivation can be negatively affected by the expectation of evaluation:

> with the performance (and any resultant feedback) yet to come, expected external evaluation can convey only external control over performance, thus undermining interest and creativity. […] On the other hand, actual

> evaluation of performance can affect subsequent intrinsic motivation and creativity positively (if a feeling of competence is conveyed) or negatively (if controlling information is still more salient) (1997: 147).

and

> Deci suggests that, to the extent that external evaluation of a person's work conveys external control over that work, intrinsic motivation will be undermined (1997: 145).

If the critical response to women's personal work is negative then the expectation of further negative responses exerts a pressure to avoid the personal, thus creating a form of control, as mentioned above, over the writer's work and undermining motivation. Amabile suggests creative tasks are 'heuristic', defined as those tasks where 'we cannot know beforehand just how to achieve a novel and appropriate response' (1997: 140); she contrasts heuristic tasks with 'algorithmic' ones where specific instructions are given about how to complete the task successfully. Within these definitions, the writing of poetry is heuristic; Amabile shows that heuristic work is negatively affected by the expectation of evaluation to a greater extent than is algorithmic work (1997: 140). Given that women cannot assume the expected evaluation will be a properly critical response, the limiting effect must be greater. Although understanding and acknowledging the barriers created by the critical landscape

reduces their power to some extent, I am left to consider how much my writing is constrained by the expectation of negative responses.

If understanding the barriers is necessary to overcome them then it is important to examine why it is so difficult for editors and critics to afford women's first-person poetry a properly thorough critical response. Perhaps it is partly because, as poet Rose Kelleher said in an online discussion about the negative reaction to Sharon Olds, 'the universal 'I' is male'[3] and if that is so, then those readers, however unconsciously, will be more inclined to dismiss the work as irrelevant to their concerns and discard it without close reading. The lyric poem, perhaps more than any other, demands the reader submits to it and accepts its world view; Vicki Bertram, in her book *Gendering Poetry* (2005), describes some of the research which has been done about the effect of gender on readers as well as writers. She describes Sarah Mills's experiments from *Gendering the Reader* (2005) where she examines both male and female reception of a poem which is an explicitly female lyric poem and shows how male readers struggle to engage with it, suggesting they 'struggle to find a position from which to read as *males*' (2005: 46). The alternative for male readers is cross-gender

[3] The forum in which the discussion took place periodically purges old threads so that it is not possible to reference the comment. A downloaded copy of the comment can be seen at appendix III.

identification which is, of course, possible but as Bertram says, 'a more unusual experience for men' (2005: 46), while women have had to become used to reading, and identifying with, the male lyric through its prevalence in education, publication, and anthologies .

Whatever gains have been made by women in the publishing world, the default definition of poet is still male; no-one says 'male poet' because at some level it sounds tautologous and poets who are women are described as 'women poets' as if they have to be defined in terms of their aberrance, of their not being men. As in the visual arts, in poetry women have traditionally been the object of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1989: 19), rather than the artist; the vehicle of the metaphor rather than the creator of it. Poetry has traditionally been framed as authoritative and public; it has been seen as imparting wisdom, philosophy, history, and insight to a passive audience. Law, medicine, politics and other domains that are seen as carrying authority have been strongly defended against incursion by women and the same is true of poetry. Mary Beard shows how public speech is defended against the incursion by women in the same way as it has always been:

> for it seems to me that many aspects of this traditional package of views about the unsuitability of women for public speaking in general – a

> package going back in its essentials over two millennia – still underlies some of our own assumptions about, and awkwardness with, the female voice in public. Take the language we still use to describe the sound of women's speech, which isn't all that far from James or our pontificating Romans. In making a public case, in fighting their corner, in speaking out, what are women said to be? 'Strident'; they 'whinge' and they 'whine' (LRB 2014).

One of the most effective defences has been the focus on content, rather than craft, in women's poetry and the use of that focus as a means of dismissal. The poet Helen Farish, writing about a conference in an article for the journal *Life Writing,* describes a male poet expressing his relief to be reading with two other male poets because 'men write about ideas, women only write about themselves' (2009: 143).

Most, if not all, lyric poetry is, at its heart, about the big life issues of love and death; a way to examine and express the mysteries of the human condition. How absurd, then, it seems to limit or dismiss the mysteries at life's beginning of childbirth and child-rearing or those of sustaining life through feeding and nurturing. This division in themes was strengthened by the Victorian emphasis on separation of the male public domain and the female domestic domain, following the foregrounding of the lyric 'I' through the Romantics. Division in themes and domains appears, to some extent, to be self-sustaining; women

poets who have managed to established a strong public lyric voice such as Gillian Clarke and Eavan Boland 'have done so by delineating a specifically female sphere: the neglected matter of women's domestic lives' (Bertram, 2005: 45). Where critical works include women's poetry, it is often sequestered to a separate chapter and analysed only in terms of Feminist Theory and not any of the other approaches available. For example, in his book 'The Twentieth Century in Poetry' (1998) Peter Childs included chapters on 'Recent Male Anthologies' and 'Recent Anthologies by Women'; however, 'while the first chapter covers a broad range of issues from Thatcherism to philosophy, the second takes feminism as its central theme' (Bertram 2005: 1). It seems that women who write poetry are in a double bind; they are expected to write within a narrow context and range of subjects but are criticised on the basis of their content or themes when they do. Jane Dowson, in her article 'Humming an Entirely Different Tune' suggests it is not enough to ask that women's poetry is judged in the same way as men's:

> the evidence from contemporary reviewing, along with the evidence from literary history, tell us that without a distinct literary terminology for women's poetry, it will continue to be measured by men's and judged negatively in relation to it (2001: online).

It is within this context, and partly because of it, that I became aware of the limiting barriers which I needed to understand, and find a way to overcome, if I

were to develop as a poet. To not only write as a woman but also to write in the first person with autobiographical elements, meant finding a way to challenge or dismiss the pejorative assumptions made about women's poetry, many of them internalised and consciously or unconsciously shared.

Chapter 2: Writing the *I*

To find a way to write poems using the autobiographical first person, I had to first find a way to establish a position from which I could negotiate the shifting and slippery territory of the 'I'. 'I' in poetry is always a construct: 'I' as persona, 'I' as personal testimony, and 'I' as a narrative device must always contain aspects of the poet's self. Whatever distancing devices a writer may use, it seems inevitable that our interests, priorities, personal histories and cultural environment will find expression in our language and how we use it. Contemporary poets are very aware that the 'I', even when autobiographical, cannot be a single coherent, consistent point of view because of the inherently complex nature of the self. The self offered to the reader in the text is different from the self who remembers, and different from the self who lived the experience. I believe the inner, private, self, if it can be defined at all, is charted by feeling and response to experience which means it must be in a constant state of flux. The inner, private, self is unvoiced; I know that as soon as I speak, or write, I express myself through filters which are specific to any given situation. It follows that an unvoiced, constantly changing self cannot be captured within

the limits of a poem's text. The instability of the 'I' demands a lot from readers, as Gill and Waters note in their introduction to *Life Writing*:

> Arguably, the lyric 'I' asks more of us as readers than the 'I' of prose narrative. It asks us to read and believe in the knowledge that our belief is chimerical. It asks us to accept the possibility that the 'I' is autobiographically referential while simultaneously insisting that it need not be. It sets a trap that we, as readers, seem to enjoy falling into (2009: 3).

The 'I' in a poem, while inevitably representing aspects of the poet, can only be the 'I' in that poem, however personal the content. The unstable nature of the 'I' in poetry, while potentially causing anxiety, may also be the area of greatest interest and creativity, as Jacqueline Rose argues in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991). Plath's poems, while usually seen as nominally autobiographical, contain elements which cause uncertainty, and sometimes outrage; for example the portrayal of her father as a Nazi in the poem 'Daddy' (2002: 222). Rose suggests reading Plath's work leads to moments of 'indecision which in turn generate[s] anxiety—an anxiety that can be productive if we allow it to indicate how uncertain truth can be' (1991: xiv). Paradoxically, the uncertainty generated by the instability of the 'I' eased some of my own anxieties; thinking about the shifting territory of the 'I' in this way helped me realise that worries about privacy and exposure were unfounded because the 'I' in my poems will never be wholly me.

Another factor which adds to the slipperiness of the 'I' in poetry for me is its homophonic relationship with 'eye'. The importance of concrete imagery in contemporary poetry means that the poet's eye is a constant presence in poetry, albeit often unacknowledged; when reading poetry, I often hear 'I', or 'eye', as I and eye simultaneously. This duality is particularly strong for me in lines from Don Paterson's poem, 'Phantom': 'Your eye is no eye but an exit wound/ mind has fired through you into the world' (2009: 56). The lines would read equally well with 'I' instead of 'eye' and could be considered potentially more interesting if it were 'I', as the 'I' exits out into the world via language. A further connection which resonates with the Paterson lines is an essay by the American psychologist, James Hillman, entitled 'The Wound and the Eye' in which he asserts 'the wound and the eye are one and the same' (2013: 149); by this he means that we see deeper and more honestly when we see through our pathologies. Hillman believes that, as human beings, we cannot help but pathologise our experience and that our pathologies are not to be fixed or made better, but used and accepted.

The combination of all of these factors: the shifting territory of the 'I'; the homophonic relationship of 'I' and 'eye'; and the wounds through which I/eye exit provided a way for me to establish a position from which to negotiate the 'I' in the first poems in the collection.

I* and not-*I

> I who is not-I bolts like a day-caught fox
> from the path; a fire-streak across the field
> taking my breath to ground ('Sightlines', p. 22).

The poem acknowledges the slippery position of the first person from the outset by showing this 'I' is 'not-I'. In early drafts, this poem existed as three separate poems until it became apparent that each of the three poems were circling around the same issues of I/eye 'who is not-I'. Each of the three poems became sections in 'Sightlines', unified by each section beginning with 'I who is not-I'. The first line of the poem alludes obliquely to the Paterson line as the 'bolts like a day-caught fox' suggests the 'exit wound' through which eye/I 'fired through' (2009: 56). The eye/I duality is present throughout 'Sightlines', enhanced by references to sight: 'It settles here, between my eye/ and a bank of dead nettles'; 'I should be facing back'; 'cocks a pale eye'; 'All the 'I's line up'. The fragmented nature of the self is explored through 'I who is not-I' and repeated instances of

'this I' so that multiple aspects of the 'I' are shown interacting with the physical world.

'Sightlines' was one of the first poems I worked on for this project and became both an examination of how I could negotiate the 'I' in poetry and a manifesto for further work. Following the 'bolt' from the path which alludes to Paterson's 'exit wound' (2009: 56), the 'I' settles on a bank 'where brambled / lines spin a loose weave of risk' (p. 22), a metaphor for the riskiness I perceived in writing autobiographical material. The following two stanzas allude to my acknowledging the need to develop poetically, which motivated this project. Stanza 3 begins 'I write' and lists ways I have approached poetry before beginning this collection, either distanced 'cloud leaving the hill, / how it straggles in tree-tops' or hidden in persona 'I slip into skins and stretch / inside disguises'. The ending of stanza 3, 'practise voices / with my tongue folded', suggests neither honesty nor openness and reflects my growing dissatisfaction with writing as ventriloquism. Stanza 4 follows with 'I should be' and indicates the direction in which I believed my poetry needed to develop. 'shortening days' allude to ageing and mortality, while the 'wind-chime bones' imply memorialisation. The lines 'turning over stones / in a bowl, finding unexpected glints' suggest the need to examine the past and turn over memories, being

open to what may emerge. These were all themes I needed to confront if I was going to work with autobiographical elements and use a personal first-person.

The three indented stanzas in 'Sightlines' (stanzas 5, 7, and 10) stand apart from the rest of the poem. This indentation is intended to signify their role as commentary on my developing relationship with the 'I who is not-I' in the poem. Stanza 5 begins with a direct reference to Paterson's 'exit wound' (2009: 56):

> The exit wound appears after
> a moment of change
> like a paper-cut, unseen
> until blood seeps along the line,
> or a bruise blooming
> with no memory of pain (p. 22).

These lines encompass my realisation that poetry can be made from any 'moment of change'. The 'I' can go out into the world, through language, when there is any shift in the internal world. The similes in the following lines reflect my belief that poetry becomes possible after a change, rather than at the moment of change. This is similar to Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' (1992: 756), but not the same. For me it is more than emotion recollected; my creative process involves a re-imagining of sensory detail and visual image as a precursor to the recollection of an emotional response, all of which I find essential if a poem is to invoke a situation for the reader. Eavan

Boland, in her essay 'Why I am a Poet' explains a similar motivation and process when she says 'I write it, not to express the experience but to experience it further' (1999: 180). Boland goes on to explain the process:

> You may think you remember the experience perfectly. But there is a difference between remembering an experience and living it again. And when you begin to write a poem about that dawn, when you reach for the language, the musical clusters of sounds – all those things poetry is so rich in – you realise how well suited a poem is to make that winter dawn not just happen again, but go on happening (1999: 180).

I recognise Boland's explanation as being very similar to my own process; from remembering sensory detail and image, I then 'reach for the language' to invoke an experience. Re-experiencing in this way contributes to every stanza of 'Sightlines'.

The next indented stanza, stanza 7, shows how the eye is directed by the 'I' to collect concrete images and scraps of detail which may be used in the making of poetry: 'directing focus / to a vein on a leaf, a hilltop tree, / a half-heard conversation' (p. 23). The final indented stanza, and the final stanza of the poem, returns to the fragmented nature of the 'I' and plays off the visual quality of 'I' as a vertical line:

> All the 'I's line up
> striate the landscape.
> Hard rain on a window,
> split sunbeams on a floor,

cracks on a mirror,
multiple and refracting (p. 23).

The figurative language of this stanza works at different levels. The vertical line of the 'I' which 'striate[s] the landscape' may be read as a physical barrier similar to a barred window and as a representation of the way the multiple I, through which experience is filtered, colours memory in darkness and light. The metaphors of rain, split sunbeams, and mirror cracks reinforce the idea of the 'I's forming a visual striation as well as referring to the fragmented and shifting nature of the self as 'multiple and refracting'. The striation of vertical lines suggest fences and boundaries, which can be seen as boundaries between inner and outer worlds, but boundaries which also contain gaps through which the inner 'I' can escape.

In reflecting on the poem 'Sightlines' with the distance time and research provides, I have to consider why the poem is almost entirely made of figurative language. It seems counter-intuitive to use so much indirect language when one of the aims of the poem was to explore how I might be more direct in poetry through using the first person. However, it is the shifting and fragmented nature of the 'I' which makes figurative language an appropriate tool with which to examine my engagement with the 'I'. None of the various metaphors I have used throughout 'Sightlines' map precisely to a specific tenor but carry

allusions and suggestions which invite the reader to consider the different worlds or aspects of the self 'I who is not-I' may inhabit. For example, in stanza 6 (p. 22) 'I who is not-I slips into Jackdaw skin'. The jackdaw has a number of associations in lore and superstition; it is trickster and mimic, clever and avaricious collector of shiny things, foreteller of death, good fortune, or weather. Common associations are alluded to in the poem while also suggesting creativity or writing. Stealing 'scraps of song', mimicking, storing 'pretty things', and making patterns could all relate to the making of poetry:

> I who is not-I slips into Jackdaw skin,
> shrugs grey shoulders, sleeks black hood,
> cocks a pale eye.
> This I rattles feathers,
> steals scraps of song, trills phone tunes
> and a builder's whistle, free-falls from a tree-top,
> tumbles to stir a cloud, flicks a wing-tip.
> This I stores pretty things,
> pecks a split or turn, makes patterns
> on beech bark to twist in the wind (p. 22).

The quick, irregular rhythm is strengthened by the sound patterning of 's', 'p' and 't' and is intended to reinforce the vehicle of the jackdaw by reflecting its movement. The stanza ends with 'this I' in the shape of the jackdaw, the I of this part of the poem, leaving 'I who is not-I' 'to scratch jagged lines /on the ground.' As noted above, 'I' in a poem can only be the 'I' in that poem so the various manifestations of 'this I' in 'Sightlines' remain gated within their contexts while 'I who is not-I' explores the creation of those contexts. 'scratch jagged lines /on

the ground' (p. 23) can be seen to relate to the act of writing but also carries a biblical allusion. In the story of Cain and Abel, a corvid scratches the ground to show Cain where to bury Abel; it could be read as an indication of the need to dig up personal history for this project, or of an intention to examine relationships with those in my life that have died.

When I started writing poems for this collection, I was concerned that if I used too much figurative language, surrealism, or other poetic techniques, I might simply be finding new ways to avoid the 'I'. I was anxious not to do as Deryn Rees-Jones says of Carol Ann Duffy, Vicky Feaver, and Selima Hill: 'all three had developed strategies for writing about the intimacy of female experience which deflected a direct relationship between the 'I' of the poet and the poetic 'I'' (2005: 148). While the use of these deflection strategies is not necessarily negative, I felt such strategies would be counter-productive for my development at this stage. As I worked with the poems for the collection, it became clear that not using the full range of poetic techniques at my disposal would result in writing which was no more than reportage or diary entries; that I could only make poems by using poetic tools.

The poem 'Getting Here from There' (p. 26) is an extended metaphor. The title suggests an account of how I arrived at where I am now, of who I have become. The poem is written in the first person and is not dramatic monologue but the 'I' is fully embedded in the metaphor and refers to very little personal information. The metaphor is that of a journey to a hut in the woods where the speaker stays while examining, and coming to terms with, past life events through the medium of 'a map / of my skin' (p. 26) nailed to the wall. The prominence of the 'map' in the poem resonates with a phrase coined by Alfred Korzybski, the creator of the field of general semantics, 'the map is not the territory' (1954: 34). Korzybski meant by this that a correctly structured map could be used as a guide to a territory but could not re-create the territory; a symbol cannot create reality. This relationship between map and territory can also be seen to relate to metaphor, to the relationship between vehicle and tenor. The metaphor is sustained throughout the poem but, while there is very little personal information, the reader is provided with cues from the description of the hut which suggest the poem is personal. The book on the table with 'my name / on the cover', the skin-map, the 'curl of dark hair' which turns grey, and the intimacy of 'the setting of each mole / and freckle' all indicate a personal tenor for the metaphor. 'Getting Here from There' is mysterious, with no explanations offered to illuminate the narrative. Early drafts had more explanation but they

added little and diluted the impact so that compression was necessary for the benefit of the poem. Compressing and cutting what was unnecessary sharpened the poem considerably so that:

> When they'd gone, I walked
> for miles, focussing on my footfall
>
> on pavements, fields, woods.
> I name where I tread;
> grass, rock, leaves
> to fix the ground beneath me.
>
> I look up to see a cottage,
> its door ajar. Inside, a smell of emptiness,
> a taste of waiting; logs stacked (draft)

became, after editing:

> I name where I tread
> *grass, rock, mud*
> to fix the ground beneath me.
>
> A door ajar.
> Inside, a smell of emptiness,
> a taste of waiting; logs stacked (p. 26).

The first line was changed to 'I name where I tread' not only to provide a stronger opening but also to set up meaning as the extended metaphor suggests naming, and owning, one's past. Further changes in the editing process cut out description and explication which added nothing to the main thrust of the poem.

'Getting Here from There' (p. 26) is a poem that I consider personal yet I am aware it offers the reader no personal nor intimate information. I was concerned about the lack of personal detail at first as the poem does not seem to achieve what I set out to do in this collection; that is to explore how I might negotiate using a personal 'I' while overcoming my barriers to writing poems about family and personal history. Jo Gill, in *Women's Poetry*, suggests that focussing on 'the private, introspective, or local', which was one of my intentions in this collection, is to:

> risk conceding the validity of a largely – but not exclusively – masculine critical tradition which has argued that the private sphere is women's proper and only concern (2007: 79).

Gill is not suggesting that women should avoid writing about the private sphere but should 'define, evaluate, and if necessary redefine the term 'private' (2007: 80). She argues for women's poetry about 'private' issues being read as 'deliberate, rhetorical, and artful' so that:

> these writers [can] be credited with the creative skill they require and continue to display in turning the private sphere into a positive domain of their own choosing. So women poets refuse to speak only in and from a position of privacy, just as they claim the right to do so if they so wish (2007: 80).

While reflecting on these issues I questioned whether, in using metaphor as I have in 'Getting Here from There', I am avoiding giving personal detail because of concerns about the critical tradition mentioned by Gill (2007: 79). My

difficulty lies, at least in part, with the use of 'private'; Gill is discussing what she calls 'conventionally private themes and subjects (childbirth, love, loss and so on)' (2007: 80); themes which are often labelled as 'domestic'. However, she also refers to closing down 'easy public access to intimate moments' (2007: 80). Gill appears to be conflating two subtly different senses of the word 'private': as in the antonym for public in line with the historic ideas of public versus private (domestic) spheres of influence, and in the sense of individual privacy as in the intimate or internal things we may choose to keep to ourselves. My difficulties in reflecting on a poem such as 'Getting Here from There' spring from these subtle shifts and ambiguities in what is private.

When Emily Dickinson, in poem 891, writes 'I could not find a Privacy' (1970: 422), it raises the question of how the instinct for privacy can be balanced with the impulse to write and reflects my own anxieties about exposure, and how to reconcile that concern with my acknowledged need to develop as a poet. I, as Gill says, 'claim the right' to write about the private sphere by deciding to use themes of personal and family history in this collection so I question whether using extended metaphor and leaving out personal information is reneging on that claim. However, in finding a way to reconcile the two senses of 'private' above, I concluded that deciding to write about the 'private' sphere does not

mean that I am obliged to disclose anything and everything. I can write about home and family themes while also maintaining personal privacy; I can, as Dickinson says in poem 1129 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant' (1970: 506). A further consideration in deciding what to cut or leave out in the editing process is that I am writing poems with autobiographical elements, not an autobiography or a diary. Every decision made in drafting and re-drafting a poem, whether about content or language, is made with benefit to the poem as the primary concern.

The memory of *I*

Other poems in the collection are more directly autobiographical, particularly those to do with childhood memories and those which memorialise people who have died. However much personal detail is in the poems, the poetic qualities must still be my priority in writing or editing in order to avoid the risk of producing mere reportage. The poem 'Blink' (p. 83) contains more directly autobiographical material than any other in the collection but I was also interested to examine the effect of time on memory, how memories shrink to isolated moments over years. Each stanza contains a vignette of personal memory, set in a different stage of life. I was aware, when I was drafting this poem, that the narrative within each stanza was more plain and linear than I am

accustomed to writing. There are very few metaphors or other tropes and I was concerned there was a risk of its content being too quotidian to engage a reader. I used compression and economy to centre the narrative on images which a reader could recognise and relate to in order to evoke memories in the reader and create resonance, for example 'skirt is shortened /by rolls at the waist'; 'tossed helmet'; 'child / playing in the long grass'.

To link the stanzas and to represent the way memory presents as isolated moments, I used a device of ending each stanza with eyes closing then beginning the following stanza with eyes opening on a different scene.

> but I'm lit up like the candles on my birthday cake.
> I close my eyes to make a wish,
>
> open them at the school gate; my skirt is shortened
> by rolls at the waist, my stance consciously casual (p. 83).

The effect of this device is not only to add interest through creative tension but also to reflect the way time jumps in memory, skipping contexts and focussing on individual scenes. The narrative jumps in this way from a childhood birthday, to a teenage school-gate, to divorce, ending on a middle-age birthday. Beginning and ending the poem on birthday scenes adds a feeling of completion to the poem which otherwise could have seemed unfinished in that a list of memories does not have a natural ending nor limit. The final line of the poem

being 'won't let me close my eyes' resolves the open and closed eyes device while bringing the poem into the present by suggesting the speaker has her eyes open to life now, in the moment. Using the device of the open and closed eyes also eased my anxieties about creating poetry from straightforward description of memories in that it enabled me to see my choice of theme as, as Gill writes, 'deliberate, rhetorical and artful' (2007: 80).

Another poem which is built on the exploration of memory and how it works is 'Thumb-Pricks & Eye-Dazzles' (p. 69). This poem focusses on the evocation of memory through sensory stimuli and so needed to be rich in sensory detail to demonstrate, as well as examine, the workings of memory.

> It's like the stretch of my hand around
> a too-big potato and the feel of the waxed
> twine on the peeler handle; the sink
> I lean on becomes deep and square,
> cracks spidering from the drain, the scent
> of damp earth rising from the peelings (p. 69).

In this poem the 'I' is used as a vehicle through which to explore the workings of memory. The poem begins with a domestic detail of 'peeling boiled eggs' and continues with peeling potatoes; my research has shown that content seen as 'domestic' may be one of the triggers for the dismissal of women's poetry as discussed in chapter 1. I decided to resist the pressure to avoid the domestic and focus on whatever individual poems needed to achieve their aims. In order to

examine the workings of memory, I believe it is essential to include details considered domestic. While memories may be about issues such as love and death, memory is usually triggered by small, often sensory, detail which must inevitably sometimes be from home and family life.

'Thumb-Pricks & Eye-Dazzles' (p. 69) begins with the sensory stimulus of touch which triggers memories. The 'prick of eggshell' from peeling eggs leads to remembered lore and superstitions about eggshell, cueing the reader in to the type of home being remembered:

> Peeling boiled eggs; the prick of eggshell
> on my thumb warns of warts, of witches
> sailing away on half-shells, of the dangers
> in egg-water, of *the pricking of my thumbs* (p. 69).

The alliteration and near-repetitions: eggs/eggshells/egg-water, thumb/thumbs, prick/pricking, eggshell/ half-shell, set up a rhythmic pattern reminiscent of nursery rhyme which suggests to the reader that the memories are of childhood. The sensory detail continues throughout the poem; physical sensations which will be familiar to many readers are used to evoke memories for readers as well as for the speaker:

> It's like the stretch of my hand around
> a too-big potato and the feel of the waxed
> twine on the peeler handle (p. 69).

The physical sensation is shown to trigger concrete visual and olfactory memory as

> the sink
> I lean on becomes deep and square,
> cracks spidering from the drain, the scent
> of damp earth rising from the peelings (p. 69).

The poem does not simply describe memories as it is intended to examine an aspect of memory and how it works. The repetition of 'it's like' in lines 5 and 11 show memories, engendered through sensory stimuli, evoking other times when physical sensation brought up memories, so that the poem becomes a chain of memories, of further memories, linked by sensory stimuli. While the first two memories are very concrete and grounded by quotidian detail, the third is comparatively ephemeral and suggestive of metaphor:

> Or it's like the sudden dazzle of autumn
> sun which sends me back in to a dream
> I had once, of a songbird trapped
> in my house, the frantic soft flutter
> of it in my hands; of opening a door
> to release it and being blinded by light (p. 69).

The section begins with sensory stimulus, 'sudden dazzle of autumn / sun' but because the memory evoked is of a dream, it is less grounded in domestic detail. I had to exercise great care in using a dream to end the poem as dreams in poetry too easily attract abstractions and clichés. To ameliorate the risk, I ensured the details were specific and concrete and that images were fresh: 'hand fading into white', 'pomegranate squint of my eyelids'. As with the metaphors

in ‘Sightlines’ (p. 22), the metaphor of the trapped songbird being released is not mapped to a specific tenor but does offer the reader a route out of the closed world of eggshells and Belfast sinks and could be a metaphor for the poem itself. The unresolved outcome of releasing the bird, ‘I couldn’t see / whether it flew or fell’ contributes to the openness introduced into the poem by the ungrounded metaphor, and also suggests the uncertainty about how a poem will be received once it is released. Richard Bradford, in *Stylistics*, shows how metaphors in poetry, unlike in ordinary speech, may create their own contexts as the released songbird does here:

> It is the language of the poem, as much as the reader’s *a priori* knowledge, which creates its perceived situation and context. It constructs its own ground, and metaphor becomes less a departure from contextual terms and conditions and more a device which appropriates and even establishes them (1997: 24).

Truth and lies

The American poet Ted Kooser contributed an essay to the book *After Confession* titled ‘Lying for the Sake of Making Poems’ in which he states his objections to poets fictionalising themselves and their experiences in lyric poetry:

> Perhaps I am hopelessly old-fashioned. Perhaps I should accept the possibility that what the poet says happened really didn't happen at all, but I'm going to have to make a painful adjustment in the way I read poetry and honor poets. I grew up believing a lyric poet was a person who wrote down his or her observations, taken from life (2001: 158).

Kooser is especially concerned about poems in which the first person is used as a persona to describe traumatic events which may not have happened to the poet; he feels the reader is 'cheated and deceived' and considers it 'despicable to exploit the trust a reader has in the truth of lyric poetry' (2001: 161). Kooser's position is extreme and is a position I find absurd. Kooser's statements about truth in lyric poetry suggest that absolute truth about an event can exist, which raises the question of whose truth he refers to. Memory and observation are notoriously elastic; as well as change being brought about by the very act of observation, any two people involved in an event or experience will have differing perceptions of 'his or her observations, taken from life' (2001: 158). Kooser also seems to be suggesting that poets should be reporting on experiences and events, rather than discovering a truth in poetry through following language, rhythm, form, and all the other tools available to us. Kathleen Jamie, in her essay 'Holding Fast – Truth and Change in Poetry' for the *Strong Words* anthology (2000) views truth as something approached through poetry, rather than an immutable element of it:

> A poem is an approach toward a truth. But poems can be funny, witty, quirky and sly. They can be mischievous, tricksterish. Their truths don't sound like the truths of the court-room or inquest. Does this, then, show us something about the nature of truth? Can we say there are many truths, or, rather, many aspects of Truth? That truth itself is a shape-shifter? (2000: 280).

Each poem carries its own truth and lyric poetry, in particular, needs to show the reader emotional truth in that the feelings or sensations the poem evokes must ring true if it is to be accepted. Other writers are less rigid than Kooser about factual truth. Stephen Dunn, in his essay in the same book suggests that fictionalising experience may be necessary for the poem's 'emotional veracity'

> I do remember feeling, after much revision, that all the details, fictive or actual, contributed to the poem's emotional veracity (2001: 180).

As a poet, I believe that if a poem is to create its own sense of truth, then I must follow the language, not the facts. George Szirtes, in an interview for the 'Writers & Artists' website suggests something similar:

> experience is best not stated or met direct. Experience ghosts through language so give it something interesting to ghost through. And listen, because your intention is not the poem; the poem is what is happening in the language in the same way as its subject is the music of what happens (Writers & Artists).

My poem 'Last Summer' (p. 37) is a mixture of fiction and fact; it is an attempt to express the feelings engendered by growing up in the area where serial killers Fred and Rosemary West were active, and the sense of collective guilt that swept the area when the bodies were discovered. The poem begins with a sylvan view of a childhood in which I spent a lot of time playing alone in the hills and woods:

> Not just summer, but one of those perfect summers
> that you might say is faulty memory.

Blue sky, wisps of white cloud,
some nights washed with enough rain
to keep the grass live and waving.
My knees were brown and scabbed; I called my bike Helen
and talked to her on long rides to visit the horses
on the hill and the kittens in the barn (p. 37).

This far, the poem is factually true although the second line sounds a warning about the plasticity of memory; 'you might say is faulty memory'. From that point in the poem onwards, fact and fiction are blended. I did have favourite places in which I 'peopled glades and paths with a kingdom' but I knew no names for the woods I played in. 'Stewards Wood' is a name I knew from later in my life and was added to the poem to ground the incident in a specific place. The poem's description of a man burying something, with the implication that it is a body, is not something I experienced but it is given veracity by using specific detail and images. 'dad's army kitbag / I sometimes climbed inside'; 'like the flick-books I made /of horses running'; 'like when I saw Aunty Silvia roll down her stockings', are all true experiences, chosen to add depth and reality to the scene described. The implication of a body is strengthened by showing the 'lumpy bag like dad's army kitbag' capable of being 'climbed inside'. The scene resonates with the idiom 'to know where the bodies are buried', with its implication of knowing guilty secrets. The end of the poem is separated by a break to show a shift in time to when the bodies were discovered, twenty to thirty years after the victims disappeared:

and I saw his face, held my breath while he left.

Last year I saw his face in the newspaper.
Rows of photos; young women in grainy monotone,
hairstyles stuck in my childhood.
I could feel bark under my hands,
smell ripe grasses,
freshly turned earth (p. 37).

The repetition of 'I saw his face', together with the sensory memory triggered by the 'rows of photos', add to the impression that something could have been done at the time and increase the feelings of guilt in the poem. A number of readers have asked me whether the incident in the poem 'really happened'; emotionally, the poem is true for me. The memory of the 'rows of photos' in the newspaper as the bodies were found is very strong and the whole community was overwhelmed with a sense of something should have been known, or seen, or done. While it may have been possible to express the collective guilt and regret in a poem based only on factual truth, I do not believe it would have been as successful in evoking the truth of how it felt and would have risked reading like a news report.

Having worked through issues about fact and fiction in 'Last Summer' (p. 37), I experimented further with the poem 'Some of These Things are True' (p. 38). The early drafts of the poem were in the form of a sestina, with a progression of years creating the repeating pattern (see appendix V). During the editing

process, it became apparent that some of the lines did not earn their place in the poem and were only there to fulfil the form requirements and as a result, I released the poem from the form. While using the sestina form had provided a way in to the poem and enabled me to be expansive, releasing the poem from the form then allowed me to cut back to the lines which carried more weight. It also became clear that the years beginning each line were no longer needed as they had only been there to create the form. This process resulted in a poem consisting of lines beginning with 'I':

> I learned about waiting, the sour taste of it
> I had long conversations with my bicycle
> I lived in a cave, learned the rhythms of bats
> I stopped whispering, tongued the roundness of breath
> I discovered a mad child and held the door open
> I spoke a long truth and lived with it (p. 38).

Writing so many lines beginning with 'I' helped me to overcome my residual barriers about writing the 'I'. Up to this point in the portfolio, my discomfort with the first person, as discussed in the introduction and chapter 1, made it difficult for me to write 'I'. Constructing the poem as a sestina in this way was a deliberate choice to force the use of 'I' in every line while concentrating on the form. The editing process, by releasing the poem from the sestina form and removing the years at the head of each line brought the first person to more prominence and created a poem in which I became comfortable with multiple uses of the first person.

As stated in the poem title, 'Some of These Things are True' (p. 38); some lines are factually true, but some are symbolically true, and some are fictionally true. Each line is offered as a statement without context and the reader has no way of differentiating between the fact and fiction so can only focus on the language. The context-free statements mean that, in this poem perhaps more than any other in the collection, the 'I' is only the 'I' in the poem. In early drafts, connections were made between lines by the structure of a progression of years. Once this structure was removed, links between lines could still be found, albeit more subtle and less logical ones. However, there are explicit and deliberate links between many of the lines in the poem and other poems in the collection. For example, 'I had long conversations with my bicycle' resonates with 'I called my bike Helen / and talked to her' in 'Last Summer' (p. 37); 'I sipped at displacement, rolled it round my mouth' echoes 'I sip at not-belonging, roll it around my tongue' in 'Placement' (p. 65); and 'I found a hidden door' refers to 'a half-door appeared, its latch removed, / its shape disguised' from 'Hide' (p. 24). The intention of creating these links is two-fold: to add to threads occurring throughout the collection and strengthen the idea of it as a whole project consisting of interrogations of autobiography, rather than a grouping of individual poems; and to suggest the idea of the title 'Some of These Things are

True' may also apply to other poems. Because of the links and resonances between poems, the reader is encouraged to consider issues about truth in poetry, and about what sort of truth the 'I' may hold in a poem.

The autobiographical *I*

The poems discussed so far in this chapter have used the 'I' as a vehicle to examine some of the issues involved in writing in the first person but there are also a number of poems in the collection which are more straightforwardly autobiographical. These are the poems which caused me the most concern in that I question how far I can achieve poetry with straightforward autobiography. The American poet Billy Collins echoes some of my concern in his essay 'My Grandfather's Tackle Box':

> In a poem of recollection, the trouble often is that the memory itself can exert so strong a grip on the poet that the poem never leaves the confines of the past, never achieves the kind of escape velocity that would propel it into another, more capacious dimension (2001: 281-282).

These concerns are exacerbated by the common lack of proper critical response to women's work with autobiographical elements, as discussed in chapter 1.

An elegy for my late father, 'Sam Browne' (p. 46), is necessarily autobiographical as it is only possible to write about a parent through the lens of one's experience of them. Stanley Plumly, in his essay on 'Autobiography

and Archetype', posits poetry of personal memories moves beyond the personal through archetypes:

> Archetype is the machinery through which autobiography achieves something larger than the single life; and autobiography is the means by which archetypes are renewed. (2001: 105)

However different the father I write about is from the reader's father, the idea of a father is heavily loaded and likely to trigger the reader's sense of 'father' as an archetype thus enabling the poem, as Plumly wrote, to be 'something larger than the single life'. This concept makes sense to me and eases my anxiety about writing from personal material.

The poem begins with the sensory detail of polishing a Sam Browne belt which immediately and economically places my father in the army and the poem is set out in couplets to suggest military discipline. The sensory detail was deliberately chosen for its evocative power; metal polish has a distinctive smell and feel which most readers would be able to recognise and bring to mind. The 'tang in the throat', in the first line, conjures the smell of 'Brasso' but also suggests a lump in the throat at a sad memory and the tang of the belt buckle to signify connection or fixing together. The first four couplets use his dressing in uniform as a vehicle to demonstrate aspects of his character, as well as my childhood pride in him. 'He smiles / at my effort, shows me how he buffs to

perfection' (p. 46), shows him as indulgent in taking the risk of allowing a child to polish part of the uniform when its perfection was important to him while the description of how he wore the jacket and Sam Browne show his pride in wearing the uniform.

The poem is written in the present tense but shifts through time periods and specific memories, linked by the idea of uniform. Couplets 5 to 8 show him taking pride in security guard uniform:

> He takes as much care with a security guard's uniform;
> irons a shirt, makes knife-edge creases on trouser legs
>
> with wet cloth under a sizzling iron, polishes each button
> to mirror the sun. He reaches for the clothes brush
>
> from a hook by the door, kept for rebel dog hairs,
> turns and laughs loud to see his Sam Browne (p. 46).

In common with many men below officer rank, his working life after leaving the army was patchy and he had a variety of jobs, often with a uniform and never well paid. The inclusion of him as a security guard in the poem is intended to indicate the way his life went after the army and the details of his ironing and polishing to show a proud man, doing his best. The emphasis on uniform shows him attempting to recreate the army discipline and forge some sort of identity for himself. His laugh at 'his Sam Browne / a perfect fit on my teenage hips' and the 'scowl, flounce / through the door' indicate the typical teenage pulling away

and rebellion. That the belt is 'snug and heavy on my pelvis' suggests that I was still comfortably under his protection but also that I was finding parental restrictions and morals 'heavy' and chafing. The dissonance between 'snug and heavy on my pelvis' and 'I don't remember when I saw it last' creates a sudden and jarring temporal shift, bringing loss to the foreground. Early drafts had more explanation at this point:

> I don't know where it went, or when, or how.
> It could have gone to a charity shop or been thrown away,
>
> tarnished and cracked for lack of army discipline;
> cleared out from my mother's widowed space. (draft)

During the editing process, I realised the explanations added nothing to the poem and these lines changed to:

> I don't remember when I saw it last,
> tarnished and cracked for lack of army discipline (p. 46).

In addition to benefiting from the compression and economy, the editing introduced ambiguity. In the revision the 'tarnished and cracked for lack of army discipline' could be read as the belt neglected because my father was no longer in the army; it could be read as the belt 'tarnished and cracked' because my father was not around; or it could be read that the speaker is 'tarnished and cracked for lack of army discipline'. The end of the poem reflects the beginning through reference to leather and metal polish while 'broad shoulders, strong

hands' act both as synecdoche and as metaphor for character. The final phrase, 'a sad falling in' is deliberately ambiguous. 'Falling in' has an inescapable association with military drills and may suggest he has fallen in with the ranks of dead soldiers. 'Falling in' also can mean a process of disintegration or crumbling, often referring to buildings, and can be read as a falling in from the upright military man at the start of the poem, to the broken and frail man at his death.

Another poem which is concerned with the effect of time passing is 'Slow Ways' (p. 54), which is a conventional lyric poem in that it is written in the first person, based on the poet's feelings and observations, and the form has a song-like quality. I chose to write this poem in a received form because I was having difficulty finding an approach to the poem that worked. Using formal restrictions creates a framework within which a poem can develop, sometimes in unexpected directions, while the mind is occupied with the requirements of the form. The form is the décima, a ten line rhyming form from Puerto Rico. The décima usually stands alone at ten lines but I felt the poem did not go far enough in ten lines; I considered it needed to go further than the appearance of the slow worm in order to speak to the human condition. To achieve this, I wrote a second stanza which was another complete décima. I considered the

décima a good fit for the theme because I think the rhyme scheme, *ABBAACCDDC*, is subtle and sinuous like the slow worm of the subject.

The first stanza has a tight focus on the slow worm, its appearance and movement. The imagery is specific and concrete so that, as far as possible, the reader can visualise what the speaker sees.

> Early this morning, a slow-worm,
> a bronze coil shining through the dense
> ivy tangled beneath a fence.
> At my slightest touch it moved, firm
> and cool, more like a wheel's turn
> than a slither or slide. I drew
> the leaves aside, watched it slip through
> snarls of vine as if a clear trail
> formed where it chose to go, its tail
> a last flick as it passed from view (p. 54).

The form of the first line, as a fragment beginning with an adverb, reflects the suddenness of the slow worm's appearance. None of the lines are end-stopped except for the final line of the stanza and the enjambment adds to the décima's unpredictable rhyme scheme in echoing the sinuousness of the creature. My language choices included a number of words with round vowels to reinforce the slowness and the muscular roundness of the body. It is typical to see just a 'bronze coil' when one sees a slow worm; they are shy and slow-moving and the way the muscles move through the coils is 'like a wheel's turn'. As the slow worm is shown leaving, I used alliteration; the sibilant 's' sounds of 'slither',

'slide', 'aside', 'slip' and 'snarls' is intended to evoke the silent and smooth movement away.

The second stanza broadens the focus to the environment and the speaker's reflections. The description of the location, while compressed and economical, clearly shows the reader an overgrown cutting through 'high umbels' and 'trees lean / over the cut'. Memories of the past are tied to the present throughout the stanza: 'Thinking back, it's years since I've seen', 'though I often walk', and 'An age since I'd play' suggest that the place has remained the same over time. The implication is that the slow worms have been there throughout the time and it is the speaker who has failed to see them. The slow worm also acts as a metaphor for what we lose or miss as we become adults. A contrast is drawn between 'I often walk' and the more detailed description of childhood play:

> An age since I'd play
> with such creatures, make bouquets
> of cow-parsley and willowherb
> with no sense of time to disturb
> the slow worm of long green days (p. 54).

The emphasis of the final two lines is on the 'no sense of time' which is underlined by the long vowels in the final line which slows the language. The reader is left to question what we lose by acquiring the 'sense of time' we have as adults.

'Hide' (p. 24), unlike 'Slow Ways', does not reach for childhood memory but is based on an adult experience of finding a hidden door into a roof space during a house renovation. The first and third stanzas are concerned with the practicalities of finding the door and exploring the space behind it:

> The wallpaper peeled easily;
> long strips fell away, weighted with dust
> and lime. Near the top of the stairs
> a half-door appeared, its latch removed,
> its shape disguised between panels
> of lath and plaster. It opened (p. 24).

While the finding of a door and the space behind it is fact, it still has to make poetry; a retelling of the facts is not enough. I used compression, rhythm, and sound to make poetry of the facts. It is always tempting, when using autobiography to make poetry, to explain too much and in early drafts of the third stanza I was trying to give the reader too much information.

> I would crawl into that place
> under the eaves, lie on the boards
> to feel their joins rib my back;
> stretch a measure of length
> then bend up my knees to guess
> a count of smaller lengths (draft).

I was attempting to suggest, by 'smaller lengths', children sleeping in the space as I had discovered that a family with ten children had lived in what was a small two-bedroomed cottage. The effect on the poem was clumsy and

confusing and I realised that what I was trying to convey had no relevance to the poem I was writing. Editing to cut what was irrelevant and focussing on my own reaction to the space improved the stanza so that it became sharper and more interesting:

> I crawl into that place
> under the eaves, lie on the boards
> to feel their edges rib my back;
> stretch a measure of length
> then bend up my knees,
> span my arms, palm to brick,
> fingertip to rafter (p. 24).

The second and fourth stanzas examine the speaker's emotional reaction to hiddenness and are indented to differentiate them from the physical practicalities of the first and third stanzas. The two pairs of stanzas trace a different, but parallel, path through the poem. The second stanza lists the variety of hidden places the speaker craves. Hiding can suggest fear but the language of the poem suggests a more purposeful, positive hiddenness in wanting 'secret' places. The bookcase which opens to a 'knowing touch', 'smuggler's tunnels' which tend to lead somewhere, the hidden path to 'snake across boundaries' all imply an aim in being hidden. The final stanza returns to the space behind the hidden door and shows the speaker creating a way to use the space as a vantage point:

> I fray hessian away from a nail,
> chip a corner, spy a crack or slipped tile

to claim a slice of sky (p. 24).

The poem shows a deliberate and purposed hiding. The speaker is shown to 'claim' a view and to wait for clouds to 'bloom into stories'. The poem ends on 'hungry eye', suggesting a strong desire for what can be seen. The homophonic relationship between 'eye' and 'I' is significant for this ending and suggests an avidity in the 'I' as well as the 'eye'. The hunger or desire could be seen as a writer's need to understand the world and the attitude to hiddenness explored through the poem could all be read as a writer's mind-set in holding oneself apart to observe and gather material for writing.

In reflecting on the poems discussed in this chapter, I am aware that, with the exception of 'Blink' (p. 83), none of them are gendered. The speaker in each one could be male or female yet they become gendered through being in a collection written by me, as a woman. My anxiety about universality in autobiographical poems springs in part from the way reading poetry is gendered. As Vicky Bertram, in *Gendering Poetry*, shows:

> so there are limitations associated with female poets' espousal of the lyric 'I'. There is still general resistance to accepting a woman's voice as representative. A woman's voice cannot shake off its explicit sexing (where a male voice is readily interpreted as a neutral, objective commentary of the human situation). If it is even able to move beyond the specifically personal and individual, it is only allowed to become the voice of a *female* collectivity (2005: 83).

Whatever the 'limitations associated with female poets' espousal of the lyric 'I'', it was important to me to stay with my concerns of family history, autobiography, and the first-person for this collection. However, not all the poems in the collection would have benefited from a first-person approach. There were some poems in which I chose not to use the 'I' for the benefit of the poem; the process of exploring my reasons for not using the 'I' led to further discovery and development for me. I will detail those reasons, together with the strategies and techniques I used, in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Avoiding the *I*

Writing a collection of poetry to examine and explore my responses to writing in the personal first person, I needed to discover which poems demanded a different approach. I wanted to investigate what reasons I had for writing with a different point of view, other than my previously noted discomfort, and the ways in which different viewpoints may be realised while still writing poems which stayed with my concerns for the collection: that is writing about the personal, about memory and its mechanisms, and about family.

The poems in the collection which are not written in the autobiographical first person can be divided into three main approaches: those with an unidentified narrator, those with a counter-factual approach, and those written using a different pronoun from the first-person singular. There is inevitably some overlap; for instance, a poem approached through the counter-factual may have an unidentified narrator or be written in the first person. For clarity I will examine the main approach foregrounded in the discussed poems.

The unidentified narrator

While writing the collection, it became clear that the first person would not work in approaching the poem 'The Visit' (p. 34). This is a poem about a memory of being taken as a child to see my dying great-grandfather. I wanted to explore the impressionistic nature of memory. It interested me that such a significant event should only leave impressions of colour and shadowy glimpses of people. Using the 'I' in this poem proved to be problematic because it would have demanded either a child's point of view or that of an adult looking back. Writing as an adult looking back on the event resulted in a rather flat narrative informed by too much information and insight. If I used the child's voice it might have worked in relating impressions of the event but was likely to be too simplistic and could not carry the sophistication of the layered language I felt was necessary to lift the poem beyond a diary entry. A child's voice might have seemed inauthentic from the opening phrase, 'Brown is the colour of waiting' because verbalising the concept of the act of waiting having a colour would not usually be a child's way of verbalising a memory. A child's voice in the poem did not feel authentic to me because as Freud, in his essay 'Screen Memories' explains:

> In most of the significant and otherwise unimpeachable childhood scenes that one recalls, one sees oneself as a child and knows one is this child, yet one sees the child as an outside observer would see him (2003: 20).

Using an observer's point of view allowed me to utilise the impressionistic memory while enabling the complexity in language and technique I needed in order to write the poem I aimed for. The first four lines of 'The Visit' set the scene with 'brown', 'waiting' and 'dingy' evoking a sombre, sun-less room, and the metonymy of the old women's hats tilting to gossip, creates a suggestion of a Greek chorus, removing individuality from them as characters.

> Brown is the colour of waiting; a wainscot in a dingy room,
> straight-backed chairs against the wall, tweed coats
>
> on old women whose felt hats nod in approval and tilt
> towards each other. They lean together to whisper (p. 34).

The suggestion of a commentary is strengthened by the women discussing and questioning the child's 'lineage' and by their remaining in the outer room as she is led through, as if it is their role to remain there and comment on visitors to the room beyond. The idea of chorus and the hushed tone also sets up the reader for an important event. An old man dying at home is not a tragedy but the patriarch of an extended working class family expected to leave the world

with sufficient ceremony. The family and community also expected the social ceremonies to be observed.

As the poem's action moves to the 'inner room', the atmosphere of the setting changes along with the colours. The vowel sounds in 'the colours of dying/are yellow and white' slow the pace while the falling stress of 'dying' and the alliterative bridge between 'white' and 'waiting' from the first line bring a sense of finality, of having arrived at a significant moment. The reader is shown the old man in a 'narrow bed'; that the 'sheet winds round him' carries an inescapable echo of winding sheet while the 'scrawny leg' and 'stained beard' bring ugly reality to the image and ensures there is no suggestion of a romanticised, dignified, deathbed scene. The final line of the poem, 'held by a shadowy woman who counts his golden breaths', is slowed and given a mournful tone by the number of long 'o' sounds and ends on a note of ambiguity with the counting of the 'golden breaths'. Are the breaths golden because they are precious or because of the colours in the stained beard? Is the woman counting them because she wants him to live or because she waits for him to die? 'The Visit' needed very little revising, because early drafts and ideas were worked out mentally before it was committed to print. As I reviewed it I

became convinced that a first person speaker would not have worked for this poem in that the subtleties and layers would not have been possible in either a child's voice or as an adult recounting memories.

A specific group of poems with an unidentified narrator are about my grandparents and investigate the influence of my grandparents' beliefs and superstitions. The poems are not objective character studies. There is no three dimensional description or depiction of them. However, while my perceptions and memories of my grandparents are inevitably present in the poems, I was not concerned with examining my relationship with them in these particular poems. Because these poems are about my grandparents and not about how I related to them, I felt the first person would have been intrusive and would have significantly altered the focus of the poems in a way that would have made it difficult to examine their beliefs, superstitions, and mores in the way I intended to. For example, the poem 'Cunning' is in the form of a list; behaviours usually labelled as superstitions are listed without reference to the person or people who held them:

> The potatoes planted on a new moon. New shoes
> never on the table. The colour green kept from the house.
>
> A coat never laid on a bed. White lilac held separate
> from mauve. The luck that shouldn't be named (p. 62).

Each couplet is end-stopped, which, in combination with the short sentences, evokes an impression of rules being enumerated. The poem was shorter in early draft form, without what became the fifth and sixth couplets, but the poem did not read as anything more than a simple list. I knew it needed something more to lift it. In the new fifth and sixth couplets, I continued to use a list form but changed the emphasis from superstitions to behaviours with a progressively darker tone. The shift is signalled in the fourth couplet by a line break on 'breath held' and an end-stop on 'death' while shorter, grammatically incomplete sentences quicken the pace and rhythm. The behaviours listed will seem mysterious to the reader because they are not explained or expanded on; the mystery and the fragmentary nature of the statements are what create uncertainty and uneasiness, intended to engender the darker undertone the poem needed:

> The trick on the doorstep. Pepper under a pillow.
> The cards that always turn up in time.
>
> An unseen gesture. The string on the banister.
> Ashes in the graveyard. The wink at church carvings (p. 62).

I introduced a person, albeit un-named, in the final couplet because I felt the poem needed to be brought back to humanity for closure, otherwise, the list could have simply trailed off without anything to ground it. The ending could have introduced the first person as the speaker but I found any attempt to do so

diluted the uncertainty and uneasiness which, by this time in the poem's gestation, had become essential to its strength. Using the second-person pronoun in the final couplet preserves the uncertainty about who the subject of the poem is, while bringing in an element of humanity for the reader to relate to. The pronoun in the penultimate line, 'The wind you can't stop from blowing', can be read as a universal 'you' and the 'wind' as a metaphor for all the factors in life we can't control, whatever rituals and beliefs we observe. In the final line, the 'you' is more specific 'how you say it always sobs your name' and narrows the focus to a direct address by the phrase 'your name'. I thought it was important to maintain ambiguity in the final line's address; that is whether the poem is addressing the reader or an un-named person, to continue the uncertainty already established and to allow the reader to take it where they wished. The instability caused by the ambiguity and uncertainty added to the combination of iambic metre, round vowels, and the narrowed focus which engender a feeling of finality in the final line closes the poem with what Barbara Herrnstein Smith describes as 'anti-closure' and 'a combination of strong and weak closural features' (1968: 405). This type of ending, which I find common to many of my poems in the collection, obeys William Carlos Williams's apocryphal instruction which Herrnstein Smith quotes as '[a poem] should not be that closed, should not click like a box' (1968: 401).

The counter-factual approach

I had some difficulty in knowing how to categorise this group of poems in order to analyse them. 'Fantasy' is the most obvious label but I found it unsatisfactory as it suggests the genre of fiction which usually involves dragons, magic, and other worlds. While the poems include a good deal of fabulation, the approach has more in common with 'speculative fiction', a term often attributed to Robert A Heinlein and currently used by Margaret Atwood to describe her fiction works. Atwood uses the term to differentiate her work from science fiction, saying that her novels are based on planet Earth and rooted in things that could possibly happen: 'Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen' (Potts, 2003). Atwood writes on her *Oryx and Crake* website 'every novel begins with a *what if*' (Atwood, 2003). In a similar way, my poems of this type are set in this world, in this time, and take an imaginative leap following a 'what if' train of thought. I will use the terms counter-factual or speculative in referring to poems of this type as it is more accurate a description than fantasy.

When I first started work on this project, I was wary of any poems which tended towards a speculative approach because I had used speculative approaches so often in earlier poems as a strategy for avoiding the

autobiographical first-person. Previous uses of such approaches had been a way of enabling a retreat from using the first person because of my personal discomfort. Examples from my earlier collections include 'The Shapeshifter's Wife' and 'Rejecting Gravity'. In the first of these the speaker is a wife who is learning to live with the reality, rather than her romanticised idea, of being married to a shapeshifter:

> There was the time he came home early
> one morning, a tomcat, stinking and scruffy.
> I yelled at him for staying out, then watched
> his curled sleep, fascinated (2009: 37).

In 'Rejecting Gravity', a woman discovers she can fly:

> Hedges were easy to clear; walls,
> buildings, required more belief.
> Moonless nights hid clumsy
> hops and jumps, cloaked
> tangles with trees and telephone wires (2009: 14).

But finds herself a target for 'hunters, /clay pigeon shooters, boys with air guns' so grounds herself with the weight of stones and recognises the lost potential in herself and 'other weighted women'. Reading these poems now, with hindsight informed by the research I have done for this project, engenders different reactions to each of them. The counter-factual form can be justified as more than my avoidance of the first person for 'Rejecting Gravity' because of its theme. The poem could have risked being didactic, and alienating readers, in examining how women are held back from reaching their potential, if it had

been written in the first person without the speculative elements. I can identify no such rationale for 'The Shapeshifter's Wife'. While the premise of marrying a man who can change shape creates amusement, I now feel the poem lacks any meaningful depth. I attribute its lack of depth to the counter-factual approach being only a way for me to avoid the autobiographical first person and not for any reason which would benefit the poem.

As I worked with the first person poems for this project it became clear that I could use a counter-factual or speculative approach and still stay with my concerns for the collection if it was not to avoid discomfort, but because it was the best approach for a particular poem, theme, or aim. Some of the poems in which I felt a speculative approach was needed were where the idea I wanted to explore risked engendering too much explication in the first person, in particular ideas of decency and family dogma. Decency was seen as a virtue of paramount importance in my family and community during my childhood. Decency was plain, modest, and resistant to embellishment or style. Any attempt to write about the restrictions of decency from a personal point of view tended towards complaint and resisted efforts to make poetry of it. After several false starts I settled on an approach for the poem 'Decent' (p. 72) which used elements of reality in a fantastic setting, facilitated through an unidentified,

speaker and mainly using the passive voice. This approach enabled a cool, ironic tone which distanced and lightened the theme, avoiding the risk of complaint or diarising and enabled me to aim for, as critic Marjorie Perloff said 'making or praxis rather than impassioned speech, as self-expression' (1998, cited in Gill and Waters, 2003: 5).

> All are welcome at the altar
> of the small god of decent people.
> Cloakrooms in the entrance hall
> are provided for coats and shoes
> which are not plain and sensible (p. 72).

The approach and tone have allowed some of my real experiences of being 'decent people', for instance bread and margarine to moderate the luxury of ice cream and the disapproval of ostentation or cosmetics, to be presented in a way which invokes humour or at least a wry nod of recognition. While using the form of instruction for the poem, with its associated plain language and syntax, reinforces the irony and dry humour it also echoes the tone of homilies used by family and community in instructing children in 'decency'. The only break in plain language, the alliteration in 'cloud watching, wondering, / or wool-gathering', serves to emphasise how the world of imagination is at variance with the world of 'decent people'. This emphasis is achieved through a using contrast in both technique and content. The soft 'w' and 'o' sounds in the phrase reflect the actions of 'cloud watching, wondering, / or wool-gathering' and draw

attention to the phrase, making it stand out amongst the plain language used throughout the rest of the poem. In the same way, the actions described contrast with the insistence on 'plain and sensible' behaviour and appearance. The contrast in both content and technique works as a metaphor for the way an imaginative person is set apart in a world where the plain and sensible is valued.

To further examine how I might write about the restrictions of decency while avoiding the traps of writing a diary entry or self-indulgent complaining, neither of which make poetry, I also explored the possibilities of moving further into the counter-factual in the poem 'Reasonable' (p. 73). The poem was triggered by the phrase 'the man on the Clapham omnibus'; a legal term that has, to some extent, passed into common parlance and is defined by Gray's Law Dictionary as 'synonymous with the pinnacle of reason in humanity: an ordinary London transit rider as representative of all rational thought and action' (quoted in Ryan, 2007). The emphasis on reason and rational thought seemed to me to hold echoes of the unwritten rules of decency and the poem explores possible outcomes if such a man were to rebel against the duty to be reasonable. The constrained form of the poem, regular quatrains, creates tension through its contrast with the protagonist's imaginings which become

progressively wilder, less 'reasonable' and breach societal rules of reason and decency:

> Tomorrow, he will wear an eye-patch and fix
> a stuffed rat to his shoulder.
> He'll stand on the bus to declaim Shakespeare
> on his way to the library (p. 73).

Although the tone of the poem is ironic and comedic it was important to me, in exploring the restrictions of duty and decency, to create tension to reflect the tensions inherent in rebelling. In addition to the form counterpointing the content, I used enjambment and line breaks which were deliberately chosen to delay meaning and create momentary ambiguity, thus increasing the stress between syntax and line. The enjambment in the first stanza has line breaks which delay meaning and create ambiguity in this way and contribute to setting the tone at the outset.

> The man on the Clapham omnibus is tired
> of being reasonable. He is bored
> with his average intelligence and sees little use
> for being moderately educated (p. 73).

The poem does not achieve resolution. The future tense is used to describe what the protagonist wants or intends to do so the reader is less able to be certain whether 'the man on the Clapham omnibus' would be successful in rebelling against reason and rational thought. While I considered, and drafted, a version in which I used present tense to show the protagonist doing the things he only

imagines in the final version, the draft lacked energy and felt flat without the uncertainty about whether 'the man' would succeed in breaking free.

In using a counter-factual approach to write about real issues, I am aware the reader may not see or understand the metaphors employed; but as a poet I cannot control or dictate how the reader reads. If a poem is well made and has enough depth, readers will discover what they bring to it and in that way a poem can be universal however personal the subject or impulse for its creation; this was confirmed by the analysis of responses to two versions of the same poem (pp. 176 – 181).

The poem 'Living with the Sooterkin' (p. 39) could be read at a surface level as being pure fiction with little connection to the central themes of the collection. The trigger for the poem was the word 'sooterkin'. Sooterkins were small furry creatures to which, according to eighteenth century superstition, some women gave birth alongside their normal children. The word evolved to mean an abortion and then to mean a mistake or foiled plan; Alexander Pope, in his satire *The Dunciad*, used sooterkin to mean a failed or poor literary work:

(1988: 199).

'Living with the Sooterkin' conflates the word's meanings of small furry creatures, mistakes, and failed poems leading to the idea of all one's past mistakes living in the house as small furry creatures. The concept of mistakes taking on living form also owes something to Fleur Adcock's poem 'Things', in which at 5 am 'All the worse things come stalking in/ and stand icily about the bed looking worse and worse' (2000: 87). While the poem uses the first person, I have included it in this group because the *I* of this poem is not directly autobiographical but is given the freedom to speculate and engage with the metaphor of the sooterkin: 'I'm on to them; I glimpse their sharp faces/at dusk as they slip along the skirting'. The poem began as a light fiction triggered by my interest in the word and its etymology but as it developed, it became an exploration of the way past mistakes may haunt us and how we come to terms with them. In the same way that Fleur Adcock's 'worse things' appear at 5am to haunt a sleepless night (2000: 87), the sooterkins in the poem become active at night and stimulated by anxiety:

> Sooterkin are bold in the dark;
> anxiety excites them; they chitter in packs,
>
> sliding over and under each other, claws tapping
> a tarantella on the floor. They grow strong on insomnia (p. 39).

I designed the pattern of sound in this section to evoke the jittery feeling of anxiety and to reflect the tension of insomnia caused by worry. The first line above is built with a pattern of aveolar (t and d) and unvoiced velar stop (k) consonants: Soo**t**er**k**in are bol**d** in the **d**ar**k**. The stop consonants being both hard and quick suggest jitteriness. The feeling of anxiety is intensified in the following line through the pattern of the consonant cluster 'ks' and alveolar 't' sounds: an**x**ie**t**y e**x**ci**t**es them; they chi**tt**er in pac**ks**. The 'x' sound in 'anxiety' is 'gz', a version of 'ks' which is voiced but still close enough to contribute to the pattern. The sound patterns evoke tension and anxiety because they are suggestive of the sounds of anxiety: finger and foot tapping, or teeth grinding and chattering.

By this point in the poem it had become clear to me, while writing, that the poem was developing into an extended metaphor of relevance to my life and not just a light fantasy. The poem's speaker describes learning about the sooterkin 'I am learning /their language, studying scratches on the floor'; and this relates to confronting and examining past mistakes so that, like the sooterkin, they will leave rather than 'grow strong on insomnia'. In reflecting on and examining 'Living with the Sooterkin' I am convinced I could not have written about this theme in a directly autobiographical first person and made

poetry of it. There was a risk the subject matter could have led to its losing any resonance and shutting out the reader by seeming self-absorbed. I am also interested that Fleur Adcock, in her poem on a similar theme 'Things', implies autobiography through a sense of intimacy with the 'worse things':

(2000: 87).

In spite of the sense of intimacy, Adcock does not use any pronouns at all in the poem that refer to people. I experimented with the approach of using no pronouns in the next poem I will examine below.

Using different pronouns

Where I have used other pronouns than the first person in writing poems for the collection it has been either because I wanted to experiment with a particular approach, to find out what was possible while staying within the central concerns of the collection, or because I had already identified a specific reason for using a different pronoun in a specific poem. The first poem I will examine, 'Private View' (p. 44) is different from the others in this group in that it has no pronoun at all that refer to people and yet carries an implication of directly personal memories. I wanted to explore memory and its imperfection in this poem while also acknowledging, through the poem's framing, my acute need

for privacy. My intention in writing the poem without using any pronouns was to examine the effect the lack of pronouns had on a poem about personal memory; whether their lack created too much distance and risked alienating the reader, or whether their lack enabled me to present memories within the framing metaphor in a more interesting way.

The poem is set in a hidden room within a house. As a metaphor, this works on a couple of levels for me; the hiddenness reflecting my need for privacy while also suggesting the way memories are not always easily accessed. It was not until I was reflecting on the poem, sometime after I had finished working on it that I realised my decision to exclude pronouns also contributes to the levels of metaphor about privacy and hiddenness as the speaker is also hidden by the lack of pronouns. I also realised, although I had not remembered it while writing, there is a connection to an earlier poem, 'Hide', which was built on a real memory of finding a hidden room:

> The wallpaper peeled easily;
> long strips fell away, weighted with dust
> and lime. Near the top of the stairs
> a half-door appeared, its latch removed,
> its shape disguised between panels
> of lath and plaster (p. 24).

Memories in 'Private View' are presented as images within mirrors: 'They hang on every wall,/ lean in stacks at the skirting and cluster on tables,/ no two the same.' The images are not clearly seen, nor are they stable:

> a solemn child with cropped hair
> fades behind a mist of dust. Jagged cracks disrupt
> rows of desks and hard faces; a birthday party
> passes an endless parcel; a teenager staggers
> from a club, swaying in and out of focus (p. 44).

The different ways the images are obscured operate as another layer of metaphor as each image is obscured or altered in a way which suggests the quality of the memory or the feelings associated with it; an image of schooldays is disrupted by 'jagged cracks' suggesting unhappiness, binge-drinking teenage years are shown 'swaying in and out of focus', and a broken marriage is represented by a mirror in which 'a bridal veil webs /a shattered surface.' Early drafts were considerably shorter and formed as a single block but the memories presented as images all suggested unhappy times which was neither honest nor appealing. I expanded the poem to include brighter memories and suggested the way we are inclined to romanticise good memories through metaphor as they 'gleam in soft focus, polished with each glance'. In the first drafts I had formed the poem as a single block because I thought it would reflect the hidden room in appearing claustrophobic but it had the effect of not allowing the images the space they needed. I introduced stanza breaks into the poem

together with some half-dropped line breaks to slow down the reading and bring air, in the form of white space, into the poem which better suited the pace and tone of the poem, being slow and contemplative. The white space and slower pace allows the reader to absorb the individual images and the ways they are presented. Reflecting on the poem made it clear to me that hiddenness is layered throughout it; not only the hidden room but also the obscuring of the memory images, the absence of any context for the memories, the hiddenness of the speaker, and the absence of any explicit meaning linked to the images. While it would have been possible to work with the themes of memory and hiddenness in a more direct way, I remain convinced that the lack of any pronoun in this poem, whether first, second, or third person, adds a layer of metaphor and depth which lift it beyond memoir.

The poet Jane Hirshfield, in her essay 'Thoreau's Hound: On Hiddenness' discusses the history and value of hiddenness in literature:

> When the world is looked at from the condition of mind that questions, each thing is seen both for itself as it is and as the holder of the immeasurable secrets good questions unlatch. A world—or a book—felt to contain the hidden is inexhaustible to the imagination, yielding new possibilities to each moment that presents itself as question more than as answer (2008: 23).

Hirshfield's essay has direct relevance to my poem 'Private View' (p. 44), with its theme of hiddenness, as the scenes portrayed are only sketched or hinted at so that the reader is invited to speculate and imagine what is not shown. The essay also resonates more generally with my instincts as a poet, both in my instinct to hide and in my taste for layered poetry. I consider a poem a failure if it does not have something hidden in deeper layers or if it explains everything to the reader. When writing poetry, I will attempt to build hidden layers through any means available, whether that is metaphor, allusion, sound, form or rhythm. Hirshfield uses an example of a jug handle which is shaped as 'a leaping tigress, heavy teats swelling down from the arc of her body' (2008: 12) to illustrate the value of hiddenness in metaphor:

> To see the tigress hiding within a handle, the handle waiting within the tigress, is to throw off the boundaries of the literal and recognize that even the simplest fragment of existence can carry multiple uses, possibilities, connections. The union, like all metaphor, brings revelation and addition, and also covers, complicated veils. Art amplifies intelligence: to experience the tiger's gold-sculpted resonance is to join in the leap the mind must take towards a more sophisticated comprehension of the world (2008: 13).

While I will not always succeed in writing poetry which engenders 'a more sophisticated comprehension of the world', it is what I believe to be one of the primary purposes of poetry and other arts.

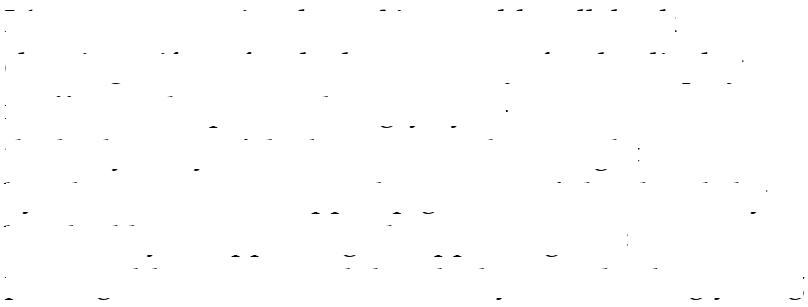
Second person

The use of second person is not as common as first or third person, either in poetry or fiction, and carries some risk if not carefully handled. A reader may feel the 'you' in a poem is aimed at them and can be alienated or resentful if they cannot relate to the theme; a reader can also be distracted from the poem by uncertainty about the identity of 'you'. The second person can be used in different ways, to achieve different aims, in contemporary poetry: it is often used in elegy where 'you' is clearly used to address the departed person or it may be used to address a specific person who is apparently not the reader, in which case the first person is also often present as in this example from a poem by Jessica Greenbaum:

(2012: online).

In this instance the specific detail given about the 'you' in the poem, 'just hung up from talking to you' and 'in your car in the parking lot of the boys' school', would make it difficult for a reader to see the poem as addressed to them. The reader is put in the position of being observer or eavesdropper; they are not invited into the poem's world but shown it as an outsider.

The use of the second person which interests me is where it is used as if the poem's speaker is addressing him/herself. This approach can set up an interesting duality as the reader is offered a kind of intimacy by being invited into the persona of the speaker; they can become the person being addressed at the same time as becoming the speaker. Anne Stevenson uses the second person in this way to good effect in her poem 'On Harlech Beach':



(2012: 47).

The reader cannot be certain who the pronoun 'you' is intended to refer to in any given poem but in the Stevenson example, the speaker appears to be addressing herself. The use of second person here has the effect of making the reader part of the scene, rather than an observer of it, hence involving the reader and evoking the feelings of exuberance and joy in the moment. It was this particular way of using the second person that I wanted to work with for this project as it seemed to be another way to work with autobiographical elements while engaging the reader. The potential duality of this position also acknowledges the shifting ground of the self in that the reader, the writer, and

the poem's voice become fluid and interchangeable. As poet Annie Finch writes in her essay on 'Coherent Decentering'

> I am aware that my own selfhood, let alone the self voicing my poems, is not a clear and simple unit, separate from everything else in the world. Our selves, insofar as they seem to exist at all, are more likely to come to our awareness as a shifting progression of moods and thoughts, contingent on circumstance, culture, and context (2000: 137).

I wrote my poem 'But Would You Go Back?' (p. 42) in the second person to explore a perspective which may not have been possible in the first person and also to invoke the situation for the reader by implicitly inviting them into it. I have found memories of the sort referenced in this poem to be those where my sense of self is most slippery: it feels as if there is distinct distance between the self who lived in the events, the self who remembers, and the self who examines memory and writes about it, so the potential duality of the second person adds to the exploration of memory for me as the writer as well as for the reader. The title is open to different readings, with the 'you' of 'But Would You Go Back' suggesting a direct address and enabling the reader to momentarily consider what they may, or may not, go back to. Following the title, the poem begins with specific detail which denies the possibility of direct address to the reader as it seems unlikely that any reader would share such specific details in memory:

Would you
button up your coat and go back
to the house with the blue door
to sit at the drop-leaf table
where you must temper
the Sunday treat tinned fruit
with bread and margarine (p. 42).

While the detail suggests the poem is addressing the writer, the reader is invited to feel the 'buttoning up' of entering a world in which treats must be tempered with the mundane. The details in the poem are sometimes of a nature which could be read as common experiences for someone of my generation and culture, 'listen to coals being raked/downstairs' and sometimes more specific and likely to be personal to the speaker 'where girls lean on the coal bunkers'. The mix of specific and general detail ensures there is enough for the reader to relate to while offering them the intimacy of being invited into the speaker's world. While girls leaning on coal bunkers is very specific, that they 'watch the gates for targets' evokes the potential for bullying that anyone who attended a secondary school will have either observed or felt. The fluidity of the poem is enhanced through the mix of detail; the reader, as well as the writer, can slip in and out of the viewpoint of both the 'you' and the speaker. The implications of the details in the poem become progressively darker until the ending of 'know that it's never enough, /not ever'. The fluidity of viewpoint up to this point ends the poem with uncertainty; who knows it's never enough? What is never

enough? Who is it never enough for? This amount of uncertainty, which I wanted in the poem to leave the reader destabilised, would have been more difficult to achieve with a first-person speaker because a first-person speaker would know what the questions referred to.

Third person

My poem 'Saving the World' (p. 50) is narrated by an unidentified speaker and the protagonist, a child, is an un-named 'she'. The impetus for writing the poem was to examine how far we are all inclined to some degree of obsessive compulsive behaviours and magical thinking. I decided on an unnamed child as protagonist from the outset as it gave me more freedom to portray extremes of obsessive behaviour without straying into the territory of adult mental illness, which would have altered the tone of the poem. I chose not to use the first person because the poem is not about my experience in particular, but is to do with elements of these concerns which most people experience to some extent. I do not feel I could have gone as far with the obsessive behaviours if I had used the first person, unless as dramatic monologue, because it would have felt inauthentic and the poem would have been weaker as a result.

The first lines of the poem plunge the reader straight into magical thinking and the 'Barbie heads' suggest to the reader from the outset that the protagonist is a child:

> She keeps Barbie heads
> on her fingertips at night.
> If they twist around
> to look at her in the morning,
> she knows asteroids are coming (p. 50).

The child's rules for counting steps to the bathroom, using simple rhymes and italics, suggest repeated chanting and the short lines throughout the poem, together with the placing of the line breaks, set up an 'if – then' rhythm which reinforces the idea of the thought patterns in obsessive behaviours.

> *If there's an 'r' in the day*
> *odd numbers play,*
> *if there's an 'n' in the day*
> *even holds sway.*
> *But if it's Tuesday,*
> *hop all the way* (p. 50).

The behaviours portrayed in the poem continue to, apparently, be driven by compulsion. The reader is not offered insight to the motivation for the behaviours; it would strike a false note to show any internal discourse as the girl's actions are observed by the external speaker. The form of the poem and the use of white space lend importance to the actions. For example, the space and stepped lines echo and emphasise the action of hopping up and down the kerb:

She hops down the curb
on her left foot,
hops up on her right
at the other side (p. 50).

The only indication of motivation for the compulsions ends the poem:

Looking at the kids
in the yard, she smiles;
They don't know they're
saved, again (p. 50).

The ending raises questions. While 'They don't know they're /saved, again' could be the protagonist's thoughts or speech, the reader cannot be certain whether they are or not. The words could be a statement by the observer which appeals to the human tendency for magical thinking and raises a question, however absurd, about whether such actions are necessary to save 'the kids/ in the yard'. The ending also raises the question of why it should be the protagonist's responsibility to save them; statistically, childhood OCD is more common in males so is the protagonist being female significant? Readers may recognise, in the protagonist, the societal expectation of women to care for and be responsible for those around them. While writing the poem began from wishing to explore the human tendency for obsession and magical thinking, writing it in this form also enabled exploration of control and responsibility from a gendered viewpoint.

The final poem I wish to discuss in this section, 'Laundry' (pp. 77-78), is different from the others in that I did not have a poetic reason for avoiding writing it in the first-person. At the time of writing 'Laundry' I had been putting together groups of poems for submission to journals and seeing so many of my poems featuring an autobiographical 'I' together made me nervous; it rekindled my previous anxieties and discomfort about writing the 'I'. The narrative of the poem is of a woman hanging dirty washing on trees in her garden and is a direct expression of my discomfort in writing poetry with autobiographic elements; the protagonist is 'airing her dirty laundry'. I wrote the poem in the third person because of my discomfort and portrayed the protagonist as an un-named 'she':

> She roots through the shed, discards a pruning saw,
> secateurs, takes the shears and slices
> through the taut line,
>
> feels the satisfying swish of the recoil and snake
> across the ground. One piece at a time
> she pulls clothes from the pile (p. 77).

When some time had passed, I acknowledged to myself that there was no good reason for using the third person in this poem. I edited the poem, changing the pronoun to 'I' but not changing anything else (p. 78). The difference in how the two poems read was quite startling and presented an opportunity to discover how an audience would react to first and third person protagonists. I wanted to

find out whether a first-person narrator may alienate readers by lacking universality, as I had often assumed.

I emailed a number of poets, asking if they would be willing to read one poem and give a response to it. I also asked the same question on an internet forum where a number of poets and publishers post. I asked for volunteers on the forum to ensure I wasn't unconsciously selecting sympathetic respondents. A total of 35 responded, 16 male and 19 female; as they responded, I sent alternating versions of the poem, strictly in the order in which they responded, asking them to offer emotional responses, not critiques, and using identical wording to all of them (the initial enquiry email, and the questions, are at appendix V). I asked for emotional responses because I was interested in readers' reactions, not critical analysis. The respondents were not told it was my poem. I copied the emailed responses, anonymously, onto two documents, one for each of the two versions, and then coded the responses into a table for thematic analysis (appendix VI), using the methodology described in chapter 1. One notable difference between this and the analyses in chapter 1 is that I was able to use the same codes in the analysis of both versions, showing that the sets of responses did not differ as much I expected they might. A thematic diagram is at appendix VII.

The results of the analysis were fascinating. The distancing strategy of using the third person, which I have often used in previous collections, appears to have had the effect of distancing some readers from the nature of the poem; the strongest response theme for this version was taking the action of the poem literally; these readers did not appear to consider metaphor or any layered interpretation. The responses included remarks such as 'it seems that she needs a better washing powder' and 'by the last line I explain the situation to myself: She's waiting for rain to do the job of washing'. The second most prevalent response to the third-person version was that of violence or threat of violence, linked to literal interpretation: 'The language used, the 'shears' and 'slices' sounds slightly violent, and then the colours, the red, pink, blood and semen, all seem to point towards a violent act having taken place - rape, perhaps?'; 'It's the inherent violence that shocks – the shears – and then the 'recoil and snake' makes me think of a power line down – dangerous. She makes me nervous. She's raw and on the edge'. However, this interpretation of the poem also featured significantly enough to be considered a theme in the responses to the first-person version, although being much less prevalent than in the third-person version.

The responses to the first-person version of the poem were much broader, covering a greater variety of interpretations. The strongest theme, by far, was that of seeing a metaphor of release or relief in the poem: 'The feeling that I am sharing in a sense of release/relief with the protagonist of the poem'; 'it was such a relief when you cut through that taut line'. The number of respondents finding release and relief in this version of the poem was much greater than the next most prevalent response for either version, and only one respondent saw the same theme in the third-person version. Following release and relief, the next strongest themes were equally divided between owning and acceptance, and the readers bringing their own stories and associations to the poem. Readers bringing their own associations to the poem appears to be what led to the wide variety of interpretations of the first-person version as the readers' associations opened up the poem to interpretations in line with their own experiences: 'It also makes me aware of how much I compromise on things I believe in – through tiredness, laziness, fear – yet still hanging on to them in my head'; 'could be quite cathartic considering all I'm going through in my life at the moment'.

Conducting this exercise has confounded my expectations and provided reassurance to counter my discomfort about writing poetry with an

autobiographical 'I'. The greater breadth and depth of the responses to the first-person version of the poem demonstrates that using the first-person allowed readers to engage with the poem more effectively in that they were able to find ways the poem resonated with their own experiences and explore the metaphors from that viewpoint. The experience of this exercise will act as a warning for me against using a third-person protagonist without good reason as it became clear from the analysis that, in distancing me as the writer from the poem, it had the effect of distancing the reader from the poem. The reaction to the third-person version was not what I had expected but, given the respondents were all experienced poets and readers, their lack of engagement with the metaphors and layers of the poem is not something I can afford to ignore in my development as a poet, especially given my preference for layered poetry as noted at page 169.

The next chapter examines a theme which emerged during the writing of the poems and would not be ignored, that of 'cunning'.

Chapter 4: Cunning

The word 'cunning' insinuated itself into the collection from the beginning. It is cunning in the sense of the old knowledge, strongly connected to traditional lore, wisdom and superstition and, for me, wholly to do with family; specifically my grandparents. The etymology of 'cunning' is possibly Old Norse *kunnandi* meaning 'knowledge' and Old English *cunnan*, to know. The sense of cunning as deceitful did not arise until later. The OED defines this sense of cunning as:

> possessing magical knowledge or skill: in cunning man, cunning woman, a fortune-teller, conjurer, 'wise man', 'wise woman', wizard or witch (OED).

Owen Davies, in his book *Popular Magic: Cunning Folk in English History,* shows how widespread 'cunning folk' were in all areas of English society, although the term is not well known today:

> a century ago everyone in rural society would have been familiar with the term, and two hundred years ago the majority of the population, in both town and country, would have known of at least one cunning-man or cunning-woman. Hundreds of thousands of people had personal experience of them over the centuries (2007: VII).

I decided to use the word 'cunning' in this sense, although it is not common usage today, because it encompasses the mixture of superstition, lore, and belief in paranormal phenomena that influenced my early years. My maternal family

has been in Gloucestershire a very long time and my grandparents, although living in town, were country workers at heart. My grandfather was illiterate and scraped a living by selling garden produce from an allotment. I spent a lot of time in their tiny terraced house and, while they were often ruled by what some would call superstition, there was also a sense of otherness, of a knowledge of what could not be seen or explained, particularly with my grandmother who appeared to be able to influence games of chance and could see a shadow in the face of a person who would soon die. It is a peculiar mix; an earthy sense of clairvoyance and pagan beliefs combined with our attending Methodist Sunday School and a matter of fact expectation that relatives came to 'visit' after they died. I found, while writing the poems, that I kept returning to these ideas and eventually completed seven poems which explicitly mention cunning, as well as others where it is unnamed but present in the themes. The 'cunning' theme emerged because of my intentions, for the collection, of working with family and personal history; it became so prominent in my thinking about my history, myself, and my feelings about hiddenness that it became the point around which the collection balanced. I have threaded the 'cunning' poems through the collection at intervals because cunning, though never named, was so strong a presence in my childhood and woven through the fabric of my being.

The first poem which references cunning is also the first poem in the collection, 'Ursa' (p. 21). The poem first formed through my studying a dead and broken tree and realizing that it looked like a bear from one angle. The poem details a fantasy meditation of the tree becoming a bear and walking away. I wanted the poem to unfold in the same way, and at the same pace, as the imagined metamorphosis so I was careful not to explain what is happening in the poem, but relied on strong imagery and concrete detail to place the reader in the scene.

> At first just a blur of outline, then sprouting
> to shaggy brown. The knarl of exposed roots soften,
> flatten to wide feet, pushing against the earth
>
> to straighten the bowed back.
> A stub of fallen branch
> lengthens to a broad muzzle and a lightning-struck
> split in the bole forms front legs with strong,
> round paws. She shakes free (p. 21).

When I started writing the poem, the bear had no gender but as the poem developed it began to feel as if it was moving beyond fantasy to metaphor and it became important to me that the bear was female. Once I changed the pronouns to female during the editing process, I found the poem snapped into focus for me and I was able to sharpen the detail more successfully. While the poem is based in fantasy, it was important that the bear was as real as possible, if the poem were going to come to life on the page. I used sound 'long-toothed roar', and scent 'pine and oestrus, sweet and pungent', as well as image to create the

sense of a real bear. I also researched how brown bears move to ensure accuracy in the description and enhance the internal truth of the poem. I used language to do with the body; 'long-toothed', 'sinew and bone', 'muscles', 'hide', to increase the physical presence of the bear in the poem. The use of 'hide', while used here to mean skin and fur, also brings to mind the ambiguity of 'Hide' as the collection title introducing a hint of uncertainty about how straightforward the description really is.

The greater part of the poem, up to the last four lines, describes the metamorphosis of the tree into the bear and her moving away. As the poem developed, it became significant that the tree, static and broken, transforms into strength and vitality in the bear; a broken branch 'lengthens to a broad muzzle' which 'yawns a long-toothed roar' and a 'lightning-struck / split' forms strong legs. The bear is shown to break free of the confines of the tree gathering strength and physicality as she 'shakes free' and 'steps away' (p. 21). In the last four lines the speaker shifts from being a narrator to being involved in the narrative through the bear's acknowledgement that she is being watched. Cunning is introduced through the speaker's assertion

> I don't have cunning enough
> to follow her, not this time,
> not in this place (p. 21).

Not having 'cunning enough' suggests the bear is at a different level of knowledge from the speaker and that the speaker is not yet ready to approach that level. Reflecting on this poem led me to realise that it may be read as a metaphor for my poetic development in starting this project as I was breaking away from my usual poetics which, for me, had become static. That 'I don't have cunning enough / to follow her' reflects my anxieties and disquiet in approaching themes and ways of writing which I found personally uncomfortable. However, perhaps there is another form of cunning at play here; the cunning which allows me, as a poet, to see the bear in the tree and find the words to release her, to inhabit her hide and draw her out. Poetry and rhythmic language has a history of being associated with chants and spells; creativity and facility with language may be seen as a sort of 'cunning', a way of 'possessing magical knowledge or skill' (OED). 'Ursa' was written late in the project but I placed it first in the collection because its themes of breaking away and transformation seem appropriate for the starting point of the poetic development I was trying to achieve. Although 'Ursa' was one of the last poems written for the project, it was written on a retreat where I was spending time revising, ordering, and reflecting on the collection. I believe my intense focus on my themes and uncertainties in the collection at that time triggered the

metaphor's formation in the poem and created the poem's suitability for its position as first in the collection.

The other poems that explicitly reference cunning, placed at intervals through the collection, are more directly concerned with my grandparents. 'Counting the Cunning Ways' (p. 49) only has the word 'cunning' in the title but is linked to cunning through being built from my grandfather's superstitions. The beliefs and behaviours listed are all to do with foretelling death or disaster:

> *Corpse-hounds*, he calls them or *lych-birds*,
> turns away from their churring call. He curses
> a white moth in the house, slaps at its blunder
> against a dusty bulb. He'll take a long way round
> to avoid meeting a hearse head-on, shudder
> to see a child point at the plumed horses (p. 49).

This poem is the only one of the 'cunning' poems which is solely about my grandfather; reflecting on the poems as a group I notice a clear difference in tone between this and the poems about my grandmother. In this poem the protagonist is shown to be reacting to signs of disaster and appears to have no agency to act or influence events. He 'turns away' from nightjars, 'curses' and 'slaps' at a moth, he takes 'a long way round', and will 'shudder' at a child's pointing. The repeated 'u' sounds throughout the six lines above, together with the slant rhyme lends weight to 'blunder' and 'shudder'; both of which are words suggesting fearfulness or weakness. The poem continues in the same

vein, showing the protagonist refusing or avoiding signs he considers ominous. Whatever actions the protagonist does initiate are mostly negative; he 'won't take the ashes out after sundown' and 'won't wear anything new to a funeral'. The list of superstitions, and his reactions to them, builds until it culminates in brief notations of apparently ominous signs:

> The bird in the house, the left eye's twitch,
> hawthorn indoors, a mirror cracked (p. 49).

By this point in the poem, the reader does not need to know how the protagonist will respond to the signs as his reactions have been demonstrated enough for the reader to imagine what he may do. The reader is not given any indication of what all the different signs mean until the penultimate line, '—so many ways to foretell death and disaster'. The listed beliefs and signs build through the poem, gathering momentum and weight until the final line has a flat tone and helplessness about it: 'it came for him while he wasn't looking'. We are all, of course, helpless in the face of death but the protagonist's helplessness is given added poignancy by the futility of all his precautions.

A 'cunning' poem about my grandmother, 'Nanna's Luck' (p. 80), also shows the protagonist helpless in the face of death but the tone is markedly different. She is shown to lean on what would usually be called superstition but in this

poem, the beliefs are positive ones, intended to attract luck, rather than foretelling disaster:

> The rabbit's foot in her pocket
> was capped in silver, grey fur
> sleek from fingering; the four leafed clover
> in her purse flat and paper-thin (p. 80).

The attitude of the protagonist is also very different from that shown in 'Counting the Cunning Ways' (p. 49). While in 'Counting the Cunning Ways' 'he' is shown to be avoidant and fearful in response to signs and superstitions, the protagonist of 'Nanna's Luck' embraces and integrates superstition into her life and she is shown to utilise the power of signs and superstitions to her own ends. The tone of this poem is lighter than 'Counting the Cunning Ways'; in the latter poem, the listing of ominous signs builds weight through the poem until it starts to feel oppressive. In 'Nanna's Luck' her engagement with the superstitions, 'grey fur / sleek from fingering' (p. 80), the mundane setting of holiday camp bingo, and the implication of humour in her winking and grinning all contribute to a more buoyant feeling. Cunning was not named in my childhood and it is not named here except in the negative 'She refused to call it luck or cunning' (p. 80), but her conviction that games of chance could be influenced by 'concentrating' is explicit: '*you ent thinkin' right!'*. Her 'cronies' complaints about her luck are met with only a wink, implying that her knowledge and connection to luck is something to be held in secret, which

resonates with my need for privacy and raises a question, for me, about how much of my instinct to hide a personal 'I' is driven by family culture.

The poem's focus moves to the speaker in the third stanza and simultaneously shifts forward in time. The introduction of the first person at this point acts as a vehicle to change the poem from a family anecdote to address wider concerns about humanity's propensity to attempt to forestall inevitable death through magical thinking. The speaker is shown trying to utilise the power of superstition in the same way that 'Nanna' does:

> There was a day when I spent hours on my knees,
> counting leaves on clover, looking for the one
> which would lend strength, bolster radiation,
> shrink tumours (p. 80).

A perfect four-leaf clover cannot shrink a tumour but the speaker ties the clover not working back to the protagonist's exhortation to concentrate harder; 'It didn't work; we weren't / *thinking right.'* Ending the poem on not '*thinking right'* implants a suggestion that the speaker does not have the knowledge, the cunning, to use the power of charms in the way that 'Nanna' does; the suggestion resonates with the first poem in the collection, 'Ursa' (p. 21) in which the speaker doesn't 'have cunning enough'. The poem draws no conclusions; the reader is left to consider how they feel about luck, superstition, and how we behave in the face of death.

'Homecoming' (p. 40) is based on both maternal grandparents, although they are not identified by name or role in the poem. In the poem, the characters are referred to as 'An old woman' and 'the old man'; the descriptions increase their weight as archetypes and increase the universality of the poem. As archetypes, they would not have been convincing without being grounded in the specific details which came from personal memories. Stanley Plumly, in his essay on 'Autobiography and Archetype' makes a similar assertion:

> Archetypes, in the abstract, have a genius for generalization. But to be of any use they must be arrived at inductively. Autobiography, as remembered experience, is inductive; in fact, it is the first definition of inductive (2001: 105).

The old women at her hearth and larder, the old man with his garden-lore are common enough archetypes that they could be seen as cliché but the specific details, induced from memory, enrich the portrayals and add depth to them, enabling layers of meaning to build.

The poem's title, 'Homecoming' is ambiguous in that it could apply to a number of different situations but the first line introduces the idea that it is some of the dead who are coming home.

> Some of our dead return, they must.
> An old woman won't leave her cunning (p. 40).

‘They must’ falling at the end of the line gives emphasis to the idea that some of the dead are compelled to return and raises questions for the reader about the reasons for compulsion. The second line offers a reason; the ‘old woman won't leave her cunning’. The following lines describe some of the elements of cunning she won’t leave which are a mixture of domestic knowledge and implications of more mystical experience. ‘the smoulder / of soot on the fireback as it catches / and shifts in ragged lines’ carries an implication of pyromancy and fire rituals, and that she will ‘bring the cards to the top of the deck’ suggests she has some agency in influencing games of chance. The reader is offered no explanation for why they ‘must’ return; the rhythm of the first line causes stress to fall on ‘some’ so it is clear the poem is not suggesting all the dead return. The described actions of the characters are given importance by the steady and persistent rhythm, the use of consonance and alliteration, and by the line breaks. For example, in the first stanza:

> She comes to creak
> the door of the kitchen corner cupboard,
> sustained on the breath of cold stone,
> the slab where marks hold a memory
> of skinned conies, the high shelf for jars.
> She'll bring the cards to the top of the deck,
> the flinch of superstitions, the sigh in the night (p. 40).

The positioning of ‘She comes to creak’ as a half-dropped line, together with the stress falling on ‘comes’ and ‘creak’ emphasises her arrival and what she comes

for. The hard c and k sounds, repeated in ‘comes’, ‘creak’, ‘kitchen corner cupboard’, and ‘cold’ are almost onomatopoeic in echoing the ‘creak’. The line ‘sustained on the breath of cold stone’ introduces ambiguity and uncertainty; it could be the larder that is sustained as traditional larders had a stone shelf for cold storage, or it could be read as the old woman’s return thus sustained. ‘Cold stone’, used in a narrative about the dead, inevitably carries a suggestion of the grave and its position at a line end adds weight to the allusion. The idea of cold stone is continued to the next line ‘the slab where marks hold a memory / of skinned conies’, and the marks left by dead rabbits holding memories of them adds to the emerging theme of what the dead leave behind. The final two lines of the stanza state, without equivocation, ‘she'll bring’ which introduces intention and implies this is a continuing situation, not a single visit.

The second stanza is focussed on the ‘old man’ who ‘stays in the garden’. His described actions are quite generalised and may be read as instructional up to the final two lines. He ‘rustles the apple tree for pruning’, demonstrates displeasure at tools left outside by blowing leaves round them and shows time and method for new plantings. His is a different sort of cunning than the old woman’s; more practical with only a hint of mysticism in the planting on a new moon and the seeds for ‘Old Nick’, but still giving the impression of knowledge

garnered over generations. The steady rhythm established in the first stanza continues but the verbs are more active in the second stanza, connected to the old man's more practical knowledge. He 'rustles', 'blows', 'measures', 'calls', and 'counts'; the verbs act to conjure a strong presence of the old man and connect him to the garden. The final two lines move the old man's presence inside the house and introduce more specific, and personal, details.

> At night he's a crackle of paper he couldn't read,
> the tap of a pipe, the grumble of poor coal on the fire (p. 40).

His presence in these two lines is all auditory which reflects back to the old woman's presence being announced by the 'creak' of the corner cupboard and reminds the reader the presence is not physical. There is a shift from the almost physical presence in the garden, created through the verb choices, to his becoming the sounds; he becomes the 'crackle of paper', the 'tap', the 'grumble'. Although the reader is offered no explicit narrative about why 'Some of our dead return', the behaviour of the revenants suggests there are issues to consider about what the dead leave behind and what knowledge older generations may have to pass on. The knowledge I have from my grandparents, and the sense of cunning, has resonance for me with writer Toni Morrison's ideas about 'discredited knowledge':

> We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things.

> But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing not limiting. And some of those things were 'discredited knowledge' that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was 'discredited'. And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible (2008: 61).

While I cannot appropriate Black experience, I do feel a connection to Morrison's view of 'that kind of knowledge'; my ancestors' knowledge is discredited because they were poor, working class, and uneducated. Their folk-wisdom and superstition had no traction in the 'press toward upward social mobility'. Morrison goes on to say 'that kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work' (2008: 61) which resonates with my poetic development through this project, as my understanding of my ancestors' influence, their cunning, has been critical to my writing this collection.

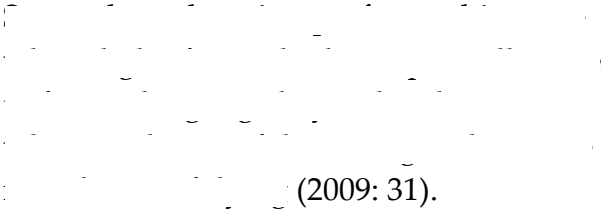
The poem which became central to the 'cunning' theme, drawing together a number of threads, is 'Canzone: Cunning' (p. 28). I started writing a canzone because I wanted to understand the form. I have always found the best way to really study a form, to understand its effects and challenges, is to fully occupy the form by writing it. I became interested in the canzone through reading the work of poet George Szirtes who included six canzoni in his collection *The Burning of the Books* (2009). The canzone is a form of sixty-five lines with only five end words. The form consists of five twelve-line stanzas followed by a

tornada of five lines. One of the five end words takes a dominant position in each stanza to a specific pattern. Giving each of the end words a letter, the first stanza is ABAACAADDAEE, the second stanza EAEEBEECCEDD; the following three stanzas continue the pattern followed by the five line tornada as AEDCB. In a similar way to my writing a canzone to understand it George Szirtes, in an article in *Magma* poetry journal said he 'wondered about it. Wrote one, then two, then, eventually six. Since then there have been three more.' (2010: 56). Szirtes compares considering the canzone to wondering whether an aircraft can fly:

> What does it feel like to sit in it? Is it for your shape? Your sense of space and movement? What is its natural way of flying? Because you know that flying isn't an entirely natural act, that you have weight and resistance, and that air itself has resistance. Will it fly at all? It must have been thought capable of flight. How do you know until you've tried? (2010: 56).

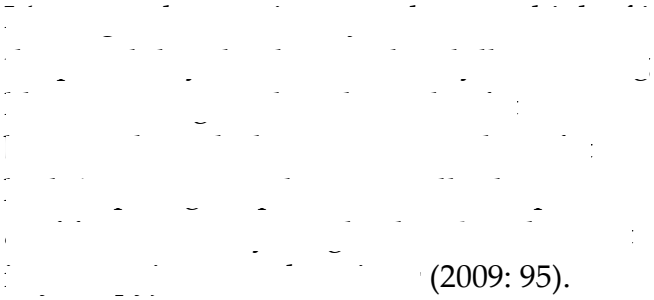
My main question about the canzone was whether it is possible to repeat words so many times in a poem without it becoming tedious or oppressive; how can one get away with it? If, as I intended, I was going to use the form for further exploration of the shifting territory of my 'I' and its influences, then I needed to work out how to accommodate the repetitions. Reading Szirtes's canzoni in *The Burning of the Books,* I am not convinced he does always get away with it. The success, or otherwise, of canzoni depends largely on the words chosen for the

repetends. There are two canzoni in *The Burning of the Books* which do not work well for me as a reader. The first of these is 'Canzone: Architecture' (2009: 31):



(2009: 31).

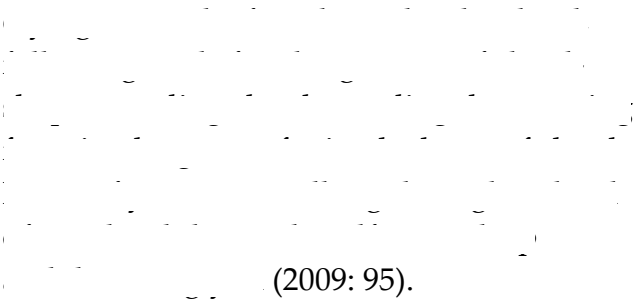
'Architecture' is a difficult word to repeat as often as the form demands; I find it awkward in my mouth and it falls heavily at the end of the line, interrupting any music that begins to build in the poem. The other end words in this canzone, 'move', 'bans', 'culprit', and 'fame' do little to help the poem; 'culprit' is another word which tends to fall heavily at the end of the line and the other end-words are rather abstract, not lending themselves easily to strong phrases. The second of Szirtes's canzoni which I don't think successful is 'Canzone: In memoriam WSU' (2009: 95):



(2009: 95).

The use of 'it' as an end-word is problematic for me here. The sound of 'it' is short and sharp; as a reader, the repetition at the line-ends begins to irritate, the sharp sound causing a tendency to stop the line even when enjambment is

intended. I also find the language rather loose with words and phrases that are doing little other than fill the line; for instance, 'somehow', 'hadn't quite got up', 'as if for ever' could all be edited to make the language tighter and more interesting. This canzone improves, to some extent, as it goes on; the other end-words are softer sounding and more flexible than 'it', enabling some music to build in the lines, as in stanza two:



(2009: 95).

The number of 'o' and 'ou' sounds give a tender feeling to this section and the enjambments have the effect of slowing the rhythm without interrupting it. I am particularly interested in how Szirtes uses repetition beyond that which is required by the form and how it builds to an effect similar to incantation. However, while there are sections I like and admire in 'Canzone: In memoriam WSU', for me the poem does not wholly recover from the jarring effect of so many repetitions of 'it' as an end word. The most successful of the canzoni, for me, in *The Burning of the Books* (2009) is 'Canzone: A Film in January' (2009: 81). The tone is contemplative, somewhat wistful, and the chosen end-words have enough flexibility to allow for variations in their use.

(2009: 81).

The interplay of sounds in the above section supports the repetitions so that the dominant word establishes a pattern without being obtrusive. The vowel sounds in rest/weight/leaves and light/film/time work with the sibilance of the 's' sounds in rest/register/assured/moves/leaves to create music in the lines. I'm interested that Szirtes again, as in 'Canzone: In memoriam WSU' (2009: 95), uses more repetition than the form requires and wonder if this is a technique he is turning to in order to work with the challenges of the form. Repetition can be masked by more repetition; the extra, in-line, repeats of the end-words dilutes the effect of the repeats on the line ends.

Examining Szirtes's canzoni made me aware that the sound of the end-words is of critical concern in their selection. My choice of end-words for 'Canzone: Cunning' was influenced by the dominant themes of the collection and by their sonic qualities. 'Cunning' seemed an obvious theme for a canzone because the idea of cunning was becoming so central to the collection and because the form would facilitate a thorough exploration of my concept of it, and how it relates to

my using the 'I'. As an end-word, cunning has a falling stress and would not land too heavily on the line-break. The other four end-words, woman, bones, time, and given, were also selected for their sound as well as for resonances with the collection as a whole. My intention was that the feminine stress of given and woman and the technically dissonant, but still euphonious, sounds in woman/bones and time/given would help to sustain the music against the difficulties of the form.

Having selected the end-words, I found the form demanded a different approach from my usual writing process. I usually allow poems to develop organically by following the language, often composing mentally before committing to text, without any clear idea of where a poem is heading. The complex pattern of repeated end-words in the canzone demanded a more structured approach in which I had to plot the end words to the prescribed pattern and then create the poem around them. I found that being forced to work towards the repeated words took the poem in interesting directions and facilitated a deeper exploration of each end-word than I would have otherwise achieved. In the extract from 'Canzone: A Film in January' (2009: 81), quoted above, Szirtes makes use of the different ways the word 'rest' can be used to

lighten the effect of the repeats; in the first stanza of 'Canzone: Cunning' I explicitly deny the poem the other definitions of cunning:

> Not sneaky, like a fox, sort of cunning
> nor a neat design sort of cunning;
> not an adjective, but a title given
> or grown into. A different cunning (p. 28).

Restricting the definition of cunning at the beginning of the poem in this way, while possibly increasing the difficulty of working with the form, forced my focus to remain on the definition of cunning as I have employed it throughout the collection, as old knowledge. The idea of old knowledge, of what is passed down through generations, is suggested in the first two lines, setting up the reader to be receptive to what follows:

> My marrow is veined with cunning;
> history is written in our bones (p. 28).

The bodily metaphors of 'marrow', 'veined', and 'bones', ground the poem in the physical to counterbalance the implication of the mystical in 'cunning' as well as suggesting an element of genetics in the way 'cunning' is passed on. The stanza begins by stating what cunning is not, in this context, and goes on to auxetic definitions of cunning as a 'title given / or grown into' (p. 28) which build to the exclamation '*Hey, Cunning!*' in the tenth line. The rhythm is stately and measured, supported by assonance and internal rhyme driving the rhythm forward and giving weight and music to the lines. The sound pattern of round

vowels invokes, for me, qualities of earthiness and womanliness. While this is difficult to prove on a technical level, the sound patterning may be viewed through a phonosemantic system, as explained in Don Paterson's essay 'The Lyric Principle':

> One still occasionally meets the objection that a thing or event which makes no sound cannot possibly have a sound to represent it; the trouble is that the 'definition' of a phonestheme indicates not rigid designation but a mere statistical tendency, *its sound denoting an area of overlapping connotatory sense between several different words*. The word 'meaning' can't be honestly used of a phonestheme either, since 'meaning' implies a clear denotation; it has no meaning, only a consensual 'feel', upon which the words that host it converge (2007: 20).

Paterson defines the phonestheme as 'a point of sound-sense coincidence' (2007: 19) and his essay has helped me understand the pressures I bring to bear when making poetry which I have previously thought of as an instinctive reaching for what feels right; an instinctive reaching which could be seen as another form of 'cunning':

> Poets can trust their ears to think and their brains to listen; no compromise between sound and sense need be negotiated, as they are understood as aspects of the same thing. The negotiation lies between the sound and sense we intended to make, and the sound and sense we end up making; the gap between them defines the compositional process (2007: 30).

The way the first stanza developed was crucial to my aim of understanding the form but also to my development in this collection as a whole; I did not know, when starting, whether I would or could complete a canzone but the process

interested me and increased my confidence. The poet Kathleen Jamie, in her essay for the *Strong Words* anthology (2000: 277-281) likens steps in poetic development to the childhood game of 'Mother, May I' in which permission must be granted to take forward steps.

> Each poem individually does not require an inner 'permission', but 'permission' is required for the bigger breakthroughs which occur maybe once every few years, perhaps once a decade. 'Permission' is an overcoming of doubts and fears. Once we feel it's granted, and we are ready to explore the new place, we may write as many poems as there are to be written. It starts off scary, and revelatory. When it becomes easy, the project is done (2000: 278).

Writing the poems in the collection felt, in Jamie's terms, as if it were a long game of 'Mother, May I'; each different approach to the first-person and autobiography being a tentative step onto new ground, each completed poem being permission granted. The movement across stanza breaks in 'Canzone: Cunning' reflects this process in microcosm, as each stanza begins with a step beyond the previous line in depth and understanding of cunning, ageing, and ancestry. For example, the end of stanza one, 'not me they call but an old woman/ who runs in my veins, a cunning woman' moves from the general 'a cunning woman' to the realisation of 'You always knew what you were, old woman. / I grew knowing the wink of your cunning' (p. 28). The end of stanza two shows the 'you' of the poem, the 'old woman', 'to skate before the pressure-wave of passing time,/ to harvest and hoard the gathering marks of time.'

leading to the speaker's meditation on time in stanza three: 'When everything was beginning, time / was a kaleidoscope. Becoming a woman /seemed just out of reach' (p. 28).

I found that using 'cunning' as the dominant word in the first stanza, and focussing only on the definition of the word as I wanted to use it, had the effect of unmaking and remaking 'cunning' until its meaning solidified and the stanza seemed to find its only possible shape. There was a risk that focussing only on what cunning is would make the stanza too self-referential and close off possible paths through the rest of the poem. The introduction of the next dominant end-word in the last two lines enabled the focus to turn outwards and set the terms for the next stanza.

> It's not me they call but an old woman
> who runs in my veins, a cunning woman (p. 28).

From this point, subsequent stanzas change from being about the 'cunning woman' to addressing her directly and exploring the relationship between 'I' and the 'cunning woman':

> You always knew what you were, old woman.
> I grew knowing the wink of your cunning (p. 28).

Throughout stanzas two to five, the focus of the narrative switches back and forth between the influence of the old woman and the speaker's meditations on

time and ageing, driven by the chosen end-words. I found the process of writing the canzone led naturally to a meditative tone as each required repeat of an end-word triggered further exploration of that word. For example, in the third stanza each repeat of 'time', in conjunction with the other end-words, impels examination of the speaker's relationship with time and reflections on ageing, but also carries a sense of timelessness.

> When everything was beginning, time
> was a kaleidoscope. Becoming a woman
> seemed just out of reach, fragments of time
> spun away by wishing. Naïve of the tricks time
> plays, it took years to match it in cunning;
> stretching when I wanted it to shrink, time
> raced on when I wanted to hold it still. Time
> teases with knowledge growing as bones
> weaken; by the time I felt in my bones
> who and where I needed to be, time
> had already taken more of the years given
> than there were years left still to be given (p. 28).

None of the end-words in isolation would have driven the poem's direction in the same way but the combination of end-words, together with the subtle connections I perceived between them, made the direction of the poem feel inevitable. 'Cunning', for me, is associated with women even though Owen Davies in *Popular Magic: Cunning Folk in English History* states 'women constituted only a minority of cunning-folk, yet made up the majority of fortune-tellers' (2007: 71), which he attributes to the later education and literacy of women.

> Until the eighteenth century few females were given the opportunity to learn to read and write, literacy rates amongst women only catching up with men during the second half of the nineteenth century. While the reputations of cunning-folk were built upon a combination of innate ability, natural prescience and acquired arcane knowledge, public expectations concerning the abilities of fortune-tellers were far more modest (2007: 71).

My grandmother was literate while my grandfather was not and this enhanced the feeling, as I grew up, that women held the sight and wisdom to negotiate life's difficulties although men were treated as head of the family. It was also the women in the family who read tea-leaves, practised fire-rituals, and received visits from family members who died. 'Bones' and 'given' are linked to my view of women in the family for what they pass on and the earthiness of the knowledge, the way wisdom seemed intrinsic to their femininity, bone deep. 'Time' always carries connotations of ageing and this association is intensified in the context of the other end-words. The form of the canzone tends to a circular, or perhaps spiral, movement which I found both interesting and frustrating while writing. My creative process has always involved composing several lines at a time mentally, before committing to print. The form's repeated words made my usual process difficult as I had to keep checking the pattern and coming up against the next end-word I had to use. The associations between the end-words, and the effect of the repeated words impelling further exploration of each word, dictated the direction of the poem so that it felt

impossible to take it in any other direction. However frustrating the process of writing the canzone, the demands of the form led me to explore themes at greater depth than I would have otherwise, and resulted in a poem which became a keystone to the 'cunning' poems and for the whole collection.

The length of the canzone and the intensive focus on some words which is required by the form put me in a position where I had to overcome doubts and fears if I were going to finish the poem. The doubts and fears were not only those, previously noted, about autobiographical material but also discomfort with a potentially irritating form. Repeating end words so often, thirteen times for each end-word, challenged my poetic instinct to avoid unjustified repetitions and I had concerns about whether I had the skill to complete the canzone successfully. Completing the canzone, sustaining the music throughout it, and following the demands of the end-words to explore personal history brought me to a point in my process that did feel, as Kathleen Jamie says (2000: 280), as if 'permission' had been granted to move forward in writing the poems of the collection.

> We seek inner permission because we know that when we are writing in this new place, we will have to seek truths. The answer may come 'No' because we know, deep inside, we're not ready for this particular challenge, this deepening out. More often than not, though, I think that if the question is beginning to formulate itself, the direction is beginning to be mapped, the permission is ready to be granted (2000: 280).

Conclusion

This study has been a stimulating and fascinating journey for me, through which I have learned and developed a great deal. The most obvious outcome, on a personal level, is that my poetics have changed. Before undertaking this project, I wrote in the first-person very rarely unless the poem was a dramatic monologue. When I did use the personal first-person, it was with anxiety and discomfort, because of the issues detailed in the introduction and chapter 1. My white, working class, Methodist upbringing valued community over the individual and discouraged talking about oneself; these deeply absorbed values, together with the perception of bias against women's poetry with autobiographical elements, created strong barriers for me against writing in the personal first-person. Now, however, I find I only write poems without the first-person if there are specific, and poetic, reasons for doing so, such as needing a different point of view to achieve the poem's aims (The Visit, p. 34) or where a first-person speaker would have changed the focus of the poem (Cunning, p. 62). This constitutes a complete reversal for me and is wholly due to the writing and research I have done for this PhD as my understanding of the issues and benefits of the first-person approach has deepened; for me, poetry is a way of understanding the human condition and I have found avoiding the 'I'

can limit routes to understanding by closing some routes of building meaning through language.

Another outcome for my personal poetics is the realisation of the importance of ancestors' influence, especially in my acceptance of 'cunning'. Cunning, in the sense of old knowledge, was present from the outset but something that I regarded as belonging to my grandmother and the women before her. The process of researching and writing the poems has brought me to an understanding that my poetry comes from a place of cunning, that all the women in my ancestry, and what they offer, are part of the fibre of my being. This understanding has changed my world view and contributed to my acceptance, through cunning, of my personal first-person as a valuable point of view. Cunning enables me to see the bear in the wood (Ursa, p. 21), to 'slip into Jackdaw skin' (Sightlines, p. 22).

The research I have conducted into the critical response offered to women's poetry has enabled me to conclude that my perception of bias against women's poetry is well founded. The informal survey of women poets' experiences (pp. 90-92), together with analysis of reviews of male and female poets' collections (pp. 96-103), demonstrated that women's poetry is mostly judged on content

and sometimes dismissed as 'too personal' or 'domestic' on that basis. The men's poetry tended to be judged on craft, technique, and originality; the sort of response one might expect from a properly critical assessment. The research demonstrates that women's poetry is sometimes denied a critical response; rather than being read for craft, language, and music, as may be expected from informed criticism, women's poetry is judged for being written by women, and what the poet chooses to write about.

The other issue which was highlighted by the analyses was the use of language in criticism. Gender-specific language tended to be used in criticism of women's poetry but not of men's poetry. Language was used that is usually associated with the silencing of women's voices, in many fields as well as the arts, such as 'whinging', 'shrill', and 'whining'. The perception, and reality, of bias has created a barrier for me in the past and may, as shown by Amabile, have an impact on women's creativity. Amabile's research shows that negative judgement or evaluation, or the expectation of it, impacts on creativity (pp. 103-105).

My research into the responses engendered by two versions of the same poem (pp. 177-181) could, at first glance, be seen to contradict the anecdotes offered

through the informal survey of women poets' experiences (pp. 90-96). The other women's experiences showed negative reactions to first-person approaches in poetry; as with the reviews analysed, they were criticised for personal content and language was used which is only associated with women. Conversely, the thematic analysis of the responses to two versions of 'Laundry' (pp. 177-181) showed the first-person version to be read more deeply. Readers of the first-person version engaged with the metaphors, examined the craft, and brought their own experiences to the poem, while readers of the third-person version read the poem for content and were inclined to understand it literally.

The difference between the results can be explained by the differing circumstances of the research. The responses collected in chapter 1 (p. 85) were published reviews. Writers who publish reviews may expect disagreement but may not expect their language to be closely examined or analysed. Those who responded to either version of the 'Laundry' poem, however, had been told they were part of an experiment; they could surmise that their responses would be examined and analysed, although they were not told to what end. They were also asked for an emotional response to the poem they were sent, not a critique. I had asked for volunteers to read and respond to a poem, and so could expect that their responses were from a position of wanting to be helpful. All of these

factors would have influenced the way the responses were written and may explain the in-depth, positive responses I received. The analysis of the responses offered to the two versions of 'Laundry' helped me to understand the benefits of writing the 'I': the analysis showed that experienced, careful, readers could connect better to layers of meaning and bring more of their own experiences to a poem in the first-person, while avoiding the 'I' could distance the reader from the poem. However, this does not alter the effect of evidence I have found of bias against women's poetry with autobiographical elements and my realisation that women's poetry cannot be guaranteed to receive a properly critical response in the public domain, especially in early career reviews.

How does this research affect me as I look forward to my next steps in poetic development? The disparity in critical response is not universal; there are properly critical reviews of women's lyric poetry. For example, Wynn Weldon reviewing Wendy Pratt's collection *Museum Pieces* for *Ink Sweat and Tears* focusses on the poet's careful layering of symbols, ideas, and images:

> Much of contemporary poetry is mere reflection, gobbets of prose in effect. Wendy Pratt does something only proper poetry can do: to make associations and connections across acres of symbol and image and idea, to address the most common of all subjects, death, provoking not only thought but also feeling. (2014: online)

Luke Kennard examines form and literary context in his review of Linda Black's prose poem collection *Inventory* for *Poetry London*:

> This delights even as it intimates a troubled upbringing. It's probably its element of pain – the sense of personal cost – that ensures Black's surrealism goes beyond the fabulist strand of prose poetry inspired by such as Russell Edson.
> Not that the work resembles traditional memoir. Black's prose poems are as likely to focus on a chair leg as a significant autobiographical event. When the idea of order is stripped away like this, a mutual respect is forged between writer and reader. (2008: 39)

Both of the women's poetry collections reviewed above contain personal material but the reviewers were able to offer properly critical responses, unlike the reviews analysed in chapter 1. Poets need to acknowledge and promote reviews such as these. When we write reviews, we need to ensure we don't perpetuate the status quo by concentrating on what is viewed as appropriate or fitting content but offer thorough analysis of craft and technique. Most of all, I need to write what I need to write, without fear or consideration of critical response. What I have to say matters and I can say it as a woman because, as Vicki Bertram writes:

> Sex and gender matter in poetry. They play a significant part in the way poets write and readers read. As a genre, poetry has proved especially resistant to this idea. To deny this is to facilitate a critical tradition that prioritises and naturalises men's writing and concerns (2005: vii).

I believe that I have achieved what I set out to do through this PhD. The poetry collection is original and publishable. The poems use a variety of strategies, forms, and techniques to examine personal and family history while connecting with more than personal concerns; it has been a journey of discovery for me, reframing the lyric beyond the label of 'confessional'. I feel I have taken the research in the writing of the poems, and into the context and challenges therein, as far as possible within the space allowed. The whole project has been stimulating and challenging, and I feel I have developed a great deal as a poet and as a researcher through the process, while bringing new knowledge to the field. There is scope to take the research into the response to women's poetry further, which I intend to do. Following my presentation of the research at a conference, an academic from the University of Budapest has expressed interest in collaborating to develop a European project. We are currently seeking funding for the first stages.

I believe the collection of poetry developed through this study is a great step forward from my previously published work; I am interested, and excited, to discover what will come next.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Reviews of male poets

Data Extract	Coding
A reliance on existing texts betrays an absence of imagination unless you do something imaginative and interesting with them. I don't see anything that lifts any of it out of the ordinary predictability of its language, the limitations in its material and, above all, a nagging sense of unoriginality. neutered by its central unoriginality a narrowness of imaginative range this isn't breaking any new ground; it's the book's sheer conventionality, the artistic conservatism that pushes me away. the near-identical register and rhythmic similarities of each poem the joint vision is dull in its conception a pedestrian ramble	Lack of originality/creativity
The poems feel rushed and unpolished it's clumsy and facile embarrassingly tin-eared warbling in the demotic	Failure of craft

tone-deaf to the comic pseudo-profundity of his lines he thinks that merely intoning the names of things can replace the hard work of description next three lines feel forced – “larynx” feels both distancing and clumsy, as do “lips un-puckered”, and “with the introduction”. He isn't adept at the required identity sculpting - the 'I' voice is too samey Too often, however, the poems default to a catalogue of unrooted specificities and lazy generalities dull in its conception, dashed off in its execution, and made far worse by its pretensions. many (poems) are straightforward reportage	
no excuse for deploying ethnic stereotypes for comic effect It’s unedifying stuff, placing the poet’s own ‘wind-slender / kinship of sea and blood / and the kinship of the earth / with everything that crawls beneath the stars’ directly in contrast with his renewable energy-loving (how dare he) neighbour poet is so enamored of himself and his sincerity that he is rendered quite tone-deaf bitter poem may work better for writer than for reader.	Poets’ personality

self-regarding collage and macho pomp jaw-stretchingly self-aggrandising introduction	
some of the writing's underlying messages are unexamined and harmful "Spinsters", stereotyped either as above or desperate for sex, appear in a couple of other poems. A reliance on existing texts the limitations in its material but, given that this is already the dominant history and portrayal of London, they shouldn't expect anyone else to find anything new or surprising in it, let alone remotely subversive.	Subject matter/theme
macho pomp	Gender-specific criticisms and language

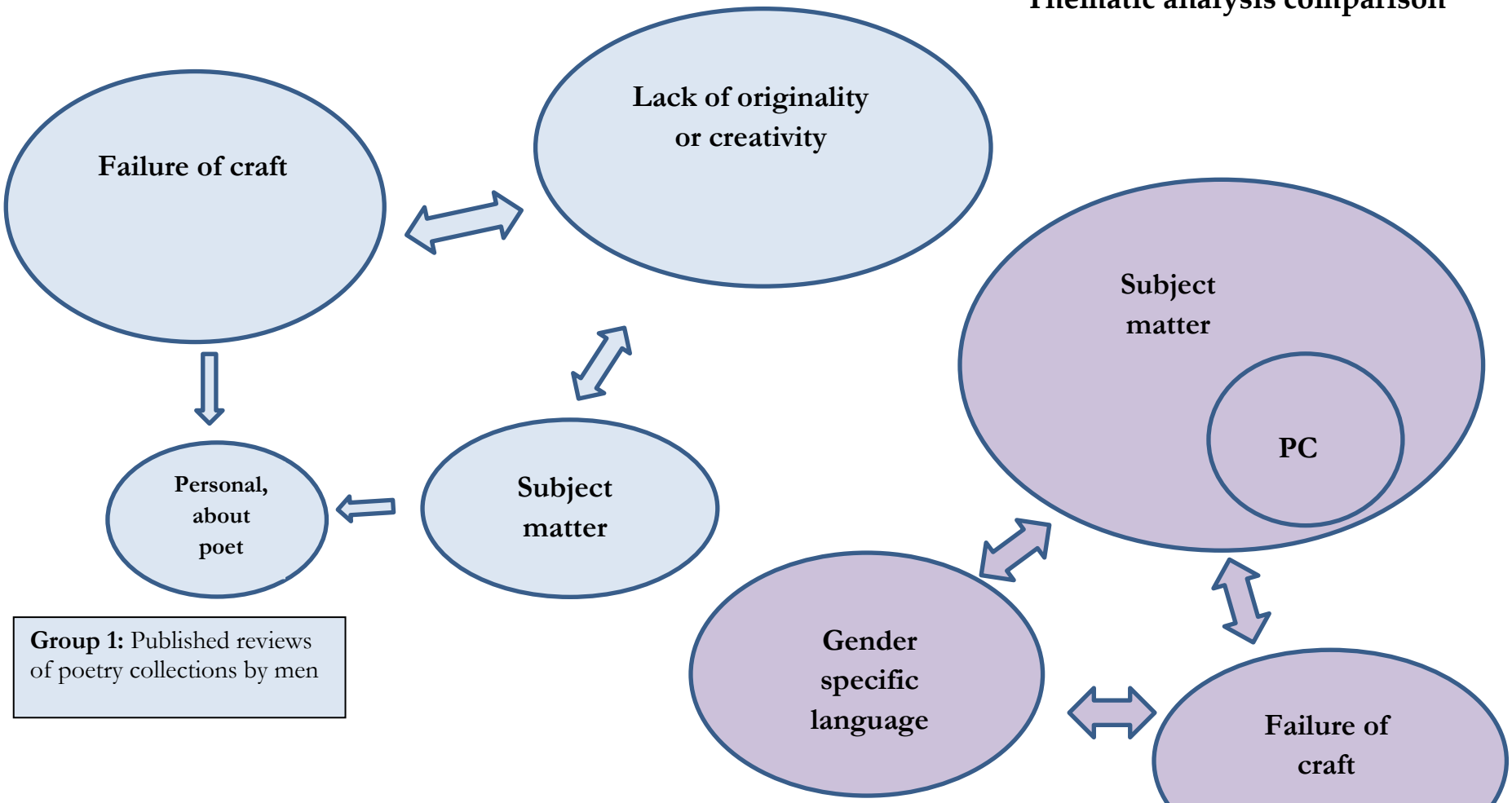
Reviews of female poets

Data Extract	Coding
Poetry should make the familiar strange, not render it all too familiar raised the spirit of McGonagall without the pleasing use of gratuitous rhyme intensely characteristic, weak and unoriginal closing epiphany verse enjambments are then typical of the easy but apparently smart "tricks" - very much as Duffy does them. falls victim to one of the most obvious flaws of un-composed poetry: it all sounds the same, a conversational drone. There is no rhythmic, sonic or even semantic patterning a skittish, unfocused, descriptive voice who relies on editorial passivity to give the action an edge poetic *moments*. . . unsustained by finished craft or diligence written so flatly and repetitively aggressively dull	Failure of craft
essentially a misery memoir The problem is that uncomfortably vivid (at times hyper-real) description is all there is. Mother has a miserable life; daughter has an equally miserable time observing her misery.	Subject matter/theme (PC)

Kali is still around, though paired in a poem with Sheela na gig, a fat exaggerated cunt, for cross-cultural, cross-historical spiritual indigestion born-again pagan proselytizing We're in the territory of public breast feeding in a restaurant, flaunting underarm hair; wanting people to object - so that a lecture can be delivered The pantheistic conceit and the Goddess-bothering from retired religions, is so cringe-worthy that this excess of nonsense approximates entertainment exemplar left-liberal turf - the hint of identity politics, with the hidden snobbishness The use of 'wraith' brought only invited connotations of pesky hobbits and dreary noble elves I can't take this overblown, dippy-hippy, Gai/Goddess trip seriously Bored Edwardian vicar's wives used to bang out pamphlets about seeing God in a drop of dew etc we now have the modern equivalent woven in Wicca. There's little to be gained, no great thought about society, no establishment challenged or accepted wisdom debunked The whole collection reads very much like a handbook for the politically correct	

One wants more from poetry than whinges highly personal and domestic poems written so flatly and repetitively Perhaps they thought the drearily PC subject matter was enough to warrant its inclusion as if some particularly over-enthused middle-class coven had raised the spirit of McGonagall	
self-consciously twee unbearable tweeness of being that fails every poem If unbridled trite tweeness blows up your skirt, this collection is for you over-enthused middle-class coven The poem is so perfect for *"Women's Hour"* or the *Guardian's* women's section Poems to be printed on Cath Kidston merchandise. One wants more from poetry than whinges	Gender-specific criticisms and language

Thematic analysis comparison



Group 1: Published reviews of poetry collections by men

Group 2: Published reviews of poetry collections by women

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Appendix III

05-26-2013, 07:07 PM

Rose Kelleher
Member

Join Date: Jul 2002
Location: Maryland, USA
Posts: 3,700

Well, I got my copy, and I'm impressed and moved, dammit! It would have been so much more satisfying to hate the book that won the Pulitzer, but she won me over.

Yeah, yeah, form. Several people have mentioned "Olives". What Olds is doing is very different. Technically, what Alicia does is more difficult. But:

1. Not everyone who writes formal poetry should flatter himself that his poetry is anything like Alicia's. Her poems aren't brilliant because they scan and rhyme, they're brilliant because of the way they sound AND because she has her own unique way of looking at things.

2. Sharon Olds has her own unique way of looking at things.

3. Risk matters. What is risk? It's making yourself vulnerable to attack. Sharon Olds stuck her neck out with this collection. I'm sure she could foresee the kind of criticism the book would draw from certain quarters. The poems are "confessional," which is a term we use whenever a woman writes a poem in the first person about something personal. It means it's narcissistic of her to imagine that anyone cares about her personal life; because of course the poems don't have any broader application than that; of course readers can't use their imagination to put themselves in her shoes; her "I" is not the universal "I"; the universal "I" is male.

Yeah, she can be a little prosy at times. You could probably remove the line breaks from (most of) her poems and the effect would be the same. But line breaks aren't everything.

My education continues. Thanks for the lesson.

Appendix IV

Some of These Things are True

In 1954 I learned about waiting, the sour taste of it
In 1964 I had long conversations with my bicycle
In 1974 I drove 1000 miles to see someone who wasn't there
In 1984 I collected eggs from 3000 hens, couldn't look at them
In 1994 I lived in a cave, learned the rhythms of bats
In 2004 I heard my own voice for the first time

In 2005 I stopped whispering, tongued the roundness of breath
In 1955 I learned that I couldn't stay in comfort
In 1995 I watched a grizzly and held my dog to stop it barking
In 1965 I discovered a mad child and held the door open
In 1985 I learned the habits of watchfulness
In 1975 I forgot what I'd learned and didn't want to be alone

In 1976 I watched forest fires from a dark beach
In 2006 I spoke a long truth and lived with it
In 1986 I rode an elephant and scared the cows on common land
In 1956 I discovered an ocean with too many waves and no shore
In 1966 I learned it wasn't always good to be good
In 1996 I searched for a hilltop, found only a plain

In 1997 I built a shelter in the valley, roofed it with paper
In 1977 I wore khaki and army boots, but couldn't keep in step
In 1967 I could climb a rope without knotting it
In 2007 I learned to walk on stilts, saw a different horizon
In 1957 I found a new land with no borders, no checkpoints
In 1987 I told a lie and gagged at the lingering taste of it

In 1988 I lived in another's skin for a year
In 1998 I found the seduction in solitude, the sting beneath
In 1958 I discovered what could hide under the brightest lights
In 1978 I learned about weight and what I could carry
In 2008 I swam a sea and found a lake within it
In 1968 I grew my hair and learned the textures of silence

In 1969 I walked barefoot for too many miles
In 1989 I counted rats running from a dog in the stable
In 2009 I cut through strands and tangles, took longer strides

In 1999 I wore glasses for reading, saw clearly without them
In 1979 I lived on a cliff-edge, looked down every morning
In 1959 I made a people, named each one a colour

I remembered in 1964, what I said in 1994
I knew in 1984 what I'd forgotten in 1974
I discovered in 2004 what I waited for in 1954

Appendix V

Dear Poets

I am looking for volunteers to help me with a small experiment, to do with my PhD. We are all busy people and I am not asking for a long-term commitment; if you're willing to help, I would send you one poem and ask you to email me with your response to it. I don't need a full blown critique, just your honest reaction - and I can promise that it won't be any more than one poem. Responses will be anonymised in any writing up.

I can't say any more about the nature of the experiment, for fear of colouring responses, but will be happy to explain afterwards if you're interested.
Please email me if you're willing to help.

Many thanks
Angela

Email #2:

Thank you for helping - I appreciate it.

I've attached a poem; it would be helpful if you could base your response on these questions:

What is your emotional response to the poem?

Can you identify what triggers your response?

I'll send some explanation round when I'm done with this in a couple of weeks.

Many thanks,
Angela

Appendix VI

Responses to First person version of 'Laundry'

Data extract	Coded for
having the need/desire to snap away any domestic conventionality…... The idea of the taut line and the pent up feelings Here I hear the poet, rather than the narrator, 'take the shears and slice/through (this) taut line', creating a tipping point, pouring the poem's energy into the final tercet a great whoosh of a letting go a kind of minor feeling of liberation at the thought of doing something destructive By cutting the line and "freeing" her clothes and herself from the laundry work and maybe from a past that has led her to have "badges of blood and semen" on her skirt. I'm the beleaguered female enjoying the narrator turning the notion of laundry on its head and I feel liberated it was such a relief when you cut through that taut line I liked the choice of gardening tool - not something to prune or shape but something to make a sheer break ... to sever the line There must be a feeling of great release to let your dirty washing display itself wantonly on plants, trees and shrubs There's something freeing about strewing dirty clothes on bushes and waiting for the rain instead. A kind of empathic emotional release or letting go, 'going mad' Finally a sense of release, of relief – she's burnt some boats Happiness when the line is cut. The feeling that I am sharing in a sense of release/relief with the protagonist of the poem.	**Release/relief freeing**

"blood and semen" - immediately I think of rape, though I'm not sure that's the intent Then bewilderment at the unwashed clothes, and shock and anxiety at the stained skirt (rape?) She seems to have endured something brutal (possibly) As soon as I read the 'badges….'line, I suspect that something awful has happened, that perhaps the other clothes have been put out dirty alongside the stained Indian skirt – the blood and semen suggesting some kind of violence. Now I feel a sense of menace. The waiting is ominous I find the poem dark, disturbing, menacing but very powerful all the cutting tools and the slicing through of the tautness, quite frightening really. First emotion is of shock – this is quite a violent act	**Violence or threat of violence**
recognised the comfort in hearing voices beyond that high fence when housework is such a chore and solitary act. in the back of my mind there's unresolved stuff, like why a bloodstained skirt would be hanging out to dry in the first place Then there's puzzlement– why has this act become necessary? Why has it taken so long to happen a certain sense of disgust. I identify with the transgressive aspect of cutting the line and putting the laundry out into nature there's slight disgust at a public display of stains	**Literal reading, housework**

here is a kind of pride in these stains a sense of owning up to what might be considered sins of the flesh. the feeling of what will be, will be Also the idea of showing the world your stains and blemishes and not keeping up an appearance anymore. could be grief – a loved one dead, a loved one gone; or could be a celebration of same I love the detail of the places that the clothes are hung out, the celebration of the breaking out of constraints. I can also read it as her hanging out how she experiences the female body, and then the word badges becomes celebratory I thoroughly enjoyed the celebratory air of 'the chance of rain' a triumphant flaunting of the 'rules' and ritual Just a little bit smug, the self-celebratory verses with the coffee, drinking wine in bed, Indian skirts and sex and menstruation it's calming and reassuring and brings one back out of the personal internal letting go to the constraints of the 'real' external world. Along with the fact that nearly every stanza is a separate unit of sense, that has a very calming effect There are a lot of long sounds at the ends of second and third lines in each stanza, too - they also help create that reflective mood.	**Owning and acceptance**

it's above all an expansive one, my emotional response; and the verbs rule it! The first one is stretches, then you step out. In the third stanza there is a brief contracting; you are rooting, pruning, slicing. But given the almost immediate return to expansion, that slight braking only adds momentum (as in momentum overcome) to the rush outward: the swish, the jump-and-fling, the facing-outward, and finally then the attention focused almost exclusively on distance The boldness of the poem's expansion seems to me to be that you've taken that already expansive image, laundry on the line, and reject it as still not expansive enough, snipping the line and moving further outward from there--skipping the washing stage entirely.	**Expansion**
I felt very connected with the poem not because of how I feel now but because of what life was like when I had small children, a full time job, and the house and no support She used to stand at the window and hang the laundry and then reel it in when it was dry. Sometimes she would let me help her, and we would talk and laugh and work together. She was wonderful to me, and I loved her dearly could be quite cathartic considering all I'm going through in my life at the moment I identify with the action of putting out the wash, both myself, and memories of mother and aunt doing the same. how I will use domestic activities (making cups tea, ironing, washing up) to both put off doing some things, as well as not facing up to others. It also makes me aware of how much I compromise on things I believe in – through tiredness, laziness, fear – yet still hanging on to them in my head. confess my delight at being re-called to the first time, in Bali, that I ever gave my laundry to the wife of a friend to be washed--only to find it tossed over ever branch and bush and bit of tall grass in sight later that afternoon--for drying,	**Readers' associations**

not washing, true--but image still echoes yours Sad that it immediately conjures in my head a place I wish I was, not being happy with my current living accommodation. It's the tree - it suggests open air and I see fields beyond it (immediately I am bringing my situation and my imaginings into the story)	

Responses to third person version of 'Laundry'

Data extract	Coded for
I wonder if she is divorcing, cracking up, newly free?	**Release/relief freeing**
These are huge 'red flags' for me in terms of symbolism. Part of me wants to celebrate this woman's defiance, but part of me is frightened and another part, enraged. There's an inkling that violence will follow. "Recoil" and "snake" are ominous word choices. While I'm reading this I experience a sensation of dread, my chest closing and my heartbeat increasing. It's the inherent violence that shocks – the shears – and then the 'recoil and snake' makes me think of a power line down – dangerous. She makes me nervous. She's raw and on the edge. The language used, the 'shears' and 'slices' sounds slightly violent, and then the colours, the red, pink, blood and semen, all seem to point towards a violent act having taken place - rape, perhaps? I thought there was an underlying threat of violence in the poem- underlying, because we weren't shown the character's thoughts or feelings I entertain the thought that, perhaps, this woman has been driven to kill someone, a husband, a lover, a boyfriend, as a result of violence that has been done to her	**Violence or threat of violence**
I like laundry poems... I'm a bit in awe and a bit disgusted too	**Literal reading, housework**

I am repelled somewhat by the descriptions of stains The mention of semen on the skirt is offputting Slightly put-off – emotionally, not critically – by the grubby imagery of verse 7. Why is she doing this? Is she unable to wash because there has been a drought, so there's no water for washing? Or is this simply an act of rebellion against the work? I'm puzzled, too: what I assumed would be clean laundry is not clean why she has brought out a basket of dirty washing to peg out, rather than clean. I like the idea of the rain doing the washing. I wonder if she is divorcing, cracking up, newly free? I feel confused when she cuts the line and there is a wondering about why. I also get confused as to why she has brought out a basket of dirty washing I don't mind that she's draping clothes – or even snagging them– in the shrubs. I do that when I'm camping and I like the freedom I identify with the "she" of the poem and with the task of hanging laundry on a line Part of me wants to celebrate this woman's defiance By the last line I explain the situation to myself: She's waiting for rain to do the job of washing I often feel annoyed by having to wash and peg out laundry, it can be all-consuming sometimes Also it seems that she needs a better washing powder, or has	**Literal reading, housework**

she not washed the clothes	
not an expiation of past guilts, but rather an increasingly open attitude toward the escapades of the past there is a sense of serene acceptance of experience -- images of traces from the past create this that last stanza also suggests an expectant openness or receptivity to future experience, which augments its quietly positive calm tone Felt the heaviness at the end, summer heaviness just before a heavy downpour. A lovely finished action. Calm. the poem's dominant tone of calm acceptance, so strongly reinforced by the contemplative stasis evoked in the last stanza	**Owning and acceptance**
a feeling of openness, of having to keep one end of my mind open while the other end carries on along the poem. It's an enjoyable feeling of being forced to notice my own mind's capaciousness I get a feeling of space. It's likable.	**Expansion**
A frustration at my own inability to cut through the crap that bogs down life because of course, there are things you want to hold onto to and a fear/cowardice of fully committing to such an act. Kept me in a dead marriage for ten years. Questioning of my own life and others – esp. the accumulated dissatisfaction of verse 4. the decisiveness slices	**Reader's associations**

through the taut line, because of course, there are things you want to hold onto to and a fear/cowardice of fully committing to such an act.	

Responses to first-person version of 'Laundry'

Responses to third-person version of 'Laundry'