

WRITING ANOMALY

Person-centred metamodernism
and the creative process



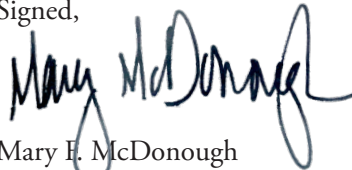
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Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary E. McDonough', written in a cursive style.

Mary E. McDonough
03 June 2019

ABSTRACT

I wanted to write in my own voice, about topics that mattered to me. I wanted to explore my own story, the stories of others, and how they intersect. I wanted time and space to grow as a writer. I ended up stuck down dead-ends, trying to speak with a voice that wasn't mine.

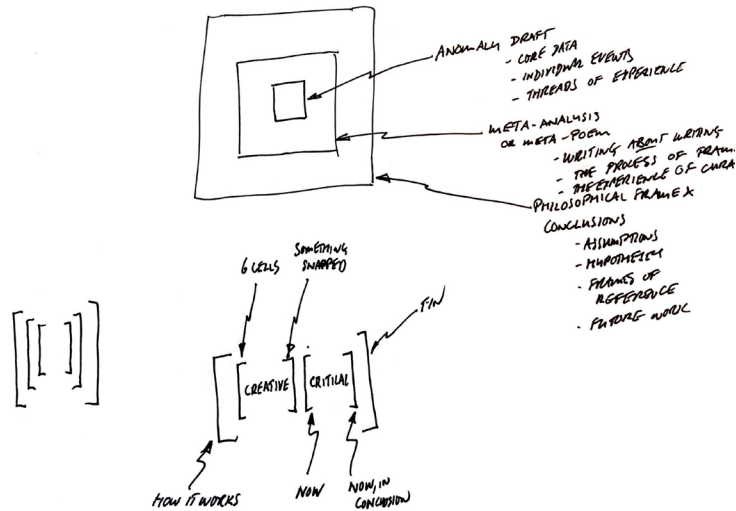
Through collaboration, I unstuck myself, explored my story in a relational way, and finally was able to put together a creative collection that was deeply personal. A story of trauma, water, sin, dirt, sensuality, and redemption.

In this thesis, I explore that creative process: my own process of letting go of the dichotomy between a received philosophy of writing and my own. In doing so, I document my letting go of any notion of needing to 'belong' in a received narrative, and of finding my place within it.

Keywords: creative writing, science, person-centred, metamodern, poetry, prose, short stories, paradox, dichotomy, process, philosophy, dirt, water, psychotherapy, collaboration, relationship.

*The worst things start with numbers,
and end with pretending.*

HOW IT WORKS: ONE POSSIBLE MAP



(Clark, *Please close the bracket*)

I am a scientist, clinician, and writer; I am also none of these things. Different aspects of me become more obvious, depending on the context I'm in. Ultimately, I'm a pragmatist and explorer: I do whatever works. I borrow whatever approach, technique, idea seems appropriate to achieve the goal I am working towards. My approach involves trying to have an open mind, starting from a place of curiosity, seeing what is, feeling the gap between what *is*, and what *could*, or *should* be, the gap between what is there, and what I expected to see, acknowledging my biases at every step. I have to occupy the space *between*; I have to be in the gap.

As I have become a better investigator, more "hard-headed" and more scientific (as I believe I have) I have felt an increasing discomfort at the distance between the rigorous objectivity of myself as a scientist and the almost mystical subjectivity of myself as a therapist.

(Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* 200)

The philosophies I'm most rooted in are scientific methodology, particularly exploratory research method (Anderson and Hepburn, *Scientific Method*, section 5.1), clinical theory, most strongly Carl Rogers' person-centred theory (which is the application of scientific methodology in psychotherapy; see *On Becoming A Person*, part V), and metamodernism, as defined by Vermeulen and van den Akker, a philosophy of exploration which is applied to cultural phenomena. I can't cleanly separate these philosophies; I don't believe that it's possible or desirable to separate them.

As a young adult, I realised that I had always been a scientist, relying on scientific method. As a child I had studied and written about the people and environments I was exposed to, trying to work out how to be safe. Training as a clinician was the logical conclusion of having adopted these childhood strategies. While training, I studied scientific and therapeutic processes, and was drawn to the work of Carl Rogers from very early on, because he was also a scientist, clinician, and a writer. Rogers didn't distinguish between scientific, clinical, and creative process. He chose to not split himself, or to compartmentalise his process based on the context he was in. As a consequence, he had to wrestle openly with the resulting tensions.

Science has its inception in a particular person who is pursuing aims, values, purposes, which have personal and subjective meaning for him. As a part of this pursuit, he, in some area, "wants to find out." Consequently, if he is to be a good scientist, he immerses himself in the relevant experience, whether that be the physics laboratory, the world of plant or animal life, the hospital, the psychological laboratory or clinic, or whatever. The immersion is complete and subjective, similar to the therapist in therapy, described previously. He senses the field in which he is interested, he lives it. He does more than "think" about it—he lets his organism take over and react to it, both on a knowing and an unknowing level. He comes to sense more than he could possibly verbalise about his field, and reacts organismically in terms of relationships which are not present in his awareness.

Out of this complete subjective immersion comes a creative forming, a sense of direction, a vague formulation of relationships hitherto unrecognised. Whittled down, sharpened, formulated in clearer terms, this creative forming becomes a hypothesis—a statement of a tentative, personal, subjective faith. The scientist is

saying, drawing upon all his known and unknown experience, that "I have a hunch that such and such a relationship exists, and the existence of this phenomenon has relevance to my personal values."

What I am describing is the initial phase of science, probably its most important phase, but one which American scientists, particularly psychologists, have been prone to minimize or ignore. It is not so much that it has been denied as that it has been quickly brushed off. Kenneth Spence has said that this aspect of science is "simply taken for granted." Like many experiences taken for granted, it also tends to be forgotten. It is indeed in the matrix of immediate personal, subjective experience that all science, and each individual scientific research, has its origin.

(Rogers 216-217)

In my masters thesis (McDonough, *MRes Thesis critical component*), I began to explore the relationship between my clinical process and my process of writing. I explored, at length, the differences between therapy and writing, womens' relationship with story, narration and its reliability, and the ethics of using stories and memories that aren't mine. I also discussed the process of building relationships with clients, especially with those who were unable to tell or to hold their own stories, poetry as a form of morality, and poetry as a form of scientific research.

The therapeutic process has for me always been dyadic, with both therapist and patient contributing; writing in the expectation that someone would be reading what I'd written feels much the same to me. The poems and stories in the collection don't arise directly from therapy sessions—e.g., from clinical working, within the context of what was a private and legally/ethically confidential interaction*—but from my imaginative reconstruction of what might have been. I aim for verisimilitude: I've tried to write poems and stories that capture as precisely as is possible what a therapeutic interaction can be like.

(McDonough, *MRes*, 58)

* [original footnote from *MRes*] Apart from the fact that this would be unethical, it would be disrespectful and potentially damaging to the therapist-client relationship that I work hard to foster. Without a strong connection, a strong mutual understanding of what our stories are, and how they intersect, I can't support someone, and I can't teach them how to not need me, how to become their own therapist.

My MRes now feels like a failed experiment. I wasn't, as it turns out, fully writing as *me*. In the proposal I submitted, I said I would tell other people's stories *for* them, with their consent. But I cleaned up their stories; I made the people and the events tidier than they were. I did so because I felt uneasy about the idea of *borrowing*. I didn't fully understand that part of how we tell our own stories is by allowing them to 'blur' with other peoples'. I felt like I had to advertise every borrowed thing, to say "I'm borrowing this. This isn't my story. This didn't happen to me." But their stories *did* happen to me; I became part of their stories in the *telling* of them. 'Truth' became less absolute with every patient and every story. My belief in one unitary reality became impossible to sustain. All the stories were data points, and the conclusions I drew from the stories didn't support my hypothesis, that the best clinical lens is one of truth-seeking (McDonough, *MRes*, 70). I have since had to face the fact that lies are sometimes more important than what is 'true'. I was left with a lingering 'itch' to write about lies. My lies, and the lies I carried.

I now see the creative component of my MRes as fragile and 'intellectualised' (Vaillant, *The Wisdom of The Ego*, chapters 1-2). I had allowed other people to persuade me to add stanzas, to pad my writing out, to over-simplify, to make things black and white for the reader's ease. I was writing about really difficult stuff; I was told to make it as 'nice' as possible. I complied, bastardising form and structure to try to make the content more palatable for my anticipated audience. The critical component was unhealthily (for me) detached, and didn't really explore the spaces between 'Self' and 'Other'. Instead, it presented a tidy argument for why I had dared to write about other peoples' stories in the first place. I wasn't comfortable stating openly what I believe to be true, which is that *everything* is borrowed. I split the thesis into 'creative' and 'critical' in an artificially tidy way, compartmentalising my process in a way which simply wasn't mine. In the name of objectivity, I denied subjectivity, while asserting that poems are always, and inevitably, subjective.

This then is the degree of integration I have currently been able to achieve between two approaches first experienced as conflicting. It does not completely resolve all the issues posed in the earlier section, but it seems to point toward a resolution. It rewrites the problem or re-perceives the issue, by putting the subjective, existential person, with the values which he holds, at the foundation and the root of the therapeutic relationship and of the scientific relationship. For science too, at its inception, is an "I-Thou" relationship with a person or persons. And only as a subjective person can I enter into either of these relationships.

(Rogers 224)

I now see that I hadn't felt safe in the 'space' that my supervisor and I had co-created. As a result, I started to eliminate relationality and femaleness from my academic writing. My creative writing became apologetic about the extent to which it was relational. I tried to eliminate my Self from my own writing, in contravention of my own philosophy, my own ethic.

...[clients in therapy] tend to move away from self-concealment, away from being the expectations of others. The characteristic movement, I have said, is for the client to permit himself freely to be the changing, fluid, process which he is. He moves also to a friendly openness to what is going on within him—learning to accurately listen to himself. This means that he is increasingly a harmony of complex sensings and reactions, rather than being the clarity and simplicity of rigidity. It means that as he moves toward acceptance of the “is-ness” of himself he accepts others increasingly in the same listening, understanding way. He trusts and values the inner complex processes of himself, as they emerge towards expression. He is creatively realistic, and realistically creative. He finds that to be this process in himself is to maximise the rate of change and growth in himself...

(Rogers 181)

My writing, about some of the most 'congruent' experiences of my life, thus became 'incongruent' (Rogers 50-51). What was intended to be an exploration of my ethic and methodology became a way of hiding my own story, in plain sight. In essence, I was writing for my supervisor, and for my work, and not for myself.

It seems to me that in the best of science, the primary purpose is to provide a more satisfactory and dependable hypothesis, belief, faith, for the investigator himself. To the extent that the scientist is endeavoring to prove something to someone else—an error into which I have fallen more than once—then I believe he is using science to bolster a personal insecurity, and is keeping it from its truly creative role in the service of the person.

(Rogers 219)

The whole reason that I began the masters was to rigorously explore my 'hypothesis', my 'belief', my 'faith'. At some point this shifted, and I was instead writing to *explain* my hypothesis, belief, faith. While my MRes succeeded in explaining the similarities between the clinical process and the process of writing a poem, it failed to explore my core research question and hypothesis:

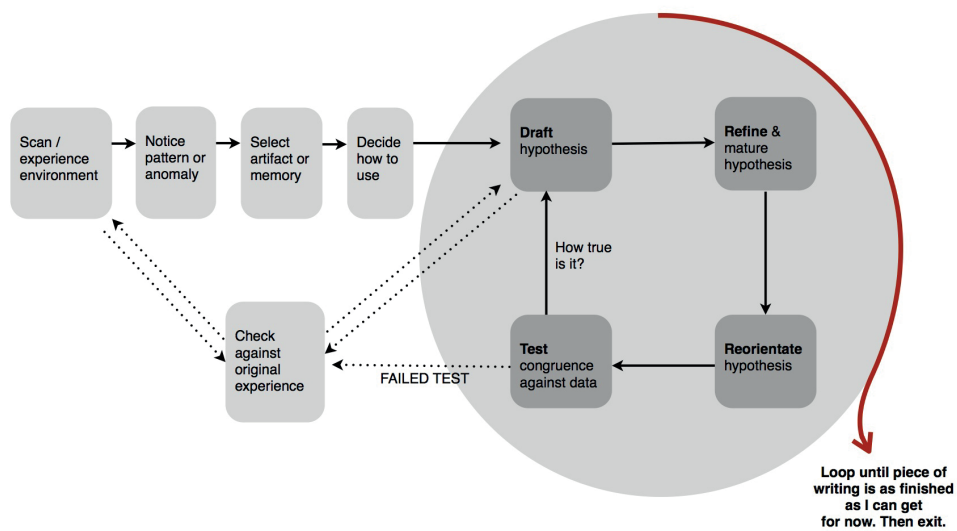
What happens if I write as *me*? If I'm writing as me, I'll know if my writing is good, no matter what anyone else thinks, or what environment I'm in.

Previously, I had focused on whether my writing met the dictates of the audience I was writing for. I had focused on being a clinical writer, technical writer, scientific writer, creative writer, and writing for social media. I wasn't applying the same principles across the board. I wanted to, and needed to, work out what my philosophy of writing was.

I have come to recognize that being trustworthy does not demand that I be rigidly consistent but that I be dependably real... can I be expressive enough as a person that what I am will be communicated unambiguously? ... If I can form a helping relationship to myself—if I can be sensitively aware of and acceptant toward my own feelings—then the likelihood is great that I can form a helping relationship toward another.

(Rogers 50-51)

I wanted to actually investigate my relationship with Self, using writing as a tool. I wanted to explore *my* reality, whether I nurtured anyone else's connection to theirs or not. I decided to do a PhD. I was still seeking an external structure that would allow me to justify my desire and need to write. I knew I had to write *relationally*. The question was how, and about what?



(McDonough, *MRes* 65)

The closest I had come, during my masters, to exploring my relationship with Self through writing was this diagram, a 'process map'. My husband, Martyn (physicist turned creative consultant), had helped me, while writing up my masters, to analyse my internal experience of writing a poem, using scientific process as a lens. As a result, I had an emergent understanding of *how* to write as me. I still lacked the courage to try it. The most useful output of my masters wasn't a book, but a sharper, partially tested, hypothesis.

The scientist has then creatively achieved his hypothesis, his tentative faith. But does it check with reality? Experience has shown each one of us that it is very easy to deceive ourselves, to believe something which later experience shows is not so. How can I tell whether this tentative belief has some real relationship to observed facts? I can use, not

one line of evidence only, but several. I can surround my observation of the facts with various precautions to make sure I am not deceiving myself... I can, in short, begin to use all the elaborate methodology which science has accumulated.

(Rogers 217)

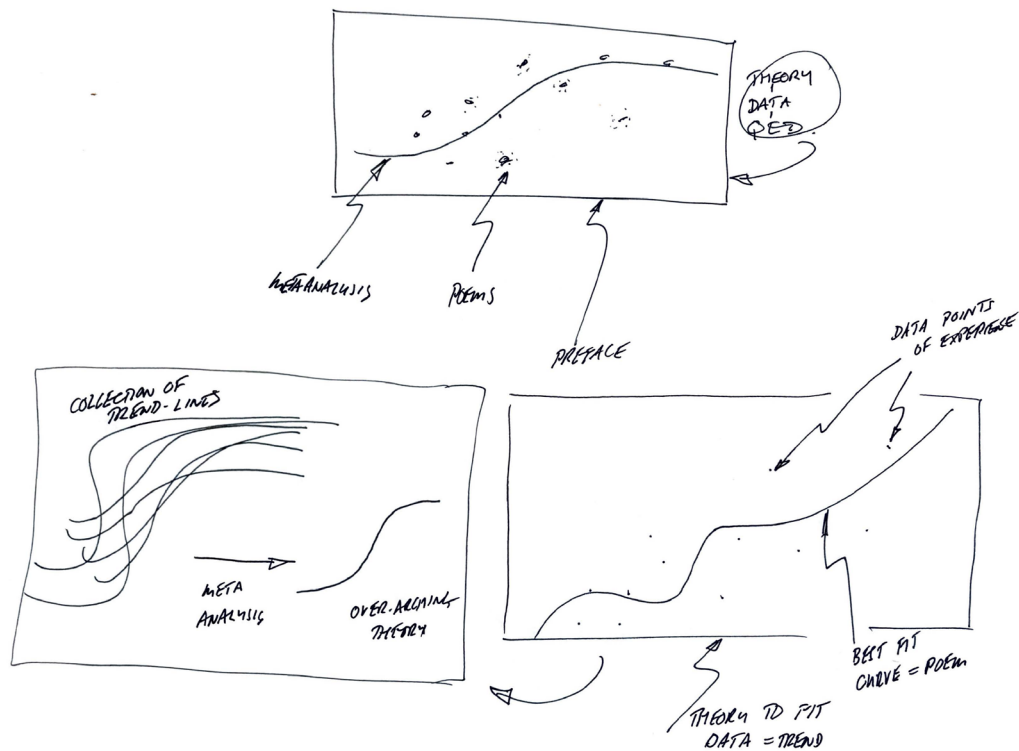
I came out of the masters with an even stronger commitment to find a way to applying my philosophy in my writing, having accepted that it is fundamentally scientific, therapeutic and relational in nature. I wanted to find a way for theory to support the complexity of my writing, rather than having my writing align to any one theoretical position. For example, including feminist theory is essential for me, but writing as a capital-F feminist is not. I wanted and needed to *explore* theory, rather than be driven by it. I needed to explore, intellectually and philosophically, as widely as possible.

However the difference between theory driven experimentation and exploratory experimentation should not be seen as a sharp distinction. Theory driven experiments are not always directed at testing hypothesis, but may also be directed at various kinds of fact-gathering, such as determining numerical parameters. Vice versa, exploratory experiments are usually informed by theory in various ways and are therefore not theory-free. Instead, in exploratory experiments phenomena are investigated without first limiting the possible outcomes of the experiment on the basis of extant theory about the phenomena.

(Anderson and Hepburn, *Scientific Method*, section 5.1)

I began hunting for a wide philosophical frame which would embrace science and therapy, while leaving room for non-traditional cultural artefacts, exploration, relationship, borrowing, and being an intellectual magpie. I was looking for a way to frame everything, to create a meta-poem to serve as an umbrella that I could fit very diverse writing under. I explored psychogeography as an option, which led me to look very closely at place, museums, and curation. I was at the

Hunterian, looking at how they presented artefacts. I started wondering how I could curate my work, which was as diverse as a Victorian cabinet museum. This led me to metamodernism, as curation is part of its philosophical structure.



(Clark, *Physics is poetry, too.*)

For me, the philosophical basis of Metamodernism is about trying to observe, without expectation, what is, tapping into whatever you want and need, looking at whatever you want to look at, rooting it in the present. It's not an idealising philosophy. It doesn't aim for perfection. It aims for balance, without relativism. It's about acknowledging influences, and signposting "this is how I'm curating these artefacts".

Therapy and scientific method as philosophies answer my questions of *why*. Why write? Why write as me? Why creative writing? Why is this effective? They also answer questions of *how*. How do I write? How do I improve what I write? How do I assess what's different about a draft relative to the previous one? Science is a stained lab coat, more concerned with the quest itself than the outcome. It assumes that other stained lab coats will understand it perfectly. Therapy is a comfy sweater, full of holes. It invites all of the other comfy sweaters over for coffee, so they can hang out and talk about how they feel. Neither has much interest in curation. They're both focused on what's true, what's real, what's measurable.

Metamodernism is a camera. It takes a snapshot of what happens when you put the stained lab coats and sweaters together. Just seeing what happens. It is concerned with presentation, curation, curiosity and outcome. It is about relationship; relationship between part and whole, Self and Other, fixity and fluidity, old things in new museums, fragments of the past in the modern world. It's about acknowledging that the modern world *is* fragmented, and we are too. And that's ok. It just *is*. Metamodernism might hang the photo upside down, but nobody minds, because the sticker underneath says "by the way, this photo is upside down". It's about acknowledging that partial truths are all we really have, and that "there's a curious sort of beauty in that" (Clark, *Personal conversation*).

Just as science strives for poetic elegance, artists might assume a quest for truth. All information is grounds for knowledge, whether empirical or aphoristic, no matter its truth-value. We should embrace the scientific-poetic synthesis and informed naivety of a magical realism. Error breeds sense.

(Turner, *Metamodernist Manifesto*, para 7)

I'm not a metamodernist. I'm not a clinician. I'm not a writer. I'm not a scientist. I'm *all* of those things and *none* of those things, and there's a curious sort of beauty in that.

DRAFT OF ANOMALY

I went wrong,
right from the beginning.
Wrong sperm.
Already en route to
becoming Mary Frances.

6 cells old,
already fucked.

*O02.9 Abnormal product of
conception, unspecified.*

At the bottom of the pool, I'm by myself for a little bit. I can't really hear anything: just some shouting and splashing. Mr. Mike says fighting with the water won't work; you have to let it hold you, and move with it. He says the best way to go out of the water is to push your face up through it, gently, like the water doesn't want to let you go, and you don't really want to get out of the pool. I like being by myself down here.

If you count a mississippi, you are counting a second. That's what Jerry says. I'm trying to stay down for more *mississippis* every day, so my lungs get bigger. I let my air bubbles out, one at a time, so I can stay down longer. If you let them all out in a rush, you have to hurry up out of the water. *Thirty-three mississippi. Thirty-four mississippi. Thirty-five mississippi.*

But sometimes my counting gets in a bit of a hurry. My words smush together—*for-y-four-mississippi-for-y-five-mississippi-for-y-six-mississippi*—and I have to push off the bottom hard with my feet to get up to the top fast enough.

I was feral.
Naked as often as I was allowed—
oftener, really.

No shoes. No shirt. Climbing,
hanging upside down from branches,
feeling my hair swirl in the wind.

And there was always wind. Always dust:
that's all West Texas is, one long dusty corridor
between nowhere and nowhere else on Earth.

I'm running away. I don't want a snack, or my hairbrush. I don't have to go very far—just to Marsha's. Brian said its ok to come to their house. I saw a boy running away on my TV. He packed things in a bandana, but I don't have one. I got a paper Piggly Wiggly bag from the pantry for my stuff. I'm not even scared about leaving. No one will notice I'm gone, except maybe Eddie. I don't know how much babies can remember. My good feelings are squeezing out, like my toothpaste when I mash the tube against the sink.

I'm hurting like a dark bruise, inside. It's not like getting a cut: my leaking isn't stopping. The black inside of me is getting bigger, and my light is going to go out unless I leave here. Good feelings make the light grow. When I have good feelings, my light dances down to my toes and back up again, like when I'm running, or when I get in the pool. My light helps me float, and think good dreams instead of bad ones. But the dark feeling is taking too many bites of my light, and I can't stop it.

I'm in my room again, crying. Because you brought me back. I just wanted to live with you, but you brought me back. You pretended I met you outside, like I was just waiting for you to get here. You said we would talk about it the next time I come to your house, but I wanted to come today. I told you. I ran away.

I know Mister Wilson is angry every day. I know he hits. That happens to me in my house already. I'm good all the time. I try my hardest to behave. But I still got ugly sandals for fat feet today, just like Nancy's. I hate having things the same. I don't think the same or look the same. I can't be here, I can't go to your house, and everyone else I love is far away.

My Grandma says that they are *dirty*. But I don't understand, because Momma lets them come live with us in our house. My other granny doesn't say that; *unlucky* is what she says. We let them live in our house, and they get their own room, those pregnant girls who came from someplace else. I like talking to them, and some of them let me read stories to them: I shout into their lumpy bellybuttons just in case the babies can hear, and they laugh, and that knocks me off their laps. I can hear them rocking in the rocking chair late at night when they can't sleep. Ellen says that she tries to rock her baby to sleep so she can get some rest from the kicking and squirming. Ellen had a boyfriend, but she doesn't any more, and he didn't want to be a Dad.

What I don't understand is, if these are dirty, bad teenager girls, then why do they take care of me, and cook with me, and help Momma make dinner? Why do they eat with us at the table? My Daddy says if we ever come to him like that he'll beat the shit out of us and throw us back out onto the streets, so we can work our way through our lives on our back. Sex with someone who didn't marry you is a sin. It's a bad sin. But a girl who couldn't keep her baby gave Eddie to us, so how could she be bad? I love Eddie. Eddie is my best thing. I like watching him sleep, and when he turns over, his sweaty curls blob into his cheek.

I asked Grandma why she said the girls were dirty. She said they were sinners, and they would have to work very hard for *The Lord* to forgive them. None of them are mean to Grandma, so I don't understand why she hates them. I told my Momma, and she said sometimes people have mixed feelings about things. I always love the girls who come to stay with us, but sometimes I feel jealous, because then they are the oldest child and not me any more. I guess that's a mixed feeling. I hope I'm not dirty by accident when I'm older.

I don't watch Kojak on my TV; there are too many guns. I don't watch Starsky, either, or Muhammad Ali, even when he wins. Everyone gets too angry. I know Starsky isn't real—he's not like Mister Wilson. Mister Wilson is yours, but I don't think you want him any more, and he's always angry, and he shouts until I close the door.

You remember Brian, because he's your boy. When Mister Wilson shouts, Brian and I lean against the door, and we pretend he isn't real. That's my idea; I'm older than Brian, so I tell him it. I thought of an eraser I can see in my brain that lets me wipe away scary things. Brian decides to have a red eraser.

You come in after Mister Wilson leaves. I know you've been crying. I hug you, and smell your perfume. You laugh: my snuffling tickles your neck. Your happy feeling shines out of you, like a light, and I'm warm. You let me spray the perfume bottle by myself. Our secret. Momma told me *don't waste Marsha's perfume*. I lie and say I didn't. Using Chanel number 5 is a bad thing: I would get in trouble. But really I don't think it is wasting it anyway, just using it. My bubble feeling inside starts to shrink, the way it always does when I make a mistake. Learning to lie is my first secret.

My second secret is about Barbie. She has pink shoes and a wedding dress. She can't stand up by herself; she has stupid feet. *Barbie teaches the wrong values*, Momma says. Barbie is a little bit Brian's, but really she's mine. I play with her every time I come over to your house.

Brian plays with Ken, just to be nice because you said to, cause he can play with her later. But not after his Dad comes home, or Brian will get the belt for being a girl instead of a boy. I don't tell Mister Wilson, even though he's Brian's Dad. Making Mister Wilson angry is a Bad Thing. That lie is my third secret. I squeeze my lips tight, and shake my head no when he grabs my shoulder and shouts *did that boy play with that damn doll?*

I don't love Mister Wilson. I love you and Brian. I just feel a bit sad for Mister Wilson. I wonder if I will have to tell Father Tom about that lie when I'm bigger and I do Confession. I wonder if God has a clipboard like the one I see in my head, getting fuller of black X marks every time I lie.

Mister Wilson doesn't like playing. He doesn't like sharing you with Brian or me or anyone. He thinks love is little, like a cupcake, and he won't get enough if you share yourself with anyone else, even a baby. Brian says that's why you can't have another baby. We both know that's a dumb idea, cause love grows bigger inside of you and spills out to other people every time you get happy. That's the bubble feeling, like I could float away.

My fourth secret is pink, pink lips. I said it was Koolaid. Really it was lipstick, pink lipstick the exact same color as Barbie's shoes that never stay on. The lipstick is yours, but it is really a bit mine too. I keep it in the drawer with your makeup. I love opening the drawer and looking at it. Our secret. Everything in the drawer is in rows, and I don't even know what lots of stuff in the drawer is for.

Brian and I don't like to play house. We are way too busy. We have pencils and lists. I have your tall shoes and blue dress with tiny straps. Brian has a shirt and a tie. We drink coffee and then we leave for work. He wants to come to my office, 'cause its at the top of the skyscraper. I say no. I'm busy with a project and my office is private. My purse is really yours too, and it is full of notes and curlers. Brian pulls Barbie's hair and I scream, because her head comes mostly off. I can see inside of her. Her head is empty, she is empty, and she isn't real. I feel sad for the rest of the day. You rub my back, and tell me I'm beautiful. I believe you, until it is time for me to go home. I'm only just me again then.

On another day, you drop Brian off at my house. I don't want to play with him here. It isn't the same. At your house, I'm special. I'm special because I'm *me* when I'm with you. You said girls can be anything they want, even if they want to be angry or fast or strong. Here, though, I just have to be good. And good means quiet. Good means not fussing about having my hair scraped back so tight it hurts. *Pride has no pain*, Momma says, and besides, *we have to keep it out of your eyes*. Long hair is like a disguise. It might even be a kind of a lie, cause you can look different every time. I don't want you to go. You are sad.

I'm worried, and all you tell me is *I'm fine Mary Frances, I'm fine, I'll see you soon*. I try to believe you, but I think you have a secret without me in it.

Later, Brian and I brush our teeth. He's going to sleep at my house until you come back. Momma says Marsha and Mister Wilson are going to talk. I don't think its a good idea. He's too black and angry inside, and I can see his screams filling him up. Momma tells me *hush!!* I try to go to sleep like a good girl, but there's shouting.

Someone let your Mister Wilson into my house, and he's holding my baby Eddie like a football, screaming for Momma to give him Brian. She won't. Momma says *please let him sleep; he's so little, please don't do this*, and she climbs Mister Wilson and yanks Eddie away. My Daddy comes inside, shaking his head. He was looking for something in Mister Wilson's car. No one can see me: I'm watching, like it's my TV, only I can't stop it. Eddie is screaming. Mister Wilson runs out the front door, covering his ears. Momma sees me, and tells me go back to bed. I hear her asking Daddy if he found the guns. He tells her shut up. He grabs me and rushes me back to my room. He calls someone. I'm afraid.

I wake up later and it is still dark. Brian is crying, but he's not in my room. He's in the living room, with a Grandma and a Grandad I don't know. They are taking him away. They are crying. Momma is crying. Momma tells me you and Mister Wilson are dead. She doesn't tell me how. She sends me back to bed. I cry, by myself, and that's my secret.

The next morning, I imagine you, head hanging to one side, like my secret Barbie when Brian pulled her head mostly off. Someone told my mother he'd shot you there. More than one time, she thinks, because her husband said so, and *wasn't it just awful that Marsha was leaving Mister Wilson and had a man on the side*. *On the side* is a weird thing; I don't know what that is, and I feel cold.

I was invisible: no one knew I heard her. I don't want to never come over to your house again. I didn't want to think about holes in your face. I try to rub the picture out with my eraser, but that just makes me think about bashing erasers at school with Brian. It's our favorite job. I will just say "no", when Mrs. Meyer asks me if I want to clean the erasers.

Someone closed your eyes, and closed the lid. A lady said they had a closed casket because Mister Wilson shot you, and you looked disgusting. Like the meat in our freezer, I think, smoking when the warm air comes in after I open it, all squashed and bony.

The funeral parlor man put your box on a conveyor like the suitcase thing at the airport where I get my Daddy's suitcase. Then the fire ate your face. I wonder if it still had blood on it, or if someone washed you first. I hope they washed you first, cause you didn't like to *look a fright*. My Momma's friend says *nothing will be left of her but ashes and some bits of teeth*.

Another lady said you *got what you deserved*. That's a lie. I don't tell any of them I can see their lies, rolling around inside of them, puffing out of their mouths and filling the room. They can't hear me anyway. I'm angry, but no one sees it. They tell each other I don't understand. I just keep sticking Lego together, trying to make a wall, but I don't have enough.

I wasn't brave. I'm frost inside, and people can see straight through me like I'm not here. I gave up. I turned off my light. I'm not clever or beautiful any more. But you still are, inside my head.

Fragile as old plaster,
lathe missing,
festooned in black velvet fleur-de-lis,
as if some over-zealous mortuary attendant
decorated you post-mortem.

You were pulled apart:
decadent efflorescences
root in the zig-zag gapping of the old sutures.

It flowered small,
right down in your marrow. One cell took root here,
another there, and your body never noticed. Death bloomed
without your consent.

Grey-stippled white, seamed with ribbons of
a coarser, peeling black, myeloma twigs jut and
curve in on themselves, making a nest
of your skull.

You've lived under glass for 200 years,
infertile as birch gall, no leaves, no purpose,
a dead end, tucked back
behind *Archaeopteryx*.

C90.0 Multiple myeloma.

No zippers, no buttons.
Did you think this would be easy?
Mammals don't work that way.

Burn off all the hairs; don't singe the skin.
The old adage—measure twice, cut once, applies.
There's just the one skin; you can't start over.

Reserve skin until step 10.

Place carcass in the pot.
Cover with water.
Boil until the bones move freely.
Allow to dry.

To reassemble:
joint with wire; splint with wood.
Experiment with lifelike poses.
When finished, contour and seal with clay.
Insert eyes.

Replace skin; sew firmly closed.
If you've taken proper care,
my seams won't show.

I'm a slattern, really.

The window is filthy, light limned in coal spores.
I cry, I bleed soot, perched on joists:
memories gather under eaves and in corners.

*Maybe I should sweep.
Each thought could spawn triplets.*

A good wife would scry past and future,
tucking them gently between sheets of white tissue.
I beg them to stay, offer them boxes.
I don't have anything else.

*Someone might need you.
Or the suitcases.*

Sing to me of Cupid's Disease.
No one can hear you.
It wasn't only a broken heart you died of:
the *Lues* took marvelous care of you,
constant companion until you died.

Leer at me with half your head missing:
a jagged void swallowed your eye,
and cost you your upper mandible.
Teeth rattle out of your jaw like chiclets;
they dot the shelf below your skull.
Extravagant growths bloom through
the cartilaginous chute that was your nose.

You can't wash some dirty secrets clean,

you whisper.

*Certainly not bathing once a year, I reply.
Mercury killed you faster than it did the Great Pox.*

GLAHM.B.1922.5

Today is going to be slow, like the last bit of toothpaste coming out. That always hurts my fingers, but I can't waste toothpaste or I'll get the belt. *Everything costs money.*

Going to play with the twins after school is fun. I feel grown up leaving with their Mom instead of mine. And they have dolls, Barbies and other ones, and I can take their shoes off and change their clothes.

Barbies don't ever wear hand-me-downs that are itchy and too big. They don't wear school uniforms or things that are ugly colours. Not like me. Momma says *new clothes are expensive and your cousins' clothes still have plenty of wear left in them*, but I don't care.

It's First Friday, so there's church today and no Reading Time. I wonder the whole way through mass what that word on the wall of the bank means. I'm sure it is bad. But I still think I know how it sounds. F.U.C.K. Dangerous. Pointy. Important. I can't ask Sister cause she'll just send me to talk to Father Tom, but I'll ask Mrs. Gonzales.

Its cold out here. I'm waiting in the front yard for my Mom to come. Mrs. Gonzales says I'm a *dirty, bad girl and the twins won't associate with me*. Which means we can't play. She called my Momma and told her to come get me. The twins are sad, and they make their sad Barbies wave to me through the glass when their Mom isn't looking. I think they're still my friends.

They look like their Mom: long black hair, beautiful brown skin. Not like me. I don't look like my Momma: no black hair, no green eyes, way too many freckles. Sometimes the twins draw on my arm and connect the dots, but they don't make a secret picture. Freckles are like being bad. My skin is mostly white; I'm mostly good, but being bad even one time is so bad that it cancels the goodness out, like one freckle. I wasn't really cursing, not like the witches in the book who make people die or fall asleep by saying magic words.

My Momma isn't happy that I can read. She keeps making me tell her ingredients from the cookbook while she's stirring. I don't get to play here, either.

No one can climb as high as me. I can shin two stories up the roof-pole, and reach up to throw down chalky rocks for everyone. We can play Hopscotch right now if I get to the top. I'm a monkey, pushing up hard with my knees and heels. I'm taller than JJ at the top of the slide; he's waving and shouting but I can't hear him. I'm laughing and laughing. *CLANG.*

Sister Catherine is banging hard on the pole. *Dirty girl! Get DOWN. Now. Everyone can see your underwear. I've already called your mother!* I almost fall as I slide down, burning my legs and my hands on the paint. My mom is angry, when she comes to pick me up, because my uniform skirt is covered in chalk, and she'll have to wash it.

Your pattern wheel leaves blue-smudged tracks
on my hand. I drive it across my palm,
rewriting in chalk pinpricks.
My life line, bisected by dots and dashes,
judders. I'm sure my heart squeezes,
skips, as the blade of your scissors *snick snick snicks*,
biting through fabric, scraping along the table.
Am I the same girl I was before?
Am I real or imaginary, here or not here?
You tell me to stop getting the dust everywhere.

You are speckled.
Every freckle, every
blot of ink on paper or on your hand,
is a sin.

Do you understand?

Like stepping on lines,
stepping on cracks,
breaking your Mother's back,
sins are things you do on purpose,
leaving marks
you can't erase.

Dab your fingers in.
Don't leave them there too long,
or the font will get dirty as a bird bath.

Remember to use your right hand,
or Sister will hit you.

Father.

Son.

Holy Spirit.

Up and down, then left to right.

Leave Mary out of it altogether.

1.

Just like Grandma's storm cellar, there are miles of wobbly metal shelving filled with jars in William's basement. Specimens, floating, home-canned, each an anatomical curiosity. This shelf holds Queen Charlotte's pets, recycled, the dissected eyeball of a nilgai.

I imagine myself stretched out on one of the shelves, reclined on my left hip, leg covered in inky squiggles, filing my nails, waiting patiently to be examined.

Grisly remains. Not too particular about where his corpses came from, they say, especially the pregnant ones, and he didn't mind, overly much, if they were still whimpering when the cutting started. *Gravid uterus*, a label says, but all I see is Death, perfectly formed, sleeping-with-eyes-closed, thumb-in-mouth, permanent *five months gestation*.

My skin is being licked, all over my body.
Arms, legs, stomach, my face:
all being licked by something
gigantic and impersonal.

It knows me, but I don't remember it.

When the last key turns,
headless, handless icons for whores
watch over the babies of the dispossessed.

Triptych moulded in wax, mid-dissection, then
carved in wood and plaster, peeled open, with
babies who will never sleep
nestled inside them,
like an elaborate jigsaw
Hunter solved
again and again.

GLAHM.125630-2

I can see my Mom. She's a tiny speck of red on the beach, flapping the sand from our towels. I'm jumping off of Dad's shoulders, into yellow-green water. I've never seen the ocean, for real, just pictures in *National Geographic*. Dad waves me toward the beach; he's talking.

I shout *crap crap crap crap CRAP* in my head as I dive down to touch the sandy ripples under my toes. I feel wild. I never want to get out of the ocean. Ever.

I'm under the waves, with my eyes open. I'm watching small fish drift past, clumping together, then zooming apart. I fly underwater with them, feeling the waves roar through the water. My legs stretch behind me, and I cup the water with my hands. I roll and roll until I'm a selkie. I sprout fur, so I can stay out here forever.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a something shiny. My brain screams *SHARK*. Just like in *National Geographic*. Something nearly as long as me, thin and blue-grey in the water. I don't want to, but I change back, and I'm a girl again. I try to swim faster. I can't keep looking. I don't stop to breathe, until I'm up on the beach, sprinting across the sand.

I don't notice until I sit down that I have lost the top of my bikini. I am almost naked in front of loads of grownups and kids and strangers. I'll get in trouble. I can't see it anywhere, so I cover my nipples with my hands. My mother grabs my arm and pulls me up hard; one of my feet is almost off the ground. *You should be modest. You should be ashamed. Running like a wild animal, losing your top.*

I know what modest means, sort of: I should not want to be naked, fast, a selkie being licked by the ocean. Mom pinches me under my hair, pushing my chin up with her other hand. *Thank the boy. Thank the boy who brought you your bikini top. Now, Mary Frances.* I can't. I'm crying, and my voice doesn't work, and he's a *teenager*. He rubs my hair, puts the bikini top in my hand, and walks away.

My skin feels like it doesn't fit any better than these poop-covered boots. I am scared. I've got a net and a bucket, and she has a beak, and claws, and she hates me. I've got to bring at least 5 eggs back to the house, no matter what the Nasty Black Huge Hen wants. She's jealous of everyone's eggs, like she laid all of them.

I'm blind, going in to the dark and the stink from outside, as I close the latch behind me. I lean against the door, pulse pounding in my throat, as my eyes adjust. The sun stripes through the boards onto my arms and legs, but I am freezing in here. I can hear feathers rustling all around me, and feel some brush my legs. Nasty Black killed my banty rooster last week, so I know they aren't his feathers. I feel like crying, and I hate crying.

She is glowering in her nesting box in the darkest corner of the darkest part of the coop. She tilts her head at me, one dinosaur black eye showing. She knows I'm scared. I prod her with the handle of the net. She flaps at me and hisses. I poke her again, banging the bucket against the door. She hates that, and jumps down towards me. I flip the net around and drop it over her body, and stamp down on the handle. I grab two eggs from her box, and collect the others as quickly as I can, slipping my hand under the warm bodies of the other hens, putting their eggs gently into my bucket.

I back out of the coop, turning the net over as I go, flattening it out so she can escape. I slam the door just before her claws hit the back of it.

One. Two. Three.
Breathe.
One. Two. Three.
Breathe.

I scythe through the water,
faster and faster,
as I turn my head left,
and then right,
every three strokes,
to snatch a lungful of air.

*I will not hide
this strange purple number.
People don't like to see it.
You can touch it if you want.
It won't burn you.*

*No, it doesn't hurt;
that hurt already happened.
It reminds me that the worst
thing has already happened to me,
to all of us.*

The worst things start with numbers.

*6 million, perhaps 7.
I was 12.
No one else in my family survived.*

2.

Cutting: butchery with a purpose. Preservation: pickling what's left after the cutting *even monsters, and all uncommon*. Cutting. Cut away health, save the waste. *All diseased animal productions*. Slicing. Slice thin. *Are useful in anatomical enquiries as the mechanism, or texture*. Pickling. Bottling: the moment of death, preserved. *Which is concealed in the ordinary fashion of parts, may be obvious in a preternatural composition*.

The end is all the justification required.

What can I buy with my body, my sanity, if I let you use me as landfill? Become your oubliette, your disowned place of forgetting? Become my own holocaust? I know what girls should do. Girls should stop being girls. Stop feeling. Stop moving. *Be good, don't get the belt. Be good, don't get the belt. Be good, don't get the belt.* I chant it over and over: those words don't work against this blackness. I am not old enough to know what I am bargaining away. *20 like a man, or 40 like a girl? No girl is ever good enough.*

Maybe it would be better to never know what I am losing, every time I take my 20 like a man. There's nothing else for me to choose, other than to let him and the rest of them destroy me.

They watch, *kitsune* women, they watch. And wait. It's all they can do, frozen on the wall. Everyone shuffles past them, shame-faced, into the museum. Fox-faced women lurk in the woodcuts, smirking, barely contained by glass and frame: *We are Art*.

Kitsune whisper, eyebrows arched, perfectly, as their backs, *Art, therefore unassailable*. Foxes, behind their faces, serviced under silks by slack-jawed buffoons, mechanically sinking bulging priapi into one engorged slit after another. Their prey don't notice fox jaws lengthening, filling with teeth, as hands morph into claws. I smell musk, centuries old: *kitsune* claim territory, sexual morass, leaving me the sterile high ground.

AN582258001001

You are up late, again, not sleeping, again. I don't know where Dad is. I hear the *brrrrr thunk click brrrrr thunk snip bbbrrrrrrrrrrrr*. Your wheezy sewing machine and dull scissors sing about a dress I won't want to wear. I hear your pursed-lips tuneless whistling, the same sound you make when you scratch hubcaps, going around corners too fast in the station wagon. You push the cloth under the biting needle, pulling steadily on the other side. The needle flashes up and down.

Tomorrow, I'll be choked by lace, suffocated under flounces, shouted at for wiggling, slapped for getting the dress dirty.

I stand by the pond, eating woolly snow from my mitten. The ice has thawed, and frozen again, but I can still see the cracks. I don't know where the pond skaters go when water freezes: there's no water here to keep them up, scooting along, no fish pushing up against the top of the water like the lid on a pot.

The house smells of good things. I pull my boots off, and leave them dripping on the rug in the hall. Nanny doesn't mind about drips; she mops them up, 'cause *a little water never hurt anything*. The table has a crack that runs across it. I help her pull it wide so we can drop leaves inside, and pretend the table is bigger, and there are always so many people here for dinner—like the old days, when there weren't any missing uncles or grandads.

Potatoes don't have eyes any more after Nanny is through with them. They lie flat, on the side of my plate, beached in gravy. She glares down the length of table, passing the rolls, and almost-arguments go out like candles. Ideology has no place here only butter, pepper.

I was supposed to be a boy named Patrick.
I was supposed to replace the one she lost before me,
and maybe even others before that.
I became the whipping-boy instead.

When she talks about the babies she's lost, I imagine a room full of tiny, transparent floating ghosts in diapers, playing with their toes as they bob around in the draft from the open door. Mom was always depressed about the missing babies, wondering if they would have had my Grandpa's smile or Aunt's eyebrows.

Sister Fidelis talked about a very different place where *little almost-angels* were stored like rolls of wallpaper on a shelf: *Limbo*. Men who'd committed suicide were kept there too, perpetually in karmic storage. Not-born leads to not-baptised, which equals *stained with Original Sin*. Murdered selves lead to unblessed burials outwith churchyards, perpetually stained with their own blood. The God who'd made Limbo and the rules frightened me more than the Devil.

Two trips to the principal's office later, I still refused to do my homework assignment: finding out the number, names, and genders, if known, of the miscarried not-quite-brothers-and-sisters our family could claim as their own almost-angels. I couldn't ask Mom, and Sister Fidelis had no right to know. I remembered that one of the babies had been named Patrick after he died, and was lost, and thought about him as I scrubbed the steps.

(1)

The flies are indolent;
Plasmodium Falciparum, less so:
Myriads of mosquitoes showed,
as probably they always do,
the presence of malaria.

And still we went into the heart
of Africa, bolstered by God and
Livingstone's Rousers.

(2)

His heart was buried, under raw redness, in the roots of a *Myongo*. Its sap dried up, and the *Myongo* hollowed and died 11 years later, its heartwood rings poisoned black. Acolytes sawed it into sections, counting the rings, noting the neat divide between 'BL' and AL'.

The tree was shipped, here and there, to inspire worthies, none caring if the tribesmen they wanted converted were as hollow and dead as the tree, or plaster Marys in Lourdes, as long as they covered their indolent breasts.

(3)

Ague is a bite. A slap, if we even notice. *Protists* hijack, then infect. Incubation is 7 days, and paroxysms prove the point. Cold stage. Hot stage. Sweating stage (with or without convulsions). Hiatus: 48 to 72 hours. Recurrence. Repeat. On autopsy, *the brain itself may show gross congestion only, leaden or slate grey in color, blood vessels pigmented with grey parasites*, stained dark as the tree killed by Livingstone's heart.

GLAHM.112992
B54 Unspecified malaria.

Some burn all the way down,
no matter how long we chew
them, or how well—
robot jaws working frantically—
memories
are just so much,
blood,
and bone.

Gristle.

Don't do it. That's insane. The pier is one giant splinter. There could be jellyfish. Or sharks. Or someone fishing, with a long line. You could cut yourself. You won't be able to see. It's dark as hell out there. No.

Are you trying to tell me to stay out of the water?

Out of the ocean? Just because it is dark? That's bullshit.

Why? I don't fucking get it. What do you get out of swimming? You could die out there. You could get sucked right down by the undertow and no one would find your body.

I'll go because the ocean is here. I'm right here. I've never been in the Atlantic after dark. I won't be out there long. Seriously—are you my mother?

The Undertow. Always in capital letters, hushed tones, the same way people talk about cancer or alcoholism. *The Undertow will get you. Bite into you. Pull you down.* It can have me. I grab a towel. I change into my bathing suit. Laurie asks if I'm going in. I run past her. My feet drum along the boardwalk. I get splinters; I don't care. Much. God, David is so irritating when he's right. I can feel the thrum of the surf through my feet, shouting through my bones. I decide, because Laurie dares me, to strip off. I throw my suit and my towel onto the sand and sprint down the beach. Straggling along behind me, I watch as a clump of other people, led by Laurie, shuck their towels and clothes. I'm so far away, backing into the surf, that I can't tell who they are.

The wind is wild. The hurricane that has been predicted for weeks may be arriving on the Outer Banks. I don't care. I dive in, porpoising out, back in again, riding the waves back to the beach. The sand the surf carries scrapes along my skin like a giant tongue; maybe The Undertow is a cat. I think about swimming out, straight out, towards the flickering lights of the shrimping boats. I decide to swim parallel to them, along the coast. I have no one to swim with; no one to play with. I'm fizzing with energy, and my skin is melting with the force of it. I'm just water, myself. Nothing solid, nothing human is left of me, other than frustrated lust. The water strokes me everywhere, and I wish The Undertow were human, or whatever it is I am.

I come back in after everyone else has retreated back into the kitchen. I lock myself in the bathroom, listening for a second to the beginning of a drunken argument before pinching my nipples and fingering myself with both hands until I'm shaking and exhausted.

The next morning my hair crunches on my pillow, stiff with salt, salt I can taste on my lips. I rummage in the bathroom cabinet for tweezers, tending to my feet, before hobbling to the door to taste the rain.

I have been the shape of water.
You will tell me water has no shape
of its own.

I will tell you that you are right.
You will tell me that water is
nearly formless, boneless.

I won't disagree.
I flowed to fill, to complete whatever
container was offered.

Indiscriminate.

Bones,
spread out thin,
a film over the bottom of a trough,
not enough of me to deepen or extend,
molecules barely touching,
bonds stretched to the point of evaporation.

Condensation.

Stasis.

The impostor grew and grew, a knee
fit for a housemaid, at the posterior
and inner aspect of the bone,
two or three inches from its upper end.

She walks with a stick and a limp,
carrying disease, fear written plain.

Her father is concerned about ether,
of which he had heard little positive,
and how scarred her leg would be,
as that would limit marriage prospects.

He speaks with disdain,
considering aloud whether he ought
to settle her fortune on her younger sister;
I advise him to wait until I've performed the procedure.
She flinches, says nothing.

The lump is clearly *too gritty and friable for real bone*,
I write later, a grotesque cauliflower, convoluted,
a clot of cartilage, sitting in a tray in my surgery.

I draw it and am surprised at how beautiful it looks,
rendered on paper with lead pencil,
separated from its mother.

M70.4 Enthesopathy of knee.

You balance on my palm.
You've shrunk, lost all your water.
You sift inside your cardboard box.
It holds you together, now your skin is gone.
Ash, bits of teeth, the odd fragment of femur
trickle as I tip you from side to side.
I don't know what to do with you.

Should I put you on the passenger seat?
Gently buckle you in?
Talk to you as I drive?
Comment on the neighbour's chrysanthemums, ask
if you feel the weather changing?
A box doesn't seem like enough protection.
I'd prefer to sprinkle you in running water, so you can't return.
I have no funerary offerings; your lipsticks are all at home.
I don't want
to put you down
in the dark.
But the hole is here,
and the priest is impatient:
he's got another two boxes today.

I didn't view Death as kind: I went screaming and sobbing, as did all of those able to draw breath. Florence, 1348: Death called at every door, after she'd followed the merchants and rats along the Silk Road. I saw her, as she moved across the piazza from l'ospedale. She touched men as she passed, this one on the shoulder, that one on the wrist. It didn't make any difference if they wore plague masks full of herbs, if they were wealthy, if they wore cassocks. I screamed: *Guardare! Guardare! Non lasciare che ti tocchi!* My Mar hushed me, thinking I was delirious. I tried to explain that there was a woman, pale as *biscotti* going in to the oven: *lei...lei era quasi morbidi*, and I was afraid of her. *Lei, lei era quasi morbidi.*

No one else could see her. She was used to going unnoticed, arrogant with power. I watched her as she glided into the villa next door. It was days before she emerged, and by then, my Mother had died, as had all of our servants. My Grandmother bloated, on the floor next to my bed, even as my buboes split and healed. My skin grew pale; my black hair faded to swan-feather white. I knew, then, that I had seen her because I was becoming Death: her successor. I stood at my window and watched as she collapsed and turned to clay, spattering the cobblestones of the piazza.

Soft, unformed, potential death.

A20.0 Bubonic Plague.

English Sweate, sudor anglicus in the Latin.

Cases of cross-species
host switching have been recorded;
genomic roulette ensues,
inhuman hosts never succumbing to the disease.

1485. Summer:

Ticks and lice,
rats,
and mice
carried by French mercenaries
adopted English hosts, and
followed Henry from Milford Haven
to Bosworth
to London, the outbreak being considered
an omen,
ushered Henry onto the throne, cloaked in
blood,
rodent saliva, excreta.

Plaiigh Allais:

Death occurred within hours
of the onset
of symptoms, merciful
Death offering irresistible sleep
to those she took,
despite the best efforts
of physicians to keep them
awake, suffering.

1502: Catherine survived, never surrendering
the apprehension that
characterised the onset of the disease.

*B33.4 Hantavirus cardio-
pulmonary syndrome.*

1908.
They drift,
on the crest of the floodwaters, arms
and legs akimbo.

Their eyes lose color,
grey film leaching
brown and black.

Typhoid
will take more casualties
in the weeks that follow,
exactng its due,
demanding respect.

It is a tiny thing,
salmonella enterica serovar typhi,
delicate flagella,
driving their water boatmen through the gut
and bloodstream, one unhurried flick
steering them to the lining of the intestines,
where they bumped along
like the cows hitting the riverbank.

*A01.09 Typhoid fever with other
complications.*

I drive home late from work.
Past the prison,
headlights skimming brick
and coiled razor ribbon wire.
I cross the bridge and
water almost dark enough to breathe.

I could be different.
I could open the door
and sink through the pavement,
let the water slough away
my too-human skin.

Remade, I would be a fleeting thing
with pebble eyes, worn from seeing.
I could be
as cold as the river.

Maybe then you'd slide into me,
or drink me dry, before
I spill through your hands,
spill through your hands
between your fingers
and spatter on the ground—

Before I went to hydrotherapy, I had imagined rows of zombies in sensible black bathing suits and bathing caps, dutifully bobbing up and down to orders shouted through a megaphone by a thick-bodied Physio named Libby. I expected pain. Hypothermia. Torture. Calisthenics. Lots of people eyeing other people up, trying to determine their relative ranks in the Cripp Pecking Order. But there weren't many of us. The water was warmer than I'd expected. And no one shouted anything. I felt the Dead Leg shift as I went down the stairs, until I was standing, chest-deep, and he floated away behind me like a rudderless boat. He is always disobedient, but not usually, obviously so: everyone waited patiently for my leg to cooperate, and for me to force it back down so my foot touched bottom. The Dead Leg kept floating away, sometimes left, sometimes right, enjoying the current created by other swimmers.

Come here:
see the freakish prize
in Doctor Allan Thomson's sideshow
for tuppence.

You won't regret it.
I'm the brainless, heartless,
half-child monstrosity.

A nightmare puppet in a bottle,
waving you over with polydactylic hand.
I'll show you my club foot—
the one on the right.
Admire the left, with all its toes,
plump as strawberries.

50.49
Q69.9 Polydactyly, unspecified

3.

Lined up in rows, so obedient.
Quiet.

Lips pursed, eyes closed.
Waiting, maybe, to be loved.
Cracked soap in school toilets,
yellowing grey:
bottled babies.

William wanted to keep you forever
tucked in glass cradles.
He gave you one last drink at bedtime,
gently pressed down the lid,
gave you ancient names:

hydrocephalus,
neck cyst,
still-born, full term,
specimen No. 74.01,

written in shaky brown letters.

74.01
G91.9 Hydrocephalus, unspecified

We don't sleep;
we spoon in silence,
legs twined in mockery of love.
Your anger beats against me:
a second heart.

It pushes into me,
a letter opener thrusting its way into a letter that
feels like it was written for someone else.
Red words that aren't for me.

I leak through the hole
in the wall of us—

My lovelies,
so slim and shiny.
Care hasn't worn you out,
nor work stained you.

I polish and dry,
put away,
keep you safe.

I expect nothing from you.
There is something you could do for me—
a small something—
slide between my ribs,
bleed me,
stay with me.
Sing me to sleep,
pretty knives.

I watch as he slices the skin from the ginger root. Meticulous. Focussed. I imagine his hands, but not the knife, moving down my body with the same care and precision. Fuck it. I'll just imagine the knife, delicately tracing an indentation down my body, never sliding in.

I take a sip of the infusion, and feel the warmth seep into me, as his eyes devour my face.

Division 1: This comprises all monstrosities resulting from twin conception, and therefore includes acephalic, acornic, and anidian monsters.

We are all sorts of ones and twos. We live in a big bottle. They let us be. I don't know why. I didn't want to lose her. She's my friend. We have 2 heads: one, two. Hers is very heavy, and she can't hold it up. Two legs: one, two. I can't touch my toes. Or hers. We have one wide neck, not very long. Two arms, but we can't hold hands. Two nostrils each. The boy next door doesn't have any. We would have one bellybutton, if we got born, but we can't.

50.8

Anterior Encephalocele. She listens to the gods speak through the rhomboid hole in her forehead. Ruptured meninges bulge through, demarcating a third inner eye. What can she see with it?
And how far?

50.100b

He seems to look back at me, a bodiless bobbing
head listing to the left, sinking in tannin-laced
formaldehyde, ruddered by a pipestem neck.

An urge to classify, to detach from what I see:
No upper lip, no filtrum. Bilateral cleft lip and
hard palate, with extensive damage to the soft
palate. Uvula absent. Some milk teeth have erupted
from perfect gums. Age 2-3 years, no COD listed.
No name. No voice. The suggestion of a dimple in
his left cheek—an affront amidst mangled chaos.
Other clinically significant features: *Hydrocephalus*.

His bulging forehead fills the jar from side to side.
I note blue eyes, rolled back behind sagging lids,
framed by long lashes, brows pencilled in in brown.

CNS 1
Q03.9 Congenital hydrocephalus,
unspecified.

You stand and stare,
but you look funny,
you with your small forehead,
those tiny eyes. Mine
are ever so much bigger.

You look strange,
your damp skin on tight,
pretty bones not showing,
sack body dangling
from your neck.

50.108

I bloom with
strange fruit.
It changes—
lemon,
pear,
small orange,
grapefruit,
watermelon.

Tumours bloom
in other people,
in the same strange way.

Do you think it is easy,
being nothing,
carrying nothing?

Shame is the mass of absent stars,
burnt-out suns, dust without the Big Bang,
black-holed lifelessness stretching out.

Empty days.
Empty life.
Waiting.

She didn't get a name.
I'm Dicephalus Diauchenus. Human.
I share with her, cause we're a
double-headed creature.

GLAHM.121521
Q89.4 Conjoined twins.

Full-time Foetus, listed as 50.107a, given by Dr. Mary B. Hannay, 1900. Hydrocephalic. Body plump, fingers dimpled, toes splayed, lips parted. The limbs and body of the foetus are large and well-nourished. But that head: of enormous size, proportionately, looking more like that of a child of three or four years.

But that head: gigantic, almost distorting the shape of the blown glass jar, *presents the characteristic shape of hydrocephalus, viz. great bulging of the cranium which appears to overhang and dwarfs the base of the skull and face.* Your poor head: A curiosity.

*50.107a
Q03.9 Hydrocephalus.*

A catalogue of sins—but whose? The midwife
told her you were dead. *Fissura Abdominalis*.
Trans: Below the putative waist, *the spleen and
almost the whole of the intestines are out of the
cavity of the abdomen*. No spinal column.

Tricorn ears fold down, close to the skull
Flounder's eyes perched on the head. No neck,
and a satyr's face on a *child whose head is bent
upwards and sunk between the shoulders; there is
a deficiency of brain*.

50.114
Q69 Congenital Malformation

Swallow this. You'll never have to think for yourself again. It will make everything easier: you won't try to get away, and he can play you on his line.

Look at this. Your contract: write your name here, give it to him, and you'll know what to do for the next 50 years.

Pond dipping. Hopeful nets
in, rotten leaves out.
Disappointing, but microscopic war
rages in our bucket. *Daphnea*
pursued by nymphs' serrated jaws.

I've picked up every stone on this beach,
Lifted and dropped them,
some more than once.
Gauged the weight of them,
Felt them:
smooth, rough,
wet, dry,
algae-slick.

None the right shape,
None will fill the space.
It needs to fit exactly.
I thought you broke my heart—
but all there is is emptiness.

Nothing is sure.
Grey sky and grey sea
meet.

No rhythm can be established:
snick–slap–clack.
Shale sliding underfoot.

An antidote to memory is called for.
Nothing else will suffice;
nothing else will ameliorate
available data that no longer applies.

Knock-kneed,
she turns her feet in,
coyly pointing toes up
towards her rosy heart
and missing head.

Her thighs ripple:
the obscure porcelain Botero
nobody wanted.

50.48
Q67 Congenital musculoskeletal deformities of
head, face, spine and chest.

I am *Proencephale*.
I'm not missing *anything*.
I've got an *extra*
thing.

Look. Some of the others
don't have their bodies.
They don't even look like people.

My twin's lost her body, and
most of her head; she's
anterior encephalocele,
hairy little skullcap
hanging like a bow
near my eyebrows.

50.100
Z87.798 History of formerly conjoined
twins.

There is nothing else
but this moment,
a thing we make and unmake
again and again
that might be love.

Lust for breakfast
sex for dinner
love for supper
throw away the bones of me after.

I can't see what follows:
there is only the bald
certainty, the urgency
of now, of you here with me.

Turning the compost heap
ensures it isn't too wet
or strong-smelling,
and that air gets in,
so that bacteria and other organisms
can colonise it.

A bag of skin
is not an ideal container.
Damp, stretchy, fertile ground
for all of the wrong things:
mildew, fungus, slime.

I was sure that we'd planted a garden.
Nothing growing here that I recognise,
no flowers that smell
of your skin, no petals
like your eyelids, pink darkening to
plum under your lashes. No sun
strikes through dank leaves
down into the roots.

I walk towards you, mouth open—
I could let all of the sex and sorrow
spill from my mouth into yours

pour la dernière fois.
La dernière fois:

a gift or a burden? I can't decide.
I carry myself *comme un verre*,
brimming over, yet not quite

maintenant, parce que
c'est la dernière fois.
Peut-être,
c'est la dernière fois.

I don't want to spill myself, to give
what you don't want

pour la dernière fois.

I dance fitfully,
with regret—
we have never danced the way you danced tonight,
never loved as I would love you tonight,
and I'll never dance again, not really,

pour la dernière fois.

I repeat the words you said to me,
buoyed up on them like water,
until I run aground on the lies,
split open—a bag of skin.

Lies burn,
and taste of dirt and ash
in my mouth;
love tastes of chocolate,
and I ate your words
before I knew that you were lies.

Before I knew that you weren't mine.
I can remember how you tasted when you
were mine, the smell of your skin,
the way your breath burned.

I wanted to be consumed:
all that's gone now, all that hope and desire.
I am left with this cold fire,
and the taste of ash in my mouth.

You murdered me after I died.
Skinless, I'm
like some hideous 1970s lava lamp,
transparent as squid—
my bones glow lurid red.

I worry about her. She looks cold.
He's skinned her, turned her into a dolly
with a seam-mouth and too-blue eyes.

Naked bones, naked bones, such
tiny, tiny toes, dangling,
a puppet from a pole.
She's not as blank as porcelain,
or as white, but dirty as a poppet,
played with and loved.
That's not been her life:
she's in an airless box on display.

She's no more able to walk than I,
limbs tied together, a girl with flippers for feet
in dry dock.

I could imagine her grown, lying in the sun
on a kelp-bed, watching out of her blue eyes
for the sailor who will see her poor feet and
carry her away, hands flapping useless as birds
by her sides.

Maybe she's better in her box.

*Q87.2 Congenital malformation syndromes
predominantly involving limbs –Sirenomelia.*

William says she was a princess,
and she's a great lady still.
She doesn't talk, but I can hear her voice
in my head all the same.
Mind your manners.
Answer the lady's questions.
Don't cry. You'll smear your eyes if you do.

*M21.9x9 Other acquired
deformities of unspecified foot.*

The foot's the symbol
pays for it all.
Femininity is in form:
the more useless the better.

There is no water here,
no life here, bobbing in the non-current.
Nowhere to go.
Waiting for the light to go off again,
for all of you to leave.

I float here, one bunched foot,
sawn through at the ankle.
Humped as a seal-back.

*My body is gone. Don't you see?
It doesn't matter. The
female is in the form, the distorted
form, toes splayed, useless.*

*M21.6X9 Other acquired
deformities of unspecified foot.*

Dirty is bad. Dirty is good. All a matter of context:
a dirty girl might be very good indeed, a dirty
whore—not so much. Alliteration is the music of
character assassination: Slut. Slag. Slapper.
Naughty. Totty. Hooker. My personal favourite,
age 5: Woman of the Night. Streetwalker. Slag.
Ho. Bad Girl. Older words: Slattern. Trollop.
Cunt. Doxy. Harlot. Scarlet. Jezebel.

You. Me. Us.

I don't give birth to lies:
I adopt them,
swallow them whole
when they are disavowed.

They are almost always forgotten,
shoved in a corner,
when you've had your use of them.

I am the Mother of Lies.

I take them in
when all the inconsistencies
come home to roost,
bad-tempered starlings
squabbling in roof gutters
over what might be a bit of bark
or bread.

4.

It smells like a library: wax polish, wood, old paper. We notice the paintings, the card catalogue, the *Ficus benjamina* someone's forgotten to water. *Sotto voce*, we talk about that other scent, the one hunting memories, tickling the backs of our throats, a basement smell, formaldehyde, a smell for dark places, a smell to be ashamed of, a smell that means something we can't control has happened to someone we don't even know.

We look. Then glance away, eyes lighting for a startled second on a 4 centimeter-long spinal column, lurid red, bobbing in a tiny bottle, then back to rows of squashed faces, parts of bodies we can't even identify without reading the labels, but the labels are small, and we don't want to get any closer to the people in the bottles.

We can't. We can't stop looking. But we have to: overwhelmed by the weight of numbers, of evidence of pagan last rites, canopic jars, sealed with pitch and fat wooden corks. We are all bystanders, all guilty, and we are the reason this quiet jury has been assembled. We know that now.

When I had given up hope of
ever being me again, alive again,
something snapped.
I tore myself open.
Light came out.
I'm sewn back together.
All threads, and crazy coloured
knots, and zigzags, and gaps.

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REFERENCES

Alphanumeric notes with descriptions are from The ICD–10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders (World Health Organization). ‘Shunga’: Illustration in the British Museum AN582258001001. Other references from Glasgow Hunterian, and Glasgow University Anatomy and Physiology Museum collections, Catalogue of the Anatomical Preparations of Dr William Hunter, and Catalogue of the Pathological Preparations of Dr William Hunter, specifically:

GLAHM.135838 Gypsy Moths

GLAHM.125630-2 Plaster casts of dissected pregnant women

GLAHM.B.1922.5 Syphilitic Skull

GLAHM.121521 Dicephalus specimen: two-headed baby

GLAHM.112992 Portion of tree under which the heart of David Livingstone was buried

CNS1 Hydrocephalus specimen

50.108 Hydrocephalus head specimen

50.100 Anterior Encephalocele specimen

50.8 Conjoined twins specimen

50.107a Hydrocephalus specimen

50.114 Congenital malformation specimen

50.48 Congenital deformity specimen

50.49 Club foot polydactyly specimen

We pilfer. Rework. Nudge, here and there, to make stories fit our vague preconceptions about where they should go. We oversimplify, murdering ideas, characters and philosophies. We are scavengers. Resurrectionists. And we don't have clean hands, literally or metaphorically: writing isn't nearly as white-collar a pursuit as we like to think it is.

NOTES ON ANOMALY

...it has sometimes jolted me a bit to learn that I am, in the eyes of some others, a fraud, a person practicing medicine without a license, the author of a very superficial and damaging sort of therapy, a power seeker, a mystic, etc. And I have been equally disturbed by equally extreme praise. But I have not been too much concerned because I have come to feel that only one person (at least in my lifetime, and perhaps ever) can know whether what I am doing is honest, thorough, open, and sound, or false and defensive and unsound, and I am that person. I am happy to get all sorts of evidence regarding what I am doing and criticism (both friendly and hostile) and praise (both sincere and fawning) are a part of such evidence. But to weigh this evidence and to determine its meaning and usefulness is a task I cannot relinquish to anyone else...

...Neither the Bible nor the prophets—neither Freud nor research—neither the revelations of God nor man—can take precedence over my own direct experience.

(Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 23-24)

NOW

Writing matters. Story matters. Both have always mattered to me, but I've not always allowed them to matter, at least not openly: no one could criticise the writing in my head, the stories in my head, if they never made it out of my skull and onto paper.

Writing matters because it's relational, because it's connecting, because it connects me to myself, and to other people. I have struggled to finish my thesis because the paradox of needing writing

to be relational and needing to ‘protect’ it, as I framed the issue internally, felt too great a gap for me to bridge. I have also struggled to write about the multi-year process, containing several lines of inquiry, that led to the thesis as it stands *now*. My creative output has fallen into two very broad thematic categories, over time: dirt and water.

I have written poems and short stories, as well as hybrid narratives, exploring my relationships with soil, smut, bodies, anatomical dissection, anatomical specimens, psychogeography, sin, shame, disease, death, chemistry, talking dirty, and the ‘dirt’ I encountered growing up in a strict, conservative, Catholic context, in which shame and guilt were levers used to control.

As a counterpoint to ‘dirt’, I have also written about my early experiences of water, some of which have been stored as prelinguistic, somatic memories. In water, I began to understand the pleasure I took in skin, in play, in my own embodiment: all things which were actively discouraged on dry land, where I had to sit, to be quiet, to be weak. Water eased my transition into adolescence, and, later, into embodied, sexual, adulthood. Through water, in water, I learned to embrace the sensual and the dirty within myself that comprise my personal understanding of the erotic. The critical component of my thesis illustrates this emotional and physical journey, using excerpts from my own creative work, as well my analysis of it. It draws on my own clinical experience as a therapist, helping others to acknowledge memory, shame, and loss.

The museum pieces formed the core of the creative collection in this thesis, and merge the personal and the clinical, the present and the past. I conceived that collection in 2013, but as my own story of self began to emerge, it became clear that another locus was present, drawing on water and dirt as themes.

I have made a transition from writing to please other people, to trying to write in a way that

hooked me into the received narrative that is academia, to simply *writing*. I will document and explore this shift and the various themes and lines of inquiry I followed, noting where possible which portions of the creative collection were conceived and written when, and what was influencing me at the time, between 2011–2015, the period in which the bulk of the creative component was written. I will use aspects of autoethnography and other critical approaches to explain how using poetry as a form of research in practice has changed my view of what constitutes research, allowing me to see it as an active process, one which in my case required engagement with the outside world, and my own history, to a far greater extent than I had anticipated. I assign *writing* an explicit moral value (McDonough, *MRes* 99). I don't, as a general rule, make much of the distinction between creative and non-creative, or less creative, forms of writing; all entail synthesis, whether conscious or unconscious, and all are communicative acts.

BOTTLE BABIES

As a therapist, I have worked with lots of people who lost their voices, their livelihoods, their sense of self, their capacity to feel, their capacity to speak. Some of my patients were retired miners with Parkinson's disease, depression and alcoholism, most as a result of head injury in the mines. Inspired by their stories, I set out to write a PhD about the impact of de-industrialisation on human beings and on their bodies. I went to the coal museum archives in Newtongrange, and discovered the writings of a doctor who had written extensively about industrial disease and the impact of factory and mine working on human bodies. Dr Andrew Ure also had an interest in reanimating corpses with electricity, and in the 1840s, sold tickets so that people could view the "procedure" in his lecture theatres at the Universities of Strathclyde and Glasgow. He preferred to "reanimate" notorious murderers when they were fresh off the scaffold; they drew bigger crowds, and he hoped to morally re-educate them through electric shock therapy if they returned to life.

Dr Ure referenced the work of Dr Joseph Lister, who in turn referenced Dr William Hunter. I went to see his specimens now held at the University of Glasgow. What interested me was bodies as “industrial products”, as objects created by forces in their environments, at scale. Hunter, as one of the first celebrity obstetricians, was replacing midwifery with an industrial process, now known as medicine, and eliminating caring in female ways from the process of caring *for* people.

I wasn't in any way prepared for the emotional impact of seeing the specimens.

At the time, I had been forced to leave my job working in the NHS. I was disabled, and could no longer physically provide the factory-style care that was demanded of me. The role of a community Speech and Language Therapist is to see as many people, in as many places as possible, as quickly as possible. It's about keeping them out of hospital to reduce costs. I did it for a different reason. I kept people at home because it was what they wanted, living their own lives as fully as possible, as long as possible, as independently as possible. I wanted people to be able to die at the time of their choosing, and in the manner of their choosing, rather than in hospital, alone, disconnected from family, from place, from Self. Modern medicine demands the adherence to a received narrative that is essentially inhuman: it is anti-individual, anti-relational. It is isolating, rather than connecting, because it's about sanitising, about taking the 'dirt' off of people and out of people. But dirt is what makes us human. And living and dying are fundamentally inefficient.

When confronted with row upon row of nameless bottled babies in William Hunter's collection, I couldn't maintain an artificial distinction any more between creative and non-creative writing, between thinking and feeling, academic and non-academic, personal and work. The scientist, therapist, mother, anatomist parts of me all had to be present.

When I stood in front of the bottle containing sleeping twins, the vibrations from my footsteps made a baby move in the bottle. I saw his hair moving, and remembered simultaneously what it felt like to be pregnant, feeling like a container of water; being at the bottom of the pool underwater, and how much tenderness I felt towards the first person I ever dissected.

Gladys was a very modest lady with salt and pepper hair. Her family asked that she be allowed to wear her stockings in the mortuary. I took them off if anybody needed to look at her feet, and put them back on when we were done. I could see the indentations on her fingers from her wedding band, and other rings that she had worn. I used to pat her on the head before we put her away in her drawer in the mortuary. I needed to say thank you, because I didn't want to be numbed to death in the way that I saw other people being numb. Gladys had insisted that her body be left to science, and overcame her family's objections in order to do that. In facing her mortality head-on, Gladys gave me the opportunity to face mine. She became a constant reminder to live and to be as myself; to be present, and to not do things just because other people want me to do them a certain way. She influenced my practise as a therapist. Because of her, I could never look at a patient and just see them as a collection of problems to be solved.

When I met the babies, as I had Gladys, I knew I couldn't do what my supervisor was demanding. I decided to write about the babies, and to abandon any parts of my PhD that weren't human in the same way, that didn't resonate with me in the way that the babies did. In that moment I was no longer trying to delete the personal in order to produce more overtly intellectual work. My PhD became *personal*. I chose to allow *flow*.

What had felt like writer's block was actually a philosophical shift.

VOICES

As I made the transition to *writing*, and more broadly, *creating*, as myself, I explored narration in much more complex ways, and took greater risks. I made the decision in 2013 to try to give each of the ‘bottle babies’ a strong individual voice, and tried to make these childlike, as well as preternaturally aware, as if the babies had been observing all of us and been irritated by us for over 200 years. The babies ‘see’ us, see all that we are attempting to hide, and see our shame at being seen by them, and our shame at being repulsed by them. I intended the voices to have an additive effect, as readers engage with the poems, to have these individual voices form a collective narrative and speak in an almost prophetic way. Some of the babies orate; some comment; some fight amongst themselves; all of them *feel*, and insist, as babies and toddlers do, that we feel as well.

The babies are experts on themselves and their conditions, and have established a hierarchy of woe based on the severity of their respective conditions. To ‘win’ at being a bottle baby is to ‘lose’ at life and being alive. Not all of the babies have individual voices; in some cases, it simply felt too forced, and I followed my instinct and used my own voice, a clinical and detached one, to heighten the dehumanisation to which the babies had been subjected, and of which I had, metaphorically, made them aware.

Some of the poems are paired or grouped, as if the babies knew each other and cared for each other. The three that follow ('Mermaid', 'Princess', and 'Bound') form an extended dialogue between the observer, a bottled baby who looks like a mermaid, and the bound foot of an adult woman. The mermaid and the foot inhabit the same shelf in the basement storage room for the specimens described to me as ‘less accessible for the general public’. The mermaid remembers

discussing the foot with William Hunter, and tells her story to an observer; the foot remembers seeing the mermaid reconstructed, and tells us why she is concerned about her.

I worry about her. She looks cold.
He's skinned her, turned her into a dolly
with a seam-mouth and too-blue eyes.

Naked bones, naked bones, such
tiny, tiny toes, dangling,
a puppet from a pole.
She's not as blank as porcelain,
or as white, but dirty as a poppet,
played with and loved.
That's not been her life:
she's in an airless box on display.

She's no more able to walk than I,
limbs tied together, a girl with flippers for feet
in dry dock.

I could imagine her grown, lying in the sun
on a kelp-bed, watching out of her blue eyes
for the sailor who will see her poor feet and
carry her away, hands flapping useless as birds
by her sides.

Maybe she's better in her box.

'Mermaid'

William says she was a princess,
and she's a great lady still.
She doesn't talk, but I can hear her voice
in my head all the same.
Mind your manners.
Answer the lady's questions.
Don't cry. You'll smear your eyes if you do.

'Princess'

The foot's the symbol
pays for it all.
Femininity is in form:
the more useless the better.

There is no water here,
no life here, bobbing in the non-current.
Nowhere to go.
Waiting for the light to go off again,
for all of you to leave.

I float here, one bunched foot,
sawn through at the ankle.
Humped as a seal-back.

*My body is gone. Don't you see?
It doesn't matter. The
female is in the form, the distorted
form, toes splayed, useless.*

'Bound'

Some voices are more explicitly childlike and optimistic.

I am *Proencephale*.
I'm not missing *anything*.
I've got an *extra*
thing.

Look. Some of the others
don't have their bodies.
They don't even look like people.

My twin's lost her body, and
most of her head; she's
anterior encephalocele,
hairy little skullcap
hanging like a bow
near my eyebrows.

'Proencephale'

She is aware that I, that we, potentially find her frightening or repulsive, but she seemed extroverted to me, and like she would persist in trying to connect.

In other poems, in other bottles, the babies seem angry; a sarcastic, brittle voice was required. This baby talks about himself in a detached, adult-like way, and acknowledges that he was not always used for his value as a teaching aid, but sometimes because paying customers wanted to enjoy the freakshow experience.

Come here:
see the freakish prize
in Doctor Allan Thomson's sideshow
for tuppence.

You won't regret it.
I'm the brainless, heartless,
half-child monstrosity.

A nightmare puppet in a bottle,
waving you over with polydactylic hand.
I'll show you my club foot—
the one on the right.
Admire the left, with all its toes,
plump as strawberries.

'Half-child'

Other poems engage with historical, Christian views of disabled and damaged people quite explicitly. In the medieval period, and I suspect in our own, people who looked bad were often assumed to be bad, or to be the product of parents who were bad, parents who had sinned.

A catalogue of sins—but whose? The midwife
told her you were dead. *Fissura Abdominalis*.
Trans: Below the putative waist, *the spleen and
almost the whole of the intestines are out of the
cavity of the abdomen*. No spinal column.

Tricorn ears fold down, close to the skull
Flounder's eyes perched on the head. No neck,
and a satyr's face on a *child whose head is bent
upwards and sunk between the shoulders; there is a
deficiency of brain*.

'Satyr'

This poem is ‘told’ in my own voice and in the voice of the original cataloguer, William Hunter, in the form of quotes in italics from his catalogue (*Catalogue of the Anatomical Preparations of Dr William Hunter in the Museum of the Anatomy Department*). I have used detached voices to communicate, again, the extent to which this baby has been dehumanised and set apart from us. The physical segregation of some specimens from us is made more apparent by the labels on the bottles, by the apparent perfection of their containers. I explored the idea of children being punished for the shame of others, for carrying the debris of the collective unconscious, in *Dirt*:

I punish the children for the
shame of their fathers.
—God

(McDonough, *Dirt*, 11)

As I spent more time in contact with the bottle babies in 2014 and 2015, it became clear to me that they no longer fit in the collection with the poems and stories about water and dirt from my childhood, particularly once I began experimenting more with recreating my own childhood voice. Most of the poems and stories from my childhood span a period of about 4 years, from the adoption of my youngest brother, through the murder of someone I was very close to, to my engagement with, and ultimately rejection of, certain aspects of Catholic doctrine, as well as familial views of same. Reportage and detachment in the second person narrative voice seemed utterly inappropriate for the subject matter, as well as avoidant of its emotional complexity. My childhood was a paradoxical mix of too-early existential awareness and freedom from constraint as soon as I was away from adults and rules, and to dryly write about this would have been a negation of its impact on me, both as a child and as an adult.

This is most apparent in ‘Marsha,’ which is told in my not-quite-6 year old voice, and relates events as I remember them, with as little adult editing and evaluation as I could manage to

include. I was angry and afraid and devastated much of the time, and most of the adults I knew were utterly unaware of their own motivations in avoiding speaking to me about things I had seen and experienced.

I remember having to talk to Marsha in my head, after she died, because no one else seemed to want to remember her; I often told her what was happening, and this went on for a period of several months.

I don't watch Kojak on my TV; there are too many guns. I don't watch Starsky, either, or Muhammad Ali, even when he wins. Everyone gets too angry. I know Starsky isn't real—he's not like Mister Wilson. Mister Wilson is yours, but I don't think you want him any more, and he's always angry, and he shouts until I close the door.

You remember Brian, because he's your boy. When Mister Wilson shouts, Brian and I lean against the door, and we pretend he isn't real. That's my idea; I'm older than Brian, so I tell him it. I thought of an eraser I can see in my brain that lets me wipe away scary things. Brian decides to have a red eraser.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 63)

I have included details that make it clear this happened in the 1970s, in the United States, but was keen to avoid too much 'tell,' and aimed as much as possible for 'show,' or more accurately 'reveal', through the eyes of my child self.

I was aware that Marsha was being physically abused, and that there was something about Mr. Wilson (her estranged husband, whose first name I didn't know at the time) that terrified and angered me. I was acutely aware of lying to him, to my mother, anything to protect, as I saw it, two people whom I loved.

My second secret is about Barbie. She has pink shoes and a wedding dress. She can't stand up by herself; she has stupid feet. Barbie teaches the wrong values, Momma says.

Barbie is a little bit Brian's, but really she's mine. I play with her every time I come over to your house. Brian plays with Ken, just to be nice because you said to, 'cause he can play with her later. But not after his Dad comes home, or Brian will get the belt for being a girl instead of a boy. I don't tell Mister Wilson, even though he's Brian's Dad. Making Mister Wilson angry is bad. That lie is my third secret.

(McDonough *Anomaly* 64)

I didn't like lying. It made me uneasy. But everything about my family and Marsha's family made me uneasy, and I did not feel safe. I decided to end the story by explaining to Marsha how everyone else had reacted to her death, and how angry and alone I was:

Another lady said you got what you deserved. That's a lie. I don't tell any of them I can see their lies, rolling around inside of them, puffing out of their mouths and filling the room. They can't hear me anyway. I'm angry but no one sees it. They tell each other I don't understand. I just keep sticking Lego together, trying to make a wall, but I don't have enough.

I wasn't brave. I'm frost inside, and people can see straight through me like I'm not here. I gave up; I turned off my light. I'm not clever or beautiful any more, but you still are, inside my head.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 67)

The adult world was an utterly baffling and alien place into which I had been dragged against my will. No one was honest. No one told the truth. No one took care of anyone else, really. And everyone pretended, all the time. I was quite cynical, in some ways, and to some extent dissociating and intellectualising. My decision to 'turn off my light,' in essence to hide my thoughts and feelings from others, was also the decision that led to me writing and creating, and to my capacity to be with people in terrible physical and emotional pain, so I continue to have mixed feelings about it, and always will.

The freedom I felt to reject adult behavioural norms led to an openness to experience and to seeing other perspectives that I don't regret, and continue to explore. I am comfortable owning my views, and accepting creative and other tensions in my life without trying to force the resolution of these. I am able, as a result of both living through and eventually writing through parts of my own story, to embrace the paradox at the heart of making, which is that making for me is relational, a constant to and fro between self and other, between individual and group, a space between.

WHY

My philosophy as a writer is that I'm open to exploring any topic, but not everything I write needs to be shared. Some writing is process writing, writing about writing, writing about something I feel, and isn't always for public consumption, which has made writing an autoethnographic study of my own work a challenge. I happily discuss writing with other writers and creatives, but was less at ease writing about writing.

Some writing is for a very small audience. Some writing reveals part of me, and comfortably masks others, and is much more extroverted than I am! This has resulted in people wanting to know exactly "what sort of writer" I am, and my answer, when I am being honest, is that it depends on the day, the topic, what I'm feeling, and what I've noticed.

Being a runner was much less complex: the answers were 'medium to long distance' and 'fast,' either of which I could easily prove. I was never expected, by other people, to limit my self-definition to 'runner': it was just a thing that I did, in addition to a lot of other things, but no one ever thought it might be a career. Running required dedication, decent shoes, and letting

my body do its thing. Writing requires a similar level of surrender to and trust in my process, in my capacity to reach an end that isn't defined yet. It entails improvising, artistry, change, flex, embracing the unknown. The outcome of writing may, eventually, be much more closely scrutinized than any of my races were, though, and that is an uneasy position to be in.

The other challenge with writing or any 'making' activity is that while I am perfectly comfortable seeing the process as mine, as unique, I don't really understand the concept of owning an idea or words. I may have strung words together in a unique way that hasn't been achieved before, though the scientific bit of me (another untidy aspect of self) thinks that statistically this seems unlikely. But copyright and attribution don't fully make sense to me, and in this sense I have always been deeply metamodern in orientation.

A few years ago, I heard an argument on a train that evolved into a piece of flash fiction. A woman was explaining to a friend that her boyfriend just didn't seem to notice when the sex was good; her friend responded (loudly enough to entertain the whole carriage) by asking if the stupid twat was gay, and that evolved over time. Is this my story? Her story? A combination of the two? And does it matter if, and to what extent, my own personal history may or may not have colored the story?

I sometimes wonder if he's gay. Nah. Not like that. He seems interested enough. Nope. That wouldn't bother me. I'm not like 'Stone him! Burn the sinner at the stake!'. I've got nothing against gays. I'm really liberal and everything. It's more like 'mind wandering as I fall asleep really late after really hot sex that he just didn't seem to notice' way. Know what I mean? Maybe? Ummm....ok. It's just that he goes for all of these kinda...sexless women who look like trannies at the half-way mark. The ones who've not had surgery yet, or had their nostrils renovated, or electrolysis. Yeah. Peter Pan looking ones. Exactly! Some are really skinny, some look like they could tear his arms off, and all of them have massive noses. What's up with that, anyway? Do all guys talk shit that makes no sense, and they're like 'Oh, I love your hips, and feeling your breasts spill out of your bra when I tear it off,' but they really mean 'I thought uncle Ted looked hot when he was really sick after he had chemo?' No? I just don't understand

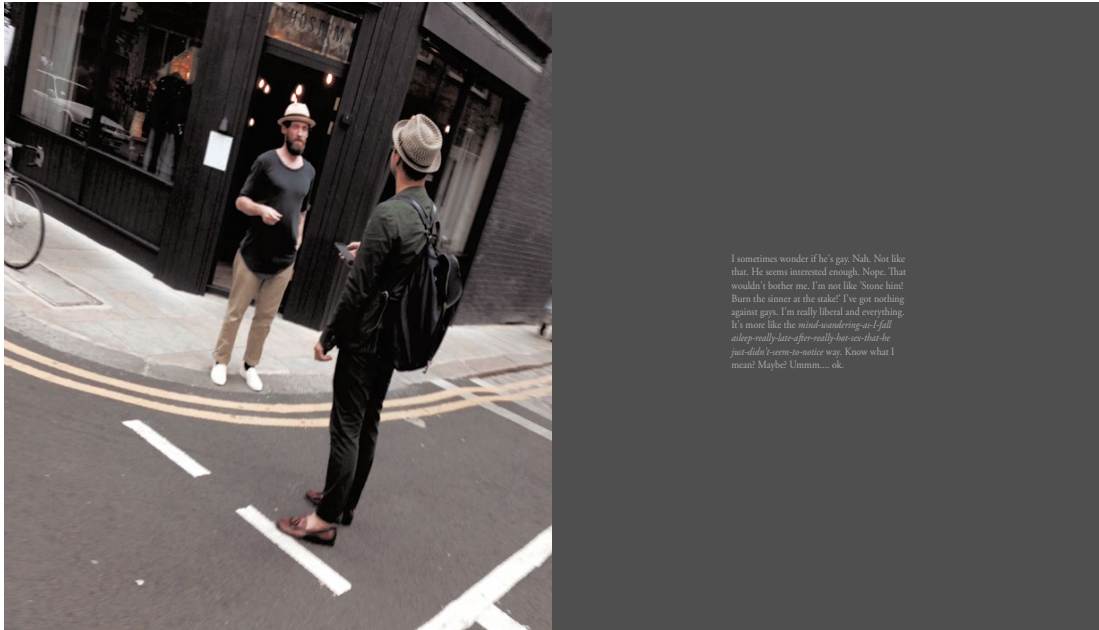
him. Yeah. I might be over thinking it, he totally could just be tired or we're going through a phase. Oh yeah – sorry – forgot to mention that I really don't want to donate to Children in Need. Could you remove my details from your database, please?

(unpublished draft: 'Men Who Love Women Who Look Like Men')

The story, which I had tried to make overly clever, was eventually edited by Martyn, and a snippet was used in *Dirt* with a photo he had taken when we were in London playing spot-the-hipster. Martyn chose a color from the photo to use as the page color on which the story was printed, and we discussed whether or not to have the text in white, black, or grey. This added another layer to the complexity of determining whose story it was, to working out how to attribute the artistry involved in bringing the story to life, and I am content to leave this as paradoxical as it is. That's the point of collaboration for me. In exchange for letting go of a precious idea, or some words, I make meaning *with* another person. This edited excerpt appeared in *Dirt*:

I sometimes wonder if he's gay. Nah. Not like that. He seems interested enough. Nope. That wouldn't bother me. I'm not like 'Stone him! Burn the sinner at the stake!' I've got nothing against gays. I'm really liberal and everything. It's more like the mind-wandering-as-I-fall asleep-really-late-after-really-hot-sex-that-he just-didn't-seem-to-notice way. Know what I mean? Maybe? Ummm.... ok.

(McDonough, *Dirt* 133)



(McDonough, *Dirt* 132-133)

POETRY

Poetry for me is an immersive summation of experience, of body language and memory, that is linguistic, extra-linguistic, and visual. Poetry is, for me, the core of the way I communicate with and understand people, a rendering of the personal into something as universal as I can make it, so that language no longer gets in the way. As humans, we spend so much time shouting at each other, trying to understand each other, yet the most deeply connecting communication is somehow beyond words, and I try to recreate that in words, as though I am painting on a canvas. I start every poem knowing that it will never fully capture what I am aiming for, and that it cannot for me be permanent, or fixed. Deciding when a poem is complete is, to some degree, random; it is always an approximation, and I grieve that.

Craig Teicher argues in a blog post that “Many—perhaps most—poets really only struggle with one or two principal themes or questions or concerns throughout their writing life, altering their

approach, perhaps coming closer, seeing more clearly, in successive poems.” (Teicher, *Rehearsals and Rehashings*, para 1). He sounds almost dismissive, talking about very few poets other than Yeats managing to somehow get past this terrible problem of being genuinely preoccupied with a very few things. We applaud academics for doing this; we acknowledge that real mastery of something requires thousands and thousands of hours, maybe even a lifetime... so why does this matter, for me as a poet and a writer? It turns out that this is something I’m not really very good at, sticking to one or two themes, one or two all-pervading questions, so, theoretically, I should feel reassured by what Teicher says. But I don’t, because a PhD, even one that is in creative writing, has to pass muster as an academic document. And I’ve been told, again and again, that I cannot write about dirt, about memory, about bottle babies, about science, about all that I have written about. I’ve been told that I need to decide if I am a nature poet or not, if I practice eco-poetics or not. And after battering myself off of that particular wall for years, I’ve come to the conclusion that deciding *any* of that is irrelevant, and that Les Murray was right: “Just get your pencils out, immerse yourself in your world, fill up with the goodness and sorrow of that world, and go back and write” (Murray, *Personal Interview*).

FAILING

Writing is like touch. It’s not something that is meaningful for me in isolation; I write knowing that I need an output, one that matters to other people in some way. I learned first to carry, and to remember, other people’s stories, because I had been shown that mine was invalid. I learned over time that it isn’t really possible to hold a story, mine or anyone else’s, but that we all have a drive to connect the fragments, and we a struggle to accept that connection is momentary, and that fragments have meaning.

The reasons I cut short a comparative literature PhD, 23 years ago, are the same reasons I’ve

struggled to complete this one: I don't want to write in the absence of an audience, I want what I write to have meaning and integrity, and what I write is never really going to be a *finished* thing, because for me, writing is process-led. Writing is about audience, it is about relationship, it is about connecting. It isn't solely about the end result.

Writing, and stories, straddle the line between the individual and collective, between the conscious and the unconscious, or, as Derek Bickerton argues, in *Language and Human Behavior* (126-135), between consciousness 1 and 2. Consciousness 2 demands recognition of, and depends upon, the distinctions between self and other, between animal and human, between urges, wants, and needs (and sometimes knowing the difference). I write because I am an animal and because at the same time I *know* that I am both animal and not-animal. I'm writing about the gap, the spaces under, behind, between words, the space where no one is supposed to look. I'm writing about what I notice, what I feel, not what it's acceptable to notice or to feel.

ALL WRITING IS CREATIVE

When I was 19, I taught my first poetry class. I had been writing poems since I was 7, and was arrogant enough to think that babysitting and being an oldest child would in any way prepare me for 14 opinionated 4 year olds. I left my lesson plans at home after the first day. I learned, that first day, that I had been arrogant in thinking poetry and writing were purely *about* me or *for* me: they were and still are about the creation of a shared space, using my perspective as a thing that can be accessed and shared, in much the same way a therapeutic 'container' is. Onomatopoeia quickly became 'onomatpooa,' and I joined them in an alternate universe. We stomped, we clapped, we danced and painted between our words, filling the air with sound and the walls with colour. The biggest thing I learned, apart from just how short the time span is

between ‘I think I might have to pee’ and ‘Ummmm....I might have just wet my pants,’ was that poetry was about playing, and feeling, and was, for me, ultimately about connecting to other people.

Five years later, and a little bit better prepared, or so I thought, I taught a few poetry classes in a maximum security prison, working with men for whom words had become torture, another thing they did wrong. Most could not read. Many had never heard a poem before. We didn’t dance, but we did eventually clap, and we listened. The power of poetry to move and to foster connection, not just in joy but in sorrow, was overwhelming. I was still resisting the lessons 4 year olds had tried to teach me, however: I would eventually have to stop withholding my story from the shared space.

I have more recently had the privilege of writing poetry and autobiographies with and for people with dementia, performing MacBeth with a classroom full of young men who had previously been allergic to English classes, taught university students about metre, written lyrics to accompany jazz improv recordings, and performed with a group of students in recovery from drug addiction and alcoholism.

One thread all of these things had in common for me was that I didn’t read or speak my own words as often as I should have. I was forced out of this rut with the publication of my first book, *The Last Pair of Ears* (McDonough), which was shortlisted for a Saltire award in 2014; it told my own sideways account of other people’s stories. A second book, *Brother Zone*, soon followed, detailing the exploits, linguistic and otherwise, of my sons. A third, *Dirt*, was published in 2015, with support from The Gillian Purvis Trust, and *Dirt* approached my own story more closely than anything else had, but it was the story of how my ‘dirt’ had collided with my husband’s as we tried to make a shared history, raise two children, work, and figure out who we were. I was still resisting writing as a relational thing, a connecting thing, however, and

hunting for intellectual reasons why I needed to tell my story, while projecting that need on to voiceless ‘bottle babies’.

I documented this postponing, in very veiled terms, in ‘Home to Roost’—all of my own internal inconsistencies were becoming external ones. I was a performer who didn’t perform; a carrier of untruths that made my family of origin feel better about itself; a writer who struggled to write anything that she valued, and, when challenged about the content of what she wrote, didn’t defend it. I had ample evidence that there were certain ‘lies’ I no longer needed to hold on to.

I don’t give birth to lies:
I adopt them,
swallow them whole
when they are disavowed.

They are almost always forgotten,
shoved in a corner,
when you’ve had your use of them.

I am the Mother of Lies.

I take them in
when all the inconsistencies
come home to roost,
bad-tempered starlings
squabbling in roof gutters
over what might be a bit of bark
or bread.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 11)

I was not practicing writing or caring for myself in the way that I practiced therapy or care for others, despite knowing that I should be, that the skills and habits were transferable. The ‘core conditions’ of client-centred counselling, first described by Carl Rogers in the 1950s, are: congruence, acceptance, and empathy (Carl Rogers, *Conditions*). The capacity to feel and

to show these things is also essential for creatives, but no one tells us this. We can't create in a vacuum. As a creative writer, I've learned that some of the most inspiring 'data' is that which is relational, and comes from interacting with and hearing other people talk about their life experiences. I try to capture 'a' truth, by documenting subjects' stories and my own responses to them.

When interacting with human remains, most hundreds of years old, I found myself blurring the lines between my experiences of them and their experiences, as their stories and names had been almost entirely erased; I had no way of engaging more directly with them. It became clear that I had erased myself, and my own history, out of shame, the sort of shame that had led to these specimens being hidden away. Again, I sidled up to having betrayed myself in a poem. 'Lava Lamp' is my story as well as that of one of the bottle babies; I felt completely exposed, on the one hand, and as though I had all but destroyed myself, while somehow hiding the fact that I was missing.

You murdered me after I died. Skinless,
I'm like some hideous 1970s lava lamp,
transparent as squid—
my bones glow lurid red.

(McDonough *Anomaly* 13)

In Scotland, even in the 21st century, a child is considered to be a 'thing' owned by its parents from the moment of birth until the age of 12 (in the case of girls), or 14 (in the case of boys). Only on attainment of these ages do children come to be regarded as 'persons' by law. Prior to birth, the foetus has an ambiguous status: it isn't seen as a person, and isn't quite seen as being owned by its mother, or anyone else (J Brown, *Theft, Property Rights and the Human Body*).

The legal status of body parts is similarly ambiguous, and depends on which legal tradition the laws in question derive from. So I found myself in an ethical quandary: I was using people, albeit dead people who had never been seen as people, who had already been used, in order to make it easier, somehow, to tell my own story. I was uneasy about it, and I remain so. On balance, giving the bottle babies *some* voice, seems better to me than the babies having no voice at all. I am respecting my own internal 'Ethic of Care', which is all that I can ever do as a clinician or writer. My definition of care has been influenced by the work of Carol Gilligan. She gave me words and a language for talking about what I felt already. It's care beyond rules. Care that is relationship-centred.

As an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and heard with respect. An ethics of care directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships (paying attention, listening, responding) and to the costs of losing connection with oneself or with others. Its logic is inductive, contextual, psychological, rather than deductive or mathematical.

(Gilligan, *Ethics of Care*, section 4)

I benefited, in the course of my training as a Speech and Language Pathologist, from access to specimens like these, which gave me tremendous insight into the breadth of what constitutes both 'normal' and 'abnormal,' as we define them. Writing about the 'bottle babies' allowed me to harmonise the writer, therapist, and scientist in me, while respecting my own ethic.

I was already at ease with telling stories about other people, and borrowing their congruence. I have been writing with, and about, patients and clients as a speech and language therapist for over 20 years—both technical reports written in the minimal amounts of legalese, and, on occasion, legalese, I can get away with, and more overtly creative forms: poems, autobiographical sketches, short stories, communication passports, and letters. Writing in this context serves

a practical purpose: someone gets to eat something they can actually swallow; a client with Asperger's Syndrome doesn't have to explain to her professor for the 12th time what will help her to sit down long enough to take the exam she is more than prepared for.

Creative writing, like any creating activity, is explicitly about being (of which more later) and sharing. Cisneros and Premawardhana argue that "sharing leads to, enables, and sustains relationships between human beings and strengthens communities. Sharing power leads to responsible, community-oriented power." (*Sharing Values: A Hermeneutics For Global Ethics* 33) We write for ourselves, but we write for others too, and writing thus forms a bridge. Writing creatively within and without the academy, bridging apparent gaps between departments and ideologies, can promote the development of communities in the literal and metaphorical senses of the word.

In my role as a mentor for the Disability Service, I relied heavily on my experience as a writer, editor, and therapist to help students to more completely access academic life. I did not believe it was possible or healthy for therapists and mentors to 'erase' themselves from the sessions, nor do I believe that this is best for students and clients. I worked then, as now, to 'own my own shit,' as my CAT (Cognitive Analytic Therapy) supervisor was fond of saying, which means, for me, acknowledging what I felt about the piece of text and the student I am being asked to interact with.

I wrote to students after every session I had with them, and worked to eliminate the perceived power imbalance. I am not an expert in their discipline, or on them, and I encouraged them to become experts on themselves and their subjects.

Over time, I have co-edited 4 PhD dissertations, 3 undergraduate honours theses, and two Social Work Masters theses. The 'reach' of writing in this context is enormous, and none of the

students or staff with whom I've interacted ever expressed concern about Creative Writing not belonging in the academy—it wasn't relevant to them what I called the sort of writing we were doing, and the creative element for me came mostly from balancing on the fuzzy tightrope between therapy and teaching, between my story and theirs.

In terms of writing, it isn't really possible to do what I do without regularly reading and performing. I don't want what I make (whether books or music) to be inaccessible or 'intellectualised' (Vaillant 36); I want it to be human and meaningful. I want it to be genuine, relevant, about connection between Self and Other. I want it to be relational and contextual. Ideally, I would like it to help other people to realise something about themselves; I'd like it to be *therapeutic*. To me, that means nurturing and enlivening. I write *as me, for me*; that has to be my starting point. I don't expect my writing to be easy to *understand*; I expect it to be easy to *read*.

WRITING AND CREATING ARE NOT THERAPY

In order to write more fully as myself, in my voice, regardless of topic, genre, or whether anyone else might find the output(s) creative, I had to continue to explore everything that meeting the ‘bottle babies’ had uncovered in my psychological landscape. The wellspring of my creativity is the resilience and stubborn insistence on the existential that helped me to survive the things I found myself in the position of needing to write about. I had to stop forcing myself to comply with my own expectations, and take some risks:

The concept of the well-adjusted personality or of good adjustment sets a low ceiling upon the possibility for advancement and for growth. The cow, the slave, the robot may all be well adjusted.

(Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 292)

Maslow argues that

The upshot of all of these developments can, I think, be summarized as an increased stress on the role of integration (or self-consistency, unity, wholeness) in the theory of creativeness. Resolving a dichotomy into a higher, more inclusive, unity amounts to healing a split in the person and making him more unified. Since the splits I have been talking about are within the person, they amount to a kind of civil war, a setting of one part of the person against another part. In any case so far as Self-Actualized creativeness is concerned, it seems to come more immediately from fusion of primary and secondary processes rather than from working through repressive control of forbidden impulses and wishes. It is, of course, probable that defenses arising out of fears of these forbidden impulses also push down primary processes in a kind of total, indiscriminating, panicky war on all the depths. But it seems that such lack of discrimination is not in principle necessary.

(Maslow, *A Psychology of Being*, 29)

As a child trying to heal the split—or the scars from forces outside of me that demanded that I split—I wrote, swam, ran; I experienced ‘flow’. As an adult, I had to do these same things

in a very conscious way, explicitly, with the same focus and determination with which I had learned them originally, in order to experience 'flow'. I documented part of this experience in 'Something Snapped,' describing the somatic sense I made of abruptly feeling more like myself as I jettisoned the fear of being seen as myself and as a writer.

When I had given up hope of
ever being me again, alive again,
something snapped.
I tore myself open.
Light came out.

I'm sewn back together.
All threads, crazy coloured knots,
zigzags, gaps.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 9)

My 'civil war' had prevented 'flow'. The most recent battle in my 'civil war,' it turned out, was a battle over whether my experience and story mattered as much as other peoples' did, and whether my voice was original enough, my subject matter unique enough, to serve as the basis of a PhD in Creative Writing. The 'civil war' wasn't just playing out in my head, but in my body, in my relationships, all around me, because I carried that war into every environment I went into, and into everything I made.

In his book, *Towards a Psychology of Being*, Maslow argues that true creativity, a creativity born not of acting out or avoidance of pain, but the embrace of it, can come only "if a person's depths are available to him," (part 4, *Creativeness*) and in many ways, mine were not available to me, even as I began to process and accept things. I was still fighting against incorporating them,

because it meant that my whole way of being would, of necessity, change. I would have to value my 'light' as well as my 'darkness', and allow the light to exist, and stop acting as though I had no right to redemption. I would have to stop 'defending' my work by never committing it to paper. This necessitated soul-searching and dialogue, with myself and with others, and required that I give up any idea of ever comfortably being part of a herd, a well-adjusted 'cow' content with its lot.

Healing the 'split' entailed deep exploration of my own values as a person and as a creative. I went down several blind alleys, creatively speaking, over the course of several years, trying to find a way to write a meta-poem that would serve as an umbrella under which to fit all of my creative output. I forgot, in so doing, some of my intrinsic motivation for writing in the first place. I tried to focus not on process, not on the experience of getting there, but on output, rather than focussing on both.

In chapter 7 of *Towards a Psychology of Being*, Maslow describes 'peak experiences' as identity-experiences which lead to a sense of being:

1. More integrated in Self
2. More able to fuse with the world
3. At the peak of their powers
4. Calm, sure, and right
5. The master of their fate
6. Free of blocks and inhibitions
7. More spontaneous and freely flowing
8. More 'creative'
9. Unique, individual and idiosyncratic
10. Present
11. A pure psyche
12. Godlike, having no needs or wants
13. Poetic, mythical and rhapsodic
14. Complete
15. Playful

These characteristics fly in the face of much of what popular culture and popular psychology now tell us we should want to be in order to be *perceived* as creative. Maslow argues in favor of show, rather than tell, of privacy, of deep relating, of not doing what pleases other people.

Rebecca Culbertson argues that the thing most often precluding self-acceptance and high-level integration of memory and trauma into our self conceptions is our silence about the trauma.

This silence fuels Maslow's 'civil war' as people who have, as I have, survived violence only to feel that it is impossible for them to speak about it, or for others to understand it, if they manage to talk:

Naive public conceptions of memory, and the attendant assumption that memory takes certain forms and not others, contribute to a curious circumstance surrounding the victimized survivor of violence. The survivor most often, nearly invariably, becomes silent about his victimization, though the experience nevertheless in every case remains somehow fundamental to his existence, and to his unfolding or enfolded conception of himself.

(Culbertson, *Embodied Memory* 168).

I didn't tell anyone about my childhood for many years, in spite of the fact that my trauma permeated me and shaped me, to some extent, because I didn't believe that anyone would understand, after a few disastrous forays into seeking help.

My poem 'Joel' summarises my encounters with a neighbour who had survived Auschwitz. I often looked at his '*strange purple number*', his Auschwitz tattoo, and wondered why it had so many digits. He often told me that I would one day have the power to rewrite my own story, and that he would never hide his past for the comfort of other people. His acceptance of his own darkness, of the abjection that he had endured, enabled him to transcend it. Auschwitz was no longer of any relevance to him unless someone denied it or tried to reduce him to that

experience, to being a victim. By accepting the trauma, he turned it into a thing that allowed him to thrive—a 'peak identity experience'.

*I will not hide
this strange purple number.
People don't like to see it.
You can touch it if you want.
It won't burn you.*

*No, it doesn't hurt;
that hurt already happened.
It reminds me that the worst
thing has already happened to me,
to all of us.*

The worst things start with numbers.

*6 million, perhaps 7.
I was 12.
No one else in my family survived.*

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 48)

I didn't attempt to suppress what I remembered; rather, I believed firmly that I had somehow earned it, deserved it, and it was perfectly obvious to other people in the form of shame, and it was best to 'spare' them contact with it, and thus spare them contact with my imperfections.

This silence is an internal one in which the victim attempts to suppress what is recalled (so as not to relive the victimization countless times), or finds it repressed by some part of himself which functions as a stranger, hiding self from the self's experience according to unfathomable criteria and requirements. It is external as well: the victim does not tell what she recalls, in part because others do not seem to hear what is said, partly out of a conviction that she will not be believed, and more basically because she simply cannot make the leap to words: "If you were not there, it is difficult to describe or say how it was.

(Culbertson 168)

Culbertson also states that

Survivor writings make it clear that to be a survivor of one's violation is precisely this: to live with the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory, and a concomitant need to tell what seems untellable. The paradox is based in more than simply the difficulty of reporting events that listeners would rather not hear or believe, or which are too different to be grasped. It is the paradox of a known and felt truth that unfortunately obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech and so seems as unreachable, as other, as these, and as difficult to communicate and interpret, even to oneself. It is a paradox of the distance of one's own experience.

(Culbertson 168–9)

I felt this distance from my own writing, and my own selfhood, each time I did not follow instinctively the habits that led to engaging with 'flow' and creativity in the way that I do these things. And as I allowed myself to feel it fully, the distance, the gap, shrank, and I could accept that poetry for me would have to occupy this space between, this dreamlike place. Writing the creative component of my thesis has been therapeutic, as any creative practice can be, but it has *not* been therapy.

Therapy would address misused or over-used 'core defences', strategies used by the bodymind to protect itself from pain, such as 'intellectualising', 'dissociation', or 'narcissism' (Vaillant, chapters 1-2). The aim of therapy is to allow the 'organism' to 'self-actualise'; to become what it *is*, not what it *has been* (Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, chapter 2).

Writing *Anomaly* helped me to see the positives that come from accepting extraordinarily negative things that have happened to me. It helped me to see the growth and the change, the distance, to see the place I am now, rather than the place I was then. It is *evidence* of self-actualisation, not the *cause* of it.

POETRY AS PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

I often talk about writing and the product of writing as an almost physical place, a destination, a jumping off point, because that, for me, is how it feels to write. This is a similar approach to that of Psychogeography, the post-Surrealist, Situationist philosophy espoused by Guy Debord, and described eloquently by Gilles Ivain, writing under the pen name Chtcheglov:

We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought....

(cited in Coverley, *Psychogeography* 84)

I'm comfortable occupying fragmentary and uncertain spaces, because I had to be, in order to survive growing up in toxic environments. I was aware of this capacity, and at ease with it, before I was aware that I wasn't supposed to be. Writing, or living, in this space, this 'between,' demands fluidity and a commitment to process. It requires acceptance that experience, and what we choose to describe of that experience, will change as we do. Poetry, like psychogeography, demands acknowledgment of fragments and separateness, but does not demand agreement.

Collective narratives are too often used to force coherence, and to force agreement. That's the risk, and the benefit, inherent in them. So we tell collective narratives, we repeat them, because they reinforce social bonds. They elicit a sense of safety which may or may not be real. All too often that sense of safety *isn't* real, and doesn't perform the function that it's claimed that it does.

The collective narrative I grew up with, for example, is that safety lies in being held by other, safety lies in following rules; being happy is not as important as being good. Being assimilated matters more than being intact. For whatever reason, I asked 'why'. And once I asked, there was no way to

calmly accept the transaction that had been forced on me. It took me many years, however, to come to terms with what not assimilating actually means.

I started writing when I was 7. I wrote to allow myself to be separate, to allow my story to differ from what other people told me it was. When I wasn't in nature, I was inside, toeing the line of the received collective narrative, but in my head, I was still free. In my head, I wrote. The necessary immersion of the writer in his or her creative act is described by Freud as a healthy response, a non-neurotic, non-dissociative way, in which to recapture the play that is an essential component of child development. I wrote as a child in order to remain one; I write as an adult for the pleasure of connecting to self, to other, and of exploring.

... Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real...the child distinguishes it quite well from reality; and he likes to link his imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world... The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously — that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion — while separating it sharply from reality.

(Freud, *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* 143-144)

Freud describes writing as a connecting act, linking memory, experience, and the exploration of memory. Impetus to create is given by an event happening in the present, connected to a desire or wish, whether conscious or unconscious. Writing in a way that allows others to access what we think and feel is one of the great challenges academic writers and writing face, when under pressure to 'prove' the worth of writing and of what is being written about. Writing is a cognitive

as well as an emotional and psycho-social activity, a daydreaming on paper. Writing becomes a way of allowing ourselves freedom—the freedom to create—and extending that freedom to others through reading what we've written.

The real problem for me has been having any of that stuff *out* of my head, where people who believe in one of the received narratives I tried to belong to can see it. I ended up paying a high price, every time, for excelling, for being different: too smart, too fast, not female enough, not good enough. Much of my writing is at least tinged with autobiography, and my PhD project as a whole is in some way a response to the emotional impact of seeing the 'bottle babies' and engaging with them from the perspectives of an anatomist, a therapist, and a mother, and from the perspective of someone marked by the shame and guilt of a large, Catholic, constellation, one in which there was little room for difference, or for narratives of the self. The physical, emotional, and semantic tensions between 'dirt' and 'water' provide the frame for the two related, but necessarily separate, collections that are my PhD creative component. Both contain poems, short stories, and hybrid narratives emerging from the contact between memories, the revisiting of those memories as an adult, and my contact with William Hunter's anatomy and pathology collections in a museum and a store-room in a basement at the University of Glasgow.

In explicitly therapeutic contexts, writing offers a means by which the experience of illness and loss of capacities can be explored and better understood by patients and by families. It can become the bridge between the current self, the self experiencing dementia or terminal illness, or wrestling with the constraints imposed by disability, and past selves, selves that may not even be known to the patient's family.

The period between late childhood—that time identified by Freud as an essential exploration of play—and early adulthood is referred to by neurologists as the 'bump years' (Janssen, Chessa and Murre, *The Reminiscence Bump*). The 'bump' is the mound of memories formed during

this intense period of becoming and defining the self. We write the story of ourselves during this period, and this richest time is the time the dementing or neurologically damaged brain revisits—and is able to share—most readily. These older memories are those of past events; they have already been stored, prior to the storage programs being eaten by Alzheimer's Disease or a thousand other ways in which personhood can be destroyed, and the connection to the collective can cease to exist. My work as both a therapist and writer assumes that memory is personal and is ultimately subjective. As such it is challengeable, and open to reinterpretation, and it is both possible and necessary to interrogate it on this basis. This tension inherent in playing with memory is a very fruitful line of inquiry for me, and has allowed me to put prose next to poetry, and fiction next to autobiography, while showing the seams and disjoints between them.

Anomaly is about accepting that to be connected to the collective in any way that is safe for me, I had to accept that the collective would see how anomalous I am. I had to be sturdy enough to defend myself, to defend having a self, at all. I felt like writing a thesis would be about finding a way to make peace with trading bits of myself away, to fit in to a different collective narrative, one that seemed less expensive. But it has instead forced me to accept that who I am means no collective narrative is ever going to completely fit. I have a choice: be an armless jack-in-the-box, so I can fit in, or to sit up straight, with my arms flopping over the sides, aware that that makes me conspicuous. It's not about resistance, or acting out. It's not about rebellion. It's not about refusing to comply. It's just about *being me*.

Maybe the gap is accepting that I'm both a physical and a metaphysical being. Collective narratives generally demand that we go one way or the other. That we deny the intellectual, the spiritual, the metaphysical, or deny the animal. I am all of these things. My writing is always going to be messy, and I'm ok with calling something a draft that looks finished to other people. I don't believe it ever *can* be finished; it's only ever momentary.

Anomaly is an affirmation, having an actual *book*, is an affirmation that choosing to focus on writing, on creating, as connecting, for me, is the necessary precondition for me valuing my own work. I spent decades writing things that *other people* valued. Decades writing perfect, ‘finished’, things, that reinforced received narratives. They didn’t reinforce my own. Not only did they not reinforce it, but they left me feeling further and further divorced from the collective, from the parts that made sense to me.

No one becomes an 8-year-old research scientist by accident. That led to a certain nihilistic despair. I made an assessment (in retrospect, an accurate one, albeit context-dependent) that it was impossible to belong, and essentially that my story would always set me apart, and I would be punished for that. For that reason, I decided that I had to tell other people’s stories rather than telling my own.

I’ve had to grow into being at ease with the awfulness of my own story, surrounded by people who told me either that it didn’t happen, or that I need to “feel better” about it. I needed to stop trying to make other people feel better about it. I’ve spent a lifetime saying “I’m sorry I’m me; I’m sorry that’s inconvenient”. And I have refused to let others meet my needs, as a result, believing the lies that trauma told me.

Now, my story is out and on paper, in the world, where people can judge it in any way they choose. I no longer feel any need to protect other people from it, or from what they feel about it. I was never high in ‘agreeableness,’ as psychologists define the term (McCrae, *Five Factor Model*). There are very valid reasons for that. Before, I felt despair about it; now I don’t. I have accepted, as Maslow suggests, that being ‘well-adjusted’ comes at cost:

Adjustment means a passive shaping of oneself to one's culture, to the external environment. But supposing it is a sick culture? Or to give another example, we are slowly learning not to prejudge juvenile delinquents as being necessarily bad or undesirable on psychiatric grounds. Crime and delinquency and bad behavior in children may sometimes represent psychiatrically and biologically legitimate revolt against exploitation, injustice, and unfairness. Adjustment is a passive rather than active process; its ideal is attained in the cow or in the slave or anyone else who can be happy without individuality, even, e.g., the well-adjusted lunatic or prisoner.

(Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* 338)

I've decided to be open about being a creature who is comfortable living in the space between. I'm comfortable insisting that I am not my story. I'm also not what anyone chooses to make of it, either. I am comfortable being, comfortable doing, taking an active role in the generation and regeneration of my own story and the stories of others, and that is in essence what *Anomaly* is about.

For that reason, the creative component of the PhD, while it shares a name with *Anomaly*, is not a book. It is a draft. It could not, in my view, be finished. I was trying to merge together at least two collections that needed to be separate entities, which is why the 'bottle babies' are not in *Anomaly*, and will eventually be published as a stand alone pamphlet with a distinct, separate foreword and frame narrative. It was only during the editing process, in preparation for publishing, that this became clear. While I see those poems and stories rooted in the Hunterian collections as well-written, and unique, they don't fit with the other material that has been included in *Anomaly*, because there is no redemption for those babies, and their story diverges from mine. Their story diverges from any collective narrative, other than the received narrative that demands that we be somehow afraid and ashamed of them.

It smells like a library. Wax polish, wood, old paper. We notice the paintings, the card catalogue, the Ficus Benjamina someone's forgotten to water. We talk about the other smell, the one hunting memories, tickling the backs of our throats, a basement smell, of formaldehyde, a smell for dark places, a smell to be ashamed of, a smell that means something we can't control has happened to someone we don't even know.

We look—then glance away, eyes lighting for a startled second on a 4 centimeter-long spinal column, lurid red, bobbing in a tiny bottle. Then back to rows of squashed faces, parts of bodies we can't even identify without reading the labels. The labels are small, and we don't want to get any closer to the people in the bottles.

We can't.

We can't stop looking. But we have to, overwhelmed by the weight of numbers—evidence of pagan rites, clear canopic jars, sealed with pitch and fat wooden corks.

We are all bystanders. All guilty. And we are the reason this quiet jury has been assembled.

(McDonough and Clark, *Dirt* 80)

I can't 'rescue' the 'bottle babies' from the obscurity into which we have rather carefully placed them. We have replaced most gross anatomy courses in medical and other professional schools with digital media; we have become conscious of the risk of exploiting vulnerable people; we destroy anatomical specimens of dubious provenance collected post-1950. This does not, for me, negate what may or may not have happened to these babies, or to the mothers who carried them. The Hunterian collections and others like them are early products of the Age of Industrialisation, in that the focus on efficiency and the professionalisation of medicine in general and obstetrics in particular led to power imbalances and the rise of the 'modern' hospital and to hospital births, and the relegation of midwifery to a fringe practice for a long time. The same efficiency, it has been argued, that led to the mass murder of millions by Nazis, and

vivisection performed on human beings by Nazi anatomists in their quests. Ethically, then, we ignore the 'bottle babies' and the work of Nazi anatomists like Pernkopf (Hubbard, *Pernkopf... the continuing ethical controversy*) at our peril, because the apparent inhumanity of the specimens forces us into uncomfortable contact with our own imperfections. Exploring dichotomies and apparent dichotomies underpins much of my creative practice, and I try not to flinch away from what looking closely at duality reveals.

I attempted to impose psychogeography as a philosophical and theoretical frame. It became about constraining creative exploration, forcing it in a certain direction. It didn't lead to the theoretical grounding, or the creative freedom that I had anticipated, but the attempt left a mark on my writing. If I hadn't explored psychogeography, I wouldn't have written about bodies, dirt or water.

MY WRITING PROCESS

I can't make my truth more palatable for you.
I know that you aren't asking me to do that:
I asked myself to do that.
I'm not a pill with a sugar coating
that you can swallow easily,
or a whiskey you can drink to forget.
Or a woman with no history and no scars,
who is never afraid, never feels small,
never feels joy and rage,
and goes untouched through life and relationships.
I know that you didn't want me to be those things,
because that would mean that I wasn't me.

(unpublished draft)

My writing is a reflection of the woman that I am, the woman I am becoming. It is an attempt to tell my story in the only honest way I can. It carries the women that I have been, and I cannot always explain those women, those girl selves. My writing carries echoes of other women I have known, and I cannot always explain them, either. Are memories ghosts, or are ghosts memories? The only answer is yes.

(unpublished draft)

I wrote the pieces above in an attempt to define more clearly what my writing process looks like, and what I am like as a writer. The poems, like many others in my books and in my thesis, are imbued with the personal, and straddle the lines between the different parts of me that someone else might experience in contact with me: woman, mother, remember—er, storyteller, writer. They are also untitled, which, again, is both a personal preference and an aspect of my writing process; a title which might seem fine one day may on another feel completely wrong. There is a part of me that resists 'leading' the reader—I would prefer to have a reader experience what I've written, rather than be told how to interpret it. I am, in essence, asking readers to participate in research with me, research in practice, "...where the end product is an artefact—where the thinking is, so to speak, embodied in the artefact, where the goal is not primarily communicable

knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication” (Frayling, *Research in Art and Design* 3).

FLOW

From the beginning, Csikszentmihalyi recognized the possibility of an autotelic personality, a person who tends to enjoy life or generally does things for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve some later external goal. This kind of personality is distinguished by several metaskills or competencies that enable the individual to enter flow and stay in it. These metaskills include a general curiosity and interest in life, persistence, and low self-centeredness, which result in the ability to be motivated by intrinsic rewards.

(Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, *The Concept of Flow* 93)

The characteristics of personality and temperament that mean ‘flow’ is something I can access and use are the result of a strange combination of temperament, genetics, and circumstance. Accessing flow demands that I grow, and persist in so doing.

What was unusual for me in 2013, is that I wasn’t writing anything, anywhere, to anyone, for myself. I struggled with this for years, with the feeling of somehow having been deserted by my own capacities; I could no longer easily get in ‘flow’. The pressure to explore one or two themes, at depth, was relentless, and writing, or, more broadly speaking, creating, simply doesn’t work that way for me. Every theme I explored felt false, like shoes that belong to someone else. Writing is, for me, about engaging completely “in the present moment” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi 89), in all of its aspects (Maslow, chapter 7). That present moment changes continually, and I believe that resisting that change is bad for me personally, and as a writer.

When writing isn't immersive, when I am not in 'flow,' the results are disastrous: wooden, non-instinctive, and not connecting. I retreat into intellectualising and away from experience. And immersion is a combination of hopping from stepping stone to stepping stone and jumping in, seeing where the current takes me, and trusting that I will arrive in the right place. Which is precisely what Csikszentmihalyi argues flow is. 'Flow' has been defined as

....the subjective experience of engaging just–manageable challenges by tackling a series of goals, continuously processing feedback about progress, and adjusting action based on this feedback. Under these conditions, experience seamlessly unfolds from moment to moment, and one enters a subjective state with the following characteristics:

- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment.
- Merging of action and awareness.
- Loss of reflective self–consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one's actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal).
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process.

(Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 90)

For me to be in flow, I have to not be fighting the direction the water takes. I have to acknowledge the primacy of the subjective, because what else is poetry but an attempt to make the personal more accessible? Poetry is about sharing experience, and is thus always going to be subjective, and relational in its intent: or, at least, that is what my poetry is about, what it is for. When I am writing in flow, I smile, I cry, I rage at the paper or keyboard. I go find other people to talk to about what I am writing, as soon as it is solid enough that it stacks together. I write with other people. I lose the sense of me as an isolated entity, and become attuned to the hum

of my surroundings; I don't need to drown the hum or to hide away from it. I feel certain, in flow, that if I write myself into a dead end, I will know about it; I will know "how to respond to whatever happens next," and I look forward to seeing what happens next (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 90). I enjoy the process, and hate it at the same time, and my "end goal" (Ibid) becomes both closer and less relevant the more 'in flow' I am.

My earliest experiences of 'flow' were in water. I can't remember not being able to swim. There was always freedom in it, always the possibility, it felt, of holding my breath longer, swimming faster or farther than the day before. I was immersed in being, in existing, while under water. Time seemed to move at a different speed, to go more quickly or more slowly. I didn't worry about what I was doing, or if anything would go wrong. I swam, I dove. For hours. I had some swimming lessons for a while, but as an activity it was completely self-directed, and I progressed at my own pace.

I was feral. Naked
as often as I was allowed—
oftener, really.

No shoes. No shirt. Climbing.
Hanging upside down from branches,
feeling my hair swirl in the wind.

And there was always wind. Always dust:
that's all West Texas is, one long dusty corridor
between nowhere and nowhere else on Earth.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 73)

My early experiences of 'flow' were something I recognised as 'the bubble feeling,' the satisfaction that I felt from swimming a bit further without taking a breath, or that I remember from the day that I was finally sure I was reading, and not reciting something I had memorized. It was a very

‘in process’ feeling, a ‘doing’ feeling. I was acutely aware of losing it, either because someone or something interrupted my process, or, most often, because I got in trouble for doing something that felt entirely normal to me: “my bubble feeling inside starts to shrink, the way it always does when I make a mistake” (‘Marsha’). The questions then, as now, are a) how to allow flow to be the transitory thing that it is, and to trust that it will return when I get out of my own way, and b) how to optimize my chances of surfing it, personally and professionally.

WHY SO MANY BOOKS, & WHY MY STORY IS LAST

My first book, *The Last Pair of Ears*, explores what it is to remember, try to honour, and tell as much of other people’s stories as I can, but it is in many ways the last book in a series of 4 produced during my time at Strathclyde. It was published in 2014, but I can, in some senses, only really understand it now. Emotionally, I was trying to write about my own story but was afraid of approaching it, of valuing it, so I wrote about me validating others’ stories and experience.

I began this PhD in 2011 by writing about a world—coal mining and the collapse of industry in the UK and elsewhere—that seemed far removed enough from my own to be emotionally safe, but still had emotional resonance for me, and that I thought had the necessary gravitas to be PhD-worthy. My maternal grandfather went from being a shop and gas station owner to delivering bread after the loss of these businesses during The Depression, and a lot of the stories central to my family’s understanding of itself are rooted in this time, and in his transition from being management to being an employee.

I had worked as a therapist with men who had lost their occupations, and more or less lost their masculinity with the collapse of coal mining. These stories interested me, but also allowed me

to hide behind intellectualising; none of this work from 2012–2013 survives in the present incarnation of my PhD or *Anomaly*, the final book which has emerged from it.

My contact with academia, and with the literary world, had left me with a strong sense that writing about ordinary things, however existential they might be, was not good enough. I read a piece in *The Atlantic* at the time that summed up with precision my fears about my creative output; Ta-nehsi Coates describes V.S. Naipul's *Esquire* interview:

A few folks on twitter and e-mail wanted to know what I thought of V.S. Naipaul's latest: In an interview at the Royal Geographic Society on Tuesday about his career, Naipaul ... was asked if he considered any woman writer his literary match. He replied: "I don't think so."He said: "I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me.""And inevitably for a woman, she is not a complete master of a house, so that comes over in her writing too," he said. He added: "My publisher, who was so good as a [sic]taster and editor, when she became a writer, lo and behold, it was all this feminine tosh. I don't mean this in any unkind way." Better people than me can detail the history of disregarding women's writing. But I know that it's an old story stretching back to the days when the novel was seen as a low form....Nathaniel Hawthorne sums up a feeling which, regrettably, remains with us today:

America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the 'Lamplighter,' and other books neither better nor worse?—worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000.

(Coates, *The Damned Mob of Scribbling Women* para 1-8)

Writers are told 'write what you know,' but a dichotomy still exists between doing that and doing it in a way that is 'academic enough,' and creative writing in the academy remains in an uneasy position because of this tension. I tried to avoid writing about 'female' topics in a 'female' way,

and found myself stuck in the same position I had been in more than 20 years ago, when I tried to write about the necessity for having an unreliable narrator to advance plot in novels. I wanted to be a ‘scribbling woman,’ but didn’t feel safe enough to BE one. Throughout 2012, I struggled to find a topic that seemed serious enough, emotionally interesting enough, and researchable enough to constitute the core of a PhD project. I read widely through mythology and archetypes, and looked at Scottish female poets who might serve as a feminine counterpoint to deindustrialisation. I looked at the shawls in the weaving museum in Paisley, trying to determine whether a psychogeographic approach to writing might prove beneficial. And kept bumping in to the same artificial dichotomies every time: science versus art, making versus breaking, creating versus curating, healthy versus sick, nature versus industry.

SCIENCE IS ART, ART IS SCIENCE

The ‘science vs art’ thread in my work emerged in 2013 from my ongoing wrestling with the (to me) very artificial divide between science and art, between doing and making, and the way this has played out in my own life and in my extended family of origin. I was realising that I could not write about what I had essentially promised I would write about. The shift in my working life from a medically-oriented, caring, professional role to a creating professional role has sharpened my own awareness of these disjoints, which Greenblatt refers to as “particular fissures in one’s psychic life” (*The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*. 3), with the result that part of my creative process is calling attention to these “fissures”, to the artifice that is entailed in separating the conscious from the unconscious, mind from brain, memory from myth/untruth.

I find myself reacting strongly against polemics, against this binary-ness, and moving in the direction of exploring ‘writing as writing’ or, perhaps more accurately, ‘writing as making’. I don’t

think it is possible for me to choose to define myself as a ‘nature poet’ or a ‘lyric poet’ (I’ve been very strongly urged to adopt both terms in describing myself and my writing); nor do I think it would be beneficial.

DESTRUCTION IS CREATION

To make involves unmaking. Approaching writing as making, from a philosophical point of view, has both narrowed my focus and extended it; I am taking inspiration from makers, many of them anonymous or long dead.

Perhaps what we most need in helping us to embrace the dual identity of our nature is a deep and constant awareness of the critically vital “why” underlying the destructive dynamic within the creative process and the inseparable union of creator and destroyer. We destroy in order to create; we become destroyers so that we can ultimately become creators. We don’t destroy for the mere sake of destruction itself and we must not remain destroyers only. Our responsibility is to participate in destruction that leads to productive creation, not that merely perpetuates further destruction. We will likely be better able to integrate the destroyer aspect of our identity if we can see ourselves as “creative destroyers,” those who destroy in the service of creation, which in the end, may be the secret key to unlocking and releasing the floodgates of our creative potential for growth and constructive transformation.

(Kiser, *Creation Through Destruction*, para 10)

My creative practice is fundamentally about exploring relationship(s) and connection(s), synthesising and pulling together or deconstructing. I like exploring the paradox of entropy: creating involves, at some level, destroying or pulling apart. The example I’ve given students is that recycling glass entails melting and repurposing the bottles, and what emerges from the process won’t, and can’t, be exactly the same.

Consider the creative movement of the will in the processes of choosing, deciding, valuing, and believing. Every choice for something is a choice against something else, and every decision for a particular direction or path in life is a decision not to explore other directions or take other paths. Actively identifying with certain values means not identifying with other values, and maintaining certain beliefs means that other beliefs must be sacrificed...

The mere acts of willing and choosing, which are so essentially characteristic of our human existence, imply a simultaneous affirmation and negation. Therefore, every affirmation is a hidden negation, and every negation is a hidden affirmation. We want to affirm but find that to do so, we must also negate, that indeed we cannot affirm without negating—that at the core of affirmation lies the dynamic of negation. We cannot say yes without also saying no, and we cannot say no without also saying yes. Every yes toward one thing demands a no toward something else, and an expression of the yes can only be done on the basis of an expression of the no. As we affirm through negating, we create through destroying.

(Kiser, para 4-5)

I have explored this terrain in creating with Martyn, and in watching and hearing him create. To choose one melody for improvisation is to *not* choose another, at least temporarily. To choose one color is to *not* choose another.

Creating is destructive.
I like that.
That's just the physics of it.

(McDonough and Clark, *Dirt 118*)

I watched one our sons explore this same paradox, and wrote about it in *Brother Zone*:

ENJOYMENT OR DESTRUCTION?

"I'm NOT thinking about enjoyment, Brendan. When I eat sour cream cookies, I am thinking about something different."

Brendan looks up, icing on his chin, crumbs spilling out of his mouth,

"Ut oo fnkin' abow?"

"I..."

said Tristan,

"...am thinking about DESTRUCTION. Destruction of all of the cookies. That's what I'm thinking about. Destruction is like enjoyment, only more better."

Brendan looks at the plate, counting.

"You can't do destruction to all the cookies; it won't be fair, and my enjoyment will disappear."

"Stop talking, Brendan. I am doing destruction. My ears are shutting, just like my eyes."

86

(McDonough, *Brother Zone* 86)

In order to express himself more completely, Tristan made up a word that he knew wasn't real —'destruction'—and acknowledged that on this particular day, at that particular time, he was much more interested in breaking than making, and was ok with that as a choice. But he was aware, even at age 4, that it was a choice. And he revelled in that choice, because he felt as though it was alright for him to make it.

Engaging in relationship, which is necessary for collaboration (which is necessary for me, for my best writing to happen, whether I mean relationship with self, or with other) necessitates a similar comfort with paradox: for relationships to grow and to evolve, for collaboration to take place, they often have to change. We can't always predict what direction that change will take a relationship in, whether that is the relationship between people or atoms or ingredients in a recipe.

Collaboration necessitates a sort of energy exchange, Martyn would argue, and the impetus for the shared experience of making comes from both parties, from a willingness to share and to risk, as well as to defend and protect. Over the last 21 years, I have written a poem for each wedding anniversary, exploring this paradox, albeit not consciously. I pulled three of these together to create a longer poem for *Anomaly*. In doing this, I destroyed the three small, original containers to create one larger one, still separable into three wholes. The parts can all stand alone, but together they create something new and different:

There is nothing else
but this moment,
a thing we make and unmake
again and again
that might be love.

Lust for breakfast
sex for dinner
love for supper
throw away the bones of me after.

I can't see what follows:
there is only the bald
certainty, the urgency
of now, of you here with me.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 17)

BROKEN SYSTEMS

Training as a clinician has changed my creative practice. To work as a clinician is to acknowledge that something about a system is not working, is broken or suboptimal; it demands that I be present, work in the present, with what *is*, in order to support someone else's act of (self) creation, of redefinition. I am focussing in, gathering data and then widening my 'lens' as I adapt my understanding of the relationship and connection. The diagnostic process begins when I meet a patient or client for the first time; the process of writing a poem, or anything else, is similar. My practice has also been shaped, very strongly, by working as an anatomist and communication consultant. Recent formal certification in transnational negotiation and mediation has underlined for me the necessity of continuing to use my creative practice, which is ultimately relational, to span worlds and ideas and bridge gaps, where possible, while making sure stories are heard.

I have worked as a Speech and Language Therapist in mental health, neurology, and end of life care, typically in community settings, for over 20 years, with my focus on keeping those I cared for independent for as long as possible—a thing that definitely requires ‘breaking’ of systems, a radical reworking of how someone sees themselves and their context. This requires community and family ‘buy in,’ and involves me getting lines of communication going between all parties. I have done this while supporting students (medical and speech and language therapy students). My focus in these contexts is always on not being the expert, and on listening carefully and treating people and stories and experiences with respect. I have written and presented nationally and internationally about my work with patients and clients at the ends of their lives, and I would not make a distinction between creating writing, powerpoints, visuals, posters for these events and contexts; all are communicative acts, all allow engagement with both individual and collective narratives, between my own story and that of others.

HEALTHY OR DISEASED

This thread is rooted in and inspired by the writing and work of William Hunter and Baron Joseph Lister, both of whom have significant Glasgow connections. Archives and artefacts at the Hunterian Museum (University of Glasgow) associated with William Hunter provided me with both a scientific outlet and a projective object, in the form of the ‘bottle babies,’ which enabled me to get close enough to tolerate writing my own story. *The Collected Papers of Joseph, Baron Lister* (Adams) were also sampled, and fragments of these were used to better define and shape both of the collections that form *Anomaly*. I began writing about specimens in the Hunterian (Glasgow) in 2013, and wrote about some specimens in the Hunterian (London) in 2014–2015, anticipating that these would form the bulk of my PhD collection. It quickly became apparent that there was a philosophical gulf, in terms of curation, between the Glasgow and London collections.

Seeing the different way(s) in which the Hunterian material (and some of Joseph Lister's work) is presented and cared for has been very enlightening. The specimens in London are housed in the Royal College of Surgeons, and have been very well cared for. They are clearly treasured in a way that the specimens at the University of Glasgow are not; there was a large bequest, and subsequent donations have been diverted to pay for maintenance and storage. The specimens are not hidden away, and there are regular tours for the general public, as well as lots of information about each specimen. All have been photographed, and can be accessed online. Volunteers (most of whom, if not all, are retired medical professionals) have been trained to support people to access the collection, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. The act of curation has essentially been one of creation, the creation of an experience of the specimens, in a 'container' that can also be 'read' by those accessing the museum. There is some irony in this, in that John Hunter was known to openly use the services of resurrection men, and William Hunter appears not to have done so. John Hunter focussed on adding to his collection, regardless of provenance; William Hunter attempted to preserve and log each specimen personally, and to treat them with a degree of respect.

The specimens in Glasgow, in contrast, are largely hidden in a store room. They have not been well cared for, and the bulk of them were essentially forgotten about for over 100 years in the old Glasgow Royal Infirmary. Many of the wet prep specimens are dried out or have become mildewed and stained at some point in their histories. The predominant emotions I see associated with the collection here are shame and loss. The specimens have clearly not been valued, and I am aware that they are viewed with fear and some degree of suspicion. It should also be noted that many of the Glasgow-based specimens are more markedly abnormal than are those in John Hunter's collection, which may reflect both curatorial and collector bias, as well as the differences in clientele for William Hunter vs. John Hunter (obstetrics and teaching for William, general surgery for John). The acts of curation in Glasgow have been inconsistent and

intermittent, and not well funded (e.g., the pathology and anatomy specimens have no dedicated fund for maintenance or storage). There has been little attempt made to let the specimens 'speak' for themselves, which is perhaps what drew me to them in the first place. The Glasgow specimens became metaphors for me, for my unvoiced, untold stories, babies trapped perpetually in stasis. I reached a point in late 2014 at which I could no longer avoid writing about my own story, and the urgency of writing about 'bottle babies' faded.

WATER

The connection between dirt and water is paradoxical for me. One isn't the absence of the other, despite the way we tend to talk about them. The presumption is that 'dirt' is always bad, and water is always good and/or healthy, something that cleans us.

Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world:

we are bodies of water.

As such, we are not on the one hand embodied (with all of the cultural and metaphysical investments of this concept) while on the other hand primarily comprising water (with all of the attendant biological, chemical and ecological implications).

(Neimanis, *Figuring Bodies of Water* 1)

We are water, and not. We are mostly water, but cerebral. The water in us cannot be separated from the rest of us. We are bodies and brains. We are fluid, we are solid. There is infinite space between the atoms that comprise us, but we can't see them. We are alone, but not alone: we are full of other beings. We are water and dirt, in every possible sense of either of those terms.

We are sensual, sexual, slippery creatures who think, who long to be singular but really aren't. Neimanis' eco-feminist position is both straightforward and paradoxical. But water can be 'dirty': discoloured, mineralised, full of algae, carrying disease.

Philosophically, I've been strongly influenced by my own practice as a therapist; Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) in particular resonates with me, as it is a written dialogue that extends and affirms therapeutic contact. The work of Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Lipovetsky, and a range of psychogeographers strongly influence my understanding of my creative practice, as does my ongoing exploration of what neurology has to teach us about the way we store and use memories.

But as bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation. With a drop of cliché, I could remind you that our human bodies are at least two-thirds water, but more interesting than these ontological maths is what this water does – where it comes from, where it goes, and what it means along the way. Our wet matters are in constant process of intake, transformation, and exchange – drinking, peeing, sweating, sponging, weeping. Discrete individualism is a rather dry, if convenient, myth.

(Neimanis 2)

The 'darker' side of being water is that we are inherently unstable; we are aren't as contained or quite as safe as we imagine we are. We are the products and byproducts of continual recycling, and the dirt, sin, filth, germs, disease we decry in others comprise part of who we are. Our separateness—as Neimanis reminds us—is an illusion, as is our togetherness, but we long for them, all the same.

I grew up in an environment that was in some ways anti-experiential, very much about following rules, and being a 'good girl'—which entailed being quiet, not being seen as smart

or strong, and doing exactly as I was told. I was as attracted to dirt as I was water, but dirt didn't afford the same freedom for the wilder parts of me that water did. My experience of water was somehow private, safer; I had physical freedom and psychological space. I was aware that I needed to contain and protect my experience of water when I returned to land, and that the wildness I felt would be criticised. In water, I could 'own' my experience, exploring both sensuality and introversion.

At the bottom of the pool, I'm by myself for a little bit. I can't really hear anything: just some shouting and splashing. Mr. Mike says fighting with the water won't work; you have to let it hold you, and move with it. He says the best way to go out of the water is to push your face up through it, gently, like the water doesn't want to let you go, and you don't really want to get out of the pool. I like being by myself down here.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 75)

If you count a mississippi, you are counting a second. That's what Jerry says. I'm trying to stay down for more *mississippis* every day, so my lungs get bigger. I let my air bubbles out, one at a time, so I can stay down longer. If you let them all out in a rush, you have to hurry up out of the water. *Thirty-three mississippi. Thirty-four mississippi. Thirty-five mississippi.*

But sometimes my counting gets in a bit of a hurry. My words smush together—*for-y-four-mississippi-for-y-five-mississippi-for-y-six-mississippi*—and I have to push off the bottom hard with my feet to get up to the top fast enough.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 74)

The exploration of the sensual we undertake as children is developmentally critical: it mitigates the growth and impact of shame, emotionally and conceptually, and gradually permits a sense of erotic to emerge. Sensually-charged experiences enable us to ‘set’ our boundaries, our internal norms; they also enable us to self-soothe and to self-stimulate, as we come define the erotic for ourselves.

This exploration of my physical capacities paralleled, and still does, my exploration of my more explicitly cognitive or analytical capacities. I learned to push myself in water, and to enjoy challenging and being challenged. As Wallace Nichols suggests,

...the ways we use our bodies in water— having to time our breaths consciously, reaching up and over and pulling the water toward us, moving the legs independently of the pace the arms are setting— is nothing like the way we move on land. We must learn how to swim, and this combination of cognitive effort and aerobic exercise has actually been proven to provide the greatest amount of what is called ‘cognitive reserve’ — that is, the mind’s resilience to damage to the brain...

(Nichols, *Blue Mind* 111)

I would argue that swimming also bolstered my emotional reserve, helping me to manage a very high level of awareness of the emotional dissonance present in my environment. I explored, consciously and unconsciously, what I struggled to understand out of the water. I think, too, that this combination of aerobic exercise and cognitive effort led to the storage of a very detailed, rich corpus of memories from my childhood, memories jostled loose when I met the ‘bottle babies’.

I lived in an environment dominated by the quest for purity, physically and spiritually. An environment in which religion and culture dictated that women be seen as vessels whose value lay in their purity, not in their essential selves, but I was being constantly told ‘just be yourself’. I met many women who were no longer ‘pure’ and played with the babies who resulted from

their 'sins.' When I swam, I experienced water as a nurturing environment, one in which I was 'clean,' relatively free, for a little while, of the psychological 'dirt' I carried. Free, too, to enjoy my body, without anyone really noticing.

My Grandma says they are *dirty*. But I don't understand, because Momma lets them come live with us in our house. My other granny doesn't say that; *unlucky* is what she says. We let them live in our house, and they get their own room, those pregnant girls who came from someplace else. I like talking to them, and some of them let me read stories to them: I shout into their lumpy bellybuttons just in case the babies can hear, and they laugh, and that knocks me off their laps. I can hear them rocking in the rocking chair late at night when they can't sleep. Ellen says that she tries to rock her baby to sleep so she can get some rest from the kicking and squirming. Ellen had a boyfriend, but she doesn't any more, and he didn't want to be a Dad.

What I don't understand is, if these are dirty, bad teenager girls, then why do they take care of me, and cook with me, and help Momma make dinner? Why do they eat with us at the table? My Daddy says *if you ever come to me like that I'll beat the shit out of you and throw you back out onto the street, and you can work your way through life on your back*. Sex with someone who didn't marry you is a sin. It's a bad sin. But a girl who couldn't keep her baby gave Eddie to us, so how could she be bad? I love Eddie. Eddie is my best thing. I like watching him sleep, and when he turns over, his sweaty curls blop into his cheek.

I asked Grandma why she said the girls were dirty. She said they were sinners, and they would have to work very hard for *The Lord* to forgive them. None of them are mean to Grandma, so I don't understand why she hates them. I told my Momma, and she said sometimes people have mixed feelings about things. I always love the girls who come to stay with us, but sometimes I feel jealous, because then they are the oldest child and not me any more. I guess that's a mixed feeling. I hope I'm not dirty by accident when I'm older.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 69)

'Dirt,' in the form of sin, was present everywhere. Dirt couldn't be avoided, really, but I was somehow supposed to avoid it. There were strange rituals I could undertake to free myself from the dirt, like going to Confession. Or using Holy Water:

Dab your fingers in.
Don't leave them there too long,
or the font will get dirty as a bird bath.

Remember to use your right hand,
or Sister will hit you.
Father.
Son.
Holy Spirit.
Up and down, then left to right.
Leave Mary out of it altogether.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 53)

I didn't have much faith in it, but I tried it every time I went through the door into church, concentrating on *not* using my left hand. For a left-dominant kid, this required a lot of effort. It was still water, however, and I loved touching it, and there was a certain comfort I felt in meeting water in a context in which so much about me felt...wrong. I was aware of being different, of not being what others expected me to be, and remember wanting to hide that difference as well as explore it.

When I was 7, I met the Atlantic, and had my first experience of seeing a body of water I couldn't see the other side of; I felt what I now call "the bubble feeling" looking back on it: a sense of my own power, a feeling of fizzing with joy that was too big to be contained. I guess it was my own version of The Sublime, as the Romantics conceived of it, and thus intimately connected to my sense of myself as a sensual, proto-sexual being.

I can see my Mom. She's a tiny speck of red on the beach, flapping the sand from our towels. I'm jumping off of Dad's shoulders, into yellow-green water. I've never seen the ocean, for real, just pictures in *National Geographic*. Dad waves me toward the beach; he's talking.

I shout *crap crap crap crap CRAP* in my head as I dive down to touch the sandy ripples under my toes. I feel wild. I never want to get out of the ocean. Ever.

I'm under the waves, with my eyes open. I'm watching small fish drift past, clumping together, then zooming apart. I fly underwater with them, feeling the waves roar. My legs stretch behind me, and I cup the water with my hands. I roll and roll until I'm a selkie. I sprout fur, so I can stay out here forever.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see something shiny. My brain screams *SHARK*. Just like in *National Geographic*. Something nearly as long as me, thin and blue-grey in the water. I don't want to, but I change back, and I'm a girl again...

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 50)

The excerpt above illustrates the abrupt loss of “the bubble feeling”, which, for me, is analogous to the “...‘relaxation response’ triggered by activities like Hatha yoga....muscles are constantly stretching and relaxing in a rhythmic manner, and this movement is accompanied by deep, rhythmic breathing, all of which help to put swimmers into a quasi–meditative state” (Nichols, 110). As I got older, I could channel and hang on to the “bubble feeling” more effectively, and was able to carry it with me out of the water, but could almost always immediately tap into it when I abandoned land. Swimming enabled me to maintain a somatic link to myself, and to my way of being in the world, and allowed me to experience embodiment.

One. Two. Three.

Breathe.

One. Two. Three.

Breathe.

I scythe through the water,
faster and faster,
as I turn my head left,
and then right,
every three strokes,
to snatch a lungful of air.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 49)

I was aware that water and swimming didn't affect most of the other people I knew in quite the same way. And as I matured, I felt more able to share what my experience of water meant to me, and to take greater risks emotionally, both in an out of water.

I can feel the thrum of the surf through my feet, shouting through my bones. I decide, because Laurie dares me, to strip off. I throw my suit and my towel onto the sand and sprint down the beach. Straggling along behind me, I watch as a clump of other people, led by Laurie, shuck their towels and clothes. I'm so far away, backing into the surf, that I can't tell who they are.

The wind is wild. The hurricane that has been predicted for weeks may be arriving on the Outer Banks. I don't care. I dive in, porpoising out, back in again, riding the waves back to the beach. The sand the surf carries scrapes along my skin like a giant tongue; maybe The Undertow is a cat. I think about swimming out, straight out, towards the flickering lights of the shrimping boats. I decide to swim parallel to them, along the coast. I have no one to swim with; no one to play with. I'm fizzing with energy, and my skin is melting with the force of it. I'm just water, myself. Nothing solid, nothing human is left of me, other than frustrated lust. The water strokes me everywhere, and I wish The Undertow were human, or whatever it is I am.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 38-39)

There was a certain amount of loneliness in knowing that I wasn't quite the same as everyone else, but it is critically important for young adults, particularly, to allow the acuteness of existential awareness to be present in and for them. I was very comfortable living in my sensate, sensual skin, even if I wasn't always comfortable with the fear and confusion other people felt about it:

Don't do it. That's insane. The pier is one giant splinter. There could be jellyfish. Or sharks. Or someone fishing, with a long line. You could cut yourself. You won't be able to see. It's dark as hell out there. No.

*Are you trying to tell me to stay out of the water?
Out of the ocean? Just because it's dark? That's bullshit.*

Why? I don't fucking get it. What do you get out of swimming? You could die out there. You could get sucked right down by the undertow and no one would find your body.

I'll go because the ocean is here. I'm right here. I've never been in the Atlantic after dark. I won't be out there long. Seriously—are you my mother?

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 38)

Memories of babies and of swimming returned in a rush when I met the 'bottle babies' William Hunter preserved as part of his obstetrics and teaching practice, but I postponed feeling my way through them. I feel a tenderness for these babies that rivals the tenderness I feel for my own babies, and for the babies I played with instead of playing with dolls. The sequence of poems about them has allowed me to pull all of these strands of my experience together and share them in a way that makes some sense to others, which is all I need now, by way of cuing, in order to experience the "bubble feeling," and to continue to question my place in the world and water. The following exemplars, from the 'bottle babies' sequence, illustrate the projective nature of my encounters with the babies, as well as the way in which I tried to give the babies a place in a collective narrative, rather than better defining my own uneasy relationship with collective

narratives in general. I am part of these poems, and not part, a specimen on a shelf, an observer, a grieving mother, a scientist who has benefitted from using specimens like these, and allowing myself to feel what I felt about them tapped into trauma I naively believed I had dealt with.

3.

Lined up in rows, so obedient.
Quiet.

Lips pursed, eyes closed.
Waiting, maybe, to be loved.
Cracked soap in school toilets,
yellowing grey:
bottled babies.

William wanted to keep you forever
tucked in glass cradles.
He gave you one last drink at bedtime,
gently pressed down the lid,
gave you ancient names:

hydrocephalus,
neck cyst,
still-born, full term,
specimen No. 74.01,

written in shaky brown letters.

‘Still-born’

1.

Just like Grandma's storm cellar, there are miles of wobbly metal shelving filled with jars in William's basement. Specimens, floating, home-canned, each an anatomical curiosity. This shelf holds Queen Charlotte's pets, recycled, the dissected eyeball of a nilgai.

I imagine myself stretched out on one of the shelves, reclined on my left hip, leg covered in inky squiggles, filing my nails, waiting patiently to be examined.

Grisly remains. Not too particular about where his corpses came from, they say, especially the pregnant ones, and he didn't mind, overly much, if they were still whimpering when the cutting started. *Gravid uterus*, a label says, but all I see is Death, perfectly formed, sleeping-with-eyes-closed, thumb-in-mouth, permanent *five months gestation*.

'Grandma's storm cellar'

The only way back through the looking glass, out of my own particular rabbit hole, out of memories and fragments of memories and an acute sense of what had shaped me, was to write, and in order to do that, I had to collaborate.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND SELF-REFLECTION

Ellis, Adams and Bochner define Autoethnography as

...an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially–just and socially–conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product.

(Ellis, Adams and Bochner, *Autoethnography: An Overview* 1)

My fundamental research orientation is strongly influenced by autoethnographic approaches, but is perhaps better seen as critical self-reflection. This means, in practice, that I am unwilling to keep my own experiencing out of the final product. I don't see that as relevant or as honest. As a result of writing the creative component of this thesis, I am acutely aware that the lenses through which I can view my own experience are the product of "being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 4). I carry my own toolkit with me, all the time, and the biases inherent in it shape my output. Traditional models of research, most notably in the sciences, try to eliminate conscious and unconscious bias. I did not and do not believe that this is actually possible, and needed an approach to research and to writing that "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming that they don't exist" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2). Poetry is ultimately a subjective pursuit, rooted in experience, and this has to be acknowledged. Other aspects of my creative practice more closely resemble the scientific process; I harness the same capacities to synthesise and engage with 'data,' regardless of the nature of the data, that I use as a clinician and in laboratory settings. I write to process, to better understand, and to explore my Self, my experience, my context.

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

I could also describe my process in terms of ‘Research in practice,’ “an umbrella term generally taken to mean research undertaken with the intent of incorporating the artistic or other practice of the researcher into the methodology and assessment of the research itself. It is, thus, to some degree, self-referential. Many academics split this concept into two strands: practice-based and practice-led research” . Practice-based research “is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcome of that practice” (Ibid), and practice-led research “is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has significance for that practice” (Candy, *Practice Based Research: A Guide* 1).

The creative component of this thesis is informed by both of these aspects of research in practice, but is more closely aligned with practice-based research, in the sense that it is a thesis whose “claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes in the form of designs, music, digital media, performances, and exhibitions. Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes” (Candy 1). The originality of the thesis is rooted in a combination of things: my approach, my choices of themes (many of which are implicit), the philosophical underpinnings of the thesis, the fact that I have chosen to include both poetry and prose, both fiction and autobiographical detail, and my use of very divergent voices to represent these aspects of the texts I’ve written. These will not be apparent without engagement with the work in its entirety.

It is clear that scientific findings can be communicated only to those who have agreed to the same ground rules of investigation. The Australian bushman will be quite unimpressed with the findings of science regarding bacterial infection. He knows that illness truly is caused by evil spirits. It is only when he too agrees to scientific method as

a good means of preventing self-deception, that he will be likely to accept its findings.

(Rogers *On Becoming a Person* 220)

The end product of my thesis is, in a very real sense, both the process and the product, which is a much better understanding of how I create and why, and how to channel this in different environments. This is the aim of research in practice, as it is the aim of any scientific exploration.

...where the end product is an artefact—where the thinking is, so to speak, embodied in the artefact, where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication.

(Frayling, *Research in Art and Design* 3)

POETIC INQUIRY

A final theoretical and philosophical strand of the PhD—in-process has been feeling my way through poetic enquiry, defined as “A process of contemplative truth-seeking followed by the creative expression of those truths discovered” (Elliot, *Poetic Enquiry* 1).

Elliot’s definition encompasses, for me, what motivates me to write in the first place, and not simply in the sense of writing a poem. It presents me with an opportunity to engage with something I am exploring internally by pulling it out and shaping it externally, and vice versa. I don’t need to worry about whether what I am experiencing is subjective or objective, and don’t expect what I feel to be universal or universally understood. This is the quieter aspect of creating, for me, the exploration of the dreamlike in-between space I engage in on my own, or before collaborating, or remove myself temporarily from collaboration to engage in. It is the more introverted ‘space’ I occupy in order to edit, or to revisit work I’ve not looked at for a while.

COLLABORATION

I define collaboration as making, no matter what is being made, in concert with other(s); a process of making that is negotiated, in which the negotiation is continuous, and boundaries are constantly acknowledged between self/other, especially when these boundaries are being suspended or moved.

Collaboration occurs along a spectrum for me, with varying levels of ‘togetherness,’ depending on how capable my collaborators are of defining and holding boundaries fluidly. As defined by the Association for Intelligent Information Management (*What is collaboration?*, para 2), collaboration can be synchronous (working with someone at the same time, potentially in the same place), or asynchronous (e.g., I write something, and someone responds or edits it at some other point).

I’ve engaged in collaboration in which the writing predated the involvement of other people completely, and negotiation about editing and presentation happened after the writing was completed, but found this much less satisfying and engaging. I prefer synchronous collaboration, as it is more fluid, more improvisational, more responsive to environmental and other factors, more immersive, and leads more quickly, for me, to a testing of a hypothesis or a concrete outcome like a paper, song, meal, or a book.

I work to try to prevent the outcome of a collaborative process from being defined too early. The divergent or exploratory phase is as critical to me as is the convergent phase of any collaboration. Part of establishing the boundaries of the project means allowing these to be emergent, defined in an ongoing way by the participants.

I don’t require rigid role definition ahead of time, but can operate in that way. Similarly, attribution doesn’t make a lot of sense to me to try to tease out of a collaborative project, unless

it is fairly obvious, as, for example, when I've written lyrics in response to someone's music, or vice versa. In general, I don't find it productive. It is one of the reasons why I have found the PhD so constraining and frustrating, though I can understand the necessity of knowing who contributed what in a research or financial context, or a context in which boundaries are unclear, and the necessary emotional and other contracting hasn't taken place. But, as Amit Gupta argues in a blog post, dealing with the complexities of collaboration and accepting that there is not going to be a tidy parcelling out of credit at the end is vital to exploration:

Questions will come up around collaborative projects. Where did the original idea come from? How was it transformed by the conversation? Who had more of a hand in the final execution? The answer to all of the above is, "Who cares?" While artists each deserve fair credit and compensation, openness, humility and commitment to the output or product are most important.

(Gupta, *Artist Collaboration Fuels Creative Exploration* para 9)

I may simply be more at ease with uncertainty of attribution than is typical in academic circles, and in others. I don't believe that it is possible to discuss something with someone, or to edit or proofread someone's work (even if all I do is put some commas in where they should be), without it changing in some way, without the idea evolving. The boundary is, for me, not fuzzy around whose idea or work the product of a discussion or editing session is— for me it remains with the originator— but I see communication as a collaborative act. I am definitely more at ease with the idea of 'copyleft'. Copyleft is defined as "a strategy of utilizing copyright law to pursue the policy goal of fostering and encouraging the equal and inalienable right to copy, share, modify and improve creative works of authorship" (Copyleft.org, *What is copyleft?* para 2).

I am aware that, as a writer, I am constantly reworking and recycling words and ideas and memories, not all of which are mine, and many of which I would be hard-pressed to say where they came from originally. It is a feature of my brain and of my creative process that I am

‘recording’ virtually all the time: words, sounds, colors, experiences, and that these things are all mediated by my interactions with others. *Dirt* derives, in part, from this philosophical and emotional/neurological bias, and it is thus an experience, rather than a book. I recognise that my experience of creating and collaborating leads to my unease with academic orthodoxy:

My views are heretical in academic circles. and in fine art circles, apparently. People are used to this in music/etc., but poets? literary types? no way. their idea is generally limited to contributing a snippet for a fundraising book. that’s called collaborative.

(McDonough, *Text message*)

One aspect of *Dirt* that emerged very early on in our individual and joint creating of it was a resistance to using page numbers. I wanted to ensure that there was a non-linear, non-hierarchical way to read *Dirt*, and the closest analogy I could find was to picture books for children or to fine art books, where the emphasis is on seeing and experiencing, rather than on getting one core message from the text. I wanted to layer meaning visually and to play with subtext by using both photos and words. *Dirt* (as is *Anomaly*) is metamodern, in its refusal to be a neat, finished work that can be read and re-read in one direction; it is, as Timotheus Vermuelen suggests a metamodern work must be “neither a residual nor an emergent structure of feeling....It can be grasped as a generational attempt to surpass postmodernism and a general response to our present, crisis-ridden moment” (Vermuelen and van den Akker, para 1).

Dirt and *Anomaly* are older forms of text, with elements of a strong collective voice, a shamanic or observing voice. In *Dirt*, this begins when I observe that “We were all floating/Once....” (McDonough, *Dirt* 17). I hark back to the collective, reminding the collective that we have all been dependent, all been refugees. This was intentional, and ensured that it was no longer reducible to my story, or Martyn’s, or any part of our shared story. In *Anomaly*, as presented in my thesis, my discomfort with the collective is what is apparent from the outset:

I went wrong,
right from the beginning.
Wrong sperm.
Already en route to
becoming Mary Frances.

6 cells old,
already fucked.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 77)

My existence was, in my experience of it, fraught from the beginning. I wasn't who or what anyone had wanted me to be. The 'me' I should have been has never existed, and the 'me' who experienced my childhood no longer exists, except in fragmentary memory, and in writing down my experience of myself, I am inducing stasis, a kind of death, in that self. Barthes suggests that

Probably this has always been the case: once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality—that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol—this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins. Nevertheless, the feeling about this phenomenon has been variable; in primitive societies, narrative is never undertaken by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or speaker, whose 'performance' may be admired (that is, his mastery of the narrative code), but not his 'genius'

(Barthes, *The Death of the Author* 2)

We didn't erase ourselves from *Dirt*, when we began writing it in 2015, and Barthes in no way suggests that authors do, but we 'died' as authors, in terms of giving away our power to tell readers who encounter *Dirt* what to think about it, and were, and are, more closely akin to 'speakers,' 'shamans' or 'mediators' than we are to writers. Both of us are action-oriented doers, and *Dirt* relies on color, visuals, movement to propel itself, to demonstrate our connection to others as well as to self.

METAMODERNITY

I had begun exploring metamodernity in 2013, in an attempt to be more at ease with the fluidity and breadth of the philosophical basis of what I was writing, and I was still looking, constantly, for justification for using writing as a tool to create as well as to self-actualise. *Dirt* and *Anomaly* are clearly metamodern, as is *Brother Zone*. None of my work ‘respects’ any need the collective might have for my work to look or feel canonical in terms of presentation or topics, because it refuses to align itself to any genre, and focuses on the connections between the personal and our “present crisis-ridden moment, a time when the world and what we think we know about it is very much in flux, with distinctions between art forms and genres becoming increasingly blurry and instinct, while, paradoxically, what defines nationality or a border is becoming more and more rigid” (Vermeulen and van der Akker, para 10).

Writing about the present is not seen as too topical, for metamodernists, nor is it seen as a sort of “cheating” the author engages in by choosing a subject that has had a lot of press coverage or is highly emotive. Wordsworth’s assertion in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* that “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (4) never made much sense to me, and makes far less sense than the metamodern position, which is that writers and readers engage with what makes felt sense to them, when it makes sense to them. Martyn and I didn’t hesitate to reference the refugee crisis, for example, or to mine our text messages to each other for ‘data,’ or to use small sections of unpublished, unpolished drafts of poems and narratives, when writing *Dirt*. The colours, photos, images, and layout are part of the language of the book itself. *Dirt* has more in keeping with textbooks than with most books of poetry (as does *Anomaly*), and in it we tried to “move beyond the worn out sensibilities and empty practices of the postmodernists, not by radically parting with their attitudes and techniques, but by incorporating and redirecting them. In politics, as in culture,

as elsewhere, a sensibility is emerging from and surpassing postmodernism; as a non–dialectical *Aufhebung* that negates the postmodern while retaining some of its traits” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 4).

I was averse to having *Dirt* or *Anomaly* fit easily in any category, other than, potentially, fine art, because I wanted readers to engage with them in an experiential way, and for the books to not be something people read once and felt they completely understood. My memories of reading picture books with children are vivid, as are my memories of reading them myself, and I value feeling pulled in to the stories in a way that books with more obvious structures and expectations of me didn't permit.

Karen Lotz argues that this is because, “To some degree, picture books force an analog way of thinking... From picture to picture, as the reader interacts with the book, their imagination is filling in the missing themes” (quoted in Bosman, para 9). My suspicion is that what Lotz means is not so much ‘analog’ as imperfect, complex, something that the reader has to complete, and will inevitably complete, in his or her way. I would argue that picture books, and, by extension, their grown–up cousins the fine art books, require the active engagement of the reader, and can allow an author to build layers of meaning and subtext in much the same way a poet uses metaphor. Density is not only possible, but desirable, if the aim of ensuring that the reader has clarity is abandoned.

For me, writing *Dirt* in the way that we did was also about upending usual ideas about authorship and ownership of ideas, feelings, words, and embracing reading as something immersive, in and through which readers and writers could communicate, without the reader having to be led or steered to a particular conclusion, or requiring clarity ‘up front’ about where we were traveling, or why.

In that sense, *Dirt* is definitely metafictional, and resembles the ‘narcissistic narratives’ Linda Hutcheon analyses, books that are “fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity. ‘Narcissistic’—the figurative adjective chosen here to designate this textual self-awareness—is not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 1).

Hutcheon doesn’t intend to describe metafiction as narcissistic in a negative sense, but in the sense that a psychiatrist might describe the behavior of someone who is healthily attuned to self, and self-aware. Metafiction knows what it is, and while it may appear to be coy, and many of its narrators are ‘unreliable,’ the unreliability of both text and narrator are advertised openly.

There was a certain protection I felt in getting to be a character in what is a subset of my story, a bit of the corpus of my memories, filtered, and in having these not necessarily distinguishable by outside parties from Martyn’s story and memories; we could exploit overlap as well as difference in our histories and perspectives. I eventually realised that I was hiding behind this, and *Anomaly* began to change radically in shape and in focus, to tell more of my story. Barthes argues that it is not always possible to tidily separate one story from another, one voice from another, and this is not always an owned position: “It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (Barthes 2). For me, being a ‘dead’ author, an author *not* in the position of absolute authority, was important.

For Martyn, not having page numbers, an index, or a table of contents offered greater creative freedom visually and emotionally, as well as greater freedom to the readers, and a chance for

readers to experience ‘flow’ if they chose to do so. Not using page numbers also freed readers to dip in and out, to not follow a prescribed path through the book. In the summer of 2017, I had a text conversation with Martyn about why he had not wanted page numbers in *Dirt*, about why an instinctive decision made then was still valid:

Why did you not want page numbers @ *Dirt*?

I know why I didn’t want them... was wanting more experiential / picture book / art book kind of thing that forced people to read differently.

I didn’t want an *index* or a table of contents. I wanted it to be a journey that people went on... something that offered them a place of surrender to process... almost like offering them an experience of *flow*... an immersive environment that didn’t offer the usual safety.

OK. that was pretty much what I remembered... and not very far removed from what I was after, which was also about a chance to suspend usual ideas about authorship/whose story it was....

Also, page numbers interfere visually for me with images, and the solid blocks of colour looked *so* good that I didn’t want anything to mess with their simplicity... like framing the texts with colour, turning them into art somehow. It’s a bit of the paradoxical thing of the book... we’re leading people to read the subtext of the images, and to see the writing as art...

That was the picture book/fine art thing for me... not interfering with experience or caring hierarchy... and between those two things, they project *their* experiences onto the book, rather than reading it like it’s a “received” experience.

Yep.

I needed to get away from received....
there was a certain safety in that for me, too,
in us almost becoming characters in the book—
like our vulnerability was hidden in the open,
right where people could see it, and most didn't.

Yeah. Only the safest people, those who are aware of their
projections, can see our story.

Its the calvino method, basically....

The rest *assume* they've seen it, but they're seeing *theirs*.
Somehow we have this lazy idea of *consuming* a book.
Like being spoon-fed stuff at school, not having to work
to understand anything. I never enjoyed that. Always
wanted to hunt *beyond* the boundaries of the *known* and
understood. I guess that's why I studied Physics. It's all about
finding *puzzles*. Creating new ones. Frontiers. Discovery.
And I think that's the attitude that DIRT forces its readers to adopt,
somehow... unless they dismiss it. In which case, they're
just projecting their own lack of curiosity and aliveness
onto the book.

(McDonough and Clark, *Text conversation*)

In a way, metamodernity is the theoretical basis for all of my writing. My writing is *integrative*:
it is about pulling together, acknowledging all the influences. It is self-referential, and discursive.
It results in work that is never 'finished', but which is deeply rooted in my own internal ethic.
I am an integrative therapist, I am a pragmatist. 'What works? What doesn't? What fits? What
doesn't?' I try to work with as few preconceptions as possible.

Metamodernity demands rigorous honesty with Self and Other. The focus of other theoretical
frames or schools is 'attribution'. In metamodernity, the focus is on the fact that we borrow,
unconsciously, all the time. Like Cognitive Analytic Therapy, it demands that we 'own our shit',

that biases and gaps in knowledge are explicitly acknowledged. It's a fundamentally anti-expert, anti-heirarchical position, but one which acknowledges expertise and necessary heirarchy.

I could be writing all day about clinics, but I'm not a clinician. I could eventually become aware of some of 'the stuff' required for clinicians, but I'm never going to be a clinician. Would this mean that I can't contribute to clinical discourse? No.

(Vermuelen, *Conversation*)

Because metamodernity acknowledges unconscious borrowing of ideas, themes, images, and the cultural and personal baggage we carry which influences the way we interpret those things, it can't ever be the *only* philosophical position. Unlike Relativism, it doesn't demand that every idea be given equal billing. It's about avoiding privilege and anti-privilege. It's about saying "I'm looking at everything: some of it, I understand, some I don't; some of it speaks to me, some doesn't; some I accept, some I don't."

Some might call my position that of an 'intellectual magpie'. That accusation doesn't bother me; I think I'm just more open to being a magpie. We all borrow. We all rework. Using metamodernity as a lens gives me the option of which 'shiny things' I want to focus on. This could be received as deliberate 'obscurity', or as an attempt to deny that I'm part of a 'tradition'. It isn't; I'm not trying to deny or prevent connection in any way.

Emphasising my place in a tradition just doesn't seem very relevant to me, either as a clinician or as a writer. I'm willing to borrow or use whatever works. I'm an integrative clinician, an integrative writer, and that's clearly quite metamodern. I prefer to connect with as little of my story in the way as possible, using as few labels as possible.

PARADOX AND ANOMALY

...the resources of philosophical hermeneutics are deployed in an effort to break out of the epistemic, dualistic paradigms of modern philosophy, and to open new philosophical ground no longer haunted by the specters of relativism and scepticism, nor by the dream of foundational justification. Now, it may seem paradoxical that a mode of thought that emphasizes exactly our beholdenness to tradition should be instrumental in what is often presented as a deliberate break with tradition. However, this impression of paradox ought to be fleeting. One of the lessons of philosophical hermeneutics is exactly that intellectual innovation of this sort depends on—indeed, is a manifestation of—the self-renewing power of tradition, of its dynamism, and its interpretability and reinterpretability.

(Ramberg and Gjesdal, section 10)

This paradox is exactly what I aim to undermine as a writer. I am not interested in rejecting the old and embracing the new; I am energised by seeing the conflicts (and lack of conflicts) between them. Fragments interest me; lost stories interest me. Distinctions between paired terms are artificial, when they exist on a spectrum (e.g., old/new, dirty/clean) but offer a seam via which I can deconstruct and reimagine.

Anomaly, the book, shares a name and 68% of its content (49/72 pieces) with *Anomaly*, the draft in this PhD. When I pulled together the draft collection in November 2017—as a chronologically interleaved merging of three collections—and read it through for the first time, I felt despair. It was relentlessly dark. The redemption at the heart of my personal story was very hard to discern in it. It felt disjointed. Its parts rubbed together: all the seams showing. The bottle babies no longer fit with my story. I had seen them as the core of the creative component. At the time, I was talking to Martyn about getting the collection ready for publication (McDonough and Clark, *Text exploration*). Martyn had the same aversive reaction. Neither of us

felt that it was worth publishing:

I don't want to call it Anomaly
It's all around my void, and not *of* it.

I had been committed to that title for over a year. The anomaly was, for me, the void, the space between. The fragmentary and uncertain place from which I can see all of my story as *one*. We tried to think of a different name, because to me it felt more like a museum catalog.

The Body Catalogue

Catalogue of Sins

Memories of a Shitty Catholic Girlhood

How about *Wrong* as a title?
Wrong: a catalogue of sins.
All lies: a personal catalogue of sins

Begins with numbers and
ends with pretending.
I may only like the last page...
it doesn't belong there though

It's like the teaser for *Anomaly*

Yes. Which will contain
no dead babies in jars.

It was obvious that there wasn't a way to make the collections fit together that we could be happy with. As a result of trying to wedge it all together, I was questioning the integrity of all of my work. Playing around with changing the name wasn't changing the fundamental problem; the pieces didn't fit together. We couldn't turn them into a coherent relational whole that did justice to either of the collections.

The stuff that's from *Dirt* is the stuff I love.

I didn't want it to end up in *Anomaly*.
By which I mean All Lies.
I love it because it is in *Dirt*, and
because we took the best bits.

I realised at this point that I was still grieving the loss of the framework for the PhD that included *all* of the books. I hadn't intended to write *Anomaly* at all, as part of my PhD. It felt like trying to assemble a dress out of the contents of a rag bag. I couldn't see beauty or value in it, which made the critical component impossible to write. It was as if I had proven that I couldn't write as me, and value my output.

In some ways, though, the honest bleakness of
it is the thing that makes it work.

It's relentlessly bleak.
that at least accurately captures my childhood.

There's enough warmth to make it bearable.

But only just.

Exactly.

I don't think I'll read it again.

I think we should send it to some publishers.
Gadfly seconds; a rejected manuscript.

Interestingly, the collection, as it goes on becomes
more and more bleak...

...as adulthood sets in.

And the voice becomes more distant.

The distant, removed tone of voice, behind which I had hidden for most of *The Last Pair of Ears*, had crept back in, and my story had crawled out the other side.

The chronological thing really works.

What do you think I should do?

Finish it.
Then leave it to sit for a while.
Then decide.

Maybe it's simply a different angle on what it means to be human.
Maybe the thing it will touch in people is that the story is *backwards*.

It's not how I'm human,
but it's how I became
very backwards.

The thing I did for a PhD almost
got destroyed.

I wonder if the book would work better *backwards*.

Backwards?
End with childhood?
I think it would.

This book gets *heavier* as it goes along.
That feels wrong.

I don't like that.
The heaviest stuff in my life happened first.

Exactly.
Ending after Marsha, with the peace
of being at the bottom of the pool,
returning to a 6-celled thing...
...feels right.

(McDonough and Clark, *Text exploration*)

We decided to remove the bottle babies and scientific pieces from the book, and to present the remainder in reverse chronological order, working from adulthood back to childhood.

The worst things
start with numbers,
and end with pretending.

(McDonough, *Anomaly* 78)

I felt liberated—it felt right. I felt able to start writing the critical component, because I finally knew what I had to write about: the necessity of relationship, collaboration, and artefact, for me, as a writer, and the necessity for me to be out in the world, experiencing, so that I had something to write about. I was also acutely aware that this was true for me about *any* kind of writing.

Do I dare to communicate the full degree of congruence which I feel? Do I dare match my experience, and my awareness of that experience, with my communication? Do I dare to communicate myself as I *am* or must my communication be somewhat less than or different from this?

(Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* 345)

I felt relieved about the book matching the emotional trajectory I was on; I was moving away from bleakness, away from fear, towards an acceptance of what had happened to me as a child. I needed *Anomaly* to be congruent with my experience (Rogers 339). I needed to find *myself* dependable. In order to trust *myself*, I had to trust *relationship*, and my need to write *relationally*. I needed someone else to reflect my story back to me in a way that allowed me to 'interpret' and 'reinterpret' it (Ramberg and Gjesdal, section 10).

I felt like I had taken enormous risks in choosing to write what I wanted to write, in discussing it with Martyn, in discussing it with supervisors at Strathclyde. I had found it difficult to trust my instincts, but really had no other choice if I was going to finish and submit my PhD. Martyn prepared and printed a proof copy of *Anomaly*, the book, planning for publication. When I held the proof for the first time, I felt overwhelmed and relieved; I felt I had curated and presented my work to *my* standard for the first time. It felt as finished as it could be; a tangible artefact. I felt as if I had closed a door between *now* and *then*. I could now see redemption, the place I had been, the place I had come from. I could see me, now, and a future that hadn't been clear to me; I could occupy the present moment more fully, as a writer.

*Between when
and why,
there is void.
In void,
there is becoming.*

(Epigram from McDonough, *Anomaly* 5)

I had proven my hypothesis: I had written *for* myself, *as* myself. Repeatedly. I had gradually written more and more as myself, for myself, without really noticing. The result is a series of books that I'm not squeamish about feeling proud of, even though I don't really believe in anything but drafts.

MOVEMENT, MEMORY AND NARCISSISM

A collective is what does not stand still but creates and is created by movement. I think of feminist action as like ripples in water, a small wave, possibly created by agitation from weather; here, there, each movement making another possible, another ripple, outward, reaching. Feminism: the dynamism of making connections. And yet a movement has to be built. To be part of a movement requires we find places to gather, meeting places. A movement is also a shelter. We convene; we have a convention. A movement comes into existence to transform what is in existence. A movement needs to take place somewhere. A movement is not just or only a movement; there is something that needs to be kept still, given a place, if we are moved to transform what is.

(Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 3)

Ahmed uses ‘movement’ as a verb, as a noun, as a small thing, as a grand overarching thing. A single small movement becomes one of many small movements, which gradually build themselves into a larger, fluid, whole. She defines feminism as ‘the dynamism of making connections...’ (Ahmed 3), but it is a kind of making connections with transformative intent, with the intent that the small movements and ripples interact and build, together, something that couldn’t be accomplished otherwise. Power lies in movement, power results from movement. To move, according to Ahmed, is also to gather, to accumulate, to huddle, to seek the safety of others, to shelter in and with others: to find a way to be still, together, in the midst of flow, of ripples, of waves. The word ‘movement,’ then, is paradoxical, like connection; in order to know that one is moving or connecting, one has to know that one is still, or that one is disconnected, somehow separate. Becoming aware of how fast water is flowing through rapids is easier, when I’m in a canoe moving through them, or standing on a stepping stone in mid-river.

Ahmed argues that a connecting act is a feminist act, a moving, flowing, act, no matter how small that act might be. I would argue that it is a human act, that it is part of what drives all of us, but I take her point: a movement begins with small things, that gradually coalesce into a thing that can no longer be ignored. Like Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a bus gave impetus to the Civil Rights Movement, and sit-ins at lunch counters made the lack of movement with respect to equal rights more obvious, movements derive energy from stillness, too.

So maybe, in a strange way, my childhood need for water, for time in it, is better viewed not as an attempt to avoid, or hide, from the collective, but to belong to it, to surrender to it, to be one small agent taking action like 'ripples in water'. Being in water felt safe to me, maybe because I felt part of something bigger, something infinite, even if I was in the middle of a concreted pool surrounded by a wall of other bodies. I assumed that it felt safe purely because it allowed me to get away from stress, from the pressure to be somehow different than I was, and because it allowed me access to flow. And movement, as Ahmed suggests, has to 'take place somewhere,' or in my case, both somewhere and some-when. The act of connecting with past selves, with one's own history, can lead to movement, to stasis, or simply to a frustrated awareness that something is not quite right.

I could not emotionally process without movement, without physical activity, and movement was definitely my place of safety; movement was flow. Each stroke of my arm created ripples in the water, akin to movements making other movements possible, as Ahmed argues, until there is 'something that needs to be kept still,' to allow change to happen.

Water was a locus for me, a place that allowed change to happen, and allowed me to feel more fully myself, more female, in my own way. Seeing the bottle babies, floating in their containers,

moving and still, trapped permanently in stasis, reminded me that telling stories and writing were ultimately acts of connection, and that trying to keep them still, or confined to one genre, was to risk having my writing becoming a narcissistic act, one that was about perfection, and deflecting people away from my vulnerabilities. Writing as not-me was about preventing ripples, about preventing conflict, preventing flow and change.

I've been told that writing about the "sort of stuff" I write about is a narcissistic act, that creative writing about anything personal is indulgent. It didn't particularly bother me, though it stung a bit, as the point of writing for me is about connecting. I'm generally trying to write about the personal in such a way that it is accessible to other people, and offers them the chance to read and explore with as little direction from me as possible. So I had to think about why being told that writing about my experience of water is narcissistic stings at all, given that my philosophical stance is that the Self can't really be left out of writing (or teaching or relational acts of any kind). Julia Kristeva explores exactly this dichotomy in *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. It had been many years since I had read it. Reading Kristeva always leads to what my grandmother called 'an attack of the *whys*'. I have to reconsider everything I was thinking about immediately prior to picking up Kristeva. She defines abjection as a kind of subjective, personal sense of horror, a dawning awareness of both the gap between Self and Other, and the ways in which Self and Other are impossibly blurred, smeared together. Rejecting this paradox, this sense of horror, leads to narcissism.

Narcissism then appears as a regression to a position set back from the other,
a return to a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven.

(Kristeva 14)

Internal conflict and paradox are not things that cannot be tolerated in a narcissistic construct; fixity leads to a closed system. Early childhood is, of necessity, a narcissistic time, a time of

exploring relative to self, trying to work out what exactly the self is, and why and how to protect it. Narcissus staring at his reflection avoids this complexity, this dance between Self and Other, as an adult. In denying paradox, in negating the conflict between the longing to be self-sufficient, and the desire for Other, he denies the desire to belong to a collective or to another being. He must reject, and everything outside of himself is abjured. In the case of Narcissus, it is a nymph, a female figure, who must be rejected.

What doesn't 'fit,' for Kristeva, the Self that does not fit, societally speaking, is often the female self, at odds with all acceptable definitions of self, a thing that cannot be integrated into Narcissus' 'given system of signs,' and must be abjured. Narcissus can't age, cannot be or become imperfect. He is complete without Other; he rejects Other-ness, he rejects connection, he rejects love. He is ultimately still, incapable of movement. He equates his reflection in the water with himself, rejecting anything that might cause ripples or mar his reflection, or intrude on his self-contemplation.

The conflicts of drives muddle its bed, cloud its water, and bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated with a given system of signs, is abjection for it.

(Kristeva 14)

Narcissus eliminates this conflict. His experience of water is thus utterly at odds with mine, utterly at odds with the ripples, building of waves, connecting potential of the female, as Ahmed defines it. Narcissus is anti-dynamic.

The paradox that Freud poses... is hence retrieved: the uncanny is thus both that which is at some level familiar and unfamiliar, that which had been known, secreted away, and then returned—the old-established 'thing' which became alienated to the mind precisely through repression.

(Hook, *Psychoanalysis and the Limits of Discourse* 5)

The ‘uncanny,’ the familiar and not-familiar, the Self and Other, is the vestigial sense of splitting, of disengaging from an aspect of self or from memories that have become, for whatever reason, intolerable. The sense of the uncanny is Kristeva’s abjection, the urge, want, need to reject what causes pain and discomfort. The irony, of course, is that this is the terrain of metaphor, and without the discomfort of the uncanny, wholeness in writing or in self simply isn’t possible. Ego gets in the way, otherwise, and connection to Self as well as to Other is impossible. Trying to write in an ‘appropriately’ objective way about my own creative output is an exercise in (narcissistic) impossibility; I don’t have the remove I would have in editing someone else’s writing, or writing about someone else’s work, and can’t really hope to attain it.

Memory is, no matter how we want to think of it, non-linear, flawed, an incomplete record of distortions and projections we have stored away. We describe time as a thief, a thief stealing memories: but we have already written and overwritten our stories hundreds and thousands of times, before we explore a memory. And memory isn’t a unitary thing, anyway.

Memory is like water, a thing beyond our control, beyond our understanding, that can often feel as though it is just happening to us. And sometimes we fall in, and the ground vanishes from beneath our feet, and we are forced to swim: one memory stimulates another, and another, and another, and the waves rearrange everything we think we know about our selves.

NOW, IN CONCLUSION

Every family has one: the embarrassing uncle who always says the wrong thing, the aunt who gives you ugly handmedowns your mother makes you wear (which also makes your mother one of 'those' people). I've spent most of the last several years feeling like that oddball relative people tolerate: always in the way, the eccentric poet surrounded by people doing 'proper' PhDs. I tried to do a 'proper' PhD, and that is the root of my problems with it as a format, and with my struggle to complete it, despite having written multiple books in that time, and despite having been, and continuing to be, prolific, even when I felt somehow that I was not.

I contend that all 3 of my books (*Brother Zone*, *Dirt*, and *Anomaly*) should be in my PhD. Each was more than sufficient, in terms of size, depth of exploration, and uniqueness of content, to be the creative component of my PhD. The central issue seems to be one of attribution, and potentially, one of format. Attribution, in the sense that there are some pages of *Dirt*, as I have demonstrated, that are clearly the work of two parties (of myself and of Martyn), and that these would not exist in the same way if pulled apart into their various pieces. Format, in the sense that I have used photos, illustrations, and color, and that all are intrinsic to the finished work, which was my first attempt to fully explore how connecting and collaborative creating is for me when I am doing it as myself, when I am 'in flow'.

Brother Zone is a collection of short narratives, written in the 20 or so minutes a day I allowed for them, over a period of a year. It involved collaboration, albeit less direct, with Martyn and with our sons. Without drawings the boys had made during the time I was writing about their linguistic and social development, *Brother Zone* would be much less evocative and true. Martyn edited the stories into a book, years later, and helped me to create a visual typographic 'language' that made the constantly shifting voices easier to follow. All of the writing was mine, but I had produced it for an audience of one (Martyn), and eventually read the stories regularly to

a slightly larger audience (the boys, who loved hearing about themselves), and often used the stories when teaching speech and language therapy students about child language and social development. As my audience changed and grew, so did my writing. The process of engaging with audience was a creative stimulus, and the writing is connecting and relational in nature and intent. Was I in some senses collaborating directly with my sons? Potentially: they knew I was writing, and that I was writing stories as a gift for Martyn, so were maybe more tolerant of me observing more and participating less in ‘kid stuff,’ but I was also supporting their growing relationship and growing independence from me.

Trying to incorporate these diverse books into one PhD was always going to be a challenge, particularly since writers are generally seen as being poets or novelists or nonfiction writers or... something else entirely. A singular something else. I could not really choose, and wasn’t interested in limiting exploration in that way. To limit it is to restrict my access to flow, and to negate, to some extent, my instinct to create in *my* way.

It has felt for years as though I have to choose between writing a PhD that will be acceptable—that will focus on one or two things, and analyse them into the ground—or being a poet. And that finishing my PhD requires that I simply and only be a poet, something I just can’t manage to do. I’m also someone who writes short stories and flash fiction and passionate email love letters, someone who is incubating three different novels in various states of completion until that magic day when the PhD is done, someone who takes photos, who weaves, someone who spent high school and university writing essays that were never on the assigned topics and getting away with it, because I could convince people that I had written exactly what was required. I sometimes feel, now, that I have no choice about writing what is actually required, speaking and writing in a voice that is not mine, and the thing that was required was that I unwrite and somehow un-know all that I have learned about myself in the last several years, because most of

that, it turns out, was inaccurate. This led to crippling self-doubt, which isn't unusual for PhD students:

Whatever else can be said of the PhD endeavor, it is fraught with anxiety and self-doubt. Everyone associated with graduate education knows this, many of us from first-hand experience, but rarely do we discuss it, and rarer still do we consider ways to ameliorate it.

Perhaps it is in the nature of the endeavor itself.

Extended PhD-level research often becomes so intimately bound up with our sense of ourselves that it is difficult to disentangle who we are from the work we do. This incapacity to distance our work from ourselves can turn every rejection into an existential crisis, every critique into a judgment of our value as a person.

(Long, *The Graduate Experience: Pathologies of Self-Doubt* para 1-3)

I never wrote to create an appendix to the collective narrative. Rather, I wrote, and write, to own or acknowledge my self, which had emerged in conflict with, and in acceptance of, collective narratives. What choice did I have? At some point I had to shift from reliving and remembering my story of self to *making* my story of self. I think that's the journey of writers, no matter the genre. It has to get from "this is *my* story, these are *my* words, *my* ideas", to "this is what I am seeing. This is what I'm choosing to share." For me, this has happened over time. Realistically, I was always doing it, but wasn't comfortable with it, accepting of it. It's in the nature of being process-led as a person, as a writer, of being 'in flow' as often as I can be.

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