

Spook and the Jewel Thief

&

**The Polyvalent Plaything: Three Forms of Play in 20th and
21st Century Poetry**

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Declaration

This is to certify that the work presented in this thesis is my own:

.....
Abigail Parry

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Spook and the Jewel Thief

Hare

You dreamed the field was a tin grid,
latticed with running hares, March-mad and stargazy,
their quick jolts the firing of neurons.

At other times you meet him alone:
that long face, the dowsy parting at the mouth,
a suggestion of teeth; lecherous, repulsive, somehow
irresistible. *Witch*.

And he was there in pinstripes,
haunches drawn out on their pivot,
leaning over your shoulder at the wedding party,
those fine ears folded smooth down his back,
complacent. Smug. Buck-sure.
His yellow eye met yours, knowing
you could do nothing. You thought:

I'll have you, you suave bastard.

Find him in a field. He's gone
in one swift arterial pump.

Oh, he is a tease...

He is the sidelong, sidling
and askance,
so learn to see as Hare sees,
learn his steps,
accept his invitation up to dance:
he'll stay that spring-heeled jolt if you keep time.
Walk in rings around him. Do not spare
one glance towards the centre or he'll bolt.
See how a pattern's there, a coiled line:
tighten up the circles, and each whorl
will shave a sickle off the verticil.
Pare away the moons. His labyrinth's
a unicursal round: with just one end,
and just one track. He'll be waiting,
slant-eyed jack, and prince
of tricks. Your part is fixed:

a virgin going down,
a widow coming back.

Reedling

I

More bauble than bird, a merry bobbin,
a balled-up sock. One button chuckling among many.
Strawberry-plump, and pipped

with achene eyes: your first inkling
of something awry. They seem
glued on, the stiff glass of waxworks.

Drag the memory banks. You can think of them
buffed in bronze, iced in strawberry pink,
paperweight-solid, or chumming it with finches

in your grandmother's lacquer-black cabinet, but never
as moving components. And now
- though you have never noticed them before –

they are everywhere – nested
among satsumas and buff paper, or cupped
where an apple should be, an egg, a breast.

They peep from tea sets, hunker
in ice-cream scoops, optics.
One nubbed bit plugs

another's socket – fills
the open mouth of an opened question.
That's how the puzzle fits.

II

We are a scattered thing – imagine a fibrous net
globe-wide, and stuffed with reedlings!
This is a thatch of ropey cells, busy.

A burst pillow. A smashed snowstorm.
The mind fizzes with circuitry. When it leaks,
what flies out? We are thinking

a cracked pot, steam wheedling from it
in flighty puffets. The mind, they say, is
whatever it is thinking. Now we are thinking

that our eyes are not hard seeds, but
liquid fossils, pinholes on prehistory.
We are awesome saurines, rolled into fat-balls. We are

so very many, maddeningly so,
and lodged like bulbs. The mind
is filled with pockets: things root.

Don't look too long. Our call
is the soft, futile ping of a giving hinge.
The mind is filled with pockets,

and things come home to roost.
Our rebus spells something elusive, nagging,
known. Forgotten again.

Milagros

Sump hearts, sluicing.
Pyx hearts, with one tinfoil coin skittering.
Porcelain hearts scaled in lime.
Lamprey hearts, sucking on dead ones.
Brinkman hearts stretched on the racks of dead stars.
Icarus hearts fired to clinkers.
Cabinet hearts chocked with trinkets.
Supple hearts trained with twine.

Strung like piñatas
in a cave of Aladdin proportions:

Minnow hearts routed. Hearts frittered to confetti.
Hearts smeared in porpoise oil, dropped in the Drink.
Marionette hearts jangling a waltz
in a last chance last dance public house
cankered to a cliff edge.
Whirlpool hearts frothing with jetsam.

Hot little engines.
Some rattle on blown valves:

Starched hearts folded like napkins.
Boned hearts folded like batwings.
Deadeye hearts. Bullseye hearts.
Peacock hearts, stuck with fat braided sequins.
Freeway hearts studded with cat's eyes.
Obelus hearts hanging by a thread.
Vivarium hearts, backlit, stuffed with iguanas.

At night, they chitter like circuit-board,
a riviere of gibbering binary.

Black Lagoon

'Even I, Lucas, have heard the legend of a man-fish.'

But what did they tell you, Lucas?

Out of the murk and mystery -

was I all pleats and webbing, spats and pipes,
my wet heart thrashing for *lovely Julia Adams?*

I live here all alone. The water looks
like screens look after everyone's gone home.

(Don't you know me, Lucas? Don't you recognise
this place? Your flarestick *I* means nothing here,

your beacon name's a dud. Who's this
who walks the bank? And who could say

what backlit tricks the mirror plays
with lights and cameras muffled for the night?)

The Amazon chugs turpid gold and greens
through California's glitz - *smiles, tinsel,*

yesses, fizz - the extras stick their tacky skin
to plastic slats of loungers. Oh Julie, Rita, Kay –

each night, in phosphorene, you've loved the lot -
hot, jiggered, all lit up like slot machines.

Lucas, when they named you, did they say
what draglines ran below? What languid things

resisted in the current? Oh Lucas, did they say
that each man has his double in the dark?

And when I climbed aboard, what else
was struggling, upwards, gagging on the light?

The Man Who

I was frightened stiff by a lot of my characters.

DAVID BOWIE

Wow boy you've got some nerve -
bitten down, a sliver of live line,
stuttering filament, blown,
wired up all wrong, strung out
and going like a striplight, *too thin, I tell you, you're too thin!*
A shock a finger-in-a-socket,
blue, electric blue and fine,
fine like cocaine, fine like flickknives,
scissored-out, snuck out the back of the
catwalk, fine like nail files,
first live birth
of the space age, dead in the wreckage
but always climbing out, always stepping
through a door
into the new, new
white-hot new,
cut in acrylics, crystalline,
one hundred thousand miles
of chrome and foil,
or wicked in pinstripes, drainpipes,
slick, tooled up
but kid,
what happens when the mask sticks?
What happens when the ice stays stuck?
Leaving you
hollowed out like a flute, like a pinion sunk
in the heart of boy like you -
then you've got to burn out -
down to the fingers, down to the quick,
to the quick quick heart of a white-hot
boy like you
who could strut and preen, burn up
and then roll over
who stitches catsuits from his ogres,
on first-name terms with all the scary monsters -
SCUM PERVERT WEIRDO FREAK
nothing sticks to you,
but fuck, weren't you
everything we feared, and all we wanted?

The Wolf Man

Of course I believe that The Wolf Man is the best of my horror films – because he is mine.

LON CHANEY JR.

You can't know how it feels –
to have the blood

bark backwards through the heart,
and every nerve snap shut.

That's how it was, each time
I saw that name, my father's name, mine

but not mine.

The man himself

played twenty roles a week, could lose
both legs and break his back by close of day.

The Miracle Man, The Hunchback, The Unknown,
The Man with a Thousand Faces, every one

his own. The work of a craftsman.
I watched him grind the lenses,

strap himself in homemade trusses,
bind his limbs, bend over backwards

till his back was broke for good, spine buckled,
his eyes spent. Everyone had a piece:

the studio took his arms, his legs,
his face a thousand times. The talkies

killed the pantomime, but even his voice
was acrobat – till that went too.

Then only his name was left
- and I took that.

The day they repossessed the car, that was -

furniture gone already, business sunk.

Only his name was left. I couldn't hock it,
so I wore it. It swallowed me in one gulp.

Those years were hungry years, scavenging
bits and scraps, giving away a good name

for third-billings and extras,
stunt work, cowboys, thrillers.

And Christ, the man's shadow! Sure,
it opened doors, but then each night

it grew long and tall, and came capering
up behind me, like the hard-

faced harbourmaster, waving *go back go back*.
Go back to what? The country starved.

I grew thin behind that name, impalpable.
I grew cold behind that name, insatiable.

A thickset ghost with a heavy burden,
uncertain, lumbering. A ghoul. That is,

till I found the Wolf.

 Makeup took the credit,

but the Wolf was mine,
I found him in me. Only I knew the Wolf,

how I'd nursed him in the stony, coldest
part of myself, chewing on nothings,

mouthfuls of ash and a brain of diamonds,
a bellyful of ice and a brain in ribbons.

"A man lost in the mazes of his own mind"

But when I walked, I felt the sprung

piston of haunch and shank, a tread too
firm to be faked. And when I opened my mouth,

I spoke from far off,
a lean and craggy country,

and behind it piped the high
grave falsetto of the Wolf. And oh, oh,

“When the Autumn moon is bright...”
Those hours were mine. *Mine.*

A word to follow home.
A word to bite down on.

J♥

*He that must use them, take this rule from mee,
Still trust a knave no further than you see.*
Samuel Rowlands, *The Four Knaves*

Sworn bachelor
and dandy, man-
about-the-town.
Snook-cocker, fancy-
man, catch-him-if-you-can man.
Peacock-suited, booted, pretty-boy,
fop. Too nimble for the altar, too dashing
for the chop. One eye's for the ladies
the other's on the crown Back-
doorer, in-and-outer, turn around,
he's gone. Trickster, twister, wild-card, liar
Now he's in a Landau Now a Black Maria.
Rich man, Poor man, Ragged man, Prince,
Steerpike, climber Give the man an inch!
Springheel, charmer, haven't-caught-him-yet.
Hard-to-get, hopeless case, straight-up
bad bet. Two-face, double-crosser,
table-talker, crook.
Player, faker, heart-
breaker, ladies'
man, I'm hooked.

The Lemures

Something is digging the stuffing from the old red plush
of the seat behind you in the darkened theatre.
And later, with the rain falling not-quite-right
in the headlights, and the odd half-glimpsed zigzag,
and the cat's eyes coming unstuck, that soft tug-
tugging at your collar is conclusive. They are still here.

Still here, with their quick fingers and luminous eyes,
their spook faces, their fingers hooked like questions.
You meet them half way, know them from halfway places:
the empty A-road, the mezzanine, the bent
reflection in the lift doors before they purr
open again on the things you know: phones ringing, people.

They are a nuisance. They have so many questions
and no respect for the living. They prod and pinch,
they stare. They paw at the glass between what is yours
and what is theirs. Do not feed them - they will always
want more. They will steal from you. Pickpockets,
rifling the snug pouches at the back of the mind,

and that one narrow finger grubbing, rat-a-tat,
for your soft spot. They never stop. They belong to you
and they will wait for you - in the borders of the wet garden,
the silence behind the beech hedge. They horde rubber balls
and the past and all your lost things, and always want to know
when you're coming back, when you're coming back, when.

The Knife Game

Thumb

A narrow time: one summer long,
if that. Old enough to know

that we're no longer children, though
we've not yet grown into

the high, clean mountain air
of common sense, where games like this

would make us wince.
There are no rules as such. You spread your hand

and push the fingers wide as fingers go.
The blade stands by your thumb. You start off slow.

Index

The kitchen winces taut. There's nothing
but the pert
tut tut of steel in wood.

The trick's to start off slow,
precise, telic. Plot
each secant line and then return it home.

Middle

The trick's to keep it low -
skimming knuckle skin, out
and in, and in
and out,
Again.

Again.
A wicked tat, a quickening refrain,
A picked-up stitch, a knitting machine,
A pat-a-cake,
A tic-tac-toe
that zeroes
on an
O

Ring

The trick is not to yelp.
A wince is fine, a grit, and you can let

your open mouth bite on that silent O.

But O – that sharp, expected
quick surprise -

and O - our rusty prints, the sticky
salt-and-iron taste of yours and mine.

Little

And the next day, and the next,
that queasy ache -

split nail, split skin,
slit cuticle, two dozen little nicks.

I eat my meals in forkfuls. My left hand -
inert, potato-eyed - lies in my lap.

But if I wince it to a fist, it's there -
the drub of blood at every scabbing point.

Two dozen hidden doors. Two dozen mouths.
They open on a secret: mine and yours.

Knife

Unluckiest of gifts, it severs ties
between giver and receiver. By September

you're getting served in bars,
and I've been packed off to different school.

A giddy vertex, that – the point
we set an angle on divergent lives.

Already, you know how to make a boy
do anything you want a boy to do. Already, I

know better than to play with girls like you.

Fetch

Who is this who is coming. And which one of us
is keeping watch. I watch your eye, that stichic jig
as it snags and snags and snags on blackout fields.
Copses, snickets, stiles. What about James' rector,
hunched in the dark, tap-tapping the wall of a well.
Oh, he can't take it back now. Not with that curse
on him like a collar. No, friend, that's not my coat.
And it's not the ugly thing in the alcove any more,
it's this hungry one who tugs and begs and whines
and says he's me. What happens when you whistle.

Pasodoble with lizards

In every house, this room. The two of us,
the two of them, and two eyes looking, looking back
at two eyes looking - double locked. A hall of mirrors.

The frills go up. The zoetrope's gone gaga. Lickety-split,
they're off again - two whirring figures skipping house to house
and room to room, and sticking to the shadows. Off we go -

in the aesthetician's house, the upstairs room. The gilt mirror
and its gila monsters, slumped and coiled and polished.
We watch them from the bed. Sweat fogs the glass. They move

whenever we do. In the hothouse, the reptile rooms. The tanks
are stuffed with bodies, lazy like dumped flex, dozens of them,
looped and doubled. Violet, scarlet, gold and black. Reflected back -

the clapped-out manor house, the red-red room. Fungus, brass,
red drapes, the full-length mirror. There they are again - two figures,
fugitives, gone with the *snick* of the aperture. But it's all caught

on camera: how their shadows whisk their tails and dash for cover.
In the grey castle, the ballroom: two figures, wheeling, drunk,
that botched one-two. A cracked-up mirror, and two archaeopteryx,

confused and karking, snared. In the picturehouse, the panic room.
Someone screwed up: it's all over. The couple clutch each other,
know they're done for. Here they come, *ATOMIC MONSTERS!*

razing tower blocks and power lines, a clumsy little number.
What an awful bloody mess they've gone and made. You, boy,
in your hall of mirrors. And me - or my projection - gone

when someone flicks a switch. The two of us, the two of them,
caught up in our reflections. It's all done with two-way glass,
with smoke and mirrors. Anyway, we made these horrors

and they follow us, they move whenever we do, keeping time.
I'm tired, love. This dance has skinned me down to nothing much.
Quick quick, we've got to hurry, set off running. Off we go -

our fingernails *tick tick* upon the road. And we could run forever,

but we'll never shake them off, these hooligans, our lizard others.
They think they're us. We don't know any better.

Pepper's Ghost

The wall onto the past is very thin -
how effortless it is to slip away.
And if he says she's gone, perhaps she's gone,
 but then again,
the wall onto the past is very thin.

He says he never thinks of her - but when
an empty room can fill with her, the way
an empty sky fills up before the rain –
the wall onto the past is very thin.

One flimsy sheet of glass rigged up between
her life and yours. And every night she plays
in crackled blues and blacks upon its screen -
the wall onto the past is very thin.

He never really loved her anyway.
And when she comes, it's just to do the scene,
repeat a gesture, spin a tired phrase -
how effortless it is to slip away.

But there's a hidden room beside the one
you live in now. And when she went away,
he shut it up, and something else moved in.
And if he says she's gone, perhaps she's gone,
 but then again,

the wall onto the past is very thin.

The Amazing Geraldine

Put a penny in the slot for Geraldine,
Geraldine -

light up like a whirligig
when someone says your name.

Don't let them see the switcheroo,
don't let them see the strings -
your heart's a bankrupt fairground, Geraldine.

Geraldine, Geraldine -
cut-string puppet, mannequin,
flealess circus, broken hoop,
a cave-in in a girl-suit, Geraldine.

So it goes, and so it goes,
gotta face the punters sometime, I suppose -

Hide inside the peepshow, Geraldine,
Geraldine -

Part the curtains! See the Lady!
Have the greasepaint at the ready -
they love it when you're lurid, Geraldine.

Captain Webb's a gonna. Lives in water
day and night

A LIVING DEATH!

(that's 50 cents)

you know, he's just like you are, Geraldine.

Get out the cards and crystals, Geraldine,
Geraldine -

give them flimflam, give them fluff,
give them what they want to hear,
they go home happy when you palm them off -

but oh, some days -
some days the mornings border on obscene.

Two dozen gurning horses, round and round,
and up and down -

the tune is so familiar, Geraldine.

Your heart's a tired fanfare,

and it stammers on repeat -

I'm fine, I'm feeling better, yes, I'm fine.

Goat

Don't fall for it – the sidelong look, that punted puck
of a pupil - Goat wants nothing more

than to slip a cleated mitt beneath a fuss of skirts,
raise merry hell.

Button up. Keep very still.

Don't think about that knock-kneed hopscotch,
dapper, quickstepped, keen. The long, tall grin.

Goat means to take your shoulder as a bit
between his teeth, skip in and out like nifty ribbonwork.

Call him *Stickpin*. Call him *Sheershank*.

Don't call to him at all -

But oh, my girl, you will.

Call it fancy. Call it whim.

Call it a door opening on the slant stair

to the room you didn't know was there,
though you've lived here all your life –

And come down with the dawn.

Now you've been gone too long -

the dance was over weeks ago, your guests
have all gone home.

Now you're shoeless, skint

and swindled. Now the daybreak wants to know.

Now the piper's piping up beyond the gate -

Too late, my girl, too late.

The Oracle

I

You love the word long before you learn
its stingy meaning.
Dry, and hollowed out

like snailshell, it has the choral click
of mussels jostled in a wicker pot;
so you put it where it fits -

at six years old,
your oracle is a sparrowskull.
Wafer-dry, its thin dome hugging

a small, snug dark.

II

Sunday, 12 p.m. Off go the gloves like lizardskin
and with them goes the slew of graven
images, genuflections and Corinthians.

The words don't let you in. Their fine scaffold
of tracery and transept, scrolled and elegant,
obdures in the ecclesiastical chill

and keeps its distance. *In principio erat verbum* -
that part you understand, though understanding
is a plodding, humdrum thing, not like the quick fix

of a good incantation: its whiplash logic.

III

You keep another altar. In the briar thicket,
the rhododendron dark, the wrought work
of praxic fern. In the tabernacle quiet

of a Sunday afternoon, rooting
for the hidden brickwork and the rusting grille.

The oracle, your oracle, is within.

Just look: the bony pate, the terse-set beak,
the vaulted sockets and their printed frown;
it is a dry professor, coddling

a lunatic wit in that eggshell brainpan.

IV

It speaks a wasp-language, mouthed in sawdust corners,
confessional. Heathen nonsense of taps and clicks,
struts and echoes, and a huge, surging whisper of the dark

music in things: a choral clamour
of organ reverberations. And you're a lost cause –
you take many gods,

rattle necklaces and call yourself *pagan*
because that word is a peg staked
in the thick turf of private hallowed ground

that Flyaway Paul and Comeback Peter,
Matthew, Mark, and all their Latin cannot budge.

The Fossils in The Square and Compass

Oh yes -

each pasty rock-face housed
a prickly genie!

Some were dull: a spindly comb
and pasta quills, a doll's-house naan

and others better, better for being strange
and strange for being gut-familiar -
braided knuckles, curled umbilicals,
a crazy-paving slab of fingernails.

Best of all
were those with faces, limbs, and all the rest.
Propelled on toothpicks, mouth harps,
bony paddles -
bonsai goblins, leering, sulking, puzzled.

We pointed, fitted faces
to violin-bow noses, pocky eyes,
the mute absurdity of gogging mouths,
the awkward poses,
said *fossil*
till it made us laugh, and then
found every chance to say the word again
till we were a jellied mess, and everything
was funny
(and everything was funny that weekend).
The whole of Dorset rocked back on its heels
bent double, heaved and cracked.

The sallow friezes blanked us.
Their moony cargo grinned and ogled back.

With all the long hot day parked up outside:
the six of us galumphing up the coast
to terrorize the tea rooms, poke our fingers
into cliffs and bric-a-brac and fish and chips –
a cyclone fizzing in a china cup,
raucous, incandescent, breathless, sprung
on the thin hilarity of holiday
and being young,
with two hours still to go till Drinking Up.

I have the photographs: we grin and grin,
and so we might
when the bell will never ring, when our glasses
remain full, with betrayal
and other monsters tucked up tight
in the stony bluff of other people's lives.

And it's awkward
that these flat-packed ghosts survive -
a flickerbook and record of a joke
no longer funny.

The years lay down in layers; underneath
we strike our stupid poses, bare our teeth.
We're stuck there now. Our smiles are hard like flint.

suave enough
to worm your way inside and pin your wicked mistletoe
above the crooked lintel to my heart.
Come on then, shimmy in -
there are things I want to know.

*Oh tell me tell me tell me
about hellhounds and rubies
and pretty boys and bad girls, and runaways and lost boys
and all the things that made my mother cry
and all the things he said to make her stay
and all the things we're not allowed to say -
there are so many things to know.*

Love song for a Minotaur

You're lost, my love, you've lost your way,
I don't know how to find you now.
You tossed your head and went away,
the walls shot up and curved around -

a knot was tangled on the ground
and when you went, it slid and shut.
The walls shot up and curved around
I can't get in, you can't get out.

A knot was tangled on the ground,
a knot was tangled in your heart.
The road was long and looped around
and hooked its ending to its start.

The road was long and looped around,
a riddle ran around its rim,
it slid and shut without a sound,
it shut me out, and shut you in.

A riddle is a tricky thing -
it hooks its ending to its start.
I don't know how to work the string
that rigged a bloodknot in your heart.

I don't know how to work the string,
I don't know how to break the knot,
the heart is such a tricky thing,
it shuts you in, or shuts you out.

A knot was tangled in your heart,
it tightened, tightened, every day.
I skipped around and played my part
but nothing I could do or say

could keep the road from curving round,
or turn your head, or break the day.
There is a riddle in the heart
that murmurs *go* when you should stay -

it shows you things you're dreaming of,
it picks them up and puts them down.
The world is full of monsters, love,
I don't think I can save you now.

The road curves on and on and on
with no way in, and no way out.
I couldn't follow. Now you're gone,

and no one else can reach you now.

All along, the ivy

'Until you're known in my profession as a monster, you're not a star.'
- Bette Davis

Sweet Charlotte.
You never noticed it, but now

sprawled helices, intricate, that lush intent
menace everything.

They will sell this house from under you.

Supple, hush hush.

It plays patience, has nice manners.

They will take you away.

Stay still. It presses,
pinches, knows intimate details. It must,
it must insist.

The ivy
is vigorously literal, has no feel for suspense.
It knew all along -

the gun and the blanks, the drugs in the supper,
Jewel and Jewel's secrets.

Spirochetes, vertices,

the script and the script's whorls.
It winches, squeezes, keeps schtum.

Darling Jane -
you can't see it from the window,
but there it is, just out of shot -

the wall, the whole brick span of it,
thralled in skinny fists.

Oh, it must insist

on the tussle, on the beach scene,
the vaudeville routine -
Joan Crawford's dead. Good.

It knew the lines before you did.

Key

Strung up like this, you've got me, boy,
I'm yours. Better dress those knots before
I count to ten. Lark's head, bowline, daisy-chain -

it's wicked fun, but it's a game. Oh, but now
you're scared again - the empty bed, the rifled
drawers, the busted hinges squawking *nevermore* -

Well sure, there's a life hung in the cupboard,
and it twitches when I twitch, the stiches pull.
But there's a hundred more beyond this room

and I'm still here. Listen now, it's really simple -
you've got something, and it belongs to me.
I don't mean that old skin, the useless key

you fret and fret about in oily sweats, wide-eyed
and sealslick. Hush, my pup, it's simple really -
you've got something, and it belong to me.

Phantom

That shady fellow's at the keys again.
A man who hides his face behind a mask.
He's asking where you were tonight, Christine.
He says you should have met him at the dance.

A man who hides his face behind a mask.
That's what he said, Christine, that's what he said.
He says you should have met him at the dance.
They waltzed in white and red and white and red.

That's what he said, Christine, that's what he said.
Behind the mirror, steps go down to dark.
They waltzed in white and red and white and red.
My girl, you let the devil in the dance.

Behind the mirror, steps go down to dark.
Beneath your dancing feet are tortured men.
My girl, you let the devil in the dance.
Now he's back, he'll never leave again.

Beneath your dancing feet are tortured men.
What did you do, Christine, what did you do?
Now he's back, he'll never leave again.
Christine, I wouldn't dance if I were you.

What did you do, Christine, what did you do?
He's asking where you were tonight, Christine.
Christine, I wouldn't dance if I were you.
That shady fellow's at the keys again.

(Don't they know it's) The End of the World?

This place is a shot fuse, hot, bitter,
defunct. A dud. No one told you
you could end up here, reels stalled,
needle snagging on a burred *frick*.

They're all in on it. The carousel
and the Big Wheel, the pier lights
cranking a stuck waltz and one blunt thought
doing the circuit: you asked for this,

you asked to go round again.
Here you are, then: spent, dead-ended
with two brown pennies to your name -
one for the bandits, the other for the ferryman.

Runaway

It's not the one about the no-good bum who never-ever did
what he should have done. And it's not the one with the teary kid
who meets her steady with a loaded gun. It's not the one

about the stockcar race, or the lipstick marks, or the small-town flirt.
And it's not the one with the green-eyed flame, or the one you hurt
when she turned you down. Did you hear the one where she can't explain,

so he stacks his bike in the pouring rain? It's not that one,
and it's not the one where the world didn't end (though it should have done).
It's not the one about the blue-blue moon, some river, dream lovers,

or thingummy's clown. It's not the one with the alleycat girl,
and every single guy in town. It's not the one where you came on cruel
when he broke her after she broke you. Give me a year, and I'll tell the one

about the girl who only does one thing, but does it really well,
better than anyone. That's just how this one goes, but still,
you'll wonder. You'll wonder *why why why*.

Spook and The Jewel Thief

It's a love song, goes like this –
the thief,
 the locks,
 the lasers,
smash and grab -
lightening, wowzers.
 Easy-peasy.

That's Annie. *Fingers* Annie.
Magpie Annie.
 What a girl -
 knows every trick,
got every skill -
all the lines, killer smile, smart as satchels,
that's our Annie. Lock-pick savvy.

And ah, she loves them all –
diamonds for the grim pizzazz,
that *rude*, unruly fission -

emeralds for audacity,
a sapphire like an asterisk -

Prickling little stars of hard precision -
 they jitterbug like urchins in her fist.

Sweet Annie.
Got names for all her lovelies -

Ginpit Nancy, Spectre, Ninker,

Tesla, Gimlet, Rudy, Ohm.

Eyes like dinner-gongs for every lure,
for every spinner,
 loves the lot.

Honey, rotgut, ginger,
that's our Annie.

*

That is –

till she meets chilly Mr Spook.

What's this what's this

That stack of splints, that spider,
wind-wrecked deckchair,
Mister Spook.

Eyes like leaky ray-guns.
With his zither, with his rayon,
Mister Spook –

long and loomy as a taper.
Man, I'd like to meet his tailor.
So unhappy, singular,
a black-hole-in-an-alcove,

no friend of mine, no gentleman,
no good, that Mister Spook.

Ah. But Oh.

The slipknot sliding shut,
those icy tokens -

clink clink clink

the zeroes stacking up, a run of links, and reaching
gut to gullet.

Scissored, skilleted. *I'm done for.* Boy oh boy –
It must be love.

Well, that's that.

Snapped taut like leather straps.
She's banjaxed, hobbled, hamstrung,
on the rack for Mr.Spook.

Oh, it's a dose alright.
It's freon down the marrow.
It's quartzzy quartzzy jitters,
like they've nicked her with a scalpel
like the ice has gone beneath her
like she's gone all out with zilch -

Alley-oop, and up-and-out,
slingshot, slung between trapezes,

Jesus, God.

What's that, Annie?

*Oh Mercy, Mercy me,
you know I'm done for.*

And he thralls his skinny arms around her neck
and hangs on tight -

A pillion. A spinnaker.
A 'chute rucked at her back.

*

But now she's feeling mean.
Feeling see-through, feeling squeaky,
feeling thin
as half a wish.

Poor dear Annie.
Never thought she'd lose a finger,
never thought she'd miss a trick

before before
before she set her eyes on Mister Spook.

What happens to a lock that can't be picked?
What happens then?
What happens when you scrabble for a join
that isn't there?

What happens with a hole that won't be stuffed
with all the rubies,
all the emeralds, all the amethyst there is?

She's looking at his eyes,
he's looking out the window.

Oh thievy, thievy man.

Pockets stuffed with diamonds,
eyes on the horizon.
He's ransacked every purse and every drawer.

Poor old Annie.
They crash like splintered sugar as he chews,

and he chews -
bring the popcorn, have a ogle,
roll up and see the showgirl

her fingers slipped, she lost it,
she's been and gone and dropped it,

for The Man Who's Made of Nothing,
Mister Spook.

Poor old Annie.

*

No, no, no -
Clever Annie.
Kept a secret in her satchel
Kept a little something back.
Clever Annie. Poker-savvy.

Her heart's a cluttered cabinet
her heart's a raucous loom
her heart's a loopy troika
and it shuttles to and fro -
looks like this -

a wildcat,

a crystal, a wee zero of her own.

Clever Annie.
Kept a canny little nothing of her own -

And she lines a box with velvet
and puts nothing in the box,
and leaves the box for Someone Sly
to come and try his luck.

*

And oh, he wants that nothing.

And he scrabbles at the edges,
and he scrabbles for a join -

Oh he wants it, oh he *wants* it,
oh he's *empty*, oh it *burns*.

And the breath comes out all flighty,
and the pleas come mewling out -

in huffs and heaves and will-o-wisps,
in prayers and gasps and sobs,
ravelled out like magic scarves,
like genies whiffling from a spout -

and soon,
there's nothing left of Mister Spook.

Wheedles like a spent balloon, that Mister Spook.

*

Clever Annie,
kept a secret like a locket,
Clever Annie –

got a skinny little trinket,
got a dancer for her gables,
got him hung on string and tenters,

Clever girl.

She sets him in her ring, and his eyes are leaky lasers.

A black-hole-in-zirconium, that *pit*,
that Mister Spook.

What's that, Annie?

Yes, some people.

Some people chew you down to sticks and straw
if you're not careful.

Some people have their fingers in the drawer before you know.

Same old story. Goes like this –
the hook,

 the line,
 the sinker,

flipped and filleted,
undone
 on half a chance.

Beware beware

and take care who you dance with, when you dance.

Good Morning, Captain

The Captain counts destroyers –
Dauntless, Diamond, Decoy, Dragon,
corrals them one by one into his dock.
And when he's done destroyers, he starts on submarines:
Voracious, Venture, Vanguard, Vulpine, Vox.

And when the Captain dreams,
he dreams of all the things he's seen –
the fire on the glacier, explosions in the sea,
The Captain's been a hero. The Captain's done it all.
The Captain's a lot of glitzy pins.

And when the Captain dreams,
the girls are wearing slinky things -
Emma, Lucy, Sarah, Charlotte, Claire.
The Captain's had his sweethearts. The Captain's seen it all.
The Captain's been the cat who got the cream.

And when the Captain dreams,
he dredges nightmares from the sea -
the slurpers and the suckers, and dreadful scuppered things
They come with open mouths. They tick upon the hull.
They walk on crabby stilts and *whisper* things.

And when the Captain wakes,
he wonders why it's ten o'clock,
and who put pastel flowers up the walls.
Good Morning, says the bedspread. *Good morning*, says his life,
the bloodknot sliding shut around his neck.

The Captain counts his children
from the photos in the albums,
thinks a thought, then chases it away.
And just on the horizon, tacking fast, the wind behind her,
that little speck that's closer every day.

Magpie as gambler

Here he comes, love this guy, chack-chacking
like a cue-ball off the break. It's the smart snickersnack
of the Scissorman, or a rattling stack of easy chips,
all bets, roulette, oh yes. Spick-and-span, pin-prick neat
with a livery fit for thief. He's a rascal, a two-bit punk
in a three-piece. A stitch-up artist, a silent era roll-me-over-
in-monochrome-Romeo. Tommy Guns, dominoes,
uckers, boys! Jounced like knuckles, or Annabel's dice
gone cock-eyed, snake-eyed, would-I-wouldn't-I'd.

So-what'll-it-be? A golden boy? A silver tongue,
a lugubrious Captain? A take-me-anywhere-anytime
Valentine? A knife in the ribs, something in scarlet?
The cruel one, the smart one, or one with a secret?
Shuffle and nudge, eyes on the cup, lady or tiger
or aces or duds. Where is he, that guy, that short-circuit
whipcrack, that out-and-out hustler, that joymonger-jack?
He's off. You're cleaned out. The deck is all jokers,
the joint's full of snakes and your pockets are picked.

Aquarium

I stitched jellyfish from a shower curtain, cobbled
a seahorse from eggboxes. What a wheeze, to mould sardines

from a sardine tin, and smash
a kaleidoscope for its ritzy bits

(it's a handful of hard phosphorescence
clittering like rice in the half-open hand).

These things are reassuring.
I have no heart
for the organic – its liquid frightens me.

All that slip and spill, the glissandos
and elastic vectors, mad like mercury –

the soul sucked from the tissue,
or sneaking between two cells like a cheap trick

seems cheap when you don't know how it's done,
the moving moment sliding up its scale.

Aquarium

has too many vowels, slipping and spilling
one into the other in its calm cool room

of intractable gerunds.
Being's a messy business.

Give me the curt chirrup
of scissors in card, and plastic's bright

simple consonants. Loveliest of all,
the plane shape of a glass pane, transparent.

You've got to have boundaries.
You know where you are

with a good straight line, a well-protracted angle.
Or where you were, at least.

The Lesson from the Snake

And we might take a tip from you -
split-mouth, doubler, underling -
who can at all times entertain
two propositions on the tongue, two
crooked and opposing things.

She loves me and *she loves me not*
so says the double-talking snake.
Both are real but one is not
and both are true before you speak.

Tell her every vinegar thing
you've swilled and swilled around the mouth.
Spill the lot, spit it out.
What happens then?
I couldn't say.

Don't tell. Gulp the acid down
and smile and smile and bite your tongue.
Keep it secret, keep it in.
What happens then?
I couldn't say.

Forks and forks: tangential ways
divide in two and two again, two
pairs of doubles take a turn
on what they do and never say.
And all are true before you speak
(*true and not true* says the snake).
Uncertain futures bifurcate
and every one belongs to you.

She loves me, and *she loves me not*.
and both are true until you speak.
Better by far to hold your tongue
and both of them can't not be true.
Futures, futures says the snake -
in one she will belong to you.

Follow the Lady

I watched...as the three-way mirror split her three-card deck.
A.S.Quinte, *The Vanity Mirror*

The first belongs to the world. Known by this argument
of artifice and accident: gypsum, almond, opal, bone,
river pearls and dental gold.

The second

is mine alone. I'd know her anywhere
by the precise syntactic script of cartilage
helixed at each ear; the proposition posed
by the yoke of muscle – just visible now –
that meathooks jaw to collarbone.

The third

I cannot see. The complicit frame
is a blind door, locked on an empty room. I never know
where she goes, or what she does. She frightens me.

52 Card Pickup

nec te quicquam nisi ludere oportet

Start small. One half-open eye may survey thirty square feet of bed for several hours. Note that not one of the seven shining hells you built is half as hot as this field of white linen. Know all your dreams are now the same six confidence tricks, shuffled.

Trust nobody. Not the old goon at the instruments: the nerves splutter imperatives, but all news is duff gen, scrambled, haywire. Be resigned, if not accustomed, to the rank flue that opens between heart and mouth. Learn to bluff, and bluff.

Get superstitious. Develop a taste for patterns, pairs, but know that you're all out of luck. Here you are sinking the black on a sure shot, snake-eyed, dropped right in it with no getaway. You've got one bad hand and you'll play it. Sweet nothing, and you've stuck.

Tally up. Find the same spilt deck, the same face turning up, whichever way you look at it. Bluff, but fool no one. There he is again, the duff joist that brings the whole lot down. This is the house. This is you, in bed at noon. Weeks pile up, discarded.

Dog

The day I slipped the leash and lost the knack
of being me, I took up with Dog.

Dog didn't give a damn
about that clever boy, with his clever hands,

because Dog could snap a pretty white neck
like that in two at the drop of a hat.

And Dog and me
went down to the woods at the end of town

and got our kicks, and pulled some stunts,
and I got smart, and learned some tricks.

Because Dog could bark and Dog could bite
and his Dog-eyes sparked like city lights

and Dog knew names for all the tracks
of veins that lace and rig the heart

and Dog knew how to pull a seam
till the heart just stops, and the blood runs black.

And now I don't think I'll ever go back.
But if I do, and if I do,

I'll bring an old friend, and a few new tricks,
- some of them, some of them, just for you.

The Stepdaughter

I opened wide the door – too wide,
the smile too bright - I think perhaps
she saw straight through
my too-bright smile, my too-wide door -
she knew, I'm sure.
She left me gawping at the open air,
crept in like rust with leaves, with wind
and dust.

And there she was, a daughter:
his child, more like an eel's daughter –
all sinew and dark water, teeth
that locked like traps,
snapped shut like oiled traps,
that zipped her in, me out. Dear God,
I stood there gawping like a landed trout.

His daughter – more like an owl's daughter.
Those eyes, I swear
they were the size of saucers.
They flashed like flying saucers, though
they puckered down to penny slots
for me. She never cried - not once -
I wanted her to cry, to need, to lean.
I thought about her mother in her box
(her mother's turning soft on Highgate Hill; I thought -
she has her mother's eyes). I thought -
a funeral in Spring is quite obscene.

That Spring
the sea turned sick: it gobbled up fish
grey dead and big as men.
That Spring
our home was under siege.
The garden weeds went wild, the fibrous stalks
came creaking up the walls.
Our nights were filled with cats: they inked
and slunk about the house in tightening rounds.

And dreams!
of boxes snapping shut, and traps
that shut on springs, that locked like teeth,
the worn-down teeth of keys, and teeth that trapped, teeth

trapping fingers, nails, and
fingernails, and locks;
that box -
lid-locked and nailed -
and twitching things washed up on greasy rocks.

I read the books: *The grieving child*
will open up in time. It wasn't true –
my doors were shut against me as I smiled.

God knows, I tried -
I prised, cajoled, and pried,
I oiled the locks, I buttered her,
spent every smile I had,
every kindness,
 every wile,
but couldn't crack that nut: the box was sealed
the shell intact, and not a gap,
not a window, not a chink,
not a keyhole nor an eyelet through which I
might look and see,
 might look and learn
 what lay inside.

But then, one night -
 those eyes, I swear
they were the size of spotlights,
they flashed and spun like satellites,
went winking through the dark -

she slid the bolt home in its cuff
just her, and me, inside.
She turned the teeth within the lock,
and pocketed the key.
She turned the mirrors to the wall,
windows blinded,
 shutters tight;
the lupins shuddered in their pots,
I coddled my hypocrisy.
The nightshade spread like oil across the door -
I followed, had to see.

His daughter
 - more like the Moon's daughter.

I followed. Did not hear
the squirm of roots contorting
and groping at the mortar.
I had to see.
I did not hear
the supple squeal of stalk and sap
of tendons straining taut as racketstrings.
of sepal-skin stretched drum-tight
of waxy drum-skin
listening -
 each flower-head configuring an ear.

I had to see.
I did not hear the hush
that fell upon the chorus-line of cats
that ringed the house. I had to see.
I did not hear the rolling clink and clank
of salt things pitching in the water tank.
I did not hear
the craunch of milk teeth grinding down the key.
I did not hear
The doors spring shut behind us as we passed.
I did not hear. I had to see.

The smallest door of all whined on its hinge.
I craned my neck, and eagerly
I pushed me head into the oven mouth.
 For never had it once occurred to me
I might not like
 what I would see.

A flap of tarp.
An unctuous query at my ear
 But was I sure?
The litany was swift.
I gripped the pew, intoned
 No more.

I was married in the Spring.
But I confess, I'm not so sure
that the hope I planted in my cake
was all I wanted
 Nothing More?
And there are nights I lie awake
shored upon my husband's chest,
and think of bruised and buckled bones
and knuckled feet
 and snatching claws:

claws that cinch me at the ankles, crack
my pelvis like a wishbone,
arch my back;
 until the wish spills out
in a spray of copper pennies on the floor;
spills out, and spells out
 More.

Honeymoon

The moon is ripe and round and sweet.
They've pulled it down for you to eat.
Hang the skin above the door.
The days are ripe and round and sweet.

The moon is bottled in the store
with honeycomb and sycamore.
The taste is sweet enough to soothe
away the life you dreamed before.

The moon grows dusty on the shelf.
The dream you live is sweet enough.
The nights are full of summer flies.
The moon made you forget yourself.

You saw a swarm calligraphise
its black event upon the skies.
The writing all dissolved before
the morning cracked a wary eye.

Something curdled in the store.
It doesn't like you any more.
It came and went each passing year
to chalk its mark upon the door.

The moon is scattered on the floor
and rotting in the apple press.
It has no flavour any more
and something ugly at the core.

Craneflies

Late summer, and the long grass is hectic with them,
staggering on pale threads: the vague, ecstatic kisses
of a hot mind flushed to profligate invention.
As though the worried ground gave back our dead
in thin, fitful hints -
clumsily, but with the best intentions.

These are the nightmares dreamed by pampas heads -
the brittle, graphite spoke the sundial strikes
at noon, the no-sound of the absent bell,
and wristbones braceleted with thread. Too still,
the catgut stretched too tight,
the gardens hush. The grasses rave. You know

how the knock-kneed staircase hobbles down to dark -
that marionettes, and hair, and jointed feet
of arthropods have stitched the journey down.
And teetering on callipers, they come,
the pin-legged men, uniquely
nightmared into being, deeply sown.

Mr. Fox

Can I talk about it yet?
About that summer
and the fox who came to stay?
 About the fox
who hid his foxy face behind a mask
and grinned a grin
that made you lift the latch
 and let him in?

Oh, Mr. Fox,
flash as summer lightning,
 twice as quick.

Mr. Sharpish, Lickety-split.
Mr. Feet under the table
 in the time it takes to wink.
Mr. Fill your father's suits
and put a ring around your neck.

Oh, Mr. F,
an ocean of cologne would never hide
 the stink of death.
Live among the bins for half your life
and something sticks.

Remember this?
How the bones all came undone like pickup-sticks.
How the skin split like a purse,
How you left a bloody mess
with every step.

 That twisted little cicatrix
that's curled inside your shoe -
I know it's there, and you do too -

and it's been fifteen years,
so can't we talk?

Looking-glass House

I have slept or walked
through a series of mirrors, each a little less forgiving.

I have watched myself balloon or turn thin
in many shapes of stainless steel – sinks, pans, the tines of forks,
the showerhead's question mark. I have had no answers to give,
and I have given the wrong answers.

I have fought wars against mould.
Still, it creeps back in horrifying florets.

I have seen the red queen
defeated, shut-up, fuming at the impeccable rose garden.
I have sidled between pity and hate with alarming conviction.

I have binned outgrown clothes. I have left wanted things
in the pockets of unwanted clothes.

I have neglected friends.
I have failed to return kindnesses,
hospitality. I have defaced perfectly good kitchenware.

I have sat through dull dinners snapping breadsticks,
pretending they are the necks of awkward birds.

I have lost things. I have forgotten things. I have left them on tables,
or made them inaccessible. I have wasted myself
on people and causes now beneath my contempt.

I have sunk my teeth into the soft
pouch of flesh at the base of the thumb, for no good reason.

I have wasted myself. I have made people inaccessible.
I have lost things.

I have seen the white rabbit, chocked,
skinless, going nowhere.

I have hung myself
on the butcher's hook of my wants. I have coached myself not to want
the unhaveable. I've dismantled the teeth of my wants.

I have occupied the house of my wants.
I have burst through the roof of my wants.
I have shrunk to the size of my wants.
I've been given enough rope.

I have been precocious.
I have been too late. You might say I am *out of time*

And I have watched my life
whirr backwards, mad projector, each frame

flickering, *quick, quick*
on the wall, until

I was light, I was light
as an idea,
a charm. When the reel clicks,

it's the snicking shut
of a pocket watch, a too-small door,
the last scene of something I didn't record.

Snowdrop

Something old for something new -
any old thing. A name will do.
And they all smiled. And you did too.

Folded, scissored, snipped in three -
like so. Quite neat and orderly.
Jig the jig, before the scree

slip of the misstep, then the fall.
They shake their heads, tight-lipped, appalled.
You do not please them any more.

What ritzy magic works a spell
in white goods, china, linen, lace?
Lies and lies. The wishing well

is jammed with wishes just like yours
for something else, or something more.

Two Poems for Sculpture

I Rodin: Danaid

Not the unfinished face, the flush of useless hair,
but the length of her: how she stretches

belief almost to breaking, angled, cocked
on that immovable pelvis; the stern

truss of muscle between the shoulders,
yanked and locked. How absolute

the back is in its syntax. How fitted to the task
of indexing, and figuring, despair.

II Ives: Undine

Feels
heavier, and is
heavier. Feels

the downward suck
planting each foot, the twitch

of hook in lip, is
jackknifed upright. Knows

that underjaw itch, the straining on
thin air. Forgets

the grave electric roar
of salt on shale, the bottle-blue dark. Remembers

nothing. Dies
through the mouth, and feels
nothing.

‘Remembering mine the loss is, not the blame’

after Inshaw

Over and in and around
us, knotted the garden.

The ten-to-three clock,
the honeybees caught
mid-fumble in the
foxgloves.

The stalled light.

*Holly and laurel and
oak*, plaited the garden.

We are dazzling here in
the garden –

with our
ricochet wit and our gin,
our immortal remarks.

We fizz and we sparkle.
We scintillate,
here in the garden.

And who,
who could blame us,
here in the garden?

Someone is counting the money out, off in the counting-house.
Someone has hitched up their secrets, out in the summerhouse.
And someone is plaiting a wreath from our shambling cypress.

Grown tall as hollyhocks,
our daughters
are poised on
each end of a badminton
game

on the lawn that
has gone on forever.

The lawn
will go on forever.
We are deadlocked in
summer.

We applaud
these green things: our
lawn and our daughters,
the garden.

White and sepulchral.
They are very beautiful,
their faces elliptical.

*Holly and laurel and
oak*, plotted the garden.

Our blackbirds have hollowed-out throats: neat little chimneys.
Hard and ceramic and shiny, and bedded in pastry.
They whistle the steam off the supper, out in the pantry.

Something is
moving like rust at the
end of the garden.
A bad thing with a bad
look –

The deadwood is
tacky with secrets, and
something is moving.

Wringing the necks of the roses.
Stuffing its pockets with apples.
Eyeing our tombstone daughters, here in the garden.

The garden was green as
a wreath and it went on
forever -

it ran and it ran,
away with our petrified
daughters,

on evening-long legs,
away with our petrified
daughters.

we had no one to blame
but ourselves, and the
treacherous summer

went on and went on,
like someone intoning
forever.

We grew these things
here in our garden –

our slab-limbed
daughters, our luminous
secrets

our lawn and
our dog-pack, our
terminal greens

and our cypress.

We had no one to blame
but ourselves –

*Holly and laurel and
oak, answered the garden.*

Cat

Who'll be Bulldog? Who'll be It?
Who will wear the crown?
Who'll take a candle up to bed?
And who'll come tumbling down?

Who'll be bridesmaid? Who'll be bride?
Who'll have ten thousand men?
Who'll be doctor? Who'll be nurse?
Who'll not get up again?

Who'll be blind man? Who'll be thief?
Who'll kiss the girls? Who'll cry?
Who'll be Grandma, Mister Wolf?
Who'll cross his heart? Who'll lie?

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor
Who'll be last to know?
Harum scare'em rip'em tear'em
Who'll be full of woe?

Who'll be farmer in his den?
Who'll tell the truth? Who'll dare?
Who'll be the one left standing when
the circle's less a chair?

O -

U -

T -

Spells

Cat. The odd one. Lost her head -
we all picked sides and she picked dead.

Eeny meeny miny moe,
the rest of us gave life a go:

Who'll get the house? Who'll keep the kids?
Who'll fuck the boss? Who'll hit the gin?
Oh Cat, you couldn't play the game,
and those of us who opted in

have mired ourselves in work and booze
and hated wives and married men
and other things we didn't choose
and didn't have the words for, then.

Notes on not becoming a werewolf

You feel it first
as an itch in the teeth, a skip-beat
of nerves coiled too tight.
Some taut aperture sliding open
between the heart and gut.
Precautions must be taken.

Do not enjoy too much
the quick grey jolt of hare, the split-crate thrill
of punctured appleskin.
High lonely places, wind,
the supple creak
of oiled leather. Woods

are of course best avoided.
Copses, spinneys, anywhere,
in fact, where the strong-sweet bulk of horse chestnut
crowds too close, where you can raise
the wet note of fresh-churned earth
by digging in the nails. Rivers

are not to be trusted. They know too much.
They nuzzle the base of cliffs and snout
at kitchen doors. They learn
from the granite of the hills, the pulp
of slick black roots and lovely braids
unwinding in the weeds. The moon

may be looked at in moderation.
But don't let it give you any ideas.

Fill your house with mirrors. Watch the clock.
Speak often. Do not feel
you are safe in the city: there's another
under this one. Stop your ears
to curlews, vixens, hounds, they've tales to tell

if you've the ears. And you've no idea
what it is to have ears like mine.

Blood, Rook, Oak

how discord is meaningless
in the thin timpani of rain, in owl voices,
splintering twig, the low,
low, well-mouth O
of the water;
in the differing pitch of the silence
of fungus and rust -

What was it you thought you brought with you?

Scraps for the Goatman

"As to an imaginary cry," said I, "do but listen for a moment to the wind in this unnatural valley while we speak so low, and to the wild harp it makes of the telegraph wires."

I *Line*

Tunnels and bridges, platforms and arches, the straight-faced rumour of the old railway. A green seam through the capital or a frayed axon, chugging its news down the line.

This is oak country. The deliberate work of knotweed, underwritten with the quick copper taste of the city -
stingers and tin cans, piss and alleycats.

II *Wire*

Web and telegraph wire, the delicate nerves of the eye. Blown, bulb-dud. Your instruments are no good here.

III *Dig*

This is the old way, backwards and downwards - soil, brick, unmending stocking of rootwork, dirt, and iron, old iron, and things with hasps.

Downwards and backwards. Down to the skeletons of things - wrens and mice, that small shorthand, strutted and hammered.

Dig. It's a thrill in the fingers, quick and nervy, an adrenalin-current. A stammer of dashes, dits.

VI *Bolt*

Drive the blade about an inch deeper.
The fit is slim. Widen the seam. Install two nails.

You'll know him by the corroded bolt –

Wobbling, long-legged, clattering Jack-of-the-Borderlands.

VII *Plant*

There are spent things in the long grass.
We left princes here, and they frittered to chaff.

We planted things
silver buckles, golden pears,
and they took hold.

This is the ground where tuberous fears
sprout limbs, get leggy, go walking
with pylons and Dead Men's Fingers -

No-Eye-Deer, Eely Agnes, Creeping Bent.
Assorted Jennys, snatching from ditches.

This is his ground – Long Jack of the Line, slim as a gibbet,
spindly a cradle-bar. An eye, opening or closing.

VIII *Sideways*

Sideways-man, hallway-man, patron of halfway places,
slipways and spillways,
jennies and changelings,
hybrids and mongrels. Two-faced Jack-of-the-Doubles.

IX *Gate*

Split down the sternum
into his two guards -
one will always lie to the other.

X *Arrow*

Blow on the leather cup.

Roll out the bones.
Cross yourself, heart and fingers.

He's a wiry one. Sinew, bone and lines
for my lovely. Arrow through a penknifed heart.

XI *Mine*

Because I'm his, like he's mine,
I gave him everything:

A swaggering belt of hips
chuckling like nutcrackers,
a clutter of bones:

Wristbone,
knucklebone,
Sternum,
Browbone,

Long, long
loping legs, and quickstep
toetaps to go with them. Off we go -

Tick-tack-toe,
I'll never
walk home alone.

The mistake was to name my fear -
three times, and once for luck -
it looped round, clicked,

and stuck, and now
he's always there. You plant a name in fifteen seconds, but
you'll never dig him up.

XII *Play*

Darling, I've lost my way.
Now I can't ever come home.
Why did you go, why did you go,
Darling, I went to play.

Darling, I went to play,
and Darling, I went to dance,
I missed a step, I missed a step,
and the Goatman took me away.

The Great Escape

We gave the others the slip,
snuck out the back of the discotheque,
the rain came down in filaments,
strung, electric.

No, *wait*
no wait, it was the cinema -

Macdonald fluffed his last goodbye,
that's when we made a break for it -

floodlit, filmic,
rattling through the fire door
and out into the street.

The cine reels rolled round
tick tick tick tick
but we were gone.

No, no, hang on,
it was a wedding -

my borrowed pearls, your father's suit,
the prim expanse of tablecloth,

the starchy conversations folding neatly one on one -
before they did the speeches
we were off.

Every time's the same -

Come on, come on

It's you and me and down an alley
through a window up a stair.

We ditch the chitter-chat, the script,
the cranked-up, wornout numbers,

the mirrorball, the screens, the cutlery,
the dreary boxstep of propriety,
and exit on a broad, flat plain -

static, *click*. And play again.

**The Polyvalent Plaything: Three Forms of Play in 20th and 21st
Century Poetry**

Abstract

This thesis identifies and explores three forms of *play* in poetry: specifically, the ‘interred’ (or etymological) pun, the hypogram, and the manipulation of what Johnson terms *discordia concors*, or harmonious discord. The precise mechanics of each are scrutinized with close readings of the work of Geoffrey Hill, Paul Muldoon and Jen Hadfield. Extrapolating from these analyses, the behaviour and potential uses of *play* are examined more broadly in relation to formal *play*, sonic *play*, punning, and oppositional texturing. It will be shown that the more ludic a poem, the greater the risk that it will turn in on itself; the anatomy of the poem is therefore compared to its etymological counterpart, the riddle.

The thesis concludes that *play*, in this context, should be viewed as a fundamentally telic activity. The forms of *play* examined all function as what may be termed a *contrivance of coincidence*; successful contrivance behaves surprisingly algorithmically, and sensitivity to its mechanics means that *play* may be put to poetic purpose. A collection of poems – *Spook and the Jewel Thief* – is submitted in support of this thesis, and demonstrates some of the ways in which *play* may be deployed.

1 Introduction

1.1 Why *play*?

How is it possible for play to be both divorced from reality and yet so rife with real life consequences?¹

For the seven years preceding the undertaking of this thesis, my work was as a toymaker and teacher of circus skills: in other words, playing with toys, and designing toys to be played with. My experience was consonant with a truth any educationalist knows: that ‘sensory-motor experiences that lead to skill development may occur “accidentally” during play’.² Central to this is the notion of experiment: a common injunction, in acquiring a new skill, is to ‘play around with [X] to see how [X] works’. In practice, seemingly trivial activity yields profitable results through happy accident.

Language, played around with, yields many such happy accidents: some words sound the same as other words, and utterances may be made to ‘fit’ with other utterances by way of rhythmic consonance. As a reader, the poetry that interests me most is that which showcases and manipulates such accidents: be they forms of wordplay such as punning and phonosemantics, or more conventionalized forms of ‘accident’ such as repetition, prescribed metres and rhyme schemes. Such conventions are highly factitious, in that they deviate from conventional speech, and represent, in extreme form, what language can ‘do’ when subjected

¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ‘Some Paradoxes in the Definition of Play’, in *Play as Context*, ed. by Alyce Taylor Cheska (New York: Leisure Press, 1979), pp. 14-25 (p.14).

² Jackie M. Oddo, ‘The Importance of Play in the Development of Language Skills’ (2010) <<https://www.atlantaspeechschool.org/default.aspx?RelId=620866>> [accessed 8 August 2014] (para. 2 of 10).

to poetic pressure. But *factitious* and *poetic* are etymologically synonymous, both rooted in the idea of ‘to make by artifice.’

Why ‘happy’ accident? William Empson observes of the pun that ‘there is a sort of formal satisfaction in such a connection between two ideas’.³ James Fenton, writing on form, describes the tension set up between rhymed words: ‘The first rhyme leaves something in the air, some unanswered business’;⁴ the result is a pleasing mental click when the rhyme word is reached. This seems an unsatisfactory account, but it gestures towards something intuitively understood: accidental sonic congruence has a tendency to hoodwink us into swallowing semantic authenticity at the same time. And in fact, this notion of unexpected congruence holds sway over all poetry: Jay Parini identifies the impulse at the heart of poetic endeavour as ‘noticing likenesses’.⁵ This seems even more unsatisfactory, but it underwrites huge chunks of poetic practice: metaphor, rhyme, punning, form; anything, in fact, where two things thought of as distinct are shown to be similar in some way. Each of the forms of play I will be looking at in this thesis make use of this artificial congruence between disparate things: in each case, the play delivers precisely this pleasing cognitive ‘kick.’ By its very nature, it is tempting to view surprising congruence as mysterious, or ineffable. However, the notion of happy accident is illusory: examined in more detail, forms of play employed to poetic purpose behave surprisingly algorithmically. Familiarity with such behavior enables the poet to repeat the trick, and uncovering ‘algorithms’ of this kind is the purpose of this thesis.

I have so far used the term *play* to refer to two distinct things: the knowing manipulation of accidental congruence between things, and the experimentation that throws

³ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edn (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963) pp. 131-132.

⁴ James Fenton, ‘An Introduction to English Poetry’ (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 72.

⁵ Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) p. 66.

up such accidents. I might say that identifying and analyzing the former is useful to me as someone scrutinizing their own work, but that the latter is vital in terms of praxis. As a writer, I have found that play – a slackening of the reins of conventional sense, in order to see what other axes of congruence may be uncovered – has been enormously useful in turning up surprising ideas and uses of language. In practice, this has involved a range of experiments: attempts to tailor forms to suit subjects, for example, or ‘Martianising’ individual words, in order to pillage their sonic attributes. I have raided a range of specialist vocabularies indiscriminately, from Jackspeak to wedding vows, and mixed them together to see what happens. I have tried to corral adult dramas into nursery rhymes, and made poems behave like abacuses, or card games, or pictures. As Mary Flanagan points out, ‘Play [...] relies on shifting realities or worldviews - transformations that transpire when one submits to chance elements.’⁶

We might substitute *fool around with* for *play around with* – and it would be an apposite substitution. Orbiting the notion of play, as an activity, are connotations of fun, jest or triviality – in other words, the livery of the Fool, or Trickster, an archetype that is catnip to many poets. Any of the forms of wordplay outlined above might be dismissed as trivial or amusing in the wrong context – the pun is a staple of lolly-stick jokes, and it is no accident that rhyme and metre are adhered to most rigidly in nursery rhymes. It is worth noting that, to save them from triviality, accidents of this kind must be synthesized with the fundamental semantic ends of the poem. This too is a contrivance of coincidence: an accident of language enters into a positive feedback loop with the world outside of language. As Helen Vendler points out, ‘the world of the poem is analogous to the existential world, but not synonymous

⁶ Mary Flanagan, ‘Creating Critical Play’, in *Artists Re:Thinking Games* ed. by Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett, and Corrado Morgana (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 49-53 (p.51).

with it'.⁷ The Fool, then, embodies the paradox inherent to all forms of play – something seemingly trivial which, as Csikszentmihalyi suggests, has the apparently uncanny ability to speak for – and effect – real life consequences.

Flanagan observes that 'games [...] offer a space to explore creativity, agency, representation, and emergent behavior with rules'.⁸ Most fundamentally, play appeals because games operate according to a set of rules, and their goals, when realized, effectively end – or perhaps resolve – the play. The complex negotiations between accident and purpose involved in play of any kind are therefore a continual exercise in control. As a writer, this seems to me fundamental to the enterprise, because something unruly is conquered, or indeed resolved, in the writing of a poem: it is made to submit to a set of rules, and then 'completed.' The vast majority of the poems submitted here are effectively games I have played with myself; those that are the most successful are those which hand the same rules to the reader, and allow them to 'play' them.

This commentary will concern itself with three forms of play in poetry: specifically, those that have informed my own writing. I will begin by defining the pivotal term of my title; I will then provide a cursory exposition of the forms of play I will be looking at.

1.2 Play

Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.⁹

⁷ Helen Vendler, *The Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 8.

⁸ Flanagan, p. 49.

⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949) p. 13.

Play, according to Huizinga, is therefore fundamentally tangential ('outside ordinary life') and non-telic ('a free activity'): an end in itself. This will not do as a working definition, because play employed to poetic purpose is telic and non-tangential – that is to say, it participates in the semantic esemplasticity of the poem.

Clearly some qualification is needed. Narrowing the focus to wordplay, we turn up the following:

Any adaptation or use of words to achieve a humorous, ironic, satirical, dramatic, critical or other effect.¹⁰

It is an unworkably expansive definition, but it does highlight a useful distinction. The key term here is *adaptation*. This signposts the fact that the word is being put to use beyond its primary function – its denotative purpose – and in this sense it is indeed being made to behave tangentially. The facility with which it may be adapted to other uses is due to the polyvalence of the signifier; that is to say, the cluster of aleatory commitments it carries with it: 'its etymological story, its strange acoustic signature, its calligraphic mark'.¹¹ Adaptation of this kind constitutes what Ronald Schlieffer terms a 'valorization of redundancies'.¹² This notion of redundancy will be explored below, and the ways in which such redundancies may be prized and put to work will be the project of this thesis.

¹⁰ Tom McArthur, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, ed. by Tom McArthur and others (London: BCA, 1992) p. 787.

¹¹ Don Paterson, 'The Lyric Principle: Part I: The Sense of Sound', *Poetry Review*, 97:2 (2007), 56-72 (p. 63).

¹² Ronald Schlieffer, 'Material Voices: Tourette Syndrome, Neurobiology, and the Affect of Poetry' in *Intangible Materialism: The Body, Scientific Knowledge, and the Power of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 146-190 (p.85).

Play is a loaded word, in this context. When Barthes writes of the ‘playing’ of signification, it refers to ‘a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations’.¹³ That is to say, the signifier is not fixed, but in a continual dynamic relationship to the Text, in turn defined by the ‘*stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers’.¹⁴ Derrida posits the *free play* of signifiers,¹⁵ where signification is continually deferred (and differed) to other signifiers within the ‘weave.’ This requires some unpacking, and I will now do so with reference to a term I will be using throughout this commentary.

1.2.2 Conceptual domains

The mind has compartments holding opinions and modes of judgement which conflict when they come together [...] and one is particularly conscious of anything that mixes them up.¹⁶

The conceptual domain – or semantic frame – of the signifier may be defined thus:

characteristic features, attributes, and functions of a denotatum, and its characteristic interactions with things necessarily or typically associated with it.¹⁷

The signifier designates a conceptual domain: a ‘semic solar system’ made up of ‘more- and less-tightly bound elements’,¹⁸ where context determines which elements orbit the core most tightly. However, it will be noted that while context may discriminate, the signifier itself

¹³ Roland Barthes, ‘From Work to Text’ in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. by David H. Richter (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1998) 2nd edn pp.901-905 (p. 902).

¹⁴ Barthes, p.903.

¹⁵ Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001) pp.351-370.

¹⁶ Empson, p.114.

¹⁷ Keith Alan, *Natural Language Semantics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001) p. 251.

¹⁸ Don Paterson, ‘The Domain of the Poem’, *Poetry Review* 100:4 (2010), 81-100 (p. 86).

does not; that is to say, it imports its domain-cluster wholesale, including those elements which context renders redundant. This idea of *redundancy* will be examined in more detail below. For now, it will be worth noting the additional observation that ‘a domain forms a unique set, but every term within it will be shared with many other domains’.¹⁹ To use Barthes’ terminology, it is the overlap or disconnect between the constituent elements that comprises the *play* of signification.

In terms of the denotative function of the signifier, the above account is unproblematic. But the poetic function of language conceived by Roman Jakobson²⁰ vexes the question. Jakobson’s conception is characterized by Derek Attridge as ‘a linguistic practice that specifically emphasizes the material properties of language [...] [that provides] pleasure and significance independently of cognitive content’.²¹ Ronald Schlieffer expands this idea of showcasing and manipulating precisely the ‘surplus’ aspects of language. Working from the premise that ‘the import of a vocal signal cannot “ignore” its material manifestation’,²² he describes poetry as ‘traffic[king] in the materiality of language, making material *sound* seem intentional and semiotically meaningful’.²³ It does this by ‘freezing and arresting [...] the “disposable” material redundancies of language in ways that make them essential.’²⁴ This is a process he refers to as ‘the valorization of redundancies’.²⁵ However,

¹⁹ Don Paterson, ‘The Domain of the Poem’, *Poetry Review* 100:4 (2010), 81-100 (p. 86).

²⁰ Roman Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, in *Selected Writings, vol. III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981) pp. 18-51.

²¹ Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988) p. 130.

²² Schlieffer, p.87.

²³ Schlieffer, p.93.

²⁴ Schlieffer, p.85.

²⁵ Schlieffer, p.85.

essential is a word whose cache depends on that to which it is syntactically glued, and Schlieffer's observation poses the question: essential to what, exactly?²⁶

Coupled to Jakobson's focus on the 'material properties of language' is another consideration: that this focus be used 'to heighten attention to the meanings of words and sentences'.²⁷ These two elements, then – a focus on material properties of language, and their direction towards heightened sense - combine to provide a neat prescription for poetic language: it demands that redundancy and sense be synthesised. Redundancies not only become 'semiotically meaningful', but said meaning is synonymous with the 'meaning of words and sentences'.

It is worth making a further observation at this point. I have noted that every term within a domain-cluster will be shared with other domains: the same may be observed of the 'redundancies' of the signifier. Accidental congruence may yoke together domains that are utterly distinct: a good example of this is the homophonic pun.²⁸ The signifier may therefore be thought of as sharing a series of accidental relationships with fellow signifiers within the weave of the Text, thanks to its material identity.

Poetic language foregrounds the signifier – messy, polysemic, and in continual play with fellow signifiers – it is the cognitive equivalent of the dog looking at the finger, rather than the thing being pointed at. But, to take our lead from Barthes, and Derrida, this valorisation of redundancies becomes meaningful – and useful - when the signifier is taken in relation to the Text of which it is an integral part. To speak of valorising redundancies is therefore not quite right – within the field of the Text, 'redundancies' is a misnomer. The fundamentally telic forms of play I will be looking at constitute a deliberate manipulation of

²⁶ We might understand *essential* in two different ways, of course: as 'vitaly important', or as 'pertaining to, or comprising, the essence of a thing'. In this case, as will be seen, these amount to the same thing.

²⁷ Attridge, p.130.

²⁸ I explore this, together with other forms of the pun, in 1.3.

the ‘disconnections,’ ‘overlappings’ and ‘redundancies’ within the weave of the Text. Or, as Heaney puts it:

the energies beating in and between words that the poet brings into half-deliberate play...the relationship between word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history.²⁹

We might term play of this kind a *contrivance of coincidence*. Below, I provide a short introduction to the forms of play I will be looking at, by focussing on a single word in the work of three poets.

1.3 Hill’s *crypt*

Nearly all words still carry some shade or tone of their deepest etymology. They reveal this not through their current dictionary definition - but through those now distant associates that sprang from the same root, but most importantly by the peculiar and specific regard their fellow words have adopted towards them over the centuries.³⁰

Below is a line from Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns*:

I was invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots and endings.³¹

Hill is an adept punster, but here we see a very specific kind of quibble, in that it pivots on etymology. That *crypt* effectively carries the manifesto of *Mercian Hymns*, a work that treats language as a geological sample, from which one can excavate competing but synthesised histories. At its etymological base, *crypt* denotes an underground gallery, immediately fixing

²⁹ Seamus Heaney, ‘Englands of the Mind’, in *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber, 2002) pp. 77-95 (p. 77)

³⁰ Don Paterson, ‘The Dark Art of Poetry’ (2004) <<http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/1.html>> [accessed 16 August 2014] (para. 40 of 49).

³¹ Geoffrey Hill, ‘IV’, in *Mercian Hymns*, 2nd edn (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976) p. 3.

the locum of Hill's endeavour: this is a work that digs down – or backwards – geologically speaking, these are effectively the same thing. To shuttle forward in time, its current use denotes a man-made chamber in which the dead are housed and preserved; here, the parallels with language are unmistakable. 'Nearly all words still carry some shade or tone of their deepest etymology',³² so that the signifier is effectively haunted by obsolete meanings. The relationship is ratified by what follows: this is a 'crypt of roots and endings'. It is a simple enough pun, borrowing simultaneously from the chthonic and linguistic domains. Already, then, the word offers a reticulated quibble, simultaneously self-referential and speaking for language as a whole.

We can dig deeper. From *crypt* we derive *cryptic*, meaning puzzling, or coded. This is once again self-referential, pointing as it does to the sophisticated mechanisms at the heart of *Mercian Hymns*: the intricate network of puns that tie past and present. It signposts the fact that we are dealing with signifiers at their most profligate.

If we take *crypt* as a touchstone, we find that *Mercian Hymns* reverberates through and through with these 'hidden' nexuses of meaning. *Invested* is another that pulls its associations into deliberate play. There is a strong axis of attraction between *invested* and *crypt*, which favours the ecclesiastical connotations of the word *invested*: here, *invested* is taken to mean 'endowed with an authority or role' – where said role is commonly that of the priesthood. Once again, this definition is on a direct line to the etymological root *vestire*, 'to clothe'. It is a relationship ratified by the extant idiom 'to take the cloth.' On this sharpening, the speaker assumes a quasi-clerical role, speaking not for the church, but for the 'crypt of roots and endings', and all that that entails.

³² Don Paterson, 'The Dark Art of Poetry' (2004) < <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/1.html> > [accessed 16 August 2014] (para. 40 of 49).

There are further layers. In 1.2, I touched on Barthes' 'weave of signifiers'; he goes on to remind the reader that 'etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric'³³ – this is because *textile* and *textual* share the Latin root *texere*, 'to weave.' Here, once again, *to take the cloth* is to assume the vestments of language. But *invested* is more conventionally coupled with *with* – here, the use of *in* renders the subject passive. This invokes the most common use of the word *invest*: to expend a commodity with the expectation of profitable return. When this idea is set in motion in relation to *mother-Earth*, it combines to produce the idea of something sown that may later be harvested. It is a neat metaphor, in which the subject stands in for the commodity, 'planted' not only in a geographical location, but a linguistic field. In this, he is quite literally 'mothered', in the sense of 'gestated'.

It is a sophisticated synthesis, and one in which the congruence of ideas is so neat as to appear pre-ordained (to submit a quibble of my own). Here, I will look more closely at the anatomy of the etymological pun.

William Empson categorises the pun among his ambiguities as an instance 'when two ideas, which are connected only by being both relevant in the context, can be given in one word simultaneously'.³⁴ He goes on to distinguish between the metaphor and the pun; in the case of the latter, 'the two meanings are different and [the author] means to say both of them'.³⁵ The distinction is at its clearest in the case of the homophonic pun, where the relationship between the two meanings is purely aleatory: that is to say, the 'redundancy' played with is the arbitrary phonic identity of the signifier. When Hamlet snarks that he is 'too much in the sun', the relationship between the two meanings submitted (*son* and *sun*) is

³³ Barthes, p.903.

³⁴ Empson, p. 102.

³⁵ Empson, p. 108.

one of happy accident. Such accidents abound in language, so that - to borrow Johnson's phrase, 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together by violence'.³⁶

The etymological pun is a different beast, because it pivots on the naturally metaphorical basis for language: as Empson himself comments, 'metaphor [...] is the normal mode of development of a language'.³⁷ When dealing with the etymological pun, therefore, conflicting meanings borrowed from discrete domains may have their root in the same domain. That is to say, the relationship of an extant definition to its etymological ghosts is *not* aleatory, but conceptually significant: they may be thought of as placed on separate dendrites of a 'nerve-like intricacy of meaning',³⁸ where said dendrites may be traced back to the same root idea. A pun of this kind, therefore, is one that comes pre-packaged as made up of congruent elements: two things 'which the reader [...] has already been prepared to hold together in his mind'.³⁹ This distinction will be important when considering the worthiness of a pun as a form of wordplay.⁴⁰

In 'The Domain of The Poem', Paterson observes that a successful metaphor plays with the notions of *nativity* and *alienity*, relative to the thematic domain of the poem: 'is the vehicle at the right distance from the poem's concerns to maximise the reader's frisson?'⁴¹ If the vehicle is from a domain too close to that of the poem, the resulting comparison is 'too

³⁶ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), vol. I, p. 14.

³⁷ Empson, p.2.

³⁸ M. M. Mahmood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 23.

³⁹ Empson, p.104.

⁴⁰ To put it another way, the etymological pun operates not on the sonic level, but the ideational one. For further discussion of this, see 4.2.

⁴¹ Don Paterson, 'The Domain of the Poem', *Poetry Review* 100:4 (2010), 81-100 (p.99).

This essay also presents a prescription for the beautiful, defined as that which 'corresponds to our ideal balance of predictable regularity and surprise' (p. 85). We might swap the terms *nativity* and *alienity* (or, indeed, *regularity* and *surprise*) for *harmony* and *discord*. I explore this contention in 1.4.

obvious to bother with' – that is to say, too predictable, too 'native'. Too distant, however, and the comparison becomes absurd. This algorithm may also be applied to the etymological pun. '[I]f the pun is producing *no* additional effect, it has no function and is of no interest.'⁴² In this instance, Empson dismisses domains that are too 'native' to one another's concerns. On the other hand, if the domains are too distant, the result is 'irritation... at having to jump at random and too far'.⁴³

Two key elements of Empson's prescription feed into this idea. One is that the meanings submitted be 'both relevant in the context'. The second is that the reader be prepared to hold the two ideas together in his mind. The etymological pun guarantees both relevance and compatibility, and therefore saves the pun from the risk of absurdity. Hill's use of such punning will be explored in Chapter 3.

1.4 Hadfield's *ringpulls*

The following lines are from Jen Hadfield's 'III Empress':⁴⁴

The one who rises from the marsh-marigolds
And, with shining fingers

The lines – and, indeed, the title - are faintly Yeatsian; there is nothing particularly surprising in them, until the reader reaches the line that follows:

⁴² Empson, p.102

⁴³ Empson, p.106

⁴⁴ Jen Hadfield, *Almanacs* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2005), p. 39.

Tugs ringpulls.

These ringpulls operate like a fishhook: the reader is pulled up, yanked into a different domain; something surprising has happened. The Empress, on loan from the tarot deck and rising like the Lady of the Lake, is ostentatiously mythic, right down to her ‘shining’ fingers. The body of water suggested by ‘marsh-marigolds’ situates us in the realm of the pastoral. The ringpulls feel discordant, because they belong in neither domain – and, indeed, are antithetical to both. They sound a note of bathos against the austere territory of myth, and stick out as unlovely detritus in an idealised pastoral landscape.

But this is a particular kind of surprise: it has the curious effect of simultaneously jarring and pleasing. There is something very ‘right’ about the tension between this note of discord and the domains it is working against. In this we detect the echo of Paterson’s observations on the pitch-perfect point between the native and the alien:⁴⁵ an interesting effect, given that it is presented as positively adversarial to the domain. How this is achieved will be explored briefly below.

It should be noted that the play here is conceptual, rather than verbal: the tension set up is between referents, rather than their linguistic representation. Hadfield might, therefore, seem like something of a cuckoo in a thesis focussing predominantly on wordplay; however, I will defend the inclusion on two grounds. The first is that an understanding of the aesthetics of discord is fundamental to the anatomy of play: this contention will be explored in detail in Chapter 2.

The second is that Hadfield’s taste – and feel – for discord is so pervasive that it also underwrites her word choices: that is to say, she is equally adept at setting up pleasing discord between the material properties of the signifier and its denotative function. The

⁴⁵ In 1.3. See footnote 41.

ringpulls quoted above find a rhyme with ‘mussel-shells’ in the line that follows; the rhythmic solidarity of ‘mussel-shells’ and ‘marigolds’ persuades us to link ‘ringpulls’ to ‘marigolds’ also. This amounts to a contrivance that highlights the pleasing phonic qualities of the word *ringpull*. The reader therefore performs a small auditory double-take, as the bathetic element is subtly embellished and, phonically at least, synthesised with a domain to which it ought not to belong.

If we accept discord as the factor that yokes the Empress and the ringpulls together so successfully, it is possible to identify additional axes of tension within the lines quoted. We see the same tension set up, microcosmically, in *marsh-marigolds*. Marigolds in isolation are pretty enough; so too are their vocal representation, a Middle English compound of the faintly sing-song given name *Mary* and *gold*, a word combining the conceptual warmth of its referent and the trusty weight of its Anglo-Saxon heritage. It is a sturdy sort of prettiness, buttressed by a firm consonant at each end. *Marsh*, on the other hand, is rather different – with its associations of putrefaction and miasma, detectable in the viscous sibilance into which it decomposes, it is definitely not pretty. Combined, they produce the same see-saw effect between prettiness and ugliness: beautiful because it is surprising. The fact that they begin with the same consonants and vowels means that we see the same phonic glossing that allowed the ringpulls to be synthesised with the landscape. This glossing is, it seems, a means for Hadfield to pull a conceptually alien element closer to the domain against which it kicks.

1.5 Muldoon's [...]

While Muldoon makes use of many different forms of wordplay, I will be focusing on what Peter Denman terms *hypograms*, where 'the letters or phonemes of certain keywords may be found distributed throughout the text'.⁴⁶ In order to provide a brief exposition of this, I will now look at a word that is pivotal in its absence:

He was last seen going out to plough
On a March morning, bright and early.

The above lines are quoted from Muldoon's 'Why Brownlee Left'.⁴⁷ Brownlee himself, while present in the title and the first line of the poem, has in fact vanished from the text by the end of the octave (where these lines appear), replaced by a series of personal pronouns, and the distinctly impersonal 'a man.'

But all is not as it seems. Stretched over the words 'bright and early' is the phonic armature of the name *Brownlee*:

bright and early

The missing vowel sound is the diphthong /aʊ/. However, if we look to the line above, we find the missing component embedded in the word *plough* – also, of course, in the *out* that appears just before it. Furthermore, *plough* is syntactically (if not actually) adjacent to the word *on*, so that the /aʊ/ sound appears to be reaching for its closing consonant. It is a tension ballasted by the almost-right diphthong in *morning*. The overall effect is of the phonic engine of the poem struggling to catch on the rhyme-sound of *brown*.

⁴⁶ Peter Denman, 'O Mould Breaker, and a Pun Maker: Paul Muldoon and the Prosody of the Letter', in *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2006), pp. 19-33 (p.19).

⁴⁷ In *Why Brownlee Left* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) p. 22.

In fact, that ‘missing’ diphthong is the dominant rhyme sound of the octave, appearing three times as an end-rhyme. The *lee*, meanwhile, appears as the subdominant, popping up as the final syllable of the end-words *barley* and *early*. Brownlee may have left, but he is very present in his absence.

Here, then, *Brownlee* appears within the Text as a key-word. This is a loaded term in itself, connoting impenetrability, locks, and precise solutions: in other words, the domain of the riddle. It is worth noting that something very interesting happens when the redundancies of the signifier are over-foregrounded. A sort of foreshortening effect occurs, where the concerns of the poem shrink to the parameters of its own borders. In its most extreme form, the conundrum, the poem turns in on itself. I will be examining this hinterland with reference to Muldoon in Chapter 4, and in relation to my own poems in Chapter 6.

1.6 Conclusions

The above constitutes a brief exposition of the forms of play that will be analysed, and some of the conceptual architecture behind it. In the following chapters, I will be looking at each in more detail: Chapter 2 will focus on oppositionality in the work of Jen Hadfield, Chapter 3 on etymological puns in Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns*, and Chapter 4 on Paul Muldoon’s key-words. In Chapter 6, I will apply the results of this study to my own writing.

2 Tug-of-War: Jen Hadfield's Ringpulls

2.1 The Beautiful is Pretty Ugly

In 1.4, I quoted three lines of Hadfield's *III Empress*. The stanza in full is:

And how is she beautiful –
the one who rises from the marsh-marigolds
and with shining fingers
tugs ringpulls
and mussel-shells
from hair made blue with the peat's oil?⁴⁸

It is tempting to read the first line rhetorically, so that we are presented with an image we are not expected to find beautiful. I venture, however, that this is not in keeping with Hadfield's clearly plotted aesthetic; rather, it teases a genuine question, which I'll endeavour to answer. How, precisely, is she beautiful?

Hadfield's manifesto for the beautiful can be found in her description of Skerryman:

You might like some background about the siren, Skerryman. There are all these tales about how he was born, and why he ended up as he did – weather stories and creation myths. If you like archetypes, he's the Green Man, a doleful coyote, the Hanged Man (the martyr), the Devil (the challenge) – a real bag of cats. He's the radio mast on Ronas Hill, the carcass of a stag on a beach in Skye: the discord that makes a pretty scene beautiful.⁴⁹

A real bag of cats indeed. Hadfield's netting of Skerryman's identity constitutes a mad trolley-dash through the mythic plane: we have pagan deities, sirens, Christian figures, and

⁴⁸ Jen Hadfield, 'III Empress', in *Almanacs* (Bloodaxe: Highgreen, 2005), p. 39.

⁴⁹ Hadfield, 'Note', in *Almanacs*, p.18.

icons of the Major Arcana. The Hanged Man invokes not only Christ (a reference made explicit by the donated epithet), but also the Norse pantheon;⁵⁰ the ‘doleful coyote’, meanwhile, is rooted in Native American tradition.⁵¹ A further layer may be lifted from the diction: the phrase ‘bag of cats’ simultaneously recalls Highland fauna and Jazz slang. The anything-goes ontology is exemplified by the informal tone: the phrase ‘If you like archetypes’ has a strong note of take-it-or-leave-it – in Hadfield’s pseudo-cosmology, no single lens claims supremacy: Skerryman simply joins the ranks.

But these are not archetypes: we are in fact dealing with cultural inflections we might more accurately term ‘types’. However, even in archetypal terms the list proves ambiguous: traditional ciphers of sin and virtue rub shoulders, as do those of fecundity and subversion, patriarch and disobedient child. At first sight, it is tempting to think that if any archetype can be sifted from the disparate types, it is that of the Trickster, the ambiguous and adversarial figure that emerges in every culture, wearing one of a number of masks: as the Fool, the *zanni*, the *gracioso*, Puck, and even Satan.⁵² The telling epithet ‘the challenge’ seems to make this explicit, the coyote is an obvious pointer, and in British folklore, the Devil is commonly domesticated from arch-fiend to impish and troublesome force, bringing him more in line with the archetypal remit. Yet others do not fit so easily – we find Odin where we might expect Loki, and the Christ figure seems out of place. The siren, while a certainly a deceiver, lacks the playfulness of the archetype in its pure form.

⁵⁰ The Hanged Man is commonly associated with Odin. Skerryman’s name hints at this element of his heritage: *skerry*, an Orkney dialect word for a reef or rocky island, comes to us from the Old Norse *sker*, meaning ‘a rock in the sea’.

⁵¹ Though it is worth noting that, under a remit as generous as this, we might reasonably assume that the reference is to Looney Tunes’ Wile E. Coyote. It would not be the only occasion on which Hadfield has looked to popular culture for her icons: ‘The Ambition’ (in *Byssus* (London: Picador, 2014), p.11) contains a reference to ‘Bert and Ernie’. Bert and Ernie are characters from *The Muppet Show*.

⁵² As Richard Cavendish points out, ‘[t]he name Satan was originally the Hebrew word for “opponent” and was used without any diabolical connotation’ (*The Powers of Evil in Western Religion, Magic and Folk Belief* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 184).

In fact, any attempt to wrestle Hadfield's Proteus into mythic submission is flawed. He wears several masks indiscriminately; what is interesting, however, is that this is quite deliberate. Skerryman acts as a vehicle for two things: the first is ontological profligacy, and the second is discord. For the moment, I will focus on the latter.

Hadfield's manifesto zeroes in on this at the end of the above description. It should be noted of the Trickster that he is commonly regarded as a force essential to creation; here, he is 'the discord that makes a pretty scene beautiful' – discordant because the two examples given are decidedly unpretty: one is an image of industrialization, one of putrefaction. They fly in the face of our feeling for pastoral and corporeal beauty respectively. Both denote a jarring element, a force of resistance and disobedience: 'the challenge'. Without it, we are left with the anodyne 'pretty'; with it – as an essential creative force, despite its seemingly rebellious nature – we have an alchemical formula for the beautiful.

'The challenge' has a near-synonym in *opposition*. *Discord* has been a useful enough term until now, but I am going to swap it for the more apposite *oppositonality*. I owe the latter term to Sarah Barnsley, who identifies *oppositional poetics* or *oppositional texturing*, and defines it as 'the blending of peculiarly companionable opposites'.⁵³ 'Companionable opposites' neatly sums up the paradox of harmonious discord: the pitch perfect point between nativity and alienity I touched on in 1.3.

To the ringpulls, then. They form the firing pin of the stanza quoted at the beginning of this chapter. This is Skerryman in action: the note of discord, the radio mast on the landscape, the force of oppositionality. Working against the 'prettiness' of the rest of the image (the shining fingers, the marsh-marigolds, the female form, her blue hair), it sets up a

⁵³ Sarah Barnsley, *Mary Barnard: American Imagist* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), p.72

Barnsley's *oppositonality* recalls Johnson's idea of *discordia concors*: 'discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike' (Johnson, p. 14).

conceptual tension that allows the Empress to achieve a particular aesthetic. I should be clear on one point: this is not to make the claim that ringpulls are beautiful – far from it. In fact, it is their status as unbeautiful objects that allows them to operate thus in this context: it would be more accurate to say that they *participate* in the beautiful. The commonplace that ‘imperfection is beauty’ is wide of the mark – rather, we might say that Hadfield’s aesthetic requires this duff note of imperfection.

Interestingly, Jo Shapcott also uses the ringpull to similar effect, in the poem ‘Goat’:

...a thousand
kinds of grass, leaves and twigs, flower-heads
and the intoxicating tang of the odd ring-pull
or rubber to spice the mixture.⁵⁴

Here, again, the ringpulls – together with the rubber – sound the duff note of man-made detritus in amongst the conventionally natural imagery. The phrase ‘to spice the mixture’ deserves attention, because it works at both a gustatory and a conceptual level. The former is simple enough: ‘spice’ works here in the conventional culinary sense, because Shapcott’s Goat is interested in the listed items (and everything else) as comestibles. Yet it also chimes with the notion of oppositionality – as with Hadfield’s ringpulls, they constitute a very different texture to the other items, adding flavour to an otherwise uniform list. As Shapcott is acutely aware of the power of such conceptual tension, I will be looking at her work later in this chapter.⁵⁵

This notion of seasoning, at a conceptual level, finds its corollary in Marina Warner’s discussion of the folk tale ‘Love Like Salt’.⁵⁶ The tale, at base strikingly similar to King Lear, has Cordelia’s counterpart telling her father that she loves him ‘like meat loves salt’. The

⁵⁴ Jo Shapcott, ‘Goat’, in *Phrase Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.11.

⁵⁵ In 2.6

⁵⁶ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Vintage, 1995) pp.387-388.

familiar banishment and betrayal ensue, until the beggared king chances upon his youngest daughter's wedding feast. The daughter, recognising the king, orders that the wedding feast be served without salt. The guests are disgusted, there is general outcry, and the king realises his error. Surmising his moral epiphany, Warner observes that:

Lacking salt, the ingredient that denotes integrity[...], aboriginal and unadulterated authenticity, love can have no flavour.⁵⁷

It will be noted that integrity operates as a seemingly discordant element, working *against* the notion of love: in the same way, Lear takes Cordelia's integrity for coolness – that is to say, a deficit of love. Here again we see the neat paradox we have observed in Hadfield's ringpulls: two apparently irreconcilable elements combine to produce something superlative. I venture that an analogous truth applies to the notion of beauty: without the 'seasoning' of an element of discord, beauty is flavourless.

2.2 *Almanacs*

I observed in 1.4 that the ringpulls jar because they do not belong to the thematic domain of the lines around them. Taken as a whole, *Almanacs* confirms Hadfield as a pastoral poet: this is a title that brings with a certain cache of expectation, largely rooted in a Wordsworthian idyll of green and pleasant lands where 'the machine has not yet gained the upper hand; some place as yet unstrangled by motorways and unfouled by concrete mixtures'.⁵⁸ However, Hadfield's ringpulls are the tip of the industrial iceberg, and her landscapes are filled with the discord these ringpulls represent. There are glens and braes, certainly; but there are also

⁵⁷ Warner, p. 391.

⁵⁸ Brigid Brophy, 'The Menace of Nature', in *Reads* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 3-8 (p. 3).

taraulins, lorries, sodium lamps and horses' arses. She makes this clear from the very first poem of the collection:

When I lift my bottle
She looks up, a sure poem
With a skull like quartzrock.
She plays her tail xylophone
Across byre bars.
She hooks her tail
In a high crozier, [...]

There is plenty that surprises here: notably, the pairing of radically different domains in a small space. In line two, an animal is sublimed to a poem in the space of six words; in line five, the play on the words *bars* unites the domains of the pastoral and the musical. However, it is not until the final words that the poem springs its big hook:

[...] to shit.

Thematically, this ending is perfectly synthesised with the poem: what else ought one to expect from an animal lifting its tail? But it still jars, because two factors have set us up not to expect it. The first is that, no matter what conceptual domain the poem presents us with, we are, first and foremost, in the domain of the poem. The second is that, in the preceding lines, we have been treated to a lush display of heightened language and metaphor, as if to remind us we are within the domain of the poem. As Helen Vendler comments, 'the world of the poem is analogous to the existential world, but not identical with it';⁵⁹ and, no matter how familiar we may be with the behaviour of animals in the existential world, *shit* jars with this domain. The disjunct is ballasted by the placing of *shit* in close proximity to *crozier*: the tension between the scatological and the ecclesiastical is very strong indeed. Here, then, the

⁵⁹ Vendler, p. 8.

former operates as the ringpull: a note of bathos and oppositionality that sounds against the poem's domain while simultaneously – and paradoxically – synthesising itself with it.

Microcosmically, we see the same thing happening at a linguistic level:

In rain, headlamps bloom chrysanthemum
But she sleeps on, sways
With lax complexity of bladderwrack.⁶⁰

With the exception of the headlamps, the lines are fairly conservative: with their benign pastoral imagery and lulling sibilance, we could reasonably expect them to be coupled to the Empress mentioned earlier. However, certain factors alert us to the fact that these are distinctly Hadfield-esque lines. The first is the use of *bladderwrack*. I observed in 1.4 that Hadfield is adept at setting up resistance between sign and referent; in the case of *ringpulls*, she contrives to highlight the pleasing phonetics of something that ought to be unlovely. Far more commonly do we see the obverse effect: the components of her landscape – the *bogbean*, *quartzrock* and *bladderwrack* – are named in phonetically cumbersome or brutish terms: all short vowels and bolshy consonants. In this case, the short *a* – already a little heavy on the ear, given that it occurs twice – is further stressed by the assonance it finds with *lax*. This is a landscape, then, that kicks against its pastoral charm through tension with its linguistic expression.

The second is *lax complexity*. Hadfield has an apparent fetish for the letters *x* and *z*: thus *Almanacs* is filled with *croziers*, *lazybeds*, *blizzards*, *fuzzy bears*, *jazz*, *xylophones*, *axles*, and *xs* isolated to stand in for kisses. And perhaps *fetish* is the correct word, because we see in this preponderance of unusual letters something of her characteristic oppositionality: they are overrepresented, and the result is a sort of orthographical Fauvism. In the myopic world of the poem, an unusual letter pulls the reader up momentarily, in the same way that the

⁶⁰ 'A835', in Hadfield, *Almanacs*, p.49.

ringpulls do. Here, they are highlighted and showcased, so that language itself becomes syncopated.

The third is the use of *chrysanthemum*. In terms of referent, it is fair to say that this is native to the thematic domain; however, it still manages to sound unusual. I venture two reasons for this. Firstly, its multiple syllables and generous jumble of vowel and consonant sounds make it a fairly flashy word: here, it is made to sound even more so by its juxtaposition with the simple *bloom*. The second is its unconventional syntactic staging. It acts as either an adjective or an adverb; however, given that we only ever encounter *chrysanthemum* as a noun, both succeed in surprising.⁶¹

It should be noted that Hadfield has opted for *chrysanthemum* where Hill has *chrysanths*;⁶² as I observe elsewhere, the effect of the extra syllables is faintly muffling. This is bolstered by its chiming, within the line, with the *m* of *headlamps* and *bloom*. The line that follows is an unusually unadorned one for Hadfield, and one in which sibilance dominates. The third line, however – that ‘lax complexity of bladderwrack’ – is rich in hearty consonance and assonant rhyme. A woozy rhyme oscillates within the line, pairing the *xs* and the short *as*; the effect is that of a slow but ‘complex’ swaying within the four words. In terms of phonetics, we might say the first line is dominated by sonorants, the second by sibilants, and the third by plosives; we therefore have three distinct and contrasting textures working against one another.

If confirmation were needed that this is a poem of oppositionality, one need only look to the title: ‘A835’. This is the ‘she’ to which the poem refers, and once again, we uncover an axis of tension: it is unusual enough that A-road should intrude upon the pastoral, rather more so that it should be glorified, and downright odd that it should be personified and feminised.

⁶¹ The shuffling of parts of speech will be explored further in Chapter 5.

⁶² See 3.1.

In Hadfield's work, the tension between the landscape and the industrial is a two-way road and, as if to show that the proof of her sincerity is its reversal, she also gives us a poem in which the landscape invades the machine:

Ghostly is Francis Assisi for engines, loves the lot: the starling valves
of mopeds, the coltish GTIs. Lorries, awnings slack on knobbly
hips.⁶³

Here, it will be noted, the tension is precisely the same; the difference is that we have momentarily traded thematic domains. In this case it is the starlings and colts of the conventional pastoral that function as the ringpulls in the world of the engine.

Hadfield's language is so rich, so feverish in its inventiveness, that a relatively simple line like 'she sleeps on, sways' is sometimes necessary to offset it. This balance of tension finds its functional expression in the poem 'Tarentella'.⁶⁴ The poem's speaker, with her short, punchy verbs ('jolt', 'hook') and imagery of 'strep throat', 'lurgy' and 'scribbled cheeks', reads very like an incarnation of Hadfield's work as a whole. The doctor's recommendation of 'poultice, linctus, calamine' might therefore be thought of as a prescription for the poet herself. It's telling that the three are set against 'tequila, rotgut, slivovic': the tripartite arrangement encourages us to compare the two directly, and once again we find a strong tension set up. Here, the soothing trio introduced in the first lines serve only to highlight the feverishness – the heat and red-raw soreness – of the rest of the poem. Once again, Hadfield makes full use of phonetics to serve her purpose: 'calamine', with its murmuring consonants and hint of the word 'mild', is poised in opposition to the tight syllables, clotted vowels and implicit insalubrity of 'rotgut'. There is a similar tension

⁶³ 'A970', in Hadfield, *Almanacs*, p. 31.

⁶⁴ 'Tarantella', in Hadfield, *Almanacs*, p.21.

between ‘*Stay out of the cold, keep to your bed*’ and the line that follows, which is set up to match it in rhythm, if not in spirit: ‘Up go the arms, above my head’.

In order properly to categorise Hadfield’s use of oppositionality, I will now look to another poet who juxtaposed the industrial with the pastoral, to very different effect.

2.3 The Pylons

When we consider the modern interposing itself with the pastoral, and particularly when radio masts are invoked as quasi-deific, it is hard not to think of this most obvious of antecedents. The touchstone of what we have retrospectively come to term the ‘Pylon Poets’ is Stephen Spender’s ‘The Pylons’, a poem that presents alternating views of the pastoral and the industrial, but placing the two very much in contradistinction to one another – they interact only competitively. The first stanza presents the former as obsolescent:

The secret of these hills was stone, and cottages
Of that stone made,
And crumbling roads
That turned on sudden hidden villages.⁶⁵

A simple enough idyll; but the telling word here is *was*. It is reinforced by the use of *turned*, where we might reasonably expect *turn*: presumably, the roads have not changed their position; so pervasive is the altering effect of industrialisation that even atemporal verbs have been inflected accordingly. These pointers are in opposition to the word that opens the second stanza, which heralds the arrival of the pylons: ‘Now’. Having located landscape and pylon in two discrete temporal planes, Spender dedicates alternating stanzas to each; now, though, the landscape is ‘mocked dry’ – subjugated to the awful beauty of the pylons.

⁶⁵ Stephen Spender, ‘The Pylons’, in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1965), p. 34.

However, what follows is no lament to an unblighted landscape, but rather a paean to the pylons themselves. They are baldly objectified:

...those pillars
Bare like nude, giant girls that
have no secret.

Their wires are ‘whips of anger’ and have ‘lightning’s danger’; like Rilke’s angels, they are terrible: stark in their beauty, but beautiful nonetheless. The closing stanza synthesises landscape and pylon, but in doing so shunts the former firmly out of the picture: the pylon ‘dwarfs our emerald | Country’. The effect is complete: it is the industrial that dominates the closing lines of the poem. With the struggle over, the language resolves itself into a sort of post-coital serenity: they are ‘dreaming’ and take their place among speculative ‘clouds’. It is ‘cities’ that the pylons are dreaming of, so that, collectively, they function as a synecdoche for the urban as a whole, for ‘the quick | Perspective of the future’. The tense of the final lines projects into this future - an effect ballasted by the notion of ‘prophecy’. This is in direct contrast to the perfect tense of the first stanza, situating the rural firmly in the past. It is a contrast that is reinforced conceptually: the fastening of pylons to cities reminds us that the primary function of a pylon is to link, to deliver; this donates them a dynamism, next to which the landscape looks woefully inert.

Spender presents the industrial and the pastoral as absolutely distinct – so much so that one is entirely eclipsed by the other. This is not what Hadfield does at all: the industrial (together with the corporeal, the bathetic, the vulgar and the contemporary) is very much part of her landscape. That is not to say that she fails to acknowledge the tension between the two – rather, it is precisely this tension that creates her curious aesthetic of ‘companionable

opposites'. This distinction is crucial. Moreover, Hadfield's urbanisms do not operate as synecdoches – they are instead employed as complete and significant in themselves.

While superficially Hadfield and Spender appear to have similar enterprises – what one might flippantly term 'radio mast on the hill poetry' – their intentions, and their effects, are in fact dramatically different. Spender's approach was radical in that it casts a conventionally unbeautiful object as beautiful; while it acknowledges the disparity between the pylons' awful beauty and the more conventional beauty of the landscape, these are presented as subsets of the same thematic bracket: both are loaded on the same end of the see-saw, as it were. In Hadfield's manifesto – and indeed her poetry – discord itself is celebrated. It makes no sense to see radio mast and landscape as subsets, because both participate in – are necessary components of – the same thematic bracket: that of oppositionality.

2.4 Oppositionality as sublime

Ginsberg's essay 'When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake' contains the following:

...spontaneous irrational juxtaposition of sublimely related fact...the dentist drill singing against piano music; or pure construction of imaginaries, hydrogen jukeboxes, in perhaps abstract images (made by putting together two things verbally concrete but disparate to begin with).⁶⁶

This requires some deciphering: I'll begin with 'verbally concrete.' *Concrete* operates as the opposite of *abstract*. It is reasonable to assume – thanks to the qualifier 'verbally', and to the

⁶⁶ Alan Ginsberg, 'When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake', in *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*, ed. by Bill Morgan (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 247-253 (p. 247).

fact that *concretion* is a term with some currency in linguistics - that, in dealing with two *concretes*, we are dealing with two signifiers. Placed together, the relationship becomes synergistic: it is the effect produced by their juxtaposition that constitutes the 'abstract' in play. Specifically, the abstract in question is the sublime: in 'sublimely related fact', *sublime* qualifies the relation. The 'drill singing against piano music' seems to support this: it presents two utterly distinct and discordant elements, the placing together of which fits with Ginsberg's enterprise of distilling the sublime from the concrete. A drill - or a radio mast, or a ringpull - on its own is unremarkable; so too, in a way, is piano music. But the two working together - or rather, against one another (it is interesting that Ginsberg has chosen to use the word 'against'⁶⁷) - constitutes Ginsberg's formula for the sublime.

A second reading suggests itself. Though not a given definition of the word, *concrete* seems etymologically to offer itself as an antonym to *discrete*. On this reading, 'verbally concrete' would be akin to 'formally congruent'. The interjection Ginsberg provides is 'hydrogen jukeboxes';⁶⁸ in terms of denotata, *hydrogen* and *jukeboxes* are irreconcilably disparate. At a verbal level, however, both are dactylic; formally, one is lulled into accepting the two as linked. This echoes the formal congruence between *mussel-shells* and *ringpulls* I discussed in 1.4, and confirms what I have previously observed about happy accidents occurring between the 'redundancies' of paired signifiers.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Interesting because it fits with the idea of oppositionality.

⁶⁸ Though not referenced, the phrase is lifted from *Howl*.

⁶⁹ In 1.1.2

2.5 Hadfield and myth

The territory we typically term mythic has a rather austere or archaic flavour, and the pitfall for the poet is artificiality. Katy Evans-Bush acknowledges this danger in her review of *Almanacs*:

[Hadfield] is a mythmaker, which is a position carrying with it certain risks – of complacency, of archness, of failing to make it stick.⁷⁰

Yet Hadfield succeeds in navigating this difficult territory, and the key to this success, once again, is oppositionality. If the mythic is arch, then the ‘challenge’ must be the bathetic: and this is precisely the tension she sets up.

Hadfield frequently draws on Christian lore and Creation myths, treating them in much the same way as her landscape: she has no compunction, for example, about placing ‘a steaming bing of new manure’⁷¹ in the Garden of Eden. It is tempting to view this as deliberate desecration of the sacred – the crude besmirching of a cipher that stands for mankind’s pre-Fall innocence – she is, after all, essentially defecating on Eden. This, however, misses the point. Rather than degrade the Edenic, Hadfield glorifies – sanctifies – the most superbly worldly of glyphs. The inclusion of manure, though incongruous, even comical, is in fact perfectly synthesised with its setting. This is a garden, after all, a fact we tend to forget, given its status as mythic terrain. If we look a little more closely, we see that much has been made of this: the words ‘allotment’, ‘hothouse’ ‘orangery’ and ‘cabbage patch | of rich roseate heads’ appear in quick succession.

⁷⁰ Katy Evans-Bush, ‘Jen Hadfield: poet of intense lividness and linguistic richness’, *Baroque in Hackney* (2009) <<http://baroqueinhackney.com/2009/01/13/jen-hadfield-poet-of-intense-livedness-and-linguistic-richness/>> [accessed 2 October 2012] (para. 6 of 13).

⁷¹ Jen Hadfield, ‘No Snow Fell on Eden’, in *Nigh-No-Place* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2008), p.17.

The reason we forget that Eden is a garden is that its mythic status obliges us to think of it as composed of concepts rather than practicalities; in dilating on the latter, Hadfield revels in the fabric of myth, instead of what it might mean. I have touched on this idea before, in dealing with the material properties of language; in revelling in the surface texture of the myth, Hadfield performs the same feat as the dog looking at the finger rather than the thing being pointed at.⁷² And here, in this case, lies another axis of tension: that set up between the mythic and the corporeal. To have a conceptual territory behave as a physical one, complete with flourishing plants and defecating livestock, is deliberately to muddle domains we may not have thought of as distinct.

Hand-in hand with the archness of myth is a sense of detachment from their dramas; as part of her vivification of the myth, Hadfield performs the same service for Adam and Eve, casting them as recognisably human:

Eve never stayed up drinking and crying
Adam knew no one who was dying⁷³

This surprises in the same way that their cabbage patch surprises. We tend to think of mythic figures as fleshed out sufficiently to do what is required of them, but no more: that is, impalpably, with an aura of austerity, and lacking any agency beyond that which the demands of narrative have donated them. Here, the tawdriness of Eve's 'drinking and crying' does not match with our tenuous but arch perception of her. In this case, it is the clash between the remote and the familiar, the solemn and the trashy, that creates the tension. This will provide an apposite point at which to return to Jo Shapcott.

⁷² See 1.2.

⁷³ Hadfield, *Nigh-No-Place*, p.17.

2.6 Jo Shapcott's *Phrase Book*

We see an analogous, yet obverse, effect in Jo Shapcott's early poems, in which we meet Superman, Tom and Jerry, and Marlon Brando. If we suck creation myths dry of their didactic and ontological function, they become rich but hollow shared narratives, having much in common with the icons of popular culture. Here, even Brando is treated as a mythic figure, and this blurring of man and legend for the purposes of the poet is the same that we see in Hill's use of Offa, of whom Hill tells us that '[d]uring medieval times he was already becoming a creature of legend'.⁷⁴

There is a distinction to be made here. Hadfield matches the danger of mythic archness with the ugly, the disposable, and the corporeal. But the stuff of popular culture – comics, cartoons and blockbusters – suffer no such archness; quite the opposite, in fact: they are commonly regarded as lurid, trashy and two-dimensional. The tension to be set up must therefore pull in the opposite direction, as it were – these qualities must be met with their antitheses. In 'Superman Sounds Depressed',⁷⁵ the reader is presented with just that: a reversal that is more pathetic than bathetic.

Superman does sound depressed. He views his work as a thankless task, for which he can expect neither reward ('Apples for the teacher | are all I get') nor lasting recognition ('The trouble is | they forget me fast'). This note of resentment is at odds with our expectations of the 'Man of Steel', an icon embodying both physical and moral strength,⁷⁶ and exemplifying the idea that virtue is its own reward. These very human concerns find a similarly incongruent physical expression: his 'head aches', a complaint that is more

⁷⁴ Geoffrey Hill, *Mercian Hymns*, p. 36.

⁷⁵ Shapcott, 'Superman Sounds Depressed', in *Phrase Book*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁶ In fact, this last is only the case from the late 1940s onwards, when DC Comics' then editor imposed a strict moral code on all characters (Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Titan, 1998), p. 42).

mundane than dramatic, and he ‘feel[s] spelled all wrong’. Superman is a figure of primary colours, black-and-white morals, and right-angled jaw, and his only weakness – Kryptonite – is an external factor rather than an internal flaw; the general malaise suggested in Shapcott’s poem introduces a shade of grey that simply does not fit. His chief desire, meanwhile, is a painfully modest one:

Give me a dinner

a lovely long dinner in dim light, with someone,
someone who will propose something rude

so it doesn’t sound rude – just delicious -

‘[S]omething rude’ is touchingly coy, and delivers a small shock: we are impressed by the subtlety of human feeling we recognise in it. In fact, the phrase ‘I feel’ occurs twice within the poem, together with three instances of ‘I want’; the reader is thus forced to donate agency – and, by extension, human emotion – to a two-dimensional glyph, and is then moved by the plaintive nature of said agency. ‘I want’ is particularly unsettling; it is driven home by the fact it is left hanging before a line break, then repeated twice in quick succession:

...And I want us to eat scallops,
And I want to lick the juice from her chin

In terms of syntax, a more natural sentence would make use of ellipsis, so that the second ‘I want’ is omitted; the repeated ‘and’ also looks a little awkward. The effect is one of quiet desperation – of repressed desire finding an outlet. These lines are from the penultimate stanza of the poem, and there is a sense that the monologue has been building to this moment of unhappy honesty where measured speech breaks down. The poem zeroes in on the phrase ‘I want’ – synonymous with ‘I lack’ – and the reader feels subtly admonished: within the logic of the poem, the reader stands in for a complacent world that has failed to acknowledge

the 'I', let alone the fact that it might 'want'. The overall effect is terribly poignant, and it is this gravitas, set against the superficial nature of the subject matter, that creates the effect of incongruity.

A different kind tension is set up in 'Tom and Jerry Visit England'.⁷⁷ Here, the disjunct is between subject matter and vehicle: a cartoon is an unusual theme for poetry, a fact of which Shapcott appears to be highly conscious. The disparity finds its functional expression in Tom's acknowledgement of his discomfort: he 'ended up in a poem and it made me uneasy'.

Thanks to his animated status, Tom may become a 'concertina zig-zag', or have his 'brains [...] form a spout and a handle' when a teapot is shoved on his head, and still 'pop right back into [himself]'. Despite this marvellously protean skill, however, a poem appears to be the one place he cannot fit. He 'trip[s] | over commas and colons hard like diamonds', and questions in the text leave him with his 'front shaped | like question mark for hours'. He finds this uncharacteristic inflexibility 'scary', and, in a fantastic piece of metapoetic self-reference, Shapcott has him 'hesitate' before the final lines of the poem. But it is worth noting that what frightens Tom is precisely that which pleases the reader – that is to say, the incongruity between vehicle and subject. The surreal but ultimately empty frivolity of a cartoon is seemingly irreconcilable with the sincerity of a poem, and in marrying to two, Shapcott's poem pivots on this notion of contrast.

⁷⁷ Shapcott, 'Tom and Jerry Visit England', in *Phrase Book*, p.3.

2.7 Conclusions

As I have observed, the use of oppositionality produces a very particular aesthetic. It is worth noting that it seems to be at odds with the Classical perception of beauty, which demands not only uniformity, but also precision:

The sculptor Polykleitos was praised by contemporaries because his athletes represent perfectly proportioned man. The athlete referred to as Doryphoros was a canon of perfect measurements, a demonstration of the Greek belief that ideal beauty can be expressed mathematically.⁷⁸

The formula we have observed – which applies to both Hadfield’s Empress and Shapcott’s Superman – seems to contradict this absolutely: in each case, a note of imperfection is a necessary ingredient. But it should be remembered that the respective territories that these notes are sounding against are not the same in each case: Hadfield’s classically mythic and natural landscapes are tintured with the industrial, the modern and the bathetic, while Shapcott’s emotively barren icons are donated human feeling. It would appear that we crave conceptual tension, and, therefore, that the idea of uniform beauty – or indeed, uniformity itself as a prescription for the beautiful – is flawed. I have however, spoken of this aesthetic as a formula; further, we’ve seen that it may be applied algorithmically to analogous but differing – and, indeed, obverse – cases. It is therefore tempting to think that the idea of a mathematically discoverable (and applicable) prescription for the beautiful is not as flawed as it first appears: rather, it must dispense with the notion of uniformity in favour of the tension afforded by oppositionality. To answer the question posed at the beginning of the chapter: she is beautiful because she takes as her cohort ‘the challenge’ – the force essential to creation – and, indeed, to beauty.

⁷⁸ Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male* (London: Paddington Press, 1978), pp. 37-38.

This idea can be taken further, of course. Such an aesthetic chimes with the convention of postmodern double-coding propounded by Charles Jencks:

Thus the schizophrenic situation I defines as postmodern: an architecture [...] that is based on new techniques *and* old patterns. To simplify: double-coding means elite/popular, accommodating/subversive and new/old. These exaggerated styles explain why postmodernism is so often ironic. Irony, like parody, can say *two different things at the same time* [my italics] [...] [It] is the way the codes are layered and contrasted that brings the style to consciousness, makes it recognisable.⁷⁹

To paraphrase Eco, Hadfield has revisited the past – and the pastoral – with irony, where irony has a very specific meaning: that of dissonant beauty or disharmonious harmony, of saying ‘two different things at the same time’. This sharpening of irony will be revisited in 6.4, with reference to my own poems.

In 2.1, I observed that Skerryman stands as a cipher for ontological profligacy: as mythic catch-all, patchwork of experiences, and beetle-drawer of heterogeneous fancies. In this way, he not only represents oppositionality, but also embodies it: he acts as a sort of prism refracting himself. However, he also acts as a mirror.

Interestingly, for a poet who allies herself so closely to her landscape, Hadfield’s territory is a borrowed one: though *Almanacs* was written in Shetland, she was born in Cheshire, and studied in Glasgow and Strathclyde.⁸⁰ It is a reminder that geography is a matter of contingency; this idea chimes with the epigraph Hadfield uses to introduce ‘Lorelei’s Lore’:

*Hey Hey Bo’ Weevil. Where’s your native home?*⁸¹

⁷⁹ Charles Jencks, *Critical Modernism*, 5th edn (Chichester: John Wiley, 2007), p. 52.

⁸⁰ Hadfield, *Almanacs*, p. 2.

⁸¹ Hadfield, *Almanacs*, p.17.

This is a blues refrain, but it is not too much of a stretch to read it as a sincere autobiographical question. It makes sense that discord should be so tied up in Hadfield's sense of identity in place, because she is herself the apparently discordant element in a landscape. That a delicate balance of belonging and not-belonging should produce a poetic voice that pivots on the notion of discord is not strange, because *Skerryman is Hadfield*: a rich but imported mythic-catchall, simultaneously bogus and authentic.

Oppositionality, put to poetic purpose, may be seen as performing two main functions. The first is aesthetic: quite simply, it is pleasing. The second is more utilitarian: as I have observed, it can be employed to offset an undesirable element in a poem. In the examples above, the mythic is saved from archness, and popular culture is elevated from being viewed as disposable or irrelevant. I will be looking at my own experiments in oppositionality in 6.2.

3 Buried Treasure! Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*

3.1 Etymarchaeology

Playful is not an adjective commonly coupled to Geoffrey Hill. However, a little digging reveals the language of *Mercian Hymns* to be highly ludic; and, as will be seen, *digging* is a particularly apposite term when dealing with Hill.

Then he dismissed you, and the rest of us followed,
sheepish next-of-kin, to the place without the
walls: spoil-heaps of chrysanthus dead in their
plastic macs, eldorado of washstand marble.⁸²

One of the first things that trips a switch is the paring of *sheepish* with *next-of-kin*, because—just audible, bookending the words — one can hear the word *sheepskin*. Stretched out on the rack of superficial sense, it is tempting to dismiss this as happy accident. More obviously interesting is the pairing of *sheepish* with the word that precedes it (*followed*), because this immediately charges the word *sheepish* with additional meanings. The most readily accessed meaning of the word *sheepish* will do just fine: the formality of a funeral — and particularly one that has, in the preceding verset, been described as almost comically awkward — is enough to make mourners feel self-conscious, and therefore *sheepish*. However, *followed* and *sheepish* invoke the common collocation ‘followed like sheep’, encouraging the reader to think of *sheepish* as meaning ‘sheep-like’ — that is to say, imitative of the movement of sheep — individuals moving, as one, where they are directed. But *followed* also donates an additional meaning: the word *sheep* — or, more commonly, *flock* — is used to describe Christian worshippers; another word used to describe the faithful is *followers*. The coupling

⁸² Hill, ‘IX: Offa’s Book of the Dead’, in *Mercian Hymns*, p. 11.

of the two makes this meaning explicit, and also appropriate, given that the drama of the verset takes place in a church.

The second element that sounds a warning bell that something interesting is going on beneath the surface is ‘the place without the walls’: referring, here, to the graveyard towards which the ‘sheepish’ mourners are herded. The construction seems unnecessarily enigmatic: while it is certainly true that graveyards lack walls (in the sense of the walls of a building, at least), so too do football pitches and beaches; that is to say, ‘the place without the walls’ is not denotatively useful. Furthermore, on this reading the second *the* is redundant: ‘the place without walls’ would be a less awkward construction.⁸³

The awkward phrasing, together with its playfully elliptical nature, means that the phrase reads like a riddle, encouraging the reader to look again. On a second reading, the phrase does reveal itself to be a sort of riddle, pivoting on the dual meaning of the word *without* – ‘without the walls’ may also, of course, mean ‘outside of the walls’. In one turn of phrase, Hill gives us both location and description, wrapped up in a momentary puzzle.

Here I will invoke Paul Muldoon’s idea of being ‘alert to resisted usage’.⁸⁴ I have observed that the construction is playfully elliptical; Muldoon characterises circumlocution of this kind as the hallmark of a poet ‘quite determined not to allow’ a word onto the page. In other words, what word is conspicuous in its absence?

In this instance, the absent word is *graveyard*, and this paves the way for another interpretation. The village of Wall – not far from Hill’s native Bromsgrove, situated within (and dating from) Anglo-Saxon Mercia – has the curious honour of being one of few

⁸³ Some would argue that Hill intended no equivocation here; rather, that he intended the more archaic meaning of the word *without* to be the first that the reader reaches for. I venture, however, that the momentary confusion is indeed intentional, and is a result of breaking the phrase over a line. The line break leaves phrase ‘the place without the’ momentarily hanging; during this half-beat, the reader must provisionally settle on a meaning of the word *without*. ‘Lacking’ is by far the most common meaning of the word, and it is this meaning with which we are forearmed when we meet the word *walls*, at the beginning of the next line. The reader is duped only momentarily, but duped nonetheless.

⁸⁴ Paul Muldoon, *The End of The Poem* (London: Faber, 2006), p.26.

settlements that can intelligibly be rendered in the plural, given that one half of it lies on a plateau, the other 16m lower. The construction ‘without the walls’ may therefore be understood as ‘situated outside the village of Wall’. This interpretation becomes more plausible when one considers the fact that the nearest settlement to Wall is the city of Lichfield; *lich*, it will be remembered, is the Middle English word for a corpse, and a *lichfield* therefore a ‘field of the dead’; or, a graveyard. *The place without the walls* may therefore be a graveyard, and also the place that bears the name graveyard. And in fact, there is a St.Chad’s in Lichfield, of Anglican denomination.⁸⁵ The church dates from the 7th century, and therefore predates the Reformation by several centuries; I believe Hill chooses to include the detail that it ‘smelled a bit “high”, of censors’⁸⁶ as a nod to its Catholic heritage. This is another play on words, of course: the term *High* is used to describe the ritual practices of Anglicanism generally associated with the Catholic Church, among them the use of incense. But it also has a very specific olfactory application, here invoked by the use of the verb *smells*: game that has been hung overlong is said to be ‘high’. Given that *high*, in this context, is a more delicate means of saying ‘slightly decomposed’, it is an appropriate, though rather dark, allusion for a funeral.

High links rather neatly with *spoil-heaps*, another obvious play on words. *Spoils* suggest accumulated or plundered treasure, a sharpening made explicit by its coupling with *heap*: we think of hoarded treasure as arranged in heaps. Here, however, *spoil-heaps* refers to dead flowers, so they are also ‘spoiled’ in the more conventional sense: they are heaps of spoiled flowers. It will be noted, additionally, that *spoil-heap* is akin to *spoil-tip*, the name given to enormous piles of overburden that result from mining or excavation. It is an

⁸⁵ ‘St. Chad’s Garth’ is referenced in the verset that follows the one quoted.

⁸⁶ In the verset that precedes the one quoted.

appropriate reference, given the inhumation treated here, and the larger exhumation that *Mercian Hymns* undertakes.⁸⁷

The phrase ‘crysanthus dead in their plastic macs’ is also interesting. If we look at – or perhaps ‘listen to’ would be more appropriate – the working parts of the phrase, we see that the components share the same consonant and vowel sounds: /k/, /s/, /ɪ/, and /æ/ are dominant. It is an arrangement that appeals to the ear: the effect is a crisp rustling and crackling that faithfully invokes the sound of the plastic in which flowers are kept. It would appear that Hill has chosen the informal British *chrysanth* over the full *chrysanthemum* in order to avoid the muffling effect that the extra syllable would produce.

Materially fitting in the same way that the crysanthus are in their place, we have gravestones described as ‘eldorado of washstand-marble’, within which may be detected a faint but tantalising echo. The phonic component gives itself up easily enough: the final two syllables of *eldorado* provide an assonant rhyme with *marble*. We also have a visible echo – the first three letters of *eldorado* form a mirror image of the final three letters of *marble*. But *eldorado* is an unusual word, and one with a history packed into it, which should alert us to the fact that it deserves greater attention. It literally means ‘golden’, and originally referred to the City of Gold dreamt up by the Conquistadors. This is fitting, of course, given that the lettering of headstones is frequently gilded. However, it is linked by sense to the *spoil-heaps* that sits directly above it, feeding the idea of hoarded treasure. A third point of the ‘golden’ triangle is offered by *chrysanths*, whose name – deriving from the Greek *khrusos* – literally means ‘golden flower’.

⁸⁷ *Heaps* recalls the statement with which David Jones introduces *The Anathemata*: ‘I have made a heap of all I could find’ (‘Preface to The Anathemata’, in *Selected Works of David Jones*, ed. by John Matthias (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), pp. 115-137 (p. 115)). Jones attributes the statement to Nennius, of whom he writes: ‘He speaks of an “inward wound” which was caused by the fear that certain things dear to him “should be like smoke dissipated”’ (p. 115). In this we see something of the curatorial intent that underwrites Jones’ great project, but we might equally apply it to *Mercian Hymns*.

A clue as to the preponderance of buried treasure in this verset may be found in the closing lines, in which the speaker addresses the dead directly:

I unburden the saga of your burial, my dear.

Saga is another loaded word. From the Old Norse, its meaning is ‘narrative’. The notion of unburdening oneself of a narrative is not strange: it fits with the contemporary psychotherapeutic practices of counselling and talking cures, and with the commonplace ‘getting something off one’s chest.’ In Hill’s work, however, it wears its history ostentatiously. Its Norse heritage looms large, an effect bolstered by its use alongside spoil-heaps and pockets of etymologically interred gold. The invocation is of Viking funerary rites, of which that of ship burial was shared with the Anglo-Saxons; suddenly, the ghosted *sheepskin* looks intentional rather than accidental. It will be remembered that the Sutton Hoo burial site was found to contain large quantities of golden objects and animals skins; the areas at the East of the site, where such artefacts were piled highest, are known as the ‘Heaps’ area. Interred below the poem, then, we find a living vein of the past running through the language. Language becomes a geological sample into which one can read the layers of competing but synthesized histories.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ At the beginning of this section, I described Hill’s language as *ludic*; we might equally say that many of Hill’s versets present as riddles. This is highly appropriate, given the historical scope of *Mercian Hymns*, and the status enjoyed by the riddle in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The relationship between the poem and the riddle will be explored further in 4.2, and in relation to my own poems in 6.1.2.

3.2 Offasitionality

I have observed previously that Hill's Offa has something in common with Hadfield's Skerryman; this may be detected in the very first poem of *Mercian Hymns*, in which Hill introduces his mythic catch-all with a series of epithets not dissimilar to that quoted in 2.1:⁸⁹

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sand-
stone: overlord of the M5 [...]⁹⁰

This does more than ratify Offa's tenure of 'all history and all geography';⁹¹ it also employs the same oppositionality I have observed in both Hadfield and Shapcott's poems. *Holly-groves* and *sandstone* are emblematically natural, and the former is additionally enduring, a fact reinforced by the qualifier *perennial*: these are ur-ciphers, which certainly carry with them that danger of archness. *Riven*, meanwhile, is self-consciously archaic, and is set up to work against what follows – the unexpected appearance of the M5. Everything about this jars with what precedes it: it is manmade (and therefore 'unnatural'), modern (rather than perennial) and ugly, in the sense that the industrial is conventionally viewed as ugly when contrasted with the natural. It also sticks out at a visual level: the fact that it is composed of a letter and a number means it simply does not look right on the page, and we are forced to pull up short: its phonetics do not match its typographical representation.

This same dissonance may be seen in 'II', in which Hill homes in on the phonetics of the name *Offa* itself:

⁸⁹ As Louise Kemeny points out, this echoes the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the panegyric, in which the subject is introduced with a series of epithets (in 'Archaeology of Words – Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*', *The Literateur* (2009) < <http://literateur.com/archaeology-of-words-geoffrey-hills-mercian-hymns/> > [accessed 12 December 2012] (para. 3 of 20))

⁹⁰ Hill, 'I: The Naming of Offa', in *Mercian Hymns*, p. 3.

⁹¹ Henry Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1986), p. 153.

A pet-name, a common name. Best-selling brand, curt
Graffito. A laugh; a cough. A syndicate. A specious
Gift. Scoffed-at horned phonograph.⁹²

As with Muldoon's Brownlee, the sound of the name runs through the list like a current. It can be heard in the repeated fricatives of *Graffito*, *cough* and *scoffed* – in this last, it is almost rendered visually. Other elements act as a series of riddles, whose solutions deliver the same sound, so that the list acts as a kind of sigil, drumming out the name over and over. 'Best-selling brand' implies a *special offer*, while a 'curt graffito' suggests any of a number of expletives coupled with the word *off*. It should be noted, however, that the areas from which Hill draws here – advertising, graffiti, and so on – are not only modern, but also ephemeral; they are therefore very much at odds with 'perennial' holly-groves and 'riven' sandstone. These natural ciphers form part of a long tradition of looking to the land and digging downwards in an attempt to locate an identity: the earth beneath one's feet, with its capacity to preserve and calibrate historical records, delivers a natural metaphor for one's own history; as Hart points out, 'for Hill, the past is always a site to excavate'.⁹³ Here, however, he has lifted and netted an identity from surface localities; working against the collection as a whole, with its continual excavation of 'mother-earth'⁹⁴ and 'the variably-resistant soil'⁹⁵, a tension is set up that jars – and pleases – in the same way that the M5 does, working against 'riven sandstone'.

We see Hill's talent for contrasting textures, both phonetic and conceptual, in the final lines of 'XVI: Offa's Sword':

⁹² Hill, 'II', in *Mercian Hymns*, p. 4.

⁹³ Hart, p.160.

⁹⁴ Hill, 'IV', in *Mercian Hymns*, p. 6.

⁹⁵ Hill, 'XII', in *Mercian Hymns*, p.14.

...an expenditure, a
Hissing. Wine, urine and ashes.⁹⁶

What to make of this strange valedictory trio. It reads like an incantation. The first two words are phonetically very close; with a little linguistic digging, they can be shown to be even more so. In Old English, the *w* sound is rendered using the now extinct letter *wynn*; this was ultimately replaced by the pairing of two *us*.⁹⁷ Given that a single *u* stands in for the *w* in order to convert it to *urine*, *wine* and *urine* are almost the same word. *Ashes*, with its heavy sibilance, is therefore the odd one out; this is also the case at a conceptual level, given that the first two are liquids, while the third is antithetical to the notion of liquid – its etymological root is in the Latin *arere*, ‘to be dry’. But there’s another tension set up in the list: ashes and urine are both waste products, where wine is not. In fact, we are pulled up short by the juxtaposition of *wine* and *urine* – there is something distasteful about the pairing of a liquid we drink with one we excrete, a disjunct reinforced by their phonetic proximity⁹⁸. *Urine* and *ashes* may also be yoked together in that both link with the preceding idea of “a | Hissing”. *Hissing* would stand alone as an appropriately onomatopoeic verb for urine, but the obvious rhyme with *pissing* ratifies the relationship. Ashes, meanwhile, do hiss – notably when liquid is applied.

Wine and *ashes* may also be paired. Both feature in Christian tradition, and notably in the Catholic Mass – one as a sacrament, one as a sacramental. Seen in this respect, these two work against the word *urine* – which now produces a strong contrast with the other two, in the same way that Hadfield’s manure works against the Garden of Eden. With a little

⁹⁶ Hill, *Mercian Hymns*, p.18.

⁹⁷ A fact recorded in the name of the letter: *double-u*.

⁹⁸ See 1.4.

transubstantiation, the two become divine; *urine* provides a note of bathos bordering on the profane.

These three words, juxtaposed with one another, therefore form a digraph in which we can identify three distinct axes: one phonetic, one conceptual in empirical terms, and one conceptual in theological terms. Along these axes we see a continual shuttling (and shuffling) of tensions within the linguistic and conceptual textures of the items in Hill's inventory.

Heaney counts Hill among those poets he terms 'hoarders and shorers of what they take to be the real England'.⁹⁹ Offa assumes a similar role to Hadfield's Skerryman, as a multivalent catch-all for an identity. But where Skerryman has something to say about the contingent relationship between identity and geographical location, Offa is a figure rooted in Hill's England, via the etymological catacombs of the language.

By way of comparison, I'm now going to look at a sequence of poems that employs wordplay to very different effect.

⁹⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind' in *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber, 2002), pp.77-95 (p. 77)). That *shorer* has an echo of Eliot's 'these fragments I have shored against my ruin'. (T.S. Eliot, 'The Wasteland', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 79). This in turn has something in common with David Jones' claim, quoted in *The Anathemata*, to have 'made a heap of all I could find' ('Preface to The Anathemata', in *Selected Works of David Jones*, ed. by John Matthias (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), pp. 115-137 (p.115)). Both statements sum up the enterprise for which Offa and Skerryman act as mouthpieces.

3.3 *Treasure Arcade*

There is no such thing as separable form or content; form is content-as-arranged, or content is form-as-exemplified. No proposition in poetry is detachable from its functional expression.¹⁰⁰

We two, love:
waterboatmen on a broad, bleak pond between galaxies – alive
but hardly alive. Just blinked out of dust, light spots. Now look –
the whole cold stub of me fades against a hive of stars, dumbstruck.¹⁰¹

With their psalmic shape, the poems that make up *Treasure Arcade* look a little like the versets of *Mercian Hymns*. Here, however, it seems the similarity ends – it is hard to think of a project more distant in its aims than a sequence of poems about computer games. On the other hand, given the recursive nature of form and content, it is unsurprising that hyperludic poets should produce work that take play, or games, as their subject. And, as will be seen, an interesting parallel may be drawn between the two.

At first sight, *Treasure Arcade* looks very like a pointless exercise in formal constraint. The collection is prefaced with the following explanatory note:

These poems use an invented, as-yet-nameless poetic form consisting of one short line and three long ones. The second line ends in a ‘fuzzy’ rhyme with the first (ie. using the same group of consonants), the third line ends in a word associated by sense or phrase with the last word of the second line and the fourth line (the ‘boss’ line) contains pure or near-pure rhymes with all of the previous lines.¹⁰²

Two things define these poems, one commonplace, the other unusual. The first is that each must be re-read several times before it hands over all its devices. The second is that the reader comes to the poem forearmed with the rules – or tools – with which to approach them.

¹⁰⁰ Vendler, p. 8.

¹⁰¹ Jon Stone, ‘Galaxy Game’, in *Treasure Arcade* (London: Sidekick Books, 2014), p. 4.

¹⁰² Stone, p. 3.

A form that requires explanation ought to thwart Vendler's definition of form as 'content-as-exemplified'¹⁰³ – form should to produce an effect, rather than describe an intention. To put it another way, it ought to do the work without showing its strings. *Treasure Arcade* flies in the face of this commitment by simultaneously withholding the desired effects, and displaying its strings ostentatiously. In other words, these ought to be textbook failed poems.

The form demands that the reader proceed meticulously. The fuzzy rhymes are subtle, and do not give themselves up all that easily – without having been alerted to them, they would be easy to miss. The sense rhymes, meanwhile, are not synthesized with the concerns of the poem, and should therefore constitute a series of misfires – they do not participate in semantic esemplasticity, and look instead like filigree. In the example quoted above, it is not at all obvious how the phrase *look alive* – delivered in the sense rhyme between lines two and three – links to the poem's subject.

However, something interesting occurs over successive readings, in that the experience of reading itself becomes curiously mimetic of the content. The multiple attempts one makes at digging out the formal quirks work like the levels of a game: when one has captured or resolved each one, one has effectively 'completed' it. The poem can still be revisited, but with the sense that one has unlocked all its components, including defeating the 'boss' in the final line. In other words, the reader must literally 'play' the poems.

What has this got to do with *Mercian Hymns*? It has something useful to say about the versatility of the signifier as a plaything. *Mercian Hymns* posits 'the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments',¹⁰⁴ Hill's

¹⁰³ Vendler, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', in *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber, 2002), pp.77-95 (p. 77)

endeavour to lay claim to ‘all history and all geography’¹⁰⁵ is accomplished by digging into language, the compost in which a shared history is fossilized and stratified. *Treasure Arcade* achieves precisely the opposite: here, language is stripped of its history, and the poet wilfully makes use of the most superficial aspects of the signifier: words are made to fit together like Tetris blocks, and, to borrow Johnson’s phrase once again, ‘the most heterogeneous terms are yoked together by violence’.¹⁰⁶ In the two-dimensional world of the computer game, language takes on an amnesiac quality, endlessly manipulable and formally transformable, so that sense becomes subject to formal tinkering, rather than history. To put it another way, we see Hill and Stone and undertaking two opposed endeavours of linguistic play: one uncovers a history interred within language, while the other treats signifier as a found object, placed in a fantastical setting and divorced from historical commitments. In this, Stone has something in common with what Derrida terms the *bricoleur*:

Someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous.¹⁰⁷

We may therefore view Hill and Stone as adopting positions of companionable opposition: for the former, the Text behaves in the same way as the ‘the variably-resistant soil’,¹⁰⁸ riddled with living roots and artefacts; for the latter, the signifier is an item of bric-a-brac, to be tinkered with, knick-knacked, taken apart and repurposed as he sees fit.

¹⁰⁵ Heaney, p.77.

¹⁰⁶ See footnote 36.

¹⁰⁷ Derrida, p. 360.

¹⁰⁸ Hill, ‘XII’, in *Mercian Hymns*, p.14.

3.4 Conclusions

In 1.3, I observed that the etymological trajectory of the signifier is the ‘redundancy’ played with in the case of the etymological pun. It is a redundancy uniquely suited to Hill’s purpose, in that its manipulation allows him to bury layers of additional signification within *Mercian Hymns*. As a quirk of language, it transforms the Text from, say, the two-dimensional traffic of information across a computer screen, to a marlpit in which centuries of history are interred and preserved.

This quirk may be put to creative purpose, too. While etymology may reveal the naturally metaphorical basis for language, the metaphors it offers are at times surprising. Don Paterson suggests that poets ‘should always hear the evening in “west”, see the little man in the centre of the “pupil”, the beardless youth in “callow”, or the terrible star in “disaster”’.¹⁰⁹ While a typically prescriptive pronouncement, it is true that a knowledge of etymology provides the poet with ready metaphors pre-poised at the ideal point between nativity and alienity. I will be looking at my own experiments with etymology in 6.3.1.

¹⁰⁹ Don Paterson, ‘The Dark Art of Poetry’ (2004) < <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/1.html> > [accessed 16 August 2014] (para. 41 of 49).

4 Hide and Seek with Paul Muldoon

4.1 Key words

In 1.5, I touched on Muldoon's predilection for hiding his subject within the weave of the text. In that instance, the key-word (*Brownlee*) was scattered as a phonic mannequin. I will now look at another example that makes use of additional ways in which the text may conceal its subject.

*Sleeve Notes*¹¹⁰ is a sequence of poems that take seminal albums as their subject. In the case of case of 'The Beatles: The Beatles',¹¹¹ Muldoon takes the correct title of the album as the title of his poem, despite the fact that the entire world knows it as *The White Album*. It is reasonable, therefore, that we expect the key-word to be *white*.

Sure enough, Muldoon hides the alternative title with a series of signposts pointing towards both the word *white* and its referent. It is there in the form of a rhyme in the end-word of the first line (*night*), and ballasted by the alliterated 'winter when' that precedes it: in other words, it is another hypogram. This also operates as a sense rhyme, thanks to the collocation 'white nights.' And *night* is full-rhymed throughout the poem in a privileged end-of-line position, drumming out the requisite sound.

Further on, it is present in the reference to the USSR, by way of a sense rhyme on 'White Russian.' The colour white (rather than the word) may be detected in the reference to 'milk', and in the image of plane 'touch[ing] its nose down'. There is also this:

¹¹⁰ Paul Muldoon, *Hay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 29-51

¹¹¹ Muldoon, p.33.

when it showed up right

on cue

It is a strange line-break, the function of which appears to be leaving the words ‘on cue’ isolated. This is another signpost: the cue ball is the white ball in a game of pool.

It is also a poem much concerned with gaps and spaces – ‘Cicero and Caesar’ is a typically tantalising coupling, and one that suggests something else may be going on. A cicero is a unit of type, not dissimilar to an em dash; a caesura, meanwhile, is a pause in a line. In addition, the second stanza of then poem has no fewer than four ellipses. This in itself represents a pause, and the word itself means ‘omission’ – which is appropriate, given the resisted usage dealt with here. The overall effect of these typographical gaps appears to be to draw attention to what is going on behind the text – that is to say, the white space in and around the poem. And, in fact, the typographical term for gaps in typesetting is *rivers of white*.

Something typically Muldoonian happens in the final line of the poem, where Muldoon drops the tricks and hands us the solution to the riddle, as the final word of the poem. He also makes explicit the subterfuge, by actually drawing attention to the play:

I’d never noticed the play on ‘*album*’ and ‘white.’

It is not particularly surprising that Muldoon has chosen to show his hand this way. This is a poet who has stated that ‘part of writing is about manipulation – leaving them high and dry, at some corner of a terrible party, where I’ve nipped out through the bathroom window’.¹¹² The

¹¹² Clair Wills, Nick Jenkins and John Lanchester, ‘An Interview with Paul Muldoon’, *Oxford Poetry*, 3.1 (1986/1987), pp. 14-20 (pp. 19-20).

I observed in 2.1 that Hadfield’s Skerryman has something in common with the Trickster archetype; Muldoon effectively cuts out the middleman, but casting himself in this role.

reader is here left indulging the manipulation, when the poet has dropped the pretence. But there is another good reason for doing this: supplying the key word prevents the poem from resolving itself into a riddle.

As there is often an element missing – or rather, hidden - in Muldoon’s poems, they do operate rather like riddles. That is to say, there is a discoverable ‘solution’ tucked away within them. This raises an interesting question – what, precisely, is the difference between a poem and a riddle?

4.2 The poem vs the riddle

The riddle does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it.¹¹³

Etymologically speaking, the riddle and the poem make for comfortable bedfellows, given that *riddle* shares with the verb *read* the Old English root *rædan* (to read, counsel). The following definition of a riddle is no more helpful in terms of differentiation:

A statement or question that is intentionally worded in a puzzling or misleading way.¹¹⁴

‘Puzzling’ chimes with the ‘cryptic’ manifesto of *Mercian Hymns*¹¹⁵, while ‘misleading’ is an apt paraphrase for telling it slant – it gestures towards the valorization of redundancies

¹¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, in Mark Bryant, *Riddles Ancient and Modern* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p.13.

¹¹⁴ McArthur, p.870.

¹¹⁵ See 1.2.

discussed in Chapter 1. The status enjoyed by the riddle in the Anglo-Saxon tradition further reinforces the parallel:

The mentality which can simultaneously engage with the sense of the *literal* statement and with the *implicit* and ‘truer’ import of the concealed meaning is a mentality alert to symbolism and allegory; and not surprisingly techniques of the riddle may be traced in poetry of other genres where ambiguity and systematic symbolism or allegory are deliberately cultivated.¹¹⁶

Mark Bryant, in *Riddles Ancient and Modern*, links the riddle to the enigma, which is, in etymological terms, ‘to speak allusively’.¹¹⁷ He goes on to distinguish the riddle from other forms of formalised allusion with an appeal to the use of metaphor; he comments further, of the literary riddle, that it has been ‘deliberately crafted around the written form’.¹¹⁸ He goes on to identify several different forms of riddle, all of which pivot on the material identity of the signifier: the conundrum, for example, relies on homophonic punning, while the charade breaks up the phonics of the solution’s constituent syllables. Once again, nothing here serves to distinguish the riddle from its etymological cohort.

However, Wittgenstein’s dismissal, quoted at the head of this section, signposts a useful distinction. The statement seems a to be a wrongheaded way of thinking about its subject, because it disregards the fundamental characteristic of the riddle: its solveability. In every case, the riddle contains a solution, a key word that unlocks and neutralises it. Not so the poem: its aims exceed the uncovering of a key word, and while it may pose a question, it does not invite resolution. In other words, and it makes no sense to talk of a poem being ‘solved,’ or even ‘resolved.’

¹¹⁶ S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Orion, 1987), p. 368.

¹¹⁷ Bryant, p.13.

¹¹⁸ Bryant, p.14

Several forms, such as the acrostic, the telestich, and echo verse, make use of riddish mechanics to embed a keyword or message within them. It is interesting to note, however, that play of this kind has a tendency to flatten a poem: when play becomes the focus, rather than a tool, a kind of foreshortening effect occurs, where the concerns of the poem shrink to the confines of its own borders. It effectively operates a series of blind doors, where the solutions are sufficient to resolve the lines. The result is a poem that feels like a parlour trick, and also rather pleased with itself. I have fallen into this trap myself, and will discuss some examples in Chapter 6.

The distinction between the poem and a riddle, then, is analogous to that between the door of an advent calendar and a bona fide threshold. In each case, the play is trivial if not bent towards poetic purpose. It is therefore not surprising that Muldoon chooses to hand over the solution to his wordplay: the deliberate string-showing effectively neuters the question that would have framed the riddle.

Lewis Turco posits four different ‘levels’ on which the poet may manipulate language: the *typographical*, the *sonic*, the *sensory* and the *ideational*.¹¹⁹ ‘The Beatles: The Beatles’ employs the first level (the typographical) in its use of ellipses, the second (the sonic) in its use of rhyme, and the third (the sensory) in its imagery of white objects. However, it is the fourth level – the ideational – that ties this play together. There is a good reason for the subterfuge: *The White Album* ought to be missing, because it is not actually the correct title of the album. Similarly, Brownlee has left, so he is effectively a missing element – Muldoon’s ‘hiding’ of him means he is simultaneously absent, but present as subject.¹²⁰ In

¹¹⁹ Lewis Turco, *The New Book of Forms* (Hanover: university Press of new England, 1986), p. 4.

¹²⁰ This juggling of presence and absence brings to mind Derrida’s *free play*, as expounded in ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ (See footnote 15) – it is hard to imagine that this is unintentional.

other words, in both examples, a little temporary occlusion participates in the semantic esemplasticity of the poems.

4.3 Muldoon's 'riddles'

it's like something keeping a secret
from itself, like something on the tip of its own tongue.¹²¹

In *Horse Latitudes*, Muldoon supplies us with a poem that takes as its title the word 'Riddle', which ought to make for interesting analysis. It proceeds according to a classic riddle form, using word pairing to isolate the constituent letters of the solution. So:

My first may be found, if ever found it is, quite firmly embedded in grime
but not in rime¹²²

As riddles go, it is not particularly challenging. The solution – *griddle* – gives itself up easily enough, and seems disappointing;¹²³ the most we might say about it is that it furnishes a rhyme word for the title. But this is not a riddle; rather, it is a poem masquerading as one, and it has something interesting to say about Muldoon's relationship to verbal trickery.

Having paired two words linked only by formal congruence – *grime* and *rime*, say – Muldoon riffs off the combined sense of the pairing, and constructs a small drama involving both. These two are mobilised – and synthesised – thus:

[...] I'm
cold as well as dirty, what with being stowed away almost all the time.

¹²¹ 'Yarrow', in Paul Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 39-189 (p. 44).

¹²² 'Riddle', in Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 76.

¹²³ Not my verdict, but Steven Matthews', in 'Muldoon's New Poems and Lyrics', in *Poetry Review*, 97:1 (2007) pp. 90-92 (p.92).

This is in keeping with the self-referential form of the riddle – teaser clues that ballast letter-isolation with first-person description. It constitutes a neat and coyly enigmatic complaint on the part of a cooking implement stashed at the back of a cupboard. The second pairing of words – *oar* and *roar* – moves the drama on by introducing buccaneers – a seemingly irreconcilable element (though foreshadowed by the use of the word ‘stowed’ in the first stanza). The poem proceeds through a faintly absurd narrative in which said buccaneers set ashore, use the griddle, then leave it behind.

In each stanza, the narrative is moved along by a ‘cue’ word (one of the two rhyming, letter-isolating words). Thus the pairing of *drum* with *rum* leads the buccaneers to be ‘drunken’, while the pairing of *leaves* and *eaves* precipitates the griddle being abandoned. In each case, something is added to the picture by one of the cue-words. And, in fact, this semantic prompting is signposted in the final stanza of the poem, in which there is a mention of ‘the buccaneers from whom I still take my cue’. At this point the poem’s pop-up play packs itself away neatly. That *cue* combines with *barb* to produce ‘barbecue’ – which not only supplies a synonym for griddle, but also – by way of etymology – provides one for ‘buccaneer’.¹²⁴ In other words, it acts as a semantic pivot between two apparently arbitrarily paired ideas.

Furthermore, the griddle did come to the party with a date, as it were: now is a good time to reiterate that it takes its rhyme from the title – Riddle – the term that underwrites the mechanics of the poem. It is also worth noting that one of the first paired words is *rime* – here, used to refer to ice crystals, but also functioning as a pun: the word is an archaic spelling of *rhyme*. This, too, is self-referential, in that it describes itself, but also says

¹²⁴ From C17th French *boucanier* – literally, ‘barbecuer’.

something about its function within the poem. In Muldoon's poems, all signifiers are marauding egoists.

Throughout the poem, puns and allusions coalesce about the narrative, with culinary vocabulary – 'raw', 'lump of dough', 'coals', 'stovepipe', 'steak' parcelled in every stanza. The reference to a 'heart of steel', meanwhile, is self-consciously imitative of the circumlocutory description of the classic riddle. What, then, elevates the poem beyond triviality?

It is possible to view the original word pairing as generative, rather than allusive. The pairing of the words *grime* and *rime* here appear to have conjured their subject, rather than simply identifying it. Viewed this way, the play employed here starts to look less trivial and more powerful: two words, linked by arbitrary formal congruence alone, stand in synergistic relation to one another – here, they have combined to produce a griddle. The poem, then, is making itself in the process of proceeding, pulling in redundancies of language and mobilising them as sense. It suggests a dynamism within language: that is to say, what signifiers get up to beyond intended meaning. Suddenly, the reference to the key-word's 'heart' looks more like a statement of autonomy:

[...] Just because I've a heart of steel
doesn't mean I don't *feel*.

The key-word might unlock the poem, but it is not the poem's focus – hence, perhaps, it seeming so disappointing. It should tell us that its true target lies elsewhere; and a disappointing riddle, in this case, makes for an interesting observation on language. That is to say, that its aleatory commitments and associations combine to synthesise sense independently of intention. That said, the poem is also proof that that such commitments and associations may be deliberately manipulated as a creative force – and this, it seems, is the

idea at the ‘heart’ of the poem. That ‘if ever found it is’ of the first line now looks as though it gestures to the deliberate repurposing of language redundancies – that is to say, to the possibilities of play.

The final lines of the poem are tantalising. With the key-word reached in the preceding stanza, it is not clear what there remains for the poem and its play to accomplish:

A barb of smoke from the barbecue
brings a blush to the cheek of the cockatoo
who’ll wait as long for a word from me as I’ll wait for a word from you.

Interestingly, there is a species of cockatoo with a characteristic ‘blush’ on its cheek: the palm cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*) is black all over, save a splash of red on its cheek. The other notable characteristic that sets the palm cockatoo apart from its fellows is a distinctive, human-like call that sounds like the word ‘hello’. One suspects this is no accident, chiming, as it does, so neatly with the line that follows. Technically, birdcalls ought to be termed ‘vocal’, rather than ‘verbal’, since they contain no language content; this allies them closely with the material redundancies of language manipulated in sonic play. In this instance, a non-verbal utterance just so happens to chime precisely with a verbal counterpart, in much the same way that *rime* just so happens to rhyme with *grime*. The last line therefore looks disingenuous: the suggestion seems to be that language – or, rather, the generative possibility of language available through play, is everywhere - ‘if ever found it is’.

We see a similarly self-referential play in ‘The Plot’, perhaps the least poem-like poem in *Hay*.¹²⁵ Here, the repeated word *alfalfa* – not quite a palindrome - is arranged like the Sator-Rotas square around the word *alpha*. It is initially baffling – it is not even entirely clear whether the words should be read left to right, or top to bottom. Furthermore, it is

¹²⁵ Paul Muldoon, *Hay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.15.

difficult to see what, beyond their phonetic proximity, *alfalfa* and *alpha* have to do with one another.

The title ought to provide a way in. As this is Muldoon, it is reasonable to suspect a pun of some kind; and, in fact, ‘The Plot’ functions here as a multivalent pun, where all meanings of the word might be admissible. Firstly, the poem itself is arranged like a ‘plot’ of land, complete with planted crop. Secondly, if there is a storyline to be scrutinised, we might look to the epigraph, which contains more of a narrative than the poem does. Here, we find something that works as a clue.

The epigraph – a traditional ballad addressed to a young woman - contains the sexual allusions ‘cut your grass’ and ‘cutting of your hay.’ Cutting of hay – or something very like it – is precisely what has happened in the poem, given that it is the ‘cutting’ of the word *alfalfa* that yields the central *alpha*. The poem may therefore be read as kind of rebus, standing in for a euphemism: for Muldoon, a typically circuitous approach to a much-loved subject.

We can go further, however. The above interpretation involves taking *alfalfa* and *hay* as near-synonyms; if we ‘cut’ the first letter of the word *hay*, we are left with *ay*, homonymous with the letter A. This in turn functions as a near-synonym with the word *alpha*, the first letter of the Greek alphabet. *Hay* and *A* therefore stand in the same relation to one another as *alfalfa* and *alpha*.

What is the function of play of this kind? Once again, the focus appears to be on the creative or generative possibilities of language. Transitive relationships such as that identified above are consonant with Muldoon’s great project of demonstrating that ‘everything connects (in ways more or less arcane) with everything else’.¹²⁶ This suggests

¹²⁶ Peter McDonald, ‘Horse Latitudes’, in *Poetry Review*, 97:1 (2007), pp. 88-90 (p. 89).

that a further meaning of the word plot is not merely submissable, but pivotal: that of a secret plan or scheme.

Peter McDonald highlights the poem 'It is What it Is'¹²⁷ as descriptive of Muldoon's enterprise. The poem, filled with apparently unconnected images ('a tamarind', 'the flyer for pantomime', 'the inlaid cigarette box'), is held together by a tight scheme of full rhymes, spaced far enough apart to evade detection on first reading. Its focus is an unidentified 'new toy' that requires assembly; however, when the speaker refers to 'this imperspicuous game | that seems to be missing one piece', it is unclear whether the subject is said toy, or something other. Furthermore, this idea of something missing constituent parts is revisited in the image of his mother:

Her voice at the gridiron coming and going
as if snatched by a sea wind.

There is that griddle again, making a cameo appearance. These pieces add up to the idea of an overarching message or order, whose missing parts prevent one from apprehending the whole, leaving a series of disconnected elements. The poem ends with:

The game. The plaything spread on the rug.
The fifty years I've spent trying to put it together.

McDonald feels that the poem poses several frustrating questions – whether, for example, *game* and *plaything* refer to the same thing, and whether this, in turn, is the same as the 'It' of the title. He ventures the following solution: that 'Muldoon doesn't know these things, and that's precisely the point of the poem'.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, p. 49.

¹²⁸ McDonald, p.89.

Presumably, this *is* precisely the point of the poem – which is curiously self-referential, and gestures towards Muldoon’s poetic technique as a whole. Play of the kind observed in this chapter serves to illuminate the inner working of a fantastically sophisticated structure piece by piece, but does not attempt to account for the whole jigsaw (except, perhaps, with the perfectly tautologous phrase with which Muldoon ‘unasks’ the question: it is what it is). The intertextual mazes down which Muldoon leads himself – and his readers – are exactly that: a series of connections and irrational pathways within language. Far from being trivial, however, this is a powerful generative force. The ‘secret plan or scheme’ to be uncovered is not, therefore, on the part of the poet; rather, his function is to illuminate elements of its architecture, which is one of endless possibility.

5 Musical Chairs: Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*

This chapter constitutes more an interlude than anything: a note on a form of play distinct from those examined here, though thematically linked, and one which has been useful in my own writing. It is a simple enough device, and one I will explore with reference to a passage from *Under Milk Wood*.

In formal terms, the language of *Under Milk Wood* is playful because it does not act in the way that semantic convention dictates.

In the blind-drawn dark dining-room of School House, dusty and echoing as a dining room in a vault, Mr. and Mrs. Pugh are silent over cold grey cottage pie. Mr. Pugh reads, as he forks the shroud meat in, from 'Lives of the Great Poisoners'. He has bound a plain brown-paper cover round the book. Slyly, between slow mouthfuls, he sidespies up at Mrs. Pugh, poisons her with his eye, then goes on reading. He underlines certain passages and smiles in secret.¹²⁹

We see in this extract what we might term a free-range attitude to language, where parts of speech are swapped round: nouns are used as adjectives, as in the case of *shroud*; adjectives are constructed by yoking together nouns and verbs (*blind-drawn*); and intelligible but non-conventional compounds are employed (*sidespies*).

Shroud is not an adjective, though it is used as one here. There is a tendency to think of substantives as more solid than adjectives, given that they are not adjunct to anything; the noun lacks the adjective's capricious tendency, in Latinate languages, to change number or gender in accordance with the word to which it is coupled (that is to say, the adjective takes its formal lead from the noun). Here, *shroud* sits uncomfortably next to a fellow monosyllabic noun, so that the construction 'shroud meat' offers two fittingly unappealing clods of sound.

¹²⁹ Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 47.

So much for formal concerns; it is also worth focussing on the ideational architecture of the construction. In order to unpick this successfully, it should first be observed that the double-noun phrase ‘shroud meat’ effectively presents the reader with an elided metaphor: in conceptual terms, it is semantically indistinguishable from the statement that the meat *is* a shroud. Here I will make use of Paterson’s observations on the nativity or alienity of the vehicle.¹³⁰ *Shroud*, as a vehicle, is poised at precisely the correct distance from the thematic domain of the sentence to be surprising without being uselessly alien. Given that a shroud is a winding-sheet, it fits thematically with the sustained conceit of the dining room being ‘like a dining room in a vault’. It also chimes with the description of the pie as ‘cold’ and ‘grey’. At the same time, however, a tension is set up between *shroud* (connoting putrefaction) and *meat* (denoting a comestible); that is to say, placed in close proximity to the edible, *shroud* becomes not merely phonetically uncomfortable, but positively unpalatable.

Fork as a transitive verb is – while not unheard of – certainly unusual; when we do come across it, it tends to be used predominantly to mean *pitchfork*: to fork in compost, for example. In other words, something from a very different domain masquerading is as something native. Thomas’s use of it is bedded in the more conventional usage, and nourished by it: while it is certainly true that Mr Pugh uses a fork, the pitchfork the reader cannot help picturing informs an understanding of his movement – as careless, perfunctory, and joyless. To draw from the same domain as pitchfork, it is akin to ‘shovelling’ one’s food in.

Blind-drawn is another example in which a sophisticated description has been concentrated into an adjectival phrase. While not a conventional construction, it is an intelligible one: the reader understands that the blinds are drawn. We might also be aware that blinds are conventionally drawn when a town is in mourning, in which case the phrase

¹³⁰ In 1.2.

would set us up for the funereal conceit that follows. Simultaneously, however, we are aware that the construction is unusual, and this alerts us to its gaugeable effects. The truncated phrase becomes strange, but – taking our lead from the denotatum – we might also observe that it becomes implacable and faintly claustrophobic.

Something else interesting is going on. Understanding the phrase as an elided noun and working verb functioning together as an adjective means that the phrase reads like a miniature pile-up: too much is going in too small a space. There is a temptation to take some of the weight off the working parts, by reading them as different parts of speech; the alternative that offers itself most willingly is to read *blind* as an adjective. This donates the phrase an additional meaning by way of an image: that of windows with blinds drawn as ‘blind eyes’.¹³¹ This image shadows that of the drawn blinds, and donates its own connotations. This semantic musical-chairs allows additional meanings to accumulate within otherwise simple descriptions.

It is unsurprising that Thomas counted Joyce among his influences;¹³² we see in the former the latter’s taste for ‘puns and verbal inventiveness’.¹³³ But it is worth adding to this what Anthony Storr terms ‘Joyce’s experiments with the *sound* of words’.¹³⁴ Storr considers this a feature of Joyce’s later works; however, Alex Aronson observes that:

Even in his earliest stories the meaning of a word did not necessarily depend on the object it denoted but on the sonority and intonation of the speaker’s voice; for even then Joyce addressed the listener rather than the reader.¹³⁵

¹³¹ In fact, this image chimes with the word’s etymology. A *window* was once a *wind eye*.

¹³² Walford Davies, Introduction to *Under Milk Wood* (London: Phoenix, 2000), pp. ix-xviii (p. xiii).

¹³³ Davies, p. xiii.

¹³⁴ Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p.10.

¹³⁵ Alex Aronson, *Music and the Novel* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), p.40.

In the very first paragraph of Joyce's first published work of fiction, the young narrator describes precisely this tendency:

Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism. But now it sounded like a malevolent and sinful being.¹³⁶

As I observed in 1.1.2, this Martianesque approach to words¹³⁷ is one half of a process that accounts for the playful quality of Thomas's language. This first half may be thought of as attuning the ear to signifier on the sonic level and, in Schlieffer's terms, treating it as 'semiotically meaningful'.¹³⁸ However, the second half of the prescription involves using this semiotically meaningful sound to 'heighten attention to the [actual] meaning'¹³⁹: that is to say, sound and sense must be synthesised.

Thomas's neologisms are not merely intelligible, but meticulously crafted to synthesize sound and sense. The word *sidespies* is contrived to exaggerate the sibilance of the component *spies*, whilst highlighting the /aɪ/ as vowel sound. The effect is a sort of sonic 'ghosting', where a series of conceptually linked words are pulled towards a working centre, thanks to their phonetic proximity. Yoked to the word *sidespies*, and homophonic with that /aɪ/, is the word *eye* – the working part behind the verb – but also the words *sly*, *snipe*, and *sideswipe*, all of which are appropriate spectres at this particular feast. The strongest non-sibilant consonant, meanwhile, is *p*; here, visibly coupled with the vowels *ie*, it visually invokes the word *piercing*; this couples neatly with the image that follows: he 'poisons her

¹³⁶ James Joyce, 'The Sisters', in *Dubliners* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1992), p.7.

¹³⁷ In 6.3.2.1, I explore a short experiment treating this approach.

¹³⁸ Schlieffer, p.93.

¹³⁹ Attridge, p.130.

with his eyes'. A continuation of the sustained conceit on which the passage turns, this is a novel rendering of the more tired collocation that convention readily offers – that of 'looking daggers' at someone. This relationship is in fact ratified by the word's etymology: its root is the now obsolete *dag*, meaning 'to pierce'. Thomas's unusual expression is thus grafted onto the more conventional phrase: a lesson, once again, in the value of etymology to underwrite a conceptual relationship.

6 Play with Abigail: My own poems

This chapter will focus on my own poems, and the ways in which this study has informed the writing of them. For the sake of thematic coherence, I will approach the poems via some of the concerns raised in this commentary, and via the themes that recur within the poems themselves. In each instance, I will look at one or two examples from the poems submitted.

6.1 Games

I observed in 3.3 that the recursive relationship between form and content means poetry has a tendency to turn in on itself. Many of my poems not only employ play, but take games, or components of games, as their subject matter. Into this bracket fall ‘The Knife Game’, ‘Follow the Lady’, ‘52-card pickup’, ‘Key’, and ‘J♥’, and it is no accident that these poems are the most ostentatiously ludic of those submitted. I am going to focus on two, in order to explore the methods of play employed.

‘J♥’ is, first and foremost, a concrete poem, in which its subject – the Jack of Hearts – is hiding in plain sight. The title is borrowed from poker notation – it is a means of proffering the subject sideways on, but also functioning as a typographical quibble, in that this is a love poem of sorts, and that ‘J♥’ looks rather like an adolescent dedication – it is reminiscent of initials carved into a tree.

I noted in 1.1.2 that wordplay constitutes a means of yoking two or more discrete domains, thanks to the overlapping ‘redundancies’ of signifiers within the weave of the Text. However, I also observed that, for a pun to be non-trivial, it must embrace ‘two things... the

reader has already been prepared to hold together in his mind'.¹⁴⁰ Here, the two domains played with are the vocabulary of various card games (principally poker), and romantic slang.

In Chapter 3, I noted that etymology provided a particularly handy yoke between domains, by supplying the metaphorical armature for the poem. In this instance, the two domains are etymologically quite distinct; happily, however, they share a rich crossover, thanks to a long cultural history of conceiving of a romance as a game, and of rakish individuals as cheats. We might say, therefore, that the work of the etymological pun has been done by a convention of seeing the two as metaphorically linked. This link offered a generous horde of puns, such as *trickster*, *twister*, *wild-card*, *hopeless case*, *bad bet*, *table-talker* and *player*. A little research into poker terminology turned up the fact that Jacks are known as 'fishhooks'. This was a gift, and I have used it to close the poem, with the terminal 'I'm hooked.'

'52 Card Pickup' also attempts to unify the ludic and the romantic. Once again – and to muddle my toys – the Jack is lurking at the bottom of the puzzle box. The end-words of each stanza ratify the relationship: *shuffled*, *bluff*, *stuck* and *discarded* have all been exported from the card table. With the relationship thus signposted, it was my intention that other parallels speak for themselves. I hoped it would be clear that the 'house' referenced in the final stanza might also a house of cards – with the additional gloss of 'the house that Jack built', in order to point to the culprit. This, then, ought to tie in with the title, and convey a sense that the narrator is in a state of collapse.

I have focussed on '52 Card Pickup' because it is a poem that fails in many ways – several of its endeavours are obscure, and much of the play self-indulgent. There is a series

¹⁴⁰ Empson, p.104.

of numbers hidden throughout the poem. Some are named directly, such as the cluster tucked into the first stanza:

Start small. **One half**-open eye may survey **thirty**
square feet of bed for several hours. Note that not **one**
of the **seven** shining hells you built is **half** as hot
as this field of white linen. Know all your dreams
are now the same **six** confidence tricks, shuffled.

Others, such as *snake-eyes* and *pairs*, are referenced more tangentially. The sum of the numbers in the poem is fifty-two, with the last card turning up in the final stanza, and instigating the collapse of the fastidiously built ‘house’:

Bluff,
but fool no **one**. There he is again, the duff joist
that brings the whole lot down.

Here, in fact, I have gone into ludic overdrive, by throwing in an entirely different deck at the last minute. It is not the only one of my poems in which a Jack appears as a Trickster, so it is perhaps unsurprising that here I have conflated him with The Fool, on loan from the tarot. The phrase ‘fool no one’ was intended to read as a series of overlapping parts of a contiguous whole. The Fool is denoted by a zero in the tarot pack, hence the ‘no’. Zero and one are linked in virtue of being adjacent cardinal numbers; *one*, as I have previously stated, here denotes the last card of the deck, the Jack, which in turn links back to The Fool. Neat, but also perfectly useless.

These associations are so deeply interred as to defeat exhumation: they constitute little more than a game played for (and with) myself. It is for this reason I think of it as failing in some ways; on the other hand, the poem is justified by its more obvious endeavours, so I am content to accept that much of its architecture is for my eyes only, as it were.

I have also learned a more nuanced lesson in this instance. As I noted above, ‘J♥’ worked because the reader comes to it prepared to hold two ideas together. ‘52 Card Pickup’ deals not with romance, but with its lack – the parallels with gaming and play are therefore not so readily available, and the domains are more distant. Empson observed of the pun that ‘clear or wide distinction between the two meanings concerned is likely to place the ambiguity at the focus of consciousness; threaten to use it as a showpiece to which poetry and meaning may be sacrificed’.¹⁴¹ Here, I believe I have fallen into precisely this trap: the metaphor is showcased, and therefore seems simultaneously obtrusive and pleased with itself. In other words, it is a poem that shows its strings.

6.1.2 *Mah jong sonnets*

Mah jong sonnets was a collaborative project undertaken with Jon Stone, and an attempt to write a sequence of poems corresponding to all possible winnings hands in the Western version of the game of mah jong. The poems take their formal identity from the make-up of the hands.¹⁴²

Mah Jong is played with 144 tiles, divided into three suits, numbered one to nine, with additional tiles corresponding to four winds and three dragons. The Western version of the game operates like a complex version of Gin Rummy, in which the players are competing to complete one of a number of hands, where each hand is composed of fourteen tiles. As in Rummy, players play by taking turns to pick up tiles, and discard them.

¹⁴¹ Empson, p.103.

¹⁴² Some two dozen sonnets were originally written for this project; of those, I have included only two in this submission – ‘Runaway’ (p. 41) and ‘Snowdrop’ (p. 65).

The rules of the game translate neatly into formal constraints. We took turns to write a sonnet, with each line representing a component tile. In each instance, the poem borrowed an element from the poem that preceded it, just as a player picks up an opponent's discarded tile. Additionally, each line was in some way faithful to the tile it represented. A 'four,' for example, might be rendered as a line of four words, or four syllables, or taking a rhyme from the word *four*. It was therefore a highly playful enterprise: an extended experiment in saying two things at once.

I do not mind admitting that these poems are not wholly successful, because the ways in which they failed have something interesting to say about the uses of play. Essentially, the problem was that the poems became slaves to their form: a violation of Vendler's idea of form as content-as arranged. My first is a case in point, and I quote it here in full:

Snowdrop

Something old for something new -
any old thing. A name will do.
And they all smiled. And you did too.

Folded, scissored, snipped in three -
clasped tight, quite neat and orderly.
Jig the jig, before the scree

slip of the misstep, then the fall.
They shake their heads, tight-lipped, appalled.
You do not please them any more.

What nifty magic works a spell
in white goods, china, linen, lace?
Lies and lies. The wishing well

is jammed with wishes just like yours
for something else, or something more.

The *Snowdrop* hand is made up of pungs (that is to say, three identical tiles) of green bamboos (twos, threes, fours, sixes and eights) and white dragons. The relevant numbers are given using a rudimentary form of the hypogram: each of the tercets (except the last), and the closing couplet, takes its rhyme from its corresponding number. Here, then, we have ‘pungs’ of twos, threes and fours, and a pair of twos. The final tercet is a pung of white dragons. In order to convey this, each line contains a sense rhyme with the word *white* – that is to say, a word that is conventionally coupled with it (here: *magic*, *goods* and *lies*).

While it meets the formal criteria, the poem sounds forced; and in fact, there is an unfortunate irony here. Part of the content was cannibalised from a draft version of an older poem, whose form was far less prescriptive. In the original version, the following line break made sense:

[...] the scree
slip of the misstep

It is abrupt, and it jars, but this was intentional: there is a slight note of panic in the word *scree*, borrowed from its phonic proximity to the sort of noise one might make if one were to slip over. Here, the intended effect was that the poem itself should skid and fall, unexpectedly, onto the next line. Corralled into a strict form, however, the break looks servile: it seems to be there only to provide the required terminal rhyme for the tercet.

More fundamentally, however, these poems suffer the same defect as ‘52 Card Pickup’. The wordplay yokes two disparate things, but in each instance, one of those things is mah jong. As the game supplies no ready parallels with any of the poems’ concerns, one end of the play is always a dead end; that is to say, there is no useful metaphorical traffic between the two domains.

Another thing worthy of note was how quickly these poems resolved themselves into riddles; this is perhaps unsurprising, given the ‘dead-end’ supplied by the play. Quoted below are two couplets from Stone’s ‘Dirty Pairs’:

Old Honey Mashier, bedridden beggar-king,
and Lois the XIVth’s mistress of everything.

Each of the seven couplets that make up the poem present a pair of things in some way linked, but that make for strange bedfellows – in this case, The King of the Gypsies and Madame de Pompadour. This couplet is unusual, in that the first line hands over its referent directly; the poem very quickly slips into the circumlocutory language of the riddle, so that by the fourth couplet, the referent (Rumpelstiltskin) is given in the form of an anagram: ‘a tinker’s slit plum.’

The use of anagrams does not in itself make the difference between a poem and a riddle; as I have noted, Muldoon makes frequent use of them. However, I observed in 4.2 that when the signifier is over-foregrounded, a foreshortening effect occurs: in such instances, play may become the focus, rather than a tool. Quoted below are three lines from a rejected sonnet, ‘Buried Treasure’:

‘Nobody pilots *this* ship without my say-so! Got that, sailor?
No moonstruck bloody boatswain, that’s for sure.’
‘Looks like the Captain’s lost it again,’ I said, curtly.

The ‘buried treasure’ of the title was a series of key words hidden in each line, all of which fell within a thematic bracket – in this case, the names of ships. The solutions are as follows:

Line one: *Nautilus*. There's a triple lock on this solution. 'Nobody' signposts the name of the ship's Captain (Nemo). The phonetic components of this name are also hidden, at one step removed, within the words 'without' (no) and 'my say-so' (me). The end word is perhaps the most obvious clue – the word *nautilus* means 'sailor.'

Line Two: *Nostramo*. The name is anagrammed in the letters at the beginning of the line. Once again, etymology proved handy – *nostramo*, a corruption of 'nostro uomo' is the Italian word for 'boatswain.' Finally, and more as filigree than anything, the *Nostramo* is a ship from a science-fiction horror film – hence the adjectives *moonstruck* and *bloody*.

Line Three: *Titanic*. The name is anagrammed in the words 'Captain' and 'it.' The use of 'lost' to link the two is straight out of crossword rubric. The leftover letters are a and p – my own initials, hence the addition of 'I said, curtly.'

In both these examples, the myopic focus on the signifier has resulted in precisely the foreshortening effect I describe above, so that the aims of the 'poems' have retreated to their own borders. They become positively solipsistic, gesturing to nothing beyond themselves: in other words, they are riddles, rather than poems.

Formal play, when it operates according to Vendler's remit, is another means of synthesising two things – form and content – that it is tempting to think would otherwise stand in arbitrary relation to one another. Where content becomes subjugated to form – when the contrivance of coincidence is too ostentatious – the play has failed. Here, again, I encountered an interesting lesson. While we had tailored our own constraints for these poems, they were also sonnets, which carried their own formal commitments. A common defect of other poems in the sequence was a fumbled turn: in other words, the attempt to

remain faithful to the puns, kongs and chows of mah jong interfered with the natural dynamics of the sonnet. This was a reminder that the relationship between form and content is *not* arbitrary: as Vendler states, ‘there is no such thing as form as divorceable from content’.¹⁴³

On the other hand, the more successful poems were a lesson in the creative potential of formal play. Just as a sonnet will naturally turn its content after the octave (or thereabouts), these forms did things to their intended content that constituted a series of happy accidents. An attempt to insert the word *one* into every line of a poem produced ‘Runaway’, a poem that whose engine is a repeated refrain:

It’s not the one about the no-good bum who never-ever did
what he should have done. And it’s not the one with the teary kid
who meets her steady with a loaded gun. It’s not the one [...]

The refrain carries the poem, but was effectively a gift. In these poems, while play frequently failed in its poetic purpose, it did perform a creative function.

6.2 Monsters

Several of the poems submitted here deal in monsters; in most instances they have been used to puppet psychological states. There is nothing novel about this approach: Jane Chance observes that the monsters in Beowulf are ‘projections of flaws in Germanic civilisation

¹⁴³ Vendler, p. 8.

portrayed by the poet as “Negative Men”,¹⁴⁴ where ‘Negative Men’ are grotesque and adversarial distortions of internal impulses.

It is a simple enough means of approaching a subject tangentially. ‘The Wolf Man’ offers a ready metaphor for an individual so hungry for an identity he (quite literally) makes a beast of himself. ‘The Creature from the Black Lagoon’ comes pre-packaged as a neat parallel for the ‘submerged’ activities of the id, a parallel made explicit by the iconic scene in which the Creature swims beneath the lit-up starlet. To use Turco’s terminology,¹⁴⁵ the ideational level was taken care of.

In Chapter 2, I observed that oppositionality may be employed to offset an excess in a poem: for example, it might be used to move the maudlin down the scale to pathos. Any poem dealing in emotional terrain risks the former; a note of bathos was required to counteract this. I therefore borrowed my monsters – The Creature, The Wolf Man, The Phantom and The Invisible Man – from Golden Age horror films; not because they are frightening, but because they have become ridiculous. And, having lost their power to frighten, they have also become rather pathetic figures – a handy boon, in that it feeds into the ideational aims of the poems. They function as rather clumsy marauding Negative Men, who come pre-loaded with a pathos of their own. Once again, it is an instance of the past revisited with irony, where irony describes the disjunct between fear and pity.

In a similar way, poems that aspired to realism, or dealt in particularly difficult themes – suicide, domestic violence and destructive relationships – had a tendency to resolve themselves into nursery rhymes, with self-consciously Ladybird-esque titles. Into this bracket I would put the likes of ‘Cat’, ‘Mr.Fox’ and ‘Spook and the Jewel Thief’. When

¹⁴⁴ Jane Chance, ‘The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel’s Mother’, in *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, ed. by Daniel Donoghue (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002) pp.152-167 (p. 154).

¹⁴⁵ see 4.2

something sat too baldly on the page, the poem leaned towards a sing-song disingenuousness that was the ideational equivalent of whistling and looking the other way.

Of these, ‘Mr.Fox’ is the least successful. It aspired to something similar to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, with the intention that, at the turn, the animal mask fall to reveal the bald truth beneath it. However, turning to face its subject directly, rather than delivering a shock, instead caused the poem to lose its clout. In other words, oppositionality ought to work a sustained feat, rather than a deliberate subterfuge. ‘Cat’ also involves a turn that shifts abruptly into an adult narrative, but this was more successful, as the form of the nursery rhyme – and therefore the discordant force that holds the poem together – is retained.¹⁴⁶

6.3 Wordplay

A comprehensive study of the wordplay employed in the collection submitted here would be impossible within the word count; I will focus instead on a few examples.

6.3.1 Puns

In two instances, I have used a title pun to mix the domains of the spectral and the animal. The first is ‘The Lemures’. The engine of the poem is an etymological pun, in that the two things compared – lemurs, and the spirits of the dead – are already conceptually linked: the former is derived from the latter. These, then, are two things the reader is ‘already prepared

¹⁴⁶ I had the opportunity to perform an interesting experiment in the course of compiling this collection, in that I was invited to write a ‘plaintive’, a form devised by Roddy Lumsden. The prescriptions for the form are as follows: that it be ten lines long, blocky, and hand-on-heart; in other words, that it express genuine personal feeling. I’m happy to admit that I struggled with the remit. Without an extra ingredient to offset it, ‘genuine feeling’ lacked any authenticity on the page – a pointed lesson, if one were needed, in the value of oppositionality. I discuss this poem (‘Fetch’) in 6.3.1.

to hold together in his mind'¹⁴⁷ – there is no need to 'jump [...] too far'.¹⁴⁸ This handy ideational link underwrites a poem that characterises the dead in lemury terms: as grasping, prodding, and attention-seeking; in other words, it imports a conceptual domain wholesale.

'Fetch' is a rather different animal: the title – a simple pun - yokes together the domains of the canine and the ghostly. As a poem, it is not as successful as 'The Lemures', for two reasons. Firstly, the two domains are too distinct: the reader has not been prepared, either by etymology or convention, to hold these two together in his mind. I had hoped that the use of *dog*, as a verb, might provide a rope(y) bridge between the two: all of M.R.James' hapless protagonists end up 'dogged' by the restless dead. However, as this verb – nor, indeed, its substantive equivalent – never appears in the poem, I have asked that the reader 'leap too far'. The second reason the poem falls short of its aims is that there is a third domain in play: this is, first and foremost, a poem about a relationship. And while this domain may hold a metaphorical relationship with both the spectral and canine aspects of the poem, it is asking too much of a poem of this length to be faithful to both simultaneously. Furthermore, the pun of the title passes over the principle theme of the poem – the result, then, is a little confused in its aims.

Another poem with a punning title – and which pivots on said pun – is 'Key'. Although it is never made explicit in the poem, it makes use of the selkie myth. I am a little wary of this one, as the word *key*, and the dual meaning packed into it, is the 'key' that unlocks the emotional sense of the poem – in other words, it is a pun-within-a-pun that risks crossing the line into riddle territory. I have let myself off the hook, however, partially because I have taken a leaf out of Muldoon's book and delivered (or, more accurately, repeated) my keyword within the poem, and dismissed it as 'useless', effectively neutralising

¹⁴⁷ Empson, p. 104.

¹⁴⁸ Empson, p. 106.

the riddle. Mostly, however, I feel the play is justified because the poem has something to say beyond this solution; that is to say, it points to something outside of itself.

Several other poems turn on an internal pun, with varying degrees of success. ‘Black Lagoon’ relies on the reader knowing that the name *Lucas* means ‘light.’ It is the crux of the poem, and is used to juxtapose the eponymous addressee with the Negative Man lurking in the poem – in this case, The Creature. This was an attempt to recreate the famous scene in which The Creature swims beneath the lit-up starlet, mirroring her movements, which in turn functions as a handy metaphor for the Freudian struggle treated here.

Others puns have been used to more localised effect. In the closing lines of ‘The Wolf Man’, the phrase ‘high grave falsetto’ pulls together the two meanings of the word *grave* (*solemn*, and *heavy*). Bookending it with two words denoting a high pitch, and working off the second meaning, the intention was that the line produce a ululating effect. In this instance, however, it is not necessary that the reader be sensitive to (or even aware of) the pun; that is to say, the poem does not pivot on it. A poem underpinned by a pun – as in the case of ‘Black Lagoon’ - is a risky business.

Each of the puns discussed in this section have operated on the ideational level; I will now look at some forms of play that work on the sonic level.

6.3.2 Sonic play

Many poems submitted take a single word as their focus – or rather, as a jumping-off point. ‘The Wolf Man’, for example, grew out of a myopic concentration on the word *mine*, and the snarling expression an exaggerated pronunciation of the word produces. Others tuned in on

the sonic identity of their titles; I will look at this enterprise in more detail in the following section.

6.3.2.1 Non-sense: A short experiment in Martianism¹⁴⁹

While completing this collection, I kept a notebook in which I donated words bogus definitions, based solely on their sonic identity. This constituted a selective deafness to the semantic field of the signifier. The following is an extract:

Ascribe: a red bird, with nasty thin white claws scratching on tin.

Design: an electric fence; an adenoidal robot. A wasp's word.

Oracle: dry, hollow, thin. A snailshell. A small skull.

Anxiety: creaky, gnashing: to chew on steel wool. Wheedling.

Luck: juicy, polished. A pat of something hard and waxy.

They read as nonsense, because that is precisely what they are; this deafness to semantics meant divorcing the signifier from its referent and turning up the volume on its sonic components, so that domains sharing said components are pulled towards it. At first sight, it

¹⁴⁹ Here I refer to what is commonly termed 'Martian' poetry; that is to say, poetry which employs unusual metaphors to render the everyday unfamiliar.

looks like, once again, ‘the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together by violence’.¹⁵⁰

However, a little analysis reveals it to be less heterogeneous than first appears.

The first definition is easy enough to unpick. *Scratching* derives from the sonic consonance with *scr*; however, I would also submit the etymology of the embedded *scribe* (to write), which suggests a quill or stylus scratching. *Quill* may have produced the avian association, though I suspect the *ib* that it shares with *ibis* is the more likely candidate. The long vowel, coupled with a bilabial plosive, produces a sound halfway between a hum and a whine, faintly metallic: this delivered *tin* (a relationship ratified typographically, by the shared vowel). The *red*, meanwhile, was a result of that short *a* – to me a ‘red’ vowel sound, perhaps because of its position in the words *slap* and *smack*.

Not non-sense, then: rather, it is a sense derived, via sound, from discrete domains. In several cases, this Martianisation of words has produced poems. Two – ‘The Oracle’ and ‘Aquarium’ are submitted here.

6.3.3 Key-words

‘The Man Who’ was a first experiment in the use of a simple hypogram, in that the name of the subject – David Bowie – is given in the first two words: ‘Wow boy.’ I observed in 4.2 that hide-and-seek of this kind ought to serve a purpose – in this case, it chimes at an ideational level with the subsuming of personal identity in a series of put-on personae. As with Brownlee and *The White Album*, the subject is simultaneously present and absent. However, it is worth noting that as a creative exercise it was a fruitful one, as it set the tone for the rest of the poem.

¹⁵⁰ Johnson, p.14.

Interestingly, a sensitivity to hypograms revealed several already embedded in previous poems. ‘Reedling’ contains the description ‘a merry bobbin,’ and I now see that, stretched across the phrase, is the word *robin*. I know very little about reedlings, but they do, in fact, look very like robins; this therefore had something interesting to tell me about my own inner workings. This, then, is what Heaney meant by ‘half-deliberate play.’¹⁵¹ The same occurred in ‘Spook and the Jewel Thief’, where the titular Mr. Spook is scattered across the following description:

That stack of **spl**ints, that **sp**ider,
wind-wre**ck**ed de**ck**chair,
Mister Spook.

[...]

long and **loom**y as a taper

In each of these cases – ‘Reedlings’, and ‘Spook’ – a deliberate hypogram would be out of place, given that there is no reason for the referent (or a cuckoo-referent) to be hiding. It is of more interest to me to know that holding the subject in mind and allowing for free play of associations can be beneficial creative exercise in its own right.¹⁵²

6.4 Conclusions: Sideways

It is worth noting that all the forms of play treated in this commentary involve some form of dyadism: the pun relies on (at least) two meanings of a word brought into deliberate (or half-deliberate) play; oppositionality juxtaposes two discordant elements; sonic play involves

¹⁵¹ Heaney, p.77.

¹⁵² This is an idea with some currency. M. M. Mahmood observes of unintentional punning that it is the result of a ‘verbal habit of association through consonance or assonance’. (*Shakespeare’s Wordplay*, p. 17). And Jack Underwood notes that poems ‘propelled by the logic of sound’ tend to result in ‘imagistic hand-brake turns’ (‘Arranging the Variables’, in *Poetry London*, 75 (2013) pp. 45-47 (p.46)).

Dantean contrapasso, the fitting end, and the neat coincidence. Each of the forms of play explored (and employed) here aspires to this sort of synthesis.

Summing up the many and varied forms of play encountered here, I might term *play* a contrivance and foregrounding of congruence. For Hill, consonance between ideas is showcased by planting them within the same word. In Muldoon's poems, the signifier is manipulated in ways that are formally appropriate to its denotatum. For Hadfield, conflicting elements fit together in virtue of this conflicted relationship: it should be remembered that Johnson's *discordia concors* suggests 'occult resemblances'¹⁵⁵ between its constituent parts.

The focus of *play*, then, is on the shuttling of tension and accord between things that are unexpectedly alike, and those that harmoniously conflict; as Jay Parini points out, 'Poetry feasts on the similarities and differences between things'.¹⁵⁶ This movement within the parts of a closed system recalls Derrida's idea of *free play*: it is a means of discovering not a single solution, but multiple tessellations between the components of Muldoon's mystery 'toy'; a way to 'unify otherwise fragmented experience'.¹⁵⁷ Of course, it is not simply the case that distinct or like things may be jammed together willy-nilly: the algorithms are not so crude. Rather, in each case, there is a point of balance – of companionable opposition or likeness – at which *play* becomes effective. Nor is it the case, in terms of poetic practice, that *play* is an end in itself: as I have observed, its effects must be synthesized with the semantic esemplasticity of the poem. In this context, *play* is transformed into a fundamentally telic activity, and a source of endless creative potential.

¹⁵⁵ Johnson, p.14.

¹⁵⁶ Parini, p.66.

¹⁵⁷ Parini, p.15.

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