Fromwards: Wavering Between Beginnings

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Abstract

In reflecting on my creative practice I've realised how much I search for beginnings, and how I waver before them, and between them, which provides some of the content and energy for my poems. The idea of a poem beginning before its beginning is something which I'll consider in various ways. I have no set project I'm undertaking as a poet, but I do see that I'm returning to certain subjects, a central one being to find where I am coming *from* which seems to relate to a secondary concern of what has prompted a poem to begin, and where speech and language begins. I will explore how my poems dwell, often autobiographically, on divided beginnings – such as my parents being from different continents. The difficulty of beginning or of locating a beginning can create a dynamic, hesitant, in-between position, that does not seem adequately summed up in the word 'liminality'. This PhD thesis will include my poetry as well as prose reflections about that poetry and the various interconnected ways in which the practice of my writing has involved what I call 'wavering between beginnings'.

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Foreword

There are more beginnings than there are ends to contain them. [1]

A beginning is always a necessary fiction. I can state that I was born in Birmingham, but I would not say, if I wanted to give a fuller account of myself, that I began there. Although my conscious memories do begin somewhere in Birmingham, I would not describe the place of those memories in such a situated way, and intuitively I sense that the memories exist in a place that is harder to pin down. In writing a poem it seems to me that the beginning of it can be said simply to be the first line, and a first line is where my poems generally start to seem like they are gaining their separate shape and body. Perhaps an intention is forming a shape, but equally one might say the shape is forming an intention. Intention in this way becomes more wavering in its position and may seem to have been formed across a wide sweep of time rather than within one isolated moment. In accounting for the practice of my poetry, the idea of a beginning is harder to locate the more I try to locate it. The beginning becomes deeper and more complicated. The beginning is before the beginning, it seems, and yet it seems to contain the end somehow, when I look back at the process, as I am doing here.

In these reflections around my poetry, where one chapter ends, and another begins, is somewhat arbitrary as the poems intricately relate to each other and their themes cross over. Nevertheless, I have structured the thesis in five chapters which will include the poems as well as a discussion of some key poems which allow me to begin my reflections from the poems outwards, rather than from a concept. My poems rarely begin with a concept to be explored and so to set the chapters out in that way would seem not to reflect the practice I'm attempting to explain. Because much of my poetry seems to loop back to the subject of origins and because the very act of beginning in a place or another becomes a source of confusion from which a poem may hesitantly set out, my reflections on writing the poetry will follow the logic of this obsession. Rather than a single beginning,

[1] Daisy Johnson, *Everything Under* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), p. 58.

followed by an argument that proceeds from that point, each part of what follows could form a beginning in its own right. A poem often seems to me to be the visible end of a string whose beginning is hard to find, but that difficulty is what powers the poem. The potential title-word *fromwards* holds this suggestion of a form of progress that is also a return. And if the possibility of return can't be to a single place, then a space of wavering between various beginning-places opens up. Perhaps this is both the 'territory' of my poems, if such a grounded word is appropriate, and also the drive behind the poems, a search to make something grounded in language out of a sense of wavering between grounds.

After this Foreword, the next chapters of the thesis will be titled as follows:

- One: Unbordered Orality and Memory Frames
- Two: Slippery Words and Hesitant Translations
- Three: The Stamped Text and the Gravitied Earth
- Four: Forked Origins and Dendritic Stories
- Five: My Eye and Historical Light

The progress through the chapters — which will each begin with a selection of poems and unfold into a discussion of the practice behind key poems — will not be a straightforwardly linear process, involving a clear beginning, middle and end, but rather a circling around the territory, sometimes involving the kind of repetition and looping back that the poems display.

The thesis will contain digressions which are marked with a subtitle indicating the digression, and inserted within chapters, including in this foreword. These digressions are an opportunity to explore a concept as it arises, and they are also an illustration of the discursive style of the poetry I am reflecting on. Part of the impulse to digress is a desire to avoid addressing an issue head on, coupled with a desire to connect through circuitous routes. Again, this seems to be reflected in my poetry. Beneath a digression there is a faith

that all will connect and that at some point it all has connected. The eponymous character in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* [2] is famous for digressions which are part of the character's weak-mindedness and wavering thoughts. Sterne's interest in time and in beginnings perhaps explains why he would want a character who doesn't know exactly where to begin and proceed. The first chapter of Sterne's shaggy-dog story of a novel begins with a discussion of how Shandy was *begot* from his parents and this is connected to the subject of *time* and the winding of clocks. As Edward Said says of *Tristram Shandy,* it is a work which despite the proof of its existence: 'cannot seem to get started … the beginning is postponed with a kind of encyclopaedic, meaningful playfulness which, like Panurge taking stock of marriage before falling into the water, delays one sort of action for the sake of undertaking another'. [3] The narrative style and interruptions in the text of *Tristram Shandy* also draw attention to the materiality of the three-dimensional book as an object in the act of being constructed. Digressions invite a reader to bear with a writer and indicate that the journey towards a point may not be straightforward or a linear, two-dimensional path. Digressions rely on and trust the reader to makes connections – as my poetry hopefully does, both within the poems and across the pages between poems.

Reflecting on a particular poem, I will also sometimes zone in on particular words and in the connections that may have been key to the process of putting the poem together. Often such words will pull in two or more directions at once, so the word itself may be freighted with my own sense of being pulled in different directions, and waver between meanings and contexts. In this way a single word can undertake its own internal digression, or wavering act. The first digression of this thesis will be on the subject of the word *and.*

Digression: And

In my chapter headings I have titles where two words stand on either side of an *and* — for example, the first chapter is called 'Unbordered Orality and Memory Frames'. The *and* in

[2] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1967).
[3] Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention & Method* (London: Granta, 1997), p. 44.

this as well as in the other chapter headings is not a binary or separative *and.* The second part of the title indicates a coupled refraction of the first descriptor. I hope this adds to a general impression of two things being coupled, and then that same coupling being expanded upon, and seen in a different iteration elsewhere. The connectedness of my poems in different ways is challenging to describe without breaking those connections down, which seems to run against the grain of this exploration of connectedness across various distances.

A poem which made a great impression on me upon my first reading, is Ted Hughes's 'Full Moon and Little Frieda'. [4] For all its brevity, this poem – about the author's very young daughter pointing at the moon and forming the word for it, as an early, initiating act of speech – encompasses vast distances. One of these is evidently the distance between one planet and its moon. Another is the distance involved in speech, and the act of naming. The small, four letter word *moon* summons it for us to recognise the scope of what is being pointed at. The distance between the signifier and the signified is perhaps a territory my poems return to, although I would not have conceptualised it in that way during the process of writing. Indeed, the reason I am using the terms *signifier* and *signified* now in the context of my poetry is because I have very recently read a review of my first collection, in *The Poetry Review*, which used this formulation to phrase what the reviewer regarded as one of the most original aspects of my poetry:

What's interesting is how the exploration [of history, identity, origins, etc.] extends to language, to foraging in the dark space between the signifier and the signified. "I'm struck by the meaninglessness of words, how slippery they are, and yet I also want to believe in them. I'm left stranded between the two", Kunial revealed to Maurice Riordan in this magazine's podcast series. The feeling translates into a keen focus on the terrain of the text, the poet dipping in and out from the landscape of language to see what lurks below. [5]

Returning to 'Full Moon and Little Frieda', this also has a title where two words are either side of an *and.* At the end of the poem, each character, the child and the moon, seem to

[4] Ted Hughes, 'Full Moon and Little Frieda', in *Wodwo* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 182.
[5] Jade Cuttle, 'Underneathness', *The Poetry Review,* 108:3 (2018), pp. 130-131

point at each other, the moon *standing back.* So that small *and* in the centre of the title almost represents or even re-enacts this two-way directionality. A kind of *fromwards* pointing, as well as a *towards* pointing.

Returning to the Foreword

Where I would 'return to' has always been a contested subject for me. I'm aware that my parents began their lives in different continents, growing up with different languages and religions, and perhaps this has always been keenly felt by me and internalised as a sense of divided beginnings. Even if I can remember a single prompt for a poem, and the writing of its first line, it often seems, particularly on reflection that the process of the poem had several beginnings and that a single, undivided beginning is hard to put a finger on. The first poem in my debut poetry collection is called 'Fielder' and it begins: 'If I had to put my finger on where this started'.

The *this* I refer to in that poem could be read as the poem I was writing, or even my interest in poetry, or perhaps a lifetime tendency to waver between one task and another, as my childhood self, the speaker of the poem remembers trying to find a lost cricket ball in the bushes beyond the boundary. This shady peripheral sphere where times and places can collide does seem, on reflection, to characterise the source and the subject of many of my poems, in one way or another. In reflecting here in the process of writing the poems, I'm doubly aware that a poem seems to have many, sometimes conflicting or contentious beginnings. Beyond the complicated layers of current and past impressions and impulses that may trigger a poem, in another sense a poem begins with the words that initiate the writing process. In my poem 'Us', I begin with a focus on that two-letter word of the title: 'If you ask me, *us* takes in undulations / each wave in the sea, all insides compressed'.

The word contains waves and undulations, and I go on to write about how I waver in my security at using the word *us* with any certainty, partly owing to my divided sense of where I might begin. Even the beginning word, *if*, holds this wavering from the start. My 'Fielder'

poem also starts with the same word. My epigraph for my first full collection also starts with the same word, as quoted here:

> If on a sunny day you climb the steep path leading up from the little wooden bridge still referred to around here as 'the Bridge of Hesitation', you will not have to walk far before the roof of my house becomes visible . . . [6]

Epigraphs are important in my poetry as another kind of divided beginning, as I'll discuss later, and this one, quoted above, is also a beginning sentence in Ishiguro's novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*. Apart from the content of the quotation, and the fact that it was an opening line, I also liked how the title of Ishiguro's book linked with various themes in my own work, such as gravity and the unstable but beautiful idea of a 'floating world'. This is a theme in poems such as 'Rainglobe', 'Fielder', 'Spider Trees, Pakistan', and 'Stamping Grounds', as well as gravity featuring less centrally elsewhere as a word or connecting thread. The notion of a floating world, and a bridge of hesitation seems to link in my mind with the word *if,* when placed at the beginning of a line, in a position that *holds* the start. Perhaps one could also argue that the word *if* as a beginning, apart from being a wavering stepping block, also recalls one of the most famous poems in the English language, 'If' by Rudyard Kipling. This poem paradoxically expresses the kind of unwavering certainty and clarity of purpose my poetic persona wouldn't match up to. Interestingly Kipling, in his own rather different way, also had to bridge two worlds – my father's part of the world in the Indian subcontinent, and my mother's England. Although where Kipling finds moral clarity and a stridence in his poem's titular and opening word, *if*, I tend to find confusion in my beginnings and the in-betweenness that the single-syllable *if* represents.

I believe this confusion coupled with a desire to overcome it is part of the energy of my poetry, an energy that is driven by that difficulty of beginning to find words that put a finger on a single point of origin, almost as though that hesitation is the 'complex' at the heart of my writing. Often key words at the start of a poem will, I realise on reflection, gather a kind of centre of gravity that will unfold as the poem finds its end. My process is

[6] Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 7.

often one of catching up with my meaning later rather than ever beginning with a purpose that knows where it is going. To this extent writing about my process will involve challenges of accurately conveying such a non-linear, iterative process. And perhaps a slightly more creative approach, which involves digression, looping back on a point made earlier, rather than proceeding in linear fashion, will be better fitted to discussing poems that work in this more roundabout way too, where a beginning will expand out and explore its own complications and not simply work towards an end. Indeed, the title of my first collection was originally going to be *Fromwards*, an old word that means the opposite of *towards*, or perhaps paradoxically, means to *go in the direction of from.*

Etymological concerns have often come up in my poetry, and a sometimes a microscopic focus on words, even down to the letter, as if words will snag as I'm trying to use them to focus outwards, and the snagging of the words or even a letter will then become part of the subject of the poem. This again is not part of some preconceived programme for my poetry, but an obsession with origins asserting itself, often to my own surprise. This is something I've seen more as I've reflected back on the poems and on the dendritic connections between them. Indeed, trees and language seem connected, perhaps jointly rooted, in poems such as 'Empty Words' and 'Ys'. I will try to dig down into some of these key poems to explore the theme of wavering between beginnings in my poetry and the way these themes branch out within and across poems. It feels more appropriate to the nature of my work and my creative processes, to begin from the poems outward, rather than to begin with an abstract theme and then merely to illustrate that theme. My reflections will be poem-centred and will explore the shifting ground from within to without. The connections, echoes and repetitions between poems are as important as such connections made within the poems, and so it perhaps goes against the grain for any reflection on the writing process of a body of work to be divided artificially into separate chapters, as though each theme had a separate sphere in the corpus of poems, and could be separated out from the body of work and have a life outside it.

Initially I intended to write about the subject of liminality in these reflections, but the concept of liminality began to seem rather static. It was neither energising as a prospect to write about, nor did the idea of the liminal express an energetic, dynamic element. My

poetic 'process' is generally to write into mysteries rather than to explore a set subject from a set position, and defining the poems as being 'about' or 'addressing' liminality didn't seem accurately to fit either the poems or the mixed, often broken, momentum behind them. Liminality describes a position of a kind, no matter how hard to define that position is. My poems feel more like an expansion on a beginning or beginnings, rather than an occupied position between one threshold and another. There is a narrative impulse in many of my poems that concentrate on the beginning as a point that holds all other points, if it could be made inclusive enough. Teresa Bridgeman writes of how in a narrative the end usually amasses the momentum towards the final interpretation, rather than the beginning: 'Beginnings are where we first encounter the narrative world and establish its key characteristics. And endings are where we move towards our final interpretation of the narrative'. [7]

In my work I will explore how I dwell on the beginning, and between various possibilities of beginning. The difficulty of beginning or of locating a beginning can create a dynamic aspect, which does not feel adequately summed up in the word 'liminality'. Although every beginning is a margin or threshold, the thresholds themselves are not static and my position more shifting within my poetry than the rather confident and undynamic word 'liminality' seems to imply. The edge or border of an experience is a fruitful place in my work, as it is for so many poets, but the impulse in my work seems to be to be in two times and places at the same time – as though they were not different – rather than to be merely between them. Another binary is the beginning and the end, and often the impulse in my work seems to be to bring these together, within and across the poems, to create a looping effect rather than a linear experience. I will explore this through the poems in which I have recognised this impulse and learned more of it, through the poems, where words themselves are a shifting ground. Poems are my entry points into nature of the ideas 'behind' them. It would therefore be putting the cart before the horse to pretend here to start from an idea and then discuss how the poems explore such an idea. I will also quote from other poets who have tried to describe the origin-point of their poems and

[7] Teresa Bridgeman, 'Time and Space', in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. by David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 57.

how non-linear and waveringly mysterious the relationship between practice and premise can be.

In writing about my poems and the practice behind them, I will explore how 'wavering between beginnings' isn't simply a state of uncertainty, but an energised position, energised by the possibilities available and the oppositional challenges of being in this position. This *moving* uncertainty can work to constrain the poet's potential words and also to provide the current for those words that do arise and the shaping of the poem against the space of possibilities represented by the page.

Elizabeth Bishop was famously hesitant to feel that a poem was finished, and equally seems hesitant to describe the shaping process of a poem without losing any accuracy. When asked by a correspondent for advice in 1975 (Letter to Miss Pierson), apart from the advice to read lots of poetry from previous centuries – and very forcefully, she admits she always advises her writing classes *NOT to read criticism* – she writes: 'I really don't know *how* poetry gets to be written. There is a mystery & a surprise, and after that a great deal of hard work.' [8]

The beginning of the process that only ends after a great deal of work, Bishop calls a *mystery* and a *surprise*. One suspects that Bishop would have felt critical writing could not account for this initiating mystery and might even impede its possibility. And yet this does not seem to be out of a wilful naivety, but out of Bishop's hard-won expertise as a practitioner and her felicity to describe a process as accurately as possible without damaging its future possibility or misrepresenting its previous workings. I would guess that she would only potentially agree with a non-linear, *poetic* account of the poetic process, if any account sensitive enough to feel faithful to the experience of composing a poem – and especially of *beginning* an eventual poem – were acceptable.

I have generally taken my cue in writing this reflective account of my professional practice from poets like Bishop and W. S. Graham, who have also perhaps hesitantly attempted to describe that mysterious practice of writing a poem. In my style of writing I have also taken soundings from poets who have well-tuned critical faculties, such as Denise Riley

[8] Elizabeth Bishop, 'Letter to Miss Pierson', in *Strong Words* ed. By W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2007), p.105.

and Seamus Heaney, whose experience as makers of poems put a different slant on the creative act and whose critical prose – although in a different form and register – is not out of character with the poems they make. I will also refer to the work of critics such as Edward Said where it can help to elucidate a point I am trying to make about my own creative process.

Chapter One

Unbordered Orality and Memory Frames

The Said Frame

This is nature's nest of boxes: the heavens contain the earth;
the earth, cities; cities, men. And all these are concentric; the
common centre to them all is decay, ruin
— John Donne, 'Devotions'

Gripping the curved gravity of each handlebar,
wired up to my earphones and stopped dead
in my tracks by talk of a 'sandouri'
in an audiobook of *Zorba the Greek*,
I twigged, somewhere else, the *link-link-link*
of an instrument – from Kashmir
as far as I knew –
a kind of hammered dulcimer.

Of course I looked it up, back home,
following a hunch, the way a pluck in a forked
branch is a shout-out from buried water.
As you might guess too, turns out
my father's native, plaintive word, *santoor*
and that Dionysian Greek's *sandouri*
name a sole thing – a box for unheard music
that had me caught between gears.

This old trapezoid echo frame,
made perhaps of walnut, goes back
as far as Fars – once Pars, or Persia – *santur*
appears in the cycles of its early poetry.
Baselessly translated 'one hundred strings',
the word can't be traced to a firm gloss –

hollow at heart – but we know it connects to this,
    the said frame

with bridges breasted across the soundboard.
Its loom of strings – stretched to within a whisper
of breaking – plinked, without gliss
by the pulsing heads of paired *misrab*:
two curved-up, hand-held sticks
that rain their sudden starts and stops;
a diviner's rods, plucking beneath the stars
sounding out the dumb links of the heart.

Us

If you ask me, *us* takes in *undulations* –
each wave in the sea, all insides compressed –
as if, from one coast, you could reach out to

the next; and maybe it's a Midlands thing
but when I was young, *us* equally meant *me*,
says the one, 'Oi, you, tell us where yer from'*;*

and the way supporters share the one fate –
I, being one, am *Liverpool* no less –
cresting the Mexican wave of *we* or *us*,

a shore-like state, two places at once, God
knows what's in it; and, at opposite ends
my heart's sunk at separations of *us*.

When it comes to us, colour me unsure.
Something in me, or it, has failed the course.
I'd love to think I could stretch to it – us –

but the waves therein are too wide for words.
I hope you get, here, where I'm coming from.
I hope you're with me on this – between love

and loss – where I'd give myself away, stranded
as if the universe is a matter of one stress.
Us*.* I hope, from here on, I can say it

and though far-fetched, it won't be too far wrong.

The Incubator

Born blue,
needled, a lumbar puncture – to see why I'm so ill
or so given to convulsing –
drawn through a cold, sharp eye, fluid bound for the meninges.
Arriving, just after full moon, a May bank holiday Monday
at twenty past midday, having tried every which way,
head first, then heels, a full circle spun in the womb
between the Friday when the caul broke and waves came,
and heading out again, now crowning, enough for metal to grab me
before the incubator had me
in its offhand way, a name in a ring round my ankle.
The first true holding half a moon away. A man I've not met thanks
Allah, prays in an ante room with empty palms out, recites rituals ...
Meanwhile, in a small frame, my murmuring heart, its mad intervals.
That's me, apart
and feeling it, put off from the start.
I'm not sure I recall these hours, each incubated instance,
but think – hand on heart, time begins in separation
which binds me to something old, and every breath to something borrowed,
something newly piped in from the cold

of my warm frame – I think I hold this time still.
No, I don’t think. I do.

The Fourth Wall

I grew up in a golden-age
for the bedroom
and I haven't grown out
of it. I say golden partly
because there wasn't much to do
on either side of the bright
door lock. And I hadn't
discovered reading.
But the future came in
every so often

through the wallpaper.
My first was dark shades
of yellow, prismatic as dust
in butterfly wings, or as leaf-light,
smudged like the first morning.
The second was black Star
Wars vinyl-coated wallpaper.
Faces floating in galactic
darkness. The third was splashes;
flicks of yellow and red and blue

against white; and the other day,
I found a matching duvet cover
in the depths of an Age
UK charity shop on Bridge Gate,
and slowly picked it up for a price
it might have fetched when new; new
as the upper world that flickeringly appears

and dissipates like spirits or sprites
into a forest's small keyholes,
or a man into a second-hand

shop in midday in midsummer
with a son who wants toys.
Though the father doesn't need
the duvet cover with the primary
colours, he can't leave without this,
as well, a fine example of past imperfect –
the exact shades he used to wake
to, the same watchful shapes too
laid over those other surfaces
that before would keep him in.

The Word

I couldn't tell you now what possessed me
to shut summer out and stay in my room.
Or at least attempt to. In bed mostly.
It's my dad, standing in the door frame
not entering – but pausing to shape advice
that keeps coming back. "Whatever is matter,

must *enjoy the life.*" He pronounced this twice.
And me, I heard wrongness in putting a *the*

before *life*. In two minds. Ashamed. Aware.
That I knew better, though was stuck inside
when the sun was out. That I'm native here.
In a halfway house. Like that sticking word.
That definite article, half right, half
wrong, still present between *enjoy* and *life*.

Prayer

First heard words, delivered to this right ear
Allah hu Akbar – God is great – by my father
in the Queen Elizabeth maternity ward.
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
says Herbert, is prayer. If I continued

his lines from there, from *birth* – a break Herbert
chimes with *heav'n and earth* – I'd keep in thought
my mum on a Hereford hospital bed
and say what prayer couldn't end. I'd say
I made an animal noise, hurled language's hurt

at midday, when word had come. Cancer. Now so spread
by midnight her rings were off.
I stayed on. At her bed.
Earlier, time and rhythm flatlining, I whispered
Thank you I love you thank you
mouth at her ear.
She stared on, ahead. I won't know if she heard.

This poem, 'Prayer', begins with the word *first* and like many of my poems it is a search for a beginning. In the process of writing it, unexpectedly, it became about endings, and about the last words I had said to my mother before she died — a subject that I hadn't begun to write about directly until it arose in this poem. The only other reference to my mother's death was in the poem 'Poppy' where, like the flower, it *crops up* unexpectedly.

I had expected the 'Prayer' poem to be about language primarily and was vaguely aiming to forge a connection between George Herbert's poem, 'Prayer (I)' and my father's first

words to me as a baby, whispered into my ear, the Arabic words, *Allah hu Akbar.* Evoking a distant land, Herbert's final line is: 'The land of spices; something understood.'

This is the last in his list-like sonnet made of metaphors or definitions of what prayer is, and I had a initiating idea to write about the foreignness of first words, and how those I received were in a language that wasn't native to myself or my father, and then perhaps also as a secondary subject, the idea of listening as a kind of faraway *first place*.

Digression: *First*

According to a 'word cloud' computed from the manuscript for my first full poetry collection, *Us*, the word I used the most – words such as *the, and,* etc. aren't included – was *first*. This wasn't planned or a consciously repeated usage of the word, *first*. I think it reflects an inner obsession that comes to the surface during composition to source an origin, or even to ask whether a beginning in space or time is possible to locate. *Where do I begin?* seems to be the question I'm asking even when I think I'm addressing a particular subject in the foreground that stands more groundedly apart from that question. Had I known how prominent this obsession was I might have resisted it consciously, but I can see that the unknown obsession asserts itself almost from one of my first or earliest confusions – from a dimly remembered time before I could articulate the feeling behind the cloudy interjection – *where do I begin?*

The place of this question is itself difficult to locate but does seem in its hazy way to be a driving force, to have a kind of power. Perhaps this relates to what Wordsworth meant when he wrote of *the hiding places of his power* – but for me, this power is not obviously assertive or even mine, but that of a wavering confusion that feels like the opposite of any power of control; something misunderstood, that might even sabotage my attempts to write, even while it also drives them – from the back seat, so to speak. A back-seat driver bent on digressing, and on repeating certain journeys, but unsure of the road ahead or behind. A *first* feeling, positioned in a shy, uncertain hiding place.

Returning to 'Prayer'

The position of the ear as a liminal zone also became a focus of the poem as I wrote it. In Islamic tradition the father whispers into the right ear of a newborn baby, and my father proudly told me on many occasions that this had happened, a story that was often followed by an account of how long the birth process was. My mother's waters broke on Friday and I was born the following Monday, doing a full rotation in the womb in the process, and being born 'blue' and having fits that led the doctors to do a lumbar puncture to withdraw spinal fluid to test for meningitis and then to keep me in an incubator. My father spoke of praying in the waiting room before I was born too. Decades later, when my mother was diagnosed with cancer, hours before she died, earlier that same one day, I said to her that the last time I was on a hospital bed with her would have been during my birth.

In my poem I quote the full line of Herbert, wanting to almost make his line part of the same breath as lines in my poem: '*God's breath in man returning to his birth*'. Having the line in my poem made me think of that last day of mother's life, of her last breaths, and us having spoken earlier that day about my difficult birth. The ear I began writing about – my own first hearings – moved towards my mother's ear – and perhaps the last words she heard. I wrote this draft on a train between Leeds and Hebden Bridge and the time disappeared as I wrote it, partly through my engagement with it and the shock of writing about a buried moment I hadn't planned to write about. I remember walking through Hebden Bridge, looking for a café to sit in and read it again, partly to steady myself and partly to edit the poem.

The first draft was, unusually for me, in an almost finished state. What changed more than the content of the poem was the shape and the sound patterning. There were many feminine endings in the poem – particularly, it seemed to me, sounds which linked with the word *her*:

Akbar, father, ear, her, earth, birth, heard.

Not only had the poem moved from my ear to my mother's ear across time, it also went from a masculine distant God, and a personal father, to a mother and a feminine receiver of prayers, as well as from a distant foreign language to intimate English. The close

resemblance of the sounds around the word *her* gather these distances together in a communion around a kind of hearing or *hereing*. The *her* in 'Herbert' and then in 'Hereford' add to this coincidental confluence that draws distance into the unified present of an ear. In editing the poem, I added the words *hurt* and *hurl* to draw the reader back and forward to these sounds that chime in the end of the word *prayer* and hint perhaps at the endlessness of the audience of prayer. I was thinking about the idea of ends, or the final *earth* of prayer. Herbert's rhyme of *birth* and *earth* sonically and economically suggest the beginnings and endings of life being drawn into one, within the ear at least.

In Herbert's poem, prayer is also *angels' age* and *reversed thunder* – two concepts which play with the scale and direction of human time and transcendent time. A hearing beyond Earth or the earthly is hinted at in the closing couplet of Herbert's poem: 'Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood, /The land of spices; something understood.'

The final phrase, after the suggested foreignness of the *land of spices*, is matter-of-fact and earthy, an inhabiting of distance: *something understood.*

This phrase feels appropriate also for the thud of knowledge that comes with watching a person's death, the internalisation that this is the end of life. A thud in the blood, as another heart stops. The rhyme of *blood* and *understood* compresses distance, and within myself I am aware that my parental ancestry or *blood* compresses difference, as my mother and father's means of being *understood*, their primary language, was also very different. Through negotiation with Herbert's poem and with the themes of my own, many types of distance became encompassed in the poem I was writing. With Herbert, as with his fellow metaphysical poet John Donne, the encompassing of distance is not only a figurative theme but also a kind of poetics, where thought and emotion are ideally drawn together through words which collectively work on different levels in a well-wrought line. In my poem, the idea of a line is also the lineage of poetry, how one line of thought can be brought into the present and even continued beyond the death of the poet's time: 'If I continued // his lines from there.'

The enjambed stanza break deliberately suggests the double break involved. The word *his* not only contrasts with the word *her* but also complicates the idea of who is speaking, meaning first Herbert's line, but more distantly hints at referring back to a masculine God and in the quoted line, '*God's breath in man returning to his birth'.* Reading Herbert's 'Prayer (I)', it seems significant to me that Herbert made his sonnet of one continuous line, and I imagine this must have been because Herbert felt that breaking the sentence was ill-suited to his theme. This large stretching sentence is achieved partly through the use of semi-colons that act as bridges, pausing but not breaking the thought. And this stretch is also the theme of my poem, 'Prayer', between two ears, a continuous *here* and hearing.

Because of the word *Hereford* containing *here* and thus to me suggesting the thought of the place of my mother's death as a kind of fording, I did consider making this more obvious to the reader. Although I felt that this would feel like an overly self-conscious and distracting pun, had I drawn the sense of *here I ford* out by perhaps repeating the word *here* and mentioning the idea of a crossing. Subliminally it is there, and I think the important meaning of the ear as a kind of fording place is present in the poem, and I decided that *her* and *hear* should be the nodal words of the poem. I wanted the poem, as a kind of mirror to Herbert's, to have a roughly sonnet-like shape and length, and within these constraints it was necessary to decide which aspects of each double-hearing of a word I wanted to emphasise. The editing of the poem was a delicate negotiation in this regard, and felt no less creative and powerful than the drafting of this poem which has so much to do with directionality and words being heard and understood across distance. The final word of my poem, *heard* echoes the place name of Hereford, and also the finality and some of the meaning of *understood* in Herbert's poem, though with far greater uncertainty and a feminine addressee: *I won't know if she heard*.

The point at which a dying person loses hearing is uncertain. Similarly, the beginning of hearing as humans is difficult to locate – should it be sounds in the womb whenever hearing develops, or should it be located after the shock and division of birth, when the hearing separates from the body of the mother? My poem starts with: *First heard words …* So the poem begins with a confident statement of words being heard, and heard first. Yet this is obviously contentious. The intention of my father was certainly to speak the first

words into into his new born baby's ear. Perhaps the separation involved in birth from the mother's body is aligned here with the idea of vocal sounds becoming separate *words* – separate words intentionally directed to the separate listener. Perhaps here there is a link being made between the space before birth, with the space after death, a space where words cannot be separate or heard separately.

I am reminded of a poem that I have read many times as I find it intriguing in relation to the notion of continuous hearing, a poem I realise now maybe links for me with the idea of prayer, and also, of the womb – Wallace Stevens' 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon'[9], and these last lines in particular:

> What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
> What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?
>
> Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
> And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
> I was myself the compass of that sea:
>
> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
> And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

This poem is from a collection called *Harmonium* and the book's title also chimes for me with the idea of a continuum that is sonically based. Stevens' poem was not at all on my mind as I wrote my poem, but it seems to resonate deeply and was a poem I read many times a decade earlier, when I first encountered it. I realise that locating the creative impulses of a poem at the time of writing it, and in what one is consciously aware of at that time, can only at best tell part of the story. Writing now about the process of the poem it seems that I am encountering connections that may have been hidden impulses. The line I was most intrigued by, in Stevens' poem – 'And my ears made the blowing

[9] Wallace Stevens, *Harmonium* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 77.

hymns they heard' – hints at the looping nature of creativity, of hymns, and the ear as a site of birth or making. Whether or not this intrigue was a hidden element behind my creative 'process', the very theme of a looping continuum, as represented by the ear, is closely pertinent to my poem 'Prayer'.

Another line from Stevens, 'I was myself the compass of that sea', now makes me think of the kind of pre-natal hearing a baby might have in the womb. On the day my mother died I compared the sound of her oxygen machine to the sound of the sea. I did this because I remembered that my mother said once that she found the rhythm of the sea reassuring and almost mother-like – something I was moved by as her own mother was a remote figure who grew up in a pub in Scotland and whose drinking led her to be committed to a mental asylum. When I told my mother about the oxygen machine sounding 'like the sea', I could not hear her reply. She took off her oxygen mask to repeat the words but again I couldn't hear them. I then put my ear close to her mouth and she said, faintly two words: *No rhythm*.

As I was writing the 'Prayer' poem, this memory was beneath the floorboards so to speak. The connections of breaths, first and last, to the heart monitor ('time and rhythm flatlining') were aroused by the line from Herbert – 'God's breath in man, returning to his birth'. The idea of continuation with the mother's body being linked to poetic continuation through remembered lines of verse was also there. This memory can be consciously remembered lines, or perhaps a more distant memory to do with sound or a dim sense of energetic connection with what otherwise has been forgotten. This recalls what T.S. Eliot wrote about the *auditory imagination* in 'The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism' (first published in 1933)[10]:

> What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of though and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.

[10] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 89.

The auditory continuum across space and time, its presence and its entropic breakage, is evoked in 'Prayer' by the way my poem separates within its lines towards the end:

> at midday, when word had come. Cancer. Now so spread
> by midnight her rings were off.
> I stayed on. At her bed.
> Earlier, time and rhythm flatlining, I whispered
> *Thank you I love you thank you*
> mouth at her ear.
> She stared on, ahead. I won't know if she heard.

The line-break on 'Now so spread' allows the reader to pause at the thought of continuous or spreading *now.* The line-drop in the middle of the broken second line of this last stanza, onto the words 'I stayed on' allows the continuity to break, and perhaps refers to *staying on* in different ways – to living on, to temporarily remaining at a bedside, and to the baby I once was staying by his mother. The words *her bed* refer to the death bed in Hereford hospital, but might also be read as signifying the bed referred to originally, where my mother gave birth to me. That *her bed* chimes with *Herbert* perhaps amplifies a secondary auditory link to the way a poet's words may bed into a future poetic line or bed themselves in future consciousness. The lacunae or gaps in the penultimate line add to the sense both of breakage but also of a distance being forded at a time when the ultimate break in consciousness, death, is happening. Prayer in general is perhaps the attempt to speak across distance until it collapses when speech fords the ultimate gap between the known and the unknown.

Digression: Lacunae

I'm unsure what to call the gaps between words in a line such as:

Thank you I love you thank you

I will call these unfilled spaces lacunae. The line above was the first time I had ever used such a space. I did it because other possible forms of punctuation between the statements

– a full stop, a comma, a dash, ellipses – seemed wrong. In the end a gap of five spaces seemed to be the right way to set the line out and to sensitively indicate the pause between each statement. These statements were neither separate sentences nor an ongoing sentence. The lacunae helped to leave the relationship between the statements unresolved, both a continuous breath and a separate breath. For this reason, I did not capitalise the beginning of the last *thank you*.

There are poets who use such lacunae consistently as alternative punctuation within a line of poetry – for example, to substitute a comma for three spaces and a full stop for six spaces – but generally I like to use conventional punctuation to help with the sense of a sentence or thought, along with the use of line breaks and stanza breaks. In *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (2018), by Don Paterson, he calls these gaps caesurae and helpfully defines them as intralineal syntactic breaks. I haven't chosen to use the term caesura here partly so as not to confuse it with the regular use of caesurae to divide a line in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The lacunae in my 'Prayer' poem had more to do with a intuitive feeling of how to lay out the line – which contained a direct quote from memory, a difficult memory and a repeated the phrase *thank you* – rather than with a measured or musical consideration.

In relation to feeling, and in a complicated statement that needs to be quoted at length, Paterson goes on to describe the caesura as:

> the product and evidence of an expressive tension between the poet's speech and their metrical template; together with enjambment, it is often a sign of the kind of formal-syntactical disagreement that we read, quite correctly, as evidence of strength of feeling. The symmetry of the template provides a contrastive means to make salient the naturalism and authenticity of our speech; it does this by foregrounding the *asymmetric* nature of the often complex, hypotactic syntax (the language of argument, consideration, qualification, conditionality, parenthetical aside) that we need as proof of both the vulnerable humanity and intellectual sophistication of poetic thought. Not only will speech-clauses run expressively counter to the lineal template; the template may also insist on pauses and

> hesitations that the speech, if presented in an unlineated form, would simply not imply.[11]

It is this last point that seems most pertinent to my eventual usage of this extended space within a line – the pause and hesitation that is expressive and expressed by that space.

In later poems of mine I would use this lacuna in a similar way whenever it seemed fitting, but also to use it sparingly so that the gaps across the collection of poems felt significant, related and even to accumulate expressive power. These lacunae began to feel as though they held energy and felt expressive in a hazy way of the sense of wavering between beginnings and endings. They did not define the space between words as say an ellipsis would, and the empty space could be read in a number of ways and this ambiguity began to feel like an energised state, energised by the uncertainty. Each sparingly used lacuna, in zen-like way, began to seem paradoxically empty and full of possibility. A line could be held in indeterminacy and this expressed the condition of the 'Prayer' poem, suspended between two hospital beds across decades, and also suspended between a poem written four centuries ago by another author, and one being written in the present by myself.

In this sense the problem of punctuation in this particular penultimate line allowed for a solution in the shape of this empty space which then taught me about the poem I was writing. In subsequent work, I would see how this new space could open up and out into other poems. And each time it did, it would contain a similar wavering energy despite its different context. This may be expressed well by Eliot's (1933) description in the quotation which I cited earlier, if we substitute his *every word* for *every lacuna: '*invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end'.

The invigoration is partly to do with the gap that the writer is attempting to bridge and the hesitation involved in the task given its scope. A hesitant gap that can return the wavering writer to that same 'primitive and forgotten' feeling in different contexts. This looping and iterative aspect of lacunae will be described further, in the section where I reflect on the process of writing a poem called 'Ys'.

[11] Don Paterson, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 436.

Another aspect of the lacuna, as I have used it, is to create line endings within one line – and so it complicates the idea of edges and middles. In the line: 'Thank you I love you thank you', the word *you* is not only repeated three times but the space after it is repeated. 'Prayer' is a poem that has the idea of *addressing* at its heart, and the addressee is sometimes a distant or unreachable listener, sometimes an intimate addressee. One kind of address can edge into another, as with speaking to a dying person whose ability to receive is unknown, even though words are spoken intimately into the ear, the closest physical edge of listening. The lacunae after the word *you* are capable of holding and dramatising this confusion of addressee or audience. A wavering possibility, between beginnings and endings, represented by empty space and the word hovering on the edge of that space.

Each lacuna between words in a line could be considered, it occurs to me, as *scored silence* in a musical sense. But this would imply that the length of the space is a form of notation, a measurement of the length of pause. And the way I have used lacunae in *Prayer* and where it has arisen since, is to suggest not a differential length of pause, but a common space that arises in the poems, and is defined across the poems, and for this reason I have kept the length of the lacunae consistent. It is a space that gathers meaning and possibility through usage, as believe, if not overused, or deployed merely as punctuation. And it very much fits with the theme of wavering between beginnings; more than mere silence, or the length of hesitation, but the shorthand sign of an energised and potentially endless space between words. It can be both a limited space, and an endless space – a broken-off island of temporary silence, and also 'a part of the main', the excerpt of an infinite, unbroken silence.

Further reflections on 'er', the ear and liminality in 'Prayer'

The *er* sound that the word *prayer* ends on became an organising sound for my poem, at the heart of a number of key words, including *ear.* Conceptually it also represents the sound of wavering as a phoneme associated with the verbalisation of hesitancy in English, the vowel-sound that acts as a substitute for a speaker's coming words or fills an insecure gap between words in progress. Perhaps a phoneme for wavering between beginnings.

Again, in retrospect I now realise how important the potential of this sound was as a sonic centre of gravity for the poem, centred both on the ear and on the 'end' or audience of prayer.

I am reminded of what Heaney has said in regard to the impulses behind the poem through which he believed he had first put his feeling into words*,* 'Digging' which opens his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist.* This poem famously begins:

> Between my finger and my thumb
> The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
>
> Under my window, a clean rasping sound
> When the spade sinks into gravelly ground[12]

I think it's significant that the very first word, whether by hidden impulse or by design – *Between* – sets out the liminal situation of his writing, and perhaps of his future writing, conjoining a beginning place with a middle place. Another kind of middle place is the vowel sound *uh* in the last word of Heaney's first line 'thumb', which may have subconsciously stimulated the progress of that first stanza towards the key word 'gun', which chimes back to the first word 'Between'. In his book of interview answers to the poet Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, Heaney says:

> In the case of the pen 'between my finger and my thumb', 'snug as a gun', and all the rest of it, I was responding to an entirely phonetic prompt, a kind of sonic chain dictated by the inner ear. It's the connection between the 'uh' sounds in 'thumb' and 'snug' and 'gun' that are the heart of the poetic matter rather than any sociological or literary formation.[13]

The phrase *a sonic chain dictated by the inner ear* would work as a description of how in *Prayer* the accumulation of *er* sounds – initially a coincidental or subconscious occurrence

[12] Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 1.
[13] Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interview with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008) pp. 82-83.

– became an organising force in the poem. And in my poem the *ear* is both figurative, an actual ear and a sonic presence, a home key for the poem as it wavers from ear to ear. The double meaning of the phoneme *here / hear* adds other layers to this wavering liminal position. In reflecting on writing the poem, it seems the possibilities around the sound *er* and the concepts and nouns that became linked with it, around *hearing* (her, here, Hereford, Herbert, hurt) and then around the linked idea and sound of *prayer* (Allah hu Akbar, father, there, whispered, heard) are the centres of gravity of the poem. A kind of terminus and opening all at once. Of which the ear seems to be a good symbol, and the word itself a kind of agent, even a listener. Perhaps as soon as the title *Prayer* was written and my intention to have a conversation with Herbert's poem of the same name was set in my mind – knowing also that I somehow wanted to begin with my father whispering my first 'heard words … Allah hu Akbar' into my ear – a wavering *sonic chain* towards the last word *heard* may have been set in place, and it just so happens that this chain is part of the poem's theme. The idea of a sonic chain links with the next poem I will look at, 'Sparkhill', which is about a fight, and its accompanying chant, but also focusses on printed language.

Sparkhill

Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight.

They'd begun the chant before we'd started. And started was the word. He's gonna start on you. After school. Over there. In Sparkhill park. By the slope. They talked it up so much, it happened. They gave me the word and they gave it to him, Jason Walsh. He wants to start on you. Neither of us had a problem. What made them do it? We'd come first or second in school races, same height, curly hair, mid-brown skin. Friends. Let's see them fight. We both went quiet as gravity after morning break, and all afternoon, and turned up as the other or the future seemed to need – on the hill, after the last bell. Starting was hard. The first punch was a shove – like shoves were our slow way of talking. Shoving arms became thrown arms. Thrown arms became wrestling arms. And there was love in the grip

on the fat lip of the slope. No one else there – not
the arguing parents not the news, not the crowd,
only ashamed attempts at anger, or worlds turned
upside down. Which was us with a crowd shouting us
to tumble as we fought like in the films. We did.
And when we did, the ground felt harder than any
fist on my mouth, as clouds whose names I'd yet to learn
intermingled with grass liquidly, like a head
in a font, like his head once, only the liquid
was light – the mute grey clouds or the crowd's word, as we
turned – *fight.* I tasted turf and saw sky, tongue-tied light
came up from the ground's mouth, the way I had shaped songs
that morning's assembly. It's false, no energy
in it. But where's it from? The big bang, or before?

Whatever it is I'm not feeling it

and don't want to go back up and start again, though that's what I'm hearing we should do. There, at the foot of the hill, I shove him weakly away, a shove to say I don't mean it, leave it. I grip the bag I dropped at the start, a bag with a changed gravity, even the heavy logo, its big letters – H – E – A – D, and head home, head out of the park, down the very long Stratford Road. I didn't have the fight in me. Or I didn't think I had. For a very long time. Until this afternoon's grey – past the green curtain – and that afternoon's grey, rub two flints behind my eyes. Two flint clouds that ring a bell, dull and bright. And I sit down, quite some way from St John's primary school, Sparkhill Park, and that slope where time felt dense. The opposite of light. And I look past my knuckles, at it – *it*, the black, up-tilted

keyboard, and on that back- lit slope, these central blocks –
F – G – H . . . And I start to type: *Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight*

My poem 'Sparkhill' is a search for a source and a complicating of the idea of a single source. It is autobiographical and centres around a memory of a childhood fight. The source of the poem is both that distant memory and the more immediate, recent memory of looking at a keyboard and attempting to write the poem that recalls that early memory. In the process of writing the poem, a connection is made with the idea of an original source of creation– intertextual biblical allusions are made (for example, 'In the beginning was the word' and the mention of 'St John's primary school') as well to the scientific notion of 'the big bang'. The words 'spark' and 'hill' in the title are exploited for their wider resonance to anchor the poem among these various allusions and locations.

The layout and metrics of the poem also occupies a liminal position – moving between loosely lyrical prose and tightly formal poetry. The first line is a five-beat repetition of the

word ‘fight’. The inspiration here was both the actual memory of the chanting at childhood fights, and also, intertextually, the famous line of pentameter from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* where the word ‘never’ is repeated five times.

In the case of ‘Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight.’ the five beats in the line are single stressed syllables, with nothing unstressed – forceful and immediate, mirroring the immediacy and closed-in stress of being in a physical fight.

In a poem about beginnings, and first sources, the first line should bear extra scrutiny. The tightly stressed five-beat line hints at a compacted version of the pentameter – which many commentators have called the linguistic heartbeat of the English lyrical poem, going all the way back to its early sources in Chaucer. In *Poetry as Discourse* (1983)[14], Antony Easthope argued that pentameter was a historical invention of Chaucer and then was reintroduced into English in 1557 by the translations of Petrarch’s sonnets by Wyatt and Surrey. From that time on, Easthope argues, the five-beat line was hegemonic in English poetry, as exemplified by English poetry’s most canonical proponent, Shakespeare.

Geographically, Sparkhill is an inner-city area of Birmingham with a high immigrant population, particularly from a Muslim, Kashmiri background. Although this is unmentioned in the poem, the contested Quranic term ‘jihaad’ means something like ‘fight’. Sparkhill has been in the news for arrests of terrorist suspects. The district is also centred around ‘the very long Stratford Road’ – which leads eventually to Stratford upon Avon and so an intertextual link to another distant source or inspiration is hinted at. Various sources are fighting in the poem for a hold.

The first line stands alone and the next stanza is a block of prose which refers to beginnings and a chant that had begun ‘before we’d even started’. The prose stanza ends with an enjambed line – ‘and there was love in the grip’ – and the grip becomes both the physical act of wresting but also alludes to the grip of form. Across the stanza break, the word ‘grip’ fully rhymes with ‘lip’ and has a half-rhyme with ‘slope’, which sonically sets up expectations of formal tightness or the grip of sonic constraints. This stanza contains more internal rhyme and has fourteen lines – hinting at the classic English sonnet form, although evading the grip of its rules. Instead the formal constraint here is purely syllabic,

[14] Antony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 54

rather than metrical. There are twelves syllables per line, with six syllables on either side of a hiatus, which visually mirrors the caesura of the very earliest poems in English, or Old English.

The six syllables on either side of a twelve-syllable line also mirror the medieval French form of the Alexandrine. At the end of this version of an Alexandrine, a single line of five beats and ten syllables stands alone – the line evading the grip of one form and entering another:

'Whatever it is I'm not feeling it'.

This is in very contemporary and casual idiom, and more prosaic than lyrical. The single line here mirrors the opening line of the poem that stood alone, and which led into prose. Again, a prose stanza follows which describes me wanting to evade the fight and walk away – which reflects the poem's formal evasion of constraints in this stanza of loose prose.

The final stanza is a couplet, continuing the poetic form of the Alexandrine above for two lines – again rhyming words connects across an enjambed stanza gap: 'the black, uptilted // keyboard, its slope backlit'. The slope in the poem moves from being the hill in a park to being the upturned keyboard of the adult writer, staring at the letters F, G and H, which happen to be in the centre of an English keyboard. The 'it' at the centre of the poem is complicated to mean an original source of creation, as well as poetic energy, as well as something concrete – and in the end 'it' ends up being the missing letters to make the word 'fight' – and return the poem to its origins and inspiration. A source that has become liminal, complicated and enriched. At this point, the title, 'Sparkhill', refers both to a geographical place and the source of a poem – the spark at the sloped keyboard, where the fight is an internal matter.

The Sparkhill poem was partly also written because I was due to read poems and be interviewed by Paul Farley on location in Birmingham for an episode of The Echo Chamber for BBC Radio 4. I was asked to connect poems 'back to source' and to think of places to read the poems. I realised that I rarely mentioned specific places in my poetry, even though many are autobiographical and based around childhood memories in Birmingham. I'd had the idea before to write a poem about the memory of the fight – and to start with

the line ‘Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight.’ – but now I thought I would begin this poem and call it *Sparkhill*, to name its location. The title set off echoes around the words ‘spark’ and ‘hill’ which led to a chain of associations.

The poem was begun within the month of me reading it for the radio broadcast, the first time I had ever read it aloud – and the producer, Tim Dee, included my comments after reading the poem, where I ask Paul and Tim not to include it in the programme, as it felt ‘too long’.

Often, it’s at a poem’s first public reading that I can sense how well the words are working together – and I felt insecure about this one – partly because it contained so much ‘prose’, which I’m not used to including within a poem. I was surprised both that the poem had been included in the broadcast – as well as my comments afterwards – and also in the week of its broadcast, was surprised that I was contacted through social media by a number of casual listeners who especially liked what they typically called ‘the fight poem’ or ‘the poem, FIGHT’.

Interestingly it was the word ‘fight’ which apparently anchored the poem in their memory, rather than the place name it was titled under.

A man of Indian heritage and a similar age to myself who had grown up in Sparkhill and remembered similar fights in the same park wrote many messages through Facebook, and his friends also contacted me. I was worried that the poem would lose the reader but felt differently about it after some of the positive feedback, particularly as these respondents weren’t particularly interested in poetry – which, for me, was the real subject I was grappling with, beneath the ostensible subject of the fight.

During the same radio programme, Paul Farley, made a comment that he thought I was a ‘wavering poet’ – which perhaps was prompted by both the poems themselves and the hesitant answers I seemed to be giving.

The wavering was also connected to the issue of the poems being hard to pin down to a particular source in place and time. I had instinctively been uninspired by the idea of liminality although I could see it was pertinent to my themes. The word ‘wavering’ has an energetic component, dynamic, rather than static – and it also felt a more energising

prospect to write around this, rather than liminality, which was never a reason for my writing, although my writing often happens to fall into a 'liminal' territory.

I remembered lines from 'Seeing Things', a poem by Seamus Heaney from the 1991 collection of the same title, which I had noted down years earlier; the last two lines of which I had considered as one of the many possible epigraphs for the poetry collection I was putting together:

> All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps
> And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered
> Like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.[15]

At the time it wasn't the word 'wavered' that drew my attention but the 'zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself'. The idea of printed language (hieroglyph) and its relationship to life is something that my poems have been drawn to in the past, and also a theme the Sparkhill poem picks up on. My poem ends with the speaker, or rather, writer, looking at a keyboard and staring at the letters in the centre of the keyboard: F, G, H.

These letters begin a series of associations with the word 'fight'. The initial memory around that word is an oral memory of a crowd of school children shouting repeatedly 'Fight': Thus the end of the poem is also the start. The poem wavers between beginnings and endings. It seems, in retrospect, that 'wavering between beginnings' is how this and many other of the poems I write go about their business, looking for a start amongst contested possibilities, both geographical and chronological.

In terms of the beginning of poetry itself, the theme of poetry's oral beginnings and the difference between oral and print memory is also hinted at. Although it is not mentioned in the poem, what is in the background is that my father came from an oral culture and was not educated beyond the age of seven. In my mind, Stratford Road, which features in the poem is connected with my father's story of learning to read English through staring at the signs above shops. Another kind of 'fight' or violence is that of the act of writing which threatens to place an event securely on the page. This is Tom Paulin, writing about printed

[15] Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 17.

language as a form of violence, referring to one of my favourite novels, Dickens's *Great Expectations*:

> Printed language is alien, inauthentic and cruelly powerful. Print is a form of violence, its signs are like that curious 'T' which Pip's brain-damaged sister chalks on her slate in Great Expectations. In Dickens's novel, the letter T, a leg-iron and hammer are identified – the T signifies Orlick who has felled Mrs Gargery with the leg iron that clamped Magwitch's ankle.[16]

The point at which the alphabet and printed language begins to affect our experience is hard to locate and possibly our imaginations waver between orality and print-culture. The speaker in the poem is also thinking of a time before he could trap the phenomena he was witnessing e.g.

fist on my mouth, as clouds whose names I'd yet to learn

intermingled with grass liquidly, like a head

in a font

The font here has the double meaning of a baptismal font and a hint of the 'fonts' of printed language that trap one's thoughts into pre-formed, identifiable shapes. The fight for a poet at a laptop, such as in this poem that ends with the poet staring at a keyboard and typing, is to work between modes of consciousness – shaping letters into words and lines but also to remain receptive to hazily unshaped sensation and memory. The 'fight' is also located here.

My poem 'Sparkhill' wavers between language awareness and dumb wordless sensation, especially as the physicality of the fight is recalled. The poem wavers in its focus between different kinds of beginnings and entries into experience. Tom Paulin continues his analysis of Pip's entry into print language and a scene where a young Pip, learning the alphabet, writes, on a slate, a message for Joe Gargery:

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[16] Tom Paulin, 'Tracking *The Wind Dog*' in *Strong Words* ed. By W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2007), p.174.

> Joe doesn't understand that Pip will write himself out of their Edenic oral world. The hearth is covered with all the letters of the alphabet – death signs have infiltrated the house. And even though it's a statement of his bond of love with Joe, Pip's slate symbolises the decomposition of paradisal speech, the beginning of the Fall.[17]

Perhaps the tumbling down the hill is an allusion to this other kind of fall from grace, or a fall, from a chanting oral culture, to a typing print culture. I say perhaps because I am aware that it is easy to ascribe apparent meanings and impulses after the event of writing, when latterly obvious links are subconsciously present, and in a wavering state of consciousness. And perhaps this also fits with the description of the sense of falling down a hill while fighting, where phenomena are confused 'liquidly', in the poem.

There is another small piece I've written, called '(Early)', the same imagery is explored differently, around liquidity, 'fonts', early inklings and inkless beginnings. The brackets around the titular word *early* are partly to reinforce the quietness around the subject, as well to suggest a kind of holding. The brackets quietly also figuratively signify a pair of ears, and within the brackets, the word the *ear* is present internally, in the word *early.*

(Early)

My baby's fingertips were *dusted*

this morning *in Yorkshire fog*

and his ears in poetry too;

no font's liquid,

but cloud's and earth's, suspended.

And composed, lifted quiet.

[17] Tom Paulin, 'Tracking *The Wind Dog*' in *Strong Words* ed. By W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2007), p.175.

I have also re-edited an earlier published poem which is called 'Liquidity' and this poem further complicates the theme by looking at ink and palimpsests and Archimedes' account of the displacement of fluids, which according to legend, was conceived of in a bath.

That the poems should 'speak to' each other despite their different settings is important if the theme of wavering between beginnings also applies to where one poem ends and another begins.

Digression: Beginnings – Wavering into Literature

I have also been thinking about my own entry into literature, not from an illiterate state, but as a teenager who wasn't particularly interested in books and didn't have the stamina to read anything very much longer than a poem. This changed at the age of nineteen when I read my first novel, Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* – which features a protagonist who has an Indian parent and an English mother. I've been thinking about how important this was for me in my own beginning as a writer – and how arrested I was by the beginning of the book which is: 'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost.'[18]

That word 'almost' made a huge impression on me. I hadn't thought about this very much until recently when I met Hanif Kureishi and told him how much that first line meant, and how, as an unbookish nineteen-year-old who didn't think books were written for him, Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* 'had me at *almost'*. The word 'almost', looking back, (almost) seems central to my work. Or more accurately, what seems central is the wavering feeling that animates and inspires that word 'almost'.

I was lucky to be invited by Kureishi to meet him at a café near where he lives, and one of the things we discussed was the effect of our mixed heritage on our perceptions and also the opening of his first novel, a line I have carried with me ever since first reading it. I

[18] Hanif Kuresihi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 3.

asked him how he came to write this line and I hadn't expected him to say that the beginning of the novel came at the end of his process. In my process this would be a rarity as the poem doesn't seem to snag until I have a first line. He told me that the original first line was something very simple – along the lines of 'Everything was about to change'. In the light of a completed book, wanting what he called 'a killer opening', he penned the first paragraph.

It's interesting that the beginning of another important book for me – Dickens's *Great Expectations* – begins with an explanation of the name Pip, which of course has a hint within it of the idea of a seed, small but full of future expectation, and soon Pip is thinking about his mysterious parentage by trying to make out clues from the letters inscribed on a gravestone.

The poem 'Sparkhill' ends with the writer staring almost disinterestedly at the keyboard, at the letters in the middle – F, G, H – and seeing the possibility of an opening word, and a beginning that speaks to the subject who is wavering, almost passively. The poem ends with italics and without a full stop, as if to suggest circularity, one syllable short of quoting the opening line: '*Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight*'.

Chapter Two

Slippery Words and Hesitant Translations

The Wardrobe

might be a good name for a bookshop, small but oddly ongoing,
the kind you'd happen upon, and enter, perhaps alone, perhaps
not, in a long grown-up coat. And as you place your cold hand
in its gloveless pocket, and feel the tweed edges of empty space
you might be reminded – as I am – of a sleeved scene in a book;
a scene I knew firstly from a VHS film I'd replay, by the fire, rapt
as a kid, watching Lucy's cartoon fingers push through long fur
coats – further, touching branches. Snow. I don't know about you
but I never forgot this feeling I've never had – like that episode
of sleeplessness in a book I did read later, spellbound, where a fir
branch, tapping a gusty window, was never fir, but skin and bone;
Cathy's icy ghost hand: *I'm come home*. Gripped, gripping, through

the broken glass. On top of the MDF wardrobe near the landing
fittingly high from the ground, was our family's Quran, wrapped
in cloth. Gilt-edged, wide enough to house three scripts. Around
the time I'd be glued to films like *The Lion, the Witch …* I'd place
a chair beneath, take down the shrouded weight, undo the black
sleeve, open a page and read a corridor of the English that slept
in the margins. I wasn't sure why I did this, or what I'd fear
I might miss, or if I was sitting the right way, or how to feel true
to the words. I'd lift them back, rewrapped, on the wardrobe.
Distantly, I've long looked up to books. The distance they cover.
Picture me, delayed, walking through a bookshop – say this one
– forgetting what I first came in for, or if I ever really knew.

Early Draft

after Rumi

Was it a lost language, like a breath through grass, darkly,
endlessly seeking after its source? It was not. Gnats. Gnats
were storming through the grass, swerving death, jittery
for wisdom. Which they found in the shape of Solomon.
O Solomon, they said, as one, agitated as one. I, we, are
in bits. You care for the wee ones, right? Well here we, I
am. I'm, we're, so little, we, I cannot sign anything of note
and life passes in a smudge. The world uses me, us, badly.
I'm, we're, little more than poxy metaphors for nothing. My,
our, being's so small, the sun runs out of gnat veins too soon.
Look in the middle of resignation! *Slap-bang.* Defend us, me!

But who's your complaint against, exactly? asked Solomon.
It is the wind, said the gnats, dotty speech marks, unsettled,
around nothing, and dry grass. I hear you, said Solomon, and
being swayed by your symphony, I am of a mind to take your
side. But a good judge must give ears to both sides of a story.
I, we, agree, said the twitchy, death-obsessed gnats. Summon
the East Wind, said Solomon. Jacketless as the earliest, leafiest
book, the East Wind whooshed into the outdoor court. What
of the gnats? *Gone*. Transposed into a wider union. The gnats'
case, summed up Solomon, is all our metaphors, so let's leave
the speech marks and agree that the sides settled their difference

far out of court, in this 'Gnats v. the Wind'. My hearing. Yours.

Hill Speak

There is no dictionary for my father's language.
His dialect, for a start, is difficult to name.
Even this taxi driver, who talks it, lacks the knowledge.
Some say it's Pahari – 'hill speak' –
others, Potwari, or Pahari-Potwari –
too earthy and scriptless to find a home in books.
This mountain speech is a low language. *Ours*. "No good.
You should learn speak Urdu." I'm getting the runaround.

Whatever it is, this talk, going back, did once have a script:
Landa, in the reign of the Buddhists.
… So was Dad's speech some kind of Dogri?
Is it Kashmiri? Mirpuri? The differences are lost on me.
I'm told it's part way towards Punjabi,
but what that tongue would call *tuwarda*,
Dad would agree was *tusaanda* –
'yours' –

truly, though there are many dictionaries for the tongue I speak,
it's the close-by things I'm lost to say;
things as pulsed and present as the back of this hand,
never mind stumbling towards some higher plane.
And, either way, even at the rare moment I get towards –
or, thank God, even getting to –
my point, I can't put into words
where I've arrived.

Q

Somewhere (thank you, father) over the hills,
through some half-door in my mind, despite my having
no call to speak it, and hearing of it so long ago,
I know the Urdu *ishq* is love.
And further, how it's the highest (a divine fervour,
a bolt cued from the round heavens – almost angelic)
among a whole host of forms, or feathers, of love
like that story of subtle Inuit measures of snow

and now I've *utterly gone and put my foot in it*
and other shoppers are turning round, as we inch
up to the queue's end, still far from those tills
and she's prodding me to explain my mute, short-falling
answer – giving the nod, when she asked me *If ...* and *Whether …*
– she swears, that at the end of my assent she heard me whisper
-ish

The Still

My wealth let sons and brethren part.
Some things they cannot share:
my work well done, my noble heart,
these are mine own to wear.
– attrib. Jabir, the 'first practical alchemist'

You'll know, Son, of the Jabberwock
and may even feel fear,
but what of Ibn Hayyan
whose pen-name was Jabir?

Writing in code, an algebra,
a hush-hush way of talking
that kept cloaked his experiments
in (whisper it) *takwin* –

the haram quest to fashion life –
he scrawled dark recipes
to conjure new snakes and humans
which helped Mary to see

Frankenstein, through Goethe's *Faust*.
But his chemistry still lasts,
from 'the ashes' of an *al-kali*,
to our distilling flasks –

his own retort and alembic
or *al-anbiq*, 'the still'
(in this mixed babble, I see *amber*;

ancient wings or bubbles)

and speaking of preservation,
it proved alcohol's need
in this time – the dry caliphate
of Haroun al-Rashid –

the base wine of poets distilled
like a useful djinn:
scents seal their notes with this spirit
and inks seal their nights in …

I see Jabir – up late, in his lab
scrying retorts of mist,
mulling on how time might preserve him –
muttering *gibberish*.

Liquidity

In a dictionary I look the other way, down its page
to one of the five entries of "**list**
v. the tilt of a ship" – "a variant of earlier *lust."*
I dwell on unsteady edges –
of the economy, and of Europe, and Greece
and evasively changing the subject, via Syracuse, or Sicily,
an old treatise …

Across the water –
Bahr-i-Sefid*, the Sea of White*
to some, and to others *Our Sea,* Mare Nostrum –

in Constantinople, on 10th-century goatskin, a parchment
of prayers was found at the turn of the last
century. The heartfelt prayers above turned out to be the least

valuable thing, for under the clearer ink
lay the difficult-to-see words of Archimedes'
On Floating Bodies. And each letter
in their first coinage –
not the Latin of the coming empire
but the governing language of Greater Greece.

Even in translation, these theorems
that settled the subject of displacement
had been out of sight
and to our long, unwritten future
almost entirely lost.

Mars and Venus

after the Pashto of Dilawar Khan

I can walk alone. I'll know where I'm going
as soon as I save myself from what's coming.
We've no time for savings. For progress,
for the far-off stepping stones of Mars and Venus.
We live under the shadow of a foreign gun.
Let me save for my children the small coin of the sun.

Empty Words

Meaning ‘homeland’ – *mulk*
(in Kashmir) – exactly how
my son demands milk.

Full-rhyme with *Jhelum*,
the river nearest his home –
my father’s ‘realm’.

Mouthing the word *mouse*
what escapes me is the ‘thief’
in the Sanskrit *mus.*

You can’t put a leaf
between *written* and *oral*;
that first ‘A’, or ‘alif’.

Letters. West to east
Mum’s hand would write; Dad’s script goes
east to west. Received.

The year Dad was born
a long lost trail. *Listen, yaar*
nothing was written.

At home in Grasmere –
thin mountain paths have me back
a boy in Kashmir.

Stratford on Avon
Mum and Dad's first date; Dad's twin
kids in Pakistan.

Now we separate
for the first time, on our walk,
at the kissing-gate.

Old English 'Deor' –
an exile's lament, the past's
dark, half-opened door.

Where migrating geese
pause to sleep – somewhere, halfway
is this pillow's crease.

Invader, to some –
neither here, nor there, with me –
our rhododendron.

Fromwards . . . lost to us,
Middle English. To head back
from . . . To turn one's face.

The son filled *The Globe.*
The dad seamed a second skin –
stitched *V*s in the glove.

Yes, I know. *Empty*.
But there's just something between
the *p* and the *t*.

In a sequence of poems that borrow from the syllabic structure of haiku, 'Empty Words', I explore various associations focussed around language and the slippery nature of words and even etymologies. The sequence both here in in my collection *Us,* appears twice in separate sections with different stanzas under the same title, 'Empty Words'. Continuity and difference is explored from stanza to stanza and between the sections. In each stanza, rhyme, and usually pararhyme, is used across the first and third line endings, and some of these rhymes are internal or extend beyond each unit or haiku and into another below.

Pararhyme tends to fit with the idea of things being half similar and are suggestive of difference and echoing all at once. A kind of double register that fits with my themes. I use the chiming sounds to explore the idea of boundaries between words, and blurring those boundaries through similar sounds so that the end rhymes almost share a mixed identity and so that words become a boundary issue. The haiku as an Eastern form is only used in so far as I usually follow the expectation of a syllable count of 5-7-5. I see each 'haiku' more as a syllabic unit of poetry. The use of end-rhyme, often half-rhyme, on the first and third lines adds a European flavour that runs against the expectation of haiku poetry in many ways. The sharp contrast of cultural expectations contained three lines adds a sense of the 'haiku' here being an almost ridiculously hybridised form where *words and subtle small differences* are a focus.

Paul Muldoon's use of haiku with end rhyme must have influenced me here, for instance, in 'Hopewell Haiku', as has his interest in borders and the ways figurative borderlines can be expressed across distance through end-rhyme that blurs the boundary between one word and another. I think this influence was a second-hand one, so to speak, as it was through Don Paterson's use of rhyming in a Japanese form in his book, *Rain*, that initially inspired me. Sometimes we can read a poet through another poet's work, if the influence shows through.

My introduction to Paul Muldoon's work came when I did a one-to-one tutorial session with Ian Duhig at an Arvon course in Hebden Bridge. After showing him my poems, in particular, a poem called *Q*, he remarked that my poetic themes and interest in language reminded him of Paul Muldoon. He then found a book in the Arvon library and read me the whole of a poem called 'Anseo' which I was struck by immediately. I do believe reading other poets such as Michael Donaghy and so on, who are familiar with Muldoon and his forebears, possibly meant I had caught up with this influence late, even after the event, as well as there being a similarity of concern and poetic impulse between Muldoon and myself – for instance feeling 'in-between' languages, and bring interested in mapping out the minute process of a thought. John Donne is part of this matrix too. Elizabeth Bishop too, who details hesitations and rethinking within her poetry. One might argue that Donne is doing in his poetry what poet-essayists are doing – working through complex ideas and

unfolding the way the writer's thought is progressing during the process of writing. Mapping a stretch of thought.

The way poems can add up over a course of a collection to form further links across distance seems to me to be a wider way of extending a thought, and one I have aspired towards, the possibility of a collection of distinct but interconnected poems, where no poem is an island.

The last piece in the 'Empty Words' sequence above, where I think of the letters *p* and *t* was the first time I wrote a rhyming 'haiku', and I was initially trying to write in a pub in Leeds, alone, a little thing about the foam on an empty pint glass. In the end what I wrote, perhaps typically for me, was more about the focal word, *empty.* This idea of writing rhyming haiku focussed in one way or another around words began here. In years before, as a student, I had tried to write more classic, nature-based haiku, and had read several translations of Basho's work, and also Issa's. This form where I borrow the syllable count and chime one word with another, often distantly, felt like it suited my themes. The 'eastern' element of the work was usually there, but at a distance, far underneath rather than on the surface. A beginning source that is there waveringly. But as with that initial poem about the pint glass, the desire beneath is for a containment, a containment that can even come down to the level of a letter. Visually, a glass even recalls the letter *U*, a letter that has come to symbolise the containing of difference in my work, as well as a kind of reaching out of a poet to the *you* of a reader. Meanwhile the letters *p* and *t* heard in the word *empty*, and suggesting something *present*, could also be read as the letters either side of the word *poet*.

I admire poetry that can catch up with a reader later, and whether possible linguistic allusions like this are picked up is doubtful, but this remains a possibility I like, and represents a kind of trust in the reader, as well as in the slipperiness of language, an insecure trust which over a series of poems may hopefully become mutual, and a little less insecure. An *us* the middle of a *trust*.

I am aware that the connections I make between words may seem trifling and only superficially interesting, but any connection I can make with words seems for me to be central to my work. For all of my insecurity around language I have a faith that words do connect, and indeed that all language somehow is connected. This is not the kind of faith I could easily explain but seems more a desire or need for this to be true, perhaps a desire that begins before I can consciously remember, which may account for why it comes up obsessively and almost in spite of my intentions as I write. Again, the experience of hearing my father speak intimately in a language I did not understand despite my profound connection with him, has possibly left a very deep impression. In a thesis on Ted Hughes and the translation, the poet Tara Bergin writes about the idea of a universal language, beneath language almost, that Hughes was interested in. Although English was his only language, Hughes was inspired perhaps by working with word-for-word literal translations of poems, where the elliptical oddness of the directly Englished translations was a positive inspiration for his poetry and carried a charge he was attracted to, as it felt nearer to the energised source of language:

> Hughes was deeply attracted to the idea of what he described as a "Universal language of understanding, coherent behind the many languages, in which we can all hope to meet." As Weissbort points out, this carries strong echoes of Walter Benjamin's "Ursprache." In 'The Task of the Translator,' Benjamin talks of the "kinship of languages" which can be the result of literary translation, and sees the act of translation as an uncovering or releasing of the common poetic experience that underlies individual languages.[19]

Being brought up in a household where my parents had different mother tongues, perhaps I was sensitive to the distances a single word could contain, and had an innate desire to look for wholeness as it seemed unattainable, or attainable only in brief glimpses or glitches of language. And so I was also sensitive to glancing possibilities where I could

[19] Tara Bergin, 'Ted Hughes and the Literal: A study of the relationship between Ted Hughes's translations of János Pilinszky and his poetic intentions for *Crow*' (Newcastle: Newcastle University, 2003), p5.

hear the same phonemes in two languages. This is the thinking behind the following poem, the title of which translates as ‘Tall Story’:

Tall Kahani

Straight answers were beyond the powers of Rashid Khalifa, who would never
take a short cut if there was a longer, twistier road available.
– SALMAN RUSHDIE, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

As bucket is to balti
so batty are the mad Bauls.
As quickly is to jaldi
a Qawwaal is a Sufi who calls.

As tale is to kahani
and lambi far too tall
so safar is our far journey
as sab is to everything. That’s all.

But, Dad, *sab* is our word for partly or under.
And to *safar* is to be under strife.
And if *kaha* means 'where', and *nahii* means 'no',
then is *kahani* – your ‘story’ – from nowhere?

No, son.
Only if your story is broken.
As zindagi is too

Dad – go on – don’t break off.

What's *zindagi*? Or what's it like?
What's the story there?

That, my son, is just life.

In this poem the italics represent my father's imagined speech and the other lines are a child-me's response. The slightly nonsensical nature of the poem is set out partly by the epigraph from Rushdie, and its Dickens-like characterisation of someone called Rashid who would always take a *longer, twistier* direction. My father's name was Abdul Rashid and in Rushdie's story, Rashid seems to be a wordplay on his own name. Rashid means *guide* in Arabic, and so a guide who takes a strange route seems an interesting take on a story teller. Incidentally Rushdie's book is dedicated to his son, called Zafar – and so when I began reading this book, I was thinking of personal associations from the off. The word *kahani* which means story, in particular set off a memory around a mistranslation of mine. Possibly from the 'Bollywood' films I used to watch on video with my father, I knew the word *kahani* quite well, and yet I also made an association with two other basic words – *nahii* and *kaha* – 'no' and 'where'. Perhaps this false glossing gives to *kahani* another layer of meaning, like the word *utopia* which means 'no place'. Another mistranslation I made while watching films was hearing in the word *safar* – 'journey', from which the English word *safari* comes – either the English *suffer* or else my name, *Zaffar.*

The urge of the child in the poem is to unify worlds through words that are baffling and familiar at once. The tall story alluded to in the title could be both *life* – the final translated word of the poem – and also the story of an immigrant who is perhaps misunderstood. The tallness is both the *twisty,* possibly unreliable nature of the narrative, but also hints at the other meaning of *story,* as in of a level in a building, where the tallness might indicate that beneath the surface are other layers of meaning.

Ultimately the speaker wants to feel at home in language, and the father in the poem seems confident about his own language – a confidence expressed in rhyme – but he also seems to withhold much of the story, as perhaps there is far too much to tell. In *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson writes:

> In her influential study of storytelling and identity, 'Relating Narratives', first published in Italy in 1997, Adrianna Caverero has used the term 'narratable selves' as distinct from 'narrated selves' to define the way in which she believes we make our home in the unique story we tell about ourselves. The idea is not the we are the product of our story but rather that memory has 'an uncontrollable narrative impulse' (Cavarero 2000: 35), that we are immersed in its possibility, and are familiar to ourselves because of it, whether it gets told or not.[20]

The idea that memory has an uncontrollable narrative impulse has a great resonance for me when I reflect on trying to pin down a poem I may have written, and account for the impulse beneath it, which sometimes does feel like a story-teller's impulse, but perhaps the impulse of my memory and the way it unfolds, rather than a conscious desire of my own. Often a memory which might set a poem in progress, or least the impression that a poem is in the offing, will be connected with language – knowing that a word, say, *kahani*, holds a memory which holds a story – in this case, both literally and metaphorically. A kind of wormhole that opens up and out.

In the following poem, 'Just a Minute', a wormhole is created not so much by a word, but more by a hesitation between words.

[20] Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 117.

Just a Minute

The whereabouts of things has gone, but I
can see the radio on the right, as you
rummage in a drawer. Same side as the sink. I
can't reach up to the stiff tap, as Birmingham
water drums against that hollow tin base. I am
splashed by what you'd say sprang from Welsh hills
to this cupboarded corridor, a long pace wide –
All is at hand, you'd add – in our Tardis metre

from here, our narrow, clapped-out kitchen
above trapped voices, the running
tap, the hammering accents of water.

I turn to hear you explain Just a Minute's rules:
To speak, without hesitation, deviation,
or repetition. One subject. This span. Undoable
I think. Like swimming a length. Small, stammering

– those wrong ways explain my habits – even
inside. Each trapped pause here has multiplied.
Wait. Any second she'll be there. Listen. You

turn off the tap to cheers as the whistle blows.
Our laughter outlasts the long wave's applause.

At the heart of this poem is a memory, and later memories, of being in the kitchen with my mother while the radio was on. My family lived in the same house from when I born until when I was nineteen, when my mother left my father. Throughout this time, and for as long as I can remember, the radio would be on in the kitchen all day, and it was always BBC Radio

4. The programme called *Just a Minute* was one of my mother's favourites, and it later occurred to me that the habits of speech for which the panelists would be penalised as they attempted to talk for a minute on a given subject during the radio show – hesitation, deviation, and repetition – were the very things I do habitually while writing a poem. One could even say it is a kind of unwitting poetics. Another thing that occurred to me prior to the writing of my poem was that a sonnet took roughly a minute to read. I was thinking about Shakespeare's sonnet 60, which seems well named as it is partly about time and contains the word *minutes*, and of course there are sixty seconds in a minute. The sonnet's elegant, fluid opening has stayed with me and I can quote it from memory. I like how it conflates time with waves, and the limits of time with a shore. It begins:

> Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore
> So do our minutes hasten to their end,
> Each changing place with that which went before

Eventually I decided to write a poem called 'Just a Minute' partly in response to this poem and the idea of a sonnet being contained orally by a minute, rather like the rough length of Chopin's *Minute Waltz*. I wrote it also partly to satisfy a feeling that I might be able to find a poem in response to memories of that radio programme in the kitchen, and how the idea of talking for a minute felt like a long stretch for me, just as writing poetry has seemed a long stretch. Various memories coalesced and pressed together to make the poem.

Originally, I was going to write about being an older child and mowing the lawn and trying to make straight lines as I went up and down, and then my mother waving at me through the window to come in to the kitchen on a Sunday as the radio programme was on. I tried various openings, but it was only until I wrote 'The whereabouts of things has gone', that I felt the poem had found its beginning, which sounded right, and placed me in a search to visualise the kitchen and recall where exactly the radio was. I then realised that the central point of my memory of the kitchen, around which I could mentally situate other objects, was the tin sink, and I then remembered early memories of how hard to reach the taps seemed. My mother would often tell me that Birmingham water was purer than other water as it was from Wales and that idea found its way into the poem too. The narrowness of our

kitchen felt like a constraint which mirrored that of the minute itself, and perhaps that of a Shakespearean sonnet, which at best can cram a great deal into a small textual space. When I began the poem, I didn't know that the image of water from a distant place, possibly inspired also by the *waves* in the Shakespeare sonnet, would link at the end of the poem with applause on the radio, which can sound like running water, and that I would use the phrase *long wave*.

Another kind of long wave is that of a poet from the past, if the past is a foreign country, or a poet from another country more literally, and the following poem attempts to join mouths together in various ways:

Whose

Till the weeping mouth surrenders and laughs,
till the laughing mouth surrenders and weeps.

Whose mouth is biting whose here, Hughes's
or Yehuda's? Both, it says, below
the three couplets, quietly in square lips:
[TH and Yehuda Amichai].
And how exactly
does a mouth weep? But let's agree,
mouth-one is Weeping and mouth-two is Laughing
and if they are fighting to the end I've quoted
and if your short poem
A Weeping Mouth
was put into English from Hebrew, jointly,
in justified lines, compounded now, another time,
through mine: this [half Muslim] mouth –

I say this because my son says
that his Muslim friends say

he can't be a quarter Muslim,
but these words that say *choose,*
choose, *choose,* are off stage in a fenced-
off school playground and have nothing to do
with your words, and when I say *your*
I mean the you
who wrote of thistles fighting over the same ground,
their grey-haired end, then their resurrected hues,
armies that fall and rise till kingdom come
and the you
who wrote, at first in Hebrew
of a kite high above Jerusalem, shepherded
by a child who's hidden from view,
veiled behind a wall –
then who among the two of you
is more behind
the verbs, the vowels, the *i*s and *u*s
that cast your parabled mouths
Weeping and Laughing

in this staged fight, this *terrible battle before a silent crowd*?
Dumb as inkless scribes, bracketed in the gods,
terraced eyes stare, huge continents of silence
as each mouth crowishly *tears and bites* the other
mouth, even *smashes* – chews? – *it*, to what one
or both of you call *shreds and bitter blood*.

It goes on. You go on. Till the last word
weeps. At the end the crying mouth stops
fighting. And laughs. The laughing
mouth stops fighting. And cries.
And there you stop. Silent

as shadows, confused
as to whose mouth
whose victory
is whose.

And I've just told my son, Zaphyr – who has
walked over to where I'm sat, and says I should choose

cries, to describe what a mouth does, and not to use
weeps – that I think this mixed-up poem, *Whose,*

that doesn't know how to end and occupies
two sides of one page, has become his. His.

This poem, which was commissioned by *Modern Poetry in Translation*, is a response to Ted Hughes's co-translation of Amichai Yehuda, who Hughes knew, and in particular the poem which was published as 'A Weeping Mouth', in *Selected Translations*[21].

Because the English poem already has a complicated authorship, having first been written in Hebrew and then jointly Englished by Hughes and Amichai, my response to the poem would complicate the poem further. My poem is written primarily for the page and is in dialogue with the idea of a shared page, as well as being in dialogue with the idea of oral poetry and a shared mouth.

As with the very different poem, 'Prayer', discussed in the first chapter, a wavering sound is at the heart of this poem, despite its other complexities. In the case of 'Whose', it is the sound of that titular word, and its slight variation, in *Hughes*. This sound is also echoed in the *who/hu* sound in the name Yehuda.

[21] Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), pp. 50-51.

In the last section of the poem, which I've allowed to rhyme at the end, the three couplets all end with sounds that are variants of the end of the phoneme *whose* — while a vowel wavers between different meanings.

In my poems the word *yours* is important, as will be discussed, and features in poems including 'Hill Speak', 'Ys', 'Jane Austen: *Selected Letters*', and 'Early Draft'. This word *yours* which is associated with a signed-off correspondence, and with ownership can be pointed in two directions. Similarly, the word *whose* seems to revolve around identifying an owner, and can also be read with an apostrophe, as in *who's speaking here?* This is one of the central dilemmas at the heart of 'Whose'. The name *Ted Hughes* is reflected in the words *resurrected hues* — where I allude in the poem, to Hughes's poem 'Thistles', from *Wodwo*, where thistles fight back over the same ground — a ground that is perhaps evocative of the poetic page we write onto.

Another confusion of identity is in my son's name — which sounds like mine but is spelt differently (my son doesn't have my surname and his mother suggested we use my name, and we decided to spell it in another way) — Zaphyr. This spelling evokes the Zephyr of the west wind, but the vowel change at the start confuses it with my name too, which in Arabic means *victory*. The word *victory* appears in the lines above the last section … *confused / as to whose mouth / whose victory / is whose.*

Confused is an important word here, as it echoes with *Hughes* a little more than *whose* but also in its containing of the word *fused*, and also *us.* Indeed, it seems appropriate that there is an *us* in the middle of *confusion*. This poem is very much about a poem with a shared authorship, or sense of *us*.

The sound *hu* is also important in Sufism, and is the word in *Allah hu Akbar*, also quoted in 'Prayer'. The mantra often repeated by Sufis such as the poet Rumi, is *Allah Hu',* which can be translated as 'God, Just He'.

My poem 'Early Draft', also relates to some of these confluences, of breath, voice, wind and authorship. It is a very loose version of a poem by Rumi that is often translated as 'Gnats

inside the Wind', and is a story connected with the union of gnats with the wind, which represents God. My version speaks to the idea of translation and of the idea of a first mover, or author, and the energy of poem was also partly inspired by Ted Hughes and his poem 'Gnat Psalm', from *Wodwo.* Which also links 'Early Draft' — which ends with the word *Yours* — to my poem 'Whose'. I hope this indicates how deeply I feel that my voice is a compound voice, and other times partake in my moment of speech in poetry. This is why, as a poet, and as I explain at the end of this thesis, I find it hard to situate myself simply and uncomplicatedly as a contemporary poet.

Chapter Three

The Stamped Text and the Gravitied Earth

Rainglobe

The warl' like an eemis stane
Wags i' the lift
– Hugh MacDiarmid

in this tilted
storm-knocked world –

this drop of Earth
that holds the lift –

how can we secure
the cobblestones to the coastal fog

or believe, that above the whirl
of cloud and flood

we might see – through whorls
on this stony sky –

the smudged, wobble-handed
fingerprints of love

---

warl' –world; *eemis stane* – unsteady stone; *lift* – sky

Placeholder

'on frozen Windermere'

Those old blades scratched the surface of Esthwaite
and not Windermere, as Heaney had it,
tracing that scrape with a star in *Wordsworth's Skates.*
That the star lay elsewhere sits about right –
I like the mistake. The lake being astray
speaks of dark ice, like Wordsworth's crossings-
out – returning to fix the line that Heaney
must have had by heart:
To cut across the _____
of a star. I've scored that space because *shadow*
first held sway. And wrongly, as light can't cast
dark. Next up, the star's *image* would land where
his skate passed. Then, the curt Latin, at last:
reflex. Fitting the foot.
And, beyond the grave,
that fixed word's meaning would still change the script.
Cold 'reflection' gave ground to a quick nerve –
till the star touched base, as the steel blade slipped
across that spot of ice – and scored deep space.
The slide in meaning fits this sliding place.

The Method of Lost Wax

I can see the weight of Yorkshire rain in your patina,
a dark window four millennia before glass.
Here is such a small place.

And your face. Bold, turned up – to what? Or who?
And your maker's name? Sealed out. Lost
like the mould before you.

You. The earliest body touchable in bronze, or brass.
Made by the method of lost wax –
the negative space

that left your sentence to stand. What sentence?
Yours. You. Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-Daro.
… Are you dancing?

Hand on hip. Bent knee. That stare … What step is that?
Stop there. Is asking your place? By whose leave
are you asking?

You – made at the far site a lost speech goes back to –
the heated compound melting the wax.
First step of your cast.

Notes: 'Lost-wax process', also called cire-perdue, method of metal casting in which a molten metal is poured into a mold that has been created by means of a wax model. Once the mold is made, the wax model is drained away. 'Dancing Girl' is a prehistoric bronze sculpture made in approximately 2500 BCE in the Indus Valley Civilisation city of Mohenjo-daro (in modern-day Pakistan), which was one of the earliest human cities.

Letter for the Unknown Soldiers

I see. This is the shape remembrance takes.
To get it, the scale had to be brought home.
Imagine them moving in one long continuous
column, four abreast … as the column's head
reaches the Cenotaph the last four men
would be at Durham. In India, that column
would stretch *from Lahore to Delhi*. Whichever
the country, it would take three and half days,
this snaking march, before the tail caught up
with the head. Somewhere on the way you'd find
two who share a strand of my DNA.
So here I am, standing at the Cenotaph,
a century on, the centre of the capital.
To my eyes, this column seems made of limestone,
old skeletal fragments of coral and shell.
Returning to that long, imagined march,
you'd be somewhere in the Midlands, I'd guess,
between London and Durham – perhaps Bascote,
where you, *Lance Corporal Albert Evetts*
of the Royal Warwickshires, were born – born
in Bascote, killed near Basra, and unburied,
like your son who hit the ground at the Somme,
Private Roland Evetts of that 1st battalion
that braved no man's land in the Christmas truce.
Who knew? In your parish church I found you,
recto and verso, in a memorial book –
I first spied your names behind the altar
in Long Itchington; I'd gone to Warwickshire
for graves, armed with my mother's maiden name –

3 and a half football teams someone had added
in blue ink. The stone I'm looking at today
doesn't say much. But this isn't weathering,
where porous limestone loses its letters.
It's meant to be so. THE GLORIOUS DEAD.
Repeated. Either side. And all else is blank.
But for Roman numerals. Two dates. Either side.
I see the whole thing as a numeral now –
one, *I*, call it what you like. All who put
their bodies, minds, souls, on the line, in this
one war, are stood for here. Mutely, year on
year, 11 11 – two quick minutes –
the 11th hour. On the 1911
census, I found you both under the one
roof: *limestone quarrymen*. I see you, arms
raised, in unison, coming down at the stone.
I've been here too long. I've heard the passing
bells of Big Ben twice, fixed on this kerbed island,
surrounded by traffic. I want to cross
over, to see the height and extent of this
empty tomb, but I'm stuck at the minute,
stranded beside this thing that stands for you –
this I – that I've been stuck here speaking to.

Stamping Grounds (Earlier)

(for their days were long before the days of photographs), my
first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably
derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters . . .
Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

1

My English grandfather, whose name in my father's language
means 'land', the earliest ground I ever held was yours.
I can see it leave my fist, beneath a sleeve
of my first school blazer. The only other 'dust to dust' earth I've let go –
further west, twenty years on – was for Mum, who you raised
behind the counter of the Polesworth Post Office, on Bridge
Street; your home turf, handed down from your mother,
a sub-postmistress, who'd tap messages in Morse
and who, I'd discover, years after, yards away
from that opening grave I'd stood at. And thereabouts
I'd find her parents – the Deemings – and theirs,
and theirs, and theirs, at a handful of plots, marked
and unmarked, in the grounds that ring the Abbey at Polesworth.
And later I'd hear that John Donne stayed in this same village,
in the same consecrated acre, even punning on the Earth's poles
as he rode out, mouthing lines to the East, one Good Friday
across a fading forest of Arden towards the borderlands
of the Marches – where Mum would be buried –
in days when messages went on the hoof, and by hand.

2

In these quickened times
I can’t help reading Post Office with the *post*
first meaning 'after'; post-natal, postscript, postponed ...
In the blank, unsorted space between other thoughts –
of Mum delaying, forever, giving you a headstone for dates
and names to cut; how, so far, I've done the same
all these years after you, and Mum, had passed on;
and how Donne's journey spanned these two graves –
something small has occurred to me. Picturing when
I first stood with Mum, as your coffin was draped with that flag
from your RAF days, I imagined a lichened slab, ivied impossibly
in later time. And there, behind the moss on *Stanley Arthur Evetts,*
the S__ A__ E__ that surely raised a comment
in passing, as you signed-off in shorthand, some parcel
across the counter. To you both
it must have been as familiar as old weather in the sky
but those letters I’d never seen
are news to me – news as full as the empty tomb
to Magdalene, when the rock rolled away –
a kind of ground, or earth
I'd only picked up on today.

Stamping Grounds (Later)

Could I behold those hands which span the poles . . .
– JOHN DONNE, 'Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward'

My English grandfather. Stanley. Stan.
The first ground I ever held was yours.
I can see the earth leave my fist, beneath a sleeve
of my first school blazer. Further west, twenty years
after, the only other handful of earth I've let go,
was for Mum, who you raised behind the counter

of the Polesworth Post Office on Bridge Street
in that village you'd be buried in. The same village
John Donne saddled up in, one Good Friday,
riding westwards towards the Welsh Marches –
where Mum would be buried – in days
when messages went on the hoof, and by hand.

In these unsaddled, unsolid, quickened times
I read the words POST OFFICE with the POST
first meaning 'after'; post-millennial, post-dated . . .
In the blank, unsorted space between other thoughts
something has occurred to me I picture you
signing your name on what passes across a small changed

counter – *Stanley Arthur Evetts* – and there it is, writ large
in your imagined hand SAE To you and Mum
it must have been as familiar as old weather in the sky
but those first letters are new ground to me. As I stand

on a planet you've both passed from, it's like a present
in the post – a coin of earth – held up to this day.

The poem called 'Stamping Grounds' has two versions, both of which I include here in the thesis and in my collection *Us*. The poem in each of its incarnations is very much about being in between beginnings – and in between poems. The focus here is more on the written word, and with the idea of print, fixing the word in place, rather than with words that are *heard*.

The poem initially began with coincidences that I thought I wanted to write about, as I wondered if they could coincide into a poem. Indeed, the idea of what is initial is part of the first coincidence. This was a sudden if late realisation that my English grandfather's initials were SAE, a trifling coincidence, but one that had weight for me as he spent most of his life running a post office, a position he took over from his own mother. My mother was brought up in a post office and I still remember visits to the post office behind which my grandfather lived, before he died. His funeral was the first I went to and made a big impression on me. Decades later, after my mother's death and her funeral, this small realisation about his name affected me as it almost felt like a late message I was catching up with, a message delayed in the post so to speak. I couldn't believe I hadn't known the coincidence before and very much doubted that my mother, or him, or his mother would have spent so long with the Post Office as the focal point of their lives without knowing this little in-joke. I was surprised that letters could have this delayed effect – almost an intimacy I was allowed to share with the past.

The second coincidence was something I'd learned about Polesworth, the village in Warwickshire where the family Post Office had been an integral part of. I'd been reading about John Donne and discovered that he had stayed in Polesworth with a friend, Sir Henry Goodyer. Donne's poem, 'Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward' was conceived and written as he left Polesworth on horseback, and rather than going east to London, went west towards Montgomery Castle in Wales to visit Sir Edward Herbert. It occurred to me

that Donne's journey was from where my grandfather was buried (the house Donne stayed in shares the same grounds as the Abbey with my grandfather's grave), towards the part of the country where my mother was buried, the Welsh Marches and Herefordshire. It was weighing on my mind that neither grave had headstones and were thus unmarked. And I went on a car journey between the two graves carrying two pieces of a crystal that had broken off, to leave one at either grave and somehow connect the two. It seems that Donne's poem, though remote in time and in many other ways, had a similar journey at its heart and was trying to make huge leaps, to connect worlds together. His horseback journey also reminded me of how slowly and intimately letters would have travelled in times long before a centralised post office. That the word *letter* has the double meaning of an individual character of the alphabet and a paper form of written message made me want to connect the coincidence of the letters that began my grandfather's name with the idea of the poem as a 'stamping ground', and a slow message that crosses the border of death, as well as distant times and places, yet feels intimately delivered.

I have included both versions of the poem 'Stamping Grounds' in my collection *Us*, in the order of their composition, but separated, appearing respectively in the first and second halves of the book. Their double inclusion seems to be worth writing about here as this repetition of a poem, albeit in two versions, is unusual. It also relates very much to the theme of wavering between beginnings – keeping two versions of a poem, where neither is presented as unambiguously definitive but as being *earlier* or *later*. The definitive nature of the printed or *stamped* word seems very opposed to the wavering act of writing a poem, or even the wavering impressions that a poem makes and is born from. John Donne's poem is in part a reflection on his thinking process as he journeys across a terrain he hardly mentions in the poem, so occupied is he with the thoughts along the way, as his horse stamps on real ground. The ground Donne is interested in is the ground that a well-made poem or even a well-connected thought might make for him. The poem once printed becomes another kind of stamped ground. Having an *earlier* and *later* version speak to the theme of grounds and thoughts catching up with each other and destabilise the finality and sacrosanct nature of the written word. This finality has been for me an intimidating prospect, perhaps having something to do with my father's reverence for the written word as a sacred object, particularly in the form of the Quran (as referenced in my

poem ‘The Wardrobe’.) This intimidating quality of the written word, and of ‘the book’, is one of the many reasons for my hesitation around beginning a poem and then ever feeling that a poem has reached a final state.

The earlier version of ‘Stamping Grounds’ is also marked out by having a different epigraph, with the later version quoting the Donne poem, and the earlier version quotes from Dickens where Pip looks at a gravestone. This epigraph is from the beginning of his *Great Expectations* (1861) where Pip is looking at the gravestone of his parents and dimly imagining their characters through the character of the letters chiselled into the stone. This epigraph is chronologically roughly halfway between the time of Donne’s 1613 poem and the present of my poem, which is in a part a journey through time, and between two distant graves.

Digression: the Epigraph

I often use epigraphs in poems, and briefly reflecting on this, I like how they give an alternative beginning to a poem while leaving the beginning intact. In a way, epigraphs can be considered the opposite to footnotes not only in that they are presented above rather than beneath a text, but also because they are usually intended to be encountered before the text is read. They also hint at intertextuality and distant forebears as well as suggesting more than one time frame for the poem if the quotation is from a different period. Perhaps epigraphs allow two authors or more to be present in one. Importantly an epigraph complicates and extends the beginning of a poem, and exists in that wavering space between the title and the poem, separate and yet a part of the whole. Because graves are associated with epitaphs it perhaps seems appropriate to foreground a poem about graves with a quotation. In the section on my poem ‘Ys’ I will discuss further the space below the title and above the poem as occupying a zone that wavers between beginnings.

Returning to 'Stamping Grounds' and Donne and the Stamp of an Initiating Thought

According to John Stubbs:

> Donne liked to compose on horseback. On the road, he said 'I am contracted, and inverted into myself'. On Good Friday, 1613, having spent the early spring with Goodyer, he set out from his friend's estate at Polesworth and found the creative vacancy his mind needed to talk to itself . . . While he was inverted within himself, a poem took shape. Although on this Good Friday he was being carried 'towards the West . . . my Soules forme bends towards the East'. His mind was on neither dusk nor dawn but on a sun rising in one place as it appeared to sink in another.[22]

Donne was composing his poem while in transition between one place and another, as though that in-between state mirrored the *creative vacancy* he liked to write in, a state which Donne characterised as being *inverted into myself.* Similarly perhaps, my poem tracks a mental journey, and also how that wavering state between thoughts and the idea of different times and places created a realisation in what I call *the blank unsorted space between other thoughts.*

It seemed appropriate when I set out writing my poem, unsure then of where it was going, not to impose any idea of form and to write in what might be called free verse. In my very first draft, the first line set out the poem as being addressed to someone: 'My English grandfather, Stanley. Stan.'

When I began the poem with this line, I was unconscious of how a poem partly about addresses and forms of address might be better written in the form of an *address* to someone, but looking back it seems the right and obvious choice, even unwittingly. At that early stage, I was thinking about whether I could make a connection with the name my grandfather was known by, Stan, and the word *stan* which means something like 'land' to my father's ear, as in *Pakistan* for example. This link had a buried emotional register for

[22] John Stubbs, *Donne, The Reformed Soul* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 286.

me as I remembered a school friend who was Pakistani being nicknamed Stan for a while, a name I initially thought was endearing due to the link with my grandad, until I realised that the white boy who first came up with the name was punning on Paki Stan. It was a realisation which haunts me now, as I had to make it myself, and that insight completely switched something positive and familial into something at once disturbing and alienating. I realise now that I often write about the freight of a word and this memory is buried beneath the poem but wasn't brought to the surface.

In the poem I suppressed this layer of meaning around the name Stan, but kept a hint of the connection between names and grounds and puns. Another link that I was aware of was the Scots word *stane* for stone, which I had seen in Hugh MacDiarmid poems, and it occurred to me that my grandfather Stan had married someone who might hear in his name, not 'land', but 'stone'; my grandmother was born and bred in Scotland. Again I realise now as I reflect in this that the feeling that prompts a poem for me is often where meanings collide, or memories collide, and especially where they collide around language – and where a word wavers between possibilities. It's often a challenge to fit into the poem the whole range of connections that prompt the poem and that arise during the course of its composition and editing; but the energy behind the poem is often due to this feeling of wavering linguistic and emotional connectedness and wanting to make sense of why I have begun to engage with it.

I'm reminded of a line I used to see on a postcard above a co-worker's desk, in a job I used to have, a popular quote that's attributed to Goethe – *Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.*

I rarely feel bold around the writing of poetry, and usually feel very hesitant, but I'm aware when I reflect on how I may have conceived of a poem, that a first line in a draft often has a kind of incipient power that holds the potential of the rest of the poem, and likewise the initiating idea or mental collision seems to hold buried within it the energy for the whole enterprise. Something which I catch up with later, and sometimes as though looking on from afar. When in my old job, a long way from poetry, I would stare at that quote of Goethe's, it was the word *begin* that seemed to be most potent as well as

daunting, and while writing these reflections on my 'process' now, it seems that *beginning* is both a theme of many poems for me as well as a conundrum, a huge challenge that draws me into other delayed realisations and divided beginnings.

Perhaps there is a link here with what Donne said about how on the road he was *contracted and inverted* within himself. A journey is between places, between thoughts, and crucially has a purpose which satisfies the purposeful impulses in Donne – he is going somewhere – and so allows for a creative vacancy where the more wavering and un-pushy parts of his consciousness can quietly do their work and come to the surface. I remember reading a long time ago that Mozart would roll a ball on a pool table against the cushions and catch it and roll it again as he composed in his head. Perhaps this is a similar way of allowing the controlling part of one's mind to feel it is being occupied, while separately almost, the subconscious mind is free to roam from that kind of chronological ordering and control that the purposeful part of the mind would demand.

Often when I begin a poem, it feels, now I look back, as though different beginnings were coming together, existing at once, confusingly, and this very confusion of beginnings is the energy and the block I am overcoming or failing to overcome all at once. This coming together mirrors Donne's state of being *contracted and inverted.* The contraction could be both a concentration that brings a too-wide world into view, and also a kind of *contract* with a beginning. Donne uses the word *contracted* in relation to the world in a line that – again a later realisation of a connection now – I have quoted in another poem of mine that has a theme of bringing a world together and how the separate hemispheres of my mind, and sense of home, operate as kind of gravitational force. Here is that poem:

Spider Trees, Pakistan

During the early 1850s, it sometimes seemed as if the British and the Mughals lived not only in different mental worlds, but almost in different time zones.

– WILLIAM DALRYMPLE, *The Last Mughal*

English mists in subcontinental sun;
the withered veil at Miss Havisham's House;
think of that thought in the brain of John Donne
scrawling *In that the world's contracted thus*;
think of holding-spells catching up with time
the way snow floods the sky in slow suspension;
think, though it's a stretch, like shock-haired Einstein
wedding time and space as lacework tension . . .

With floods in Sindh, and their tenants long stranded,
these trees are warped globes, veiled spectres of silk.
It's these photos that have me, stretched, extended –
glued to a webpage since opening a link –
racking my brain for lines to catch how they carry
the gravities of home. Worlds I can't marry.

What links this poem to my writing of Stamping Grounds is not only Donne, but the theme of tracking a realisation, and the attempt to hold different grounds together, which also happen to have an East / West theme. Mentioning the same writer in different poems was something I wasn't sure I should do, although I let it happen, but I decided in putting a collection together that the unwitting repetition of Donne's name across poems was something I could keep rather than reduce. In some ways it signals a similar territory, the

impulse to bring worlds and east and west together, being one of the thematic similarities. It also perhaps shows that I have a conscious awareness of my use in poems of what might be called puns, as Donne is known for this way of contracting different meanings through wordplay as a kind of gesture towards wholeness. Again, on reflection, it occurs to me how much this need to contract, or bring together binaries – thought, feeling; east, west; past, future, and so on – also shows itself in my poetry in its gravitational pull towards those words that contain various possibilities which re-enact my feeling of wavering between worlds.

It also seems appropriate to me that my poems might tell a story across the pages, in poems that are otherwise separate worlds, and so the repeated connections between poems are part of the wavering energy that has made them, and perhaps the repetition of a writer's name can be borne to this end as long as it is apt in other ways, and so hints at a wider fabric of connection beneath the surface.

One of the puns Donne used in *Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward* seemed particularly apt in demonstrating this bringing together of worlds and my own confused sense of home, or home ground. Learning that Donne's poem and the journey it was composed in was begun in Polesworth, and seeing that Donne had used the word *poles* to signify opposite ends of the earth, felt electric for me. My associations with Polesworth were this very English village that my very English grandfather lived in, and as its postmaster, he felt like its epicentre. Visits to him felt like visits to England from another kind of England. (See also the poem, 'Bonsai'.) The name *Polesworth* had a strong resonance in this regard, and represented one pole of my polarised sense of the worlds in which my mother and my father had grown up. The links that were possible here seemed a ground within itself, the kind of ground that is a link between words and homes at once.

Digression: Donne and Beginnings and Puns

One of the reasons I admired Donne when I first read him was seeing how a single word in his poem could act as a nodal point, bridging different meanings, until this nodal word was almost the lens through which the rest of the poem could be read. For instance in what is perhaps his best known poem, *The Flea,* he begins with 'Mark but this flea, and mark in

this …' and this single opening word *mark* economically sets out a conversational tone of address to the reader, similar perhaps to the *Hweat* that addresses the listener at the beginning of Beowulf. In *Perspectives on Renaissance Poetry,* Robert C. Evans argues, regarding the dramatic opening of Donne's poem: 'a formalist might note how the poem immediately plunges us into the midst of a literally dramatic situation in which two people are present but only one of them speaks.'[23]

The word *mark* has its own drama as a word. It acts as pointed imperative to notice or think about something very specific. Further, it hints at the marks Donne, as a self-conscious writer in an age of print, is leaving on a page, and perhaps the mark or impression left by his words in the mind of an attentive reader, perhaps even an impression beyond the conscious marking of the intellect, beyond the margin of thought. *Mark* also perhaps suggests a smudged, inky stain, such as might be left by a swatted flea. One might go further and stretch to say that *mark* is also a denomination of weight and then also a measure of value, as in the German currency of the same name. Mark is after all a Germanic word which is incidentally from an Indo-European root shared by the Latin word *margo, '*margin' which hints at the liminal position as well as something more fixed, as in the measure of a limit.

Just as the flea of his poem is a tiny, marginal being that comes to hold much larger significance and value, Donne seems to have this aim for his pivotal, key words, no matter how small and incidental those words may initially seem. Just as the flea mingles two bloods in Donne's poem, so a word can mingle two or more wavering meanings in the one small frame. The seemingly still, unwavering printed word can enact within itself a *stretch.*

A printed word, despite its apparent fixity on the page, can be both *pinned and wriggling*, still and wavering, to use T.S. Eliot's phrase:

> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
>
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
>
> Then how should I begin[24]

[23] Robert C. Evans, *Perspectives on Renaissance Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 93)
[24] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 13

As a writer who began writing with an acute awareness of how difficult I found it to formulate what I was, I'm often drawn back to the subject of confused or unfixed or waveringly 'mixed' identity and have a similar desire to find ways to represent how seemingly opposite poles can be held economically, together, as perhaps I feel they are in my blood, but more importantly in my memory and consciousness, wherever memory and consciousness begins. There is almost a magnetic pull within myself towards the kind of words that can operate at this doubling level and I don't always realise that it is happening when it is. Puns perhaps work best like this, as if they seem overly self-conscious and pleased with themselves they can irritate rather than seem subtly suggestive. Similarly, I rarely aim to address the subject of mixed heritage head on, as a project to be consciously explored, but my subconscious desire to reconcile binaries and differences often shows itself as I write, and perhaps puns for me seem more relevant than they do for other writers, despite the risks of punning. A pun is a kind of coincidence of meaning. Donne is a shorthand for this way of thinking where the desire is to bring different things together onto the same page and even into the same word, as balanced through the poem to hold all its 'opposed' directions and coincidental meanings at once, and setting out a stall so to speak. For instance, the word *counter*, in Stamping Grounds, holds a nodal place as it situates itself as a post office counter which holds over time and where dates are stamped, etc. and also works as one who *counts*, both in the sense of being valued, and measuring time, distance, syllables, value, etc.

In the September 22 2006 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement*, A.S.Byatt wrote about John Donne in an article called 'Observe the Neurones', and about how puns might relate and point to this experience: 'Maybe . . . we delight in puns because the neuron connections become very excited by the double input associated with all the stored information from two arbitrarily connected things or ideas.'

This seems fitting with the idea of wavering between beginnings – the input of two or more possible entry points, a feeling that I keep coming back to as I reflect on my own creative process and try to put my finger on a point which seems difficult to pin down, possibly because of its very inbetweenness. This hesitancy can become the central point of a poem, if point is the right word.

A word may take a nodal position in a poem if it is balanced between possibilities of meaning, where a pun becomes more than incidental, as is the case in much of Shakespeare's work, for example there are many visual puns in *King Lear*, even in his name. Another aspect of a pun or repeated word that gains different meanings is that such a nodal word may draw the reader's attention to the idea of that key word as a kind of reified object that should be held and considered, an object almost to be turned in the hand and stared at in different lights as the poem progresses. Such words can also potentially anchor the poem in the reader's mind after the poem has been read, as a nodal point where meanings intersect and carry on holding interest and the possibility of connection.

The idea of a central nodal point that may anchor a narrative act of telling features in another of my autobiographical poems, 'Six'. Here a cricket ball is hit by a six-year-old-me over a fence, a moment of 'timing' that becomes in the writer's mind the beginning of a revelation and an axial turning point.

Six

Forget that old joke about timing, which I won't rudely
repeat. I learnt that timing had a world to do with weight
transference between the feet, planting my front pole
down, and as the ball is middled, the burden on the back
foot amasses through the axis of tensed, stick-thin arms
to the sweet spot in the rootless willow. A kind of sacrifice

from one side to the other. The ball now hit, and staying
hit – airborne, insanely towards a sky the locked-in
Scottish grandmother I'd never meet might have called
the lift. Over the fence, from that first garden
to another address, all that wound-up string beneath

the skin. Gone. *Mum's gone*, says Roseta, the girl at 60,

next to our 58, one morning while fetching the washing
from a line spiralling a shared stake. *Gone where?*
asks mine. *Where's your mother? She's dead? Dear God,*
o Love, Mum says above the crossed lines. At her tears
I'm still cottoning on. Roseta, Zeta, who posted
my first Valentine, signed with a question mark I'd not

get. Whose mum was *the only one* who could get me
to sleep. To the country of that eternal beginningness.
She'd come round in the small hours mum would say,
hearing your cries, dad working nights*, and she'd go*
like this, jigging you in her arms, and you'd be off, gone.
She'd come from Barbados, her husband from Jamaica,

a one-time boxer; *different islands, different tempers,*
she'd tell mum. Fighting leaked in and past walls.
Silences too. Belted up. Once, innocent, naked,
I placed my penis through that fence, peed – till he waved
a pitchfork; fathers fist-fought. Once, Zeta's dad shook
a crowbar. Mine raised mum's school hockey stick.

Dad's middle finger smashed. Feeling gone. Forever.
He made me press a needle to test the dead, knuckled
centre. The nerves. Gone. The word's weight returns
me to that fenced world, at this turning point, when
my bat arcs up, held high, the sun weightless in the glass
of next door's greenhouse. A perfect still point, until it's all

gone sharp. Loud as the pitch of a pole star. And the sky falls
in.

In this poem the lacuna in the first line, *Forget that old joke about timing that I won't rudely / repeat*, indicates a pause of uncertain length, or timing. The delayed word *timing* is the sixth word in the line. The poem is autobiographical and deals with a memory, set at the age of six, of hitting the ball over the garden fence, and around this memory other childhood memories and confusions collide. The poem felt uncontainable and challenging to organise as a narrative, and when I first wrote a draft it was a single stanza with long lines. This form felt too loose and wasn't helping me to write the poem, and I eventually I settled on the idea of exploiting the title *Six* to help me contain and focus the layered and sprawling story I was trying to tell. I decided to fit the narrative into six stanzas of six lines each, with roughly six stresses – although I didn't want this to feel over determined or fixed. At the end of the sixth stanza I have an enjambed, shortened stanza that almost falls off the edge of the poem.

The single word *in* on the last line perhaps returns the reader to the idea of the lacuna in the first line, and the idea of well-timed cricket ball crashing into a glasshouse, as well as needle going in to flesh, as well as the needle of a pole star, *a perfect still point, until it's all // gone sharp.* The word *gone* is another nodal point in the poem, one like the repeated lacuna itself, that accumulates meaning and a loaded resonance as the narrative continues.

The word *gone* in my memory connects with cricket matches, as in a proud exclamation when a wicket shockingly falls – an exclamation that amplifies and compounds the shock – or when a ball is suddenly struck out of ground. The word *gone* also connects deeply with a memory of how my mother came to learn that the lady who lived in the house next door had died while speaking to one her daughters over the fence in the garden, but only after a pause when she realised that the word *gone* didn't mean that the neighbour had left the house, or her husband, or the country. So I connect the word *gone* with shock, and also with a kind of delayed shock that catches up both in the present minute and at indeterminate times in the distant future, whenever another shock strikes that

same note in the memory. The lacuna in the sixth stanza, between the words *nerves* and *gone*, hints also at this gap into which the present moment, and frayed nerves, can fall.

This fits with the idea of an energised wavering space, a nodal point of origin, or as this poem puts it *the country of that eternal beginningness,* a point which I see now many of my other poems have also touched upon in their different ways.

The cricket ball also focuses as a nerve-like ball of string *beneath the skin*, an object that travels from the ground to the sky and then comes back down with a crash. The good *timing* of the ball represents a point of connection, when the bat connects well with ball and the movement is centred and balanced, the weight transferring *between the feet*, which could also be read as the metrical feet in a poem and the lessons learned by a poet of transferring one image to another through the feet of poetry, or transferring and carrying the weight of an emotion across the lines of a poem until it *connects* and is *gone* into mind and nerves of a reader.

The poem has a closure that is stable and unstable at once – *the sky falls / in* but the word *in* on its own, as the last line, points to its significance and its smallness – a point that wavers between being inside a person and something quite external, 'over the fence', and perhaps even in the unearthly sphere above.

Robert Frost's idea, in his essay, 'The Figure a Poem Makes (1939)'[25], of the poem as 'a momentary stay against confusion' reminds me of the effect in the *Six* poem of having the hit cricket ball suspended in the air above – *a perfect still point* – as the poem continues towards its uncertain closure where the ball smashes abruptly through clear glass. Poetry for me seems to derive its energy from confused, wavering impulses that operate not against confusion but within it. A confusion that is intrinsic to the poem, on the inside, and not the external enemy of the poem, or from another sphere. Perhaps therefore it is fitting that the last line of *Six* is simply the word *in.*

[25] Robert Frost, 'The Figure a Poem Makes' in *Strong Words* ed. By W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2007), p. 45.

What *stays* in the poem is the memory of the experience of a 'six', and being six years old, a moment which impinges upon other moments, becoming part of the same sphere of action despite the chronological gaps. And crossing another gap, hopefully something of this effect *stays* a reader within their own wavering thoughts and connections as they read, and perhaps even later remembering something of the poem, and re-experiencing the feeling of being in two times at once, and of gaps being closed and opened at once. The wavering at the beginning meets a wavering closure at the end, an *in* that is both inside and out.

The way *in* to the poem, its beginning is the first conversational word *forget* – which is a paradoxical command as it makes one first try to recall what one should forget. But the theme of timing hopefully lodges itself in the reader's attention. The ball being hit for *six* could also be interpreted as the central memory in the poem, or even an impression from it, being temporarily lodged in the mind of the reader – going *in.*

In a critical essay called 'The Stories We Tell'*,* focussing on the novelist David Mitchell and his *Cloud Atlas*, Courtney Hopf writes helpfully about the way a figure or theme may repeatedly arise in his work, and the effects this may have on the mind of reader and on the notions of inside and outside:

Characters, themes, objects and stories consistently reappear and reconstitute themselves from narrative to narrative and novel to novel. These repetitions incite moments of recognition that serve to transform the literary subject and to encourage reader agency in the process of narrative meaning-making […] When a complicated text draws a link between themes, images, characters or ideas, the reader's recognition of that link is itself a kind of doubling, though it unfolds over an extended time, rather than arresting the reader in a jarring moment of recognition […] When we read, we experience a conflation of subject and object because we produce meaning in concert with the text, and we do so by maintaining positions both 'inside' and 'outside' the narrative:

This unfolding over an extended time of themes that may arise again in different ways in the mind of a reader (eg. timing, sky, the poles of the earth, pole star, the word gone, etc.) is something Six has attempted in its own way, across the more limited space of a poem. Rather than being asked to forget anything, the reader is being challenged to recall certain words and themes as the poem progresses and see them as nodal words and themes that snag on concentrate the reader's attention as much as they concentrate the snagging memories being described and the snagging metaphysics of the poem.[26]

Even the obvious double meaning of the word *six* in this context, coupled with the way the number six has helped to organise the form of the poem, is part of the texture of double-meaning making where the external reader's connections enact the internal memory conflations within the poem, and this 'double recognition', wavering between inside and outside at once. Perhaps the single word *in* isolated on a line at the poem's closure asks to be seen in this doubling way – an *in* that is somehow inside and outside at once.

This doubling recalls what was said about John Donne in the section on *Stamping* Grounds, and on the kinds of poetic closure he seemed to obsessively aim for. In an essay called 'Wallflowers', partly discussing the subject of closure, the poet Michael Donaghy has written:

> Academics use the word 'closure' to mean the strategies poets use to give their poems a sense of conclusion –the big build-up at the end, the clinching rhyme. I use the term 'enclosure' to describe the way in which a poem is established as All-One-Thing [. . .]
>
> Modern poets often build their poems about a single point of emotional focus analogous to a point of optical focus in photographs –often represented by a single

[26] Courtney Hopf, 'The Stories We Tell', in *David Mitchell, Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited, 2011) p. 106.

> object held, like Yorick's skull, in the poet's hand, a magician's prop toward which we direct our attention so that the magic can proceed by sleight of hand.[27]

In 'Six', the talismanic point of emotional focus is not just the hit-into-the-sky cricket ball and the wound-up nerves/string beneath the skin, it is also the word *gone*. At the end of the poem, the ball has gone *in*, hopefully in more ways than one.

In psychoanalytic theory this point of emotional focus is analogous to what D.W. Winnicott calls a transitional object, where a child holds something like a piece of rag for comfort, an object that helps an infant to negotiate the borders between self and non-self, inside and outside. When I was a child I grew up hearing a story of how I was extremely attached to a piece of cloth I called my *bocca shee*, which my mother would tell me meant the *sheet* I wrapped my milk *bottle* in, which apparently stank and was stiff with all the spilt milk and various other fluids. I have not yet written this poem, but I intend to write about this story of how when my mother washed the piece of rag I was very upset and would not be consoled by this cloth anymore. I do wonder whether it is continuity we look for – if I can use the word *we* – both as uncertain infants wanting an object to bridge the worlds of inside and out, and as poets wanting to write a poem to bridge a gap within and without, between our languages, and our memories. Perhaps a nodal word like *gone* in *Six* operates at this level, and perhaps an image that I ask a reader to hold, such as a cricket ball in the air, while the poem progresses, attempts to test a kind of boundary – how far can I go as a writer to leave this subject or object *in the air* before the reader won't forget to think of it at the end, and so to close the gap of meaning, of continuity. One of the widest gaps I could have attempted figuratively was to put the ball in the sky, and perhaps in outer space, before it comes back down. Thus the child/poet is pleased that a *six* has been hit so well and also is shocked at the results of the ball coming back down to earth. Perhaps this re-enacts earliest fears of abandonment when *stepping out* in any way. I have always felt that the impulses behind a poem are far older and earlier than I am aware of, and the more I dig the older and more pre-verbal that impulse seems to be – and it will often concentrate around the issue of trying heal a gap through words and memories,

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[27] Michael Donaghy, *The Shape of the Dance,* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 24.

towards a continuum, that 'country of eternal beginningness', of wavering between beginnings.

One of the beginnings my poems waver between is obviously language, and Seamus Heaney used the word 'waver' to refer to language itself, and the idea of bolting down impulses and securing sensation:

> Sink every impulse like a bolt. Secure
> The bastion of sensation. Do not waver
> Into language. Do not waver into it.[28]

Digression: Heaney and Wavering

Although I admire Heaney, I seem the opposite kind of a poet in so many ways, one of which is the quality of being able to bolt down in language what he calls *the bastion of sensation*, as opposed to wavering 'into language'. I'm aware that even when I'm focusing on a concrete subject, for example in the poem 'First Light', which was prompted by a very physical memory of holding a heavy matchbox, my poem eventually wavered into being about language, about beginnings, and the heavy matchbox at its centre was perhaps not the poem's gravitational centre, but my associations with it.

Heaney uses a variation of the word *waver* a number of times, sometimes negatively, and more positively sometimes, to describe a quality of energy, or light: 'When you plunged / The light of Tuscany wavered'. [29]

It seems to me that Heaney attaches a mysterious quality to the word *waver* that can indicate a disembodied energetic or numinous presence. A space that opens up in and between language and experience, and does so mysteriously, perhaps in contrast with the grounded and earthy qualities of his language that seems to pin sensation down so well and so concretely. It seems fitting that the word *wavering* appears in the following

[28] Seamus Heaney, 'Lightenings', from *Seeing Things*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p.56

[29] Seamus Heaney, 'The Otter', from *Field Work*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p.43

description of a visit to Heaney's birthplace by two poets who admire and are attuned to his work and its presence:

> For writers of our generation he had simply always been there, a huge and calibrating presence [. . .] But the whole day was a kind of wavering, a boundary walk between past and present, poem and place name, local and universal.[30]

[30] Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Deaths of the Poets* (London: Vintage, 2017), p. 32.

Chapter Four

Forked Origins and Dendritic Stories

The Path

They're there. To the side.
It's hard not to stare
at the centre of the screen
and the stopped kerb
where the news has happened,
struck. But, dear me, look past
what the worst want you to see
and share. And, dear self, even
when the scene strays far from
headlines, when you've gone,
alone, phoneless, stepping over
limb-like roots, and dips, and glooms
into Nutclough woods on this
treacherous side of the hill – even still,
look to the verges, where some tiny
pixel-flowered herb, perhaps cleavers,
takes hold at a sharp corner
of the descent (like a half remembered
snatch of a meme) down
past the path, through the scrolling
of a fern's frayed edges
and where, from a few
dark millimetres of earth,
a tumble of heads is clutched
as you turn yours – an anonymous
brightness almost too small
to be there, by the wayside,
unmagnified. *Look for*
the helpers. They're there.

Bonsai

One collected begonias,
and was tempted by bonsai.
But worried that their tray world
was too shallow and cruel.
The other grandfather –
more short-lived – wouldn't wear
shoes. Survived only three
days after a snake found a foot.
Mohammed Said. The name reads
in English like a sentence cut.

I do not own them, this day's owner
says, of his bonsai, their situation
occupied also, by potted begonias
that fall brightly and move me, to a garden
in Polesworth and flip a Saturday
to Sunday. Visits to England
from England. But this steady
pine I can't name has a Himalayan
air. And a three-century old sigh.
The soil's slight incline to the tree's

trunk moves a mountain to here.
If an exile's sigh has a word, or sign,
for me it's *such*. Such. A custodian
of what has passed beyond reach
or owning. In my father's house, *such*
means 'true'. Said at the far end of a sigh,
followed by a cigarette drag. On hearing a fellow

from a mountainous place say 'Life is short'
or 'That's how it is' … A sigh, then: *Such.* I'd wait.
Nothing. *Such what?* I'd think. *Such what?*

*

I go back into the room of the Saturnian, stately
pine. A trunk of wounded rings, collecting inches
from each owner's time. I stare, soon rooted to
the spot, to what I couldn't let pass. An old flinch,
wanting to correct or prune my father's version
of Himalaya. He said the end like the clipped end
of Cordelia. Then the second syllable, the one in
his middle, was a drawn-out ahhh … *Himahhhlia*.
It ends like *a layer* – I'd think. Later I'd see better:
all four syllables, his. Just a sole one I say as him.

Jute

Twelve, staying in my father's village, one Easter
at the house of his mother and first wife,
I remember one day us all, my part of the family, returning
to see two men sat on the woven beds outside
waiting for my father, drinking water from the metal bowls
that covered the clay pots, carried for miles from the well.
Tall men with long legs. They spoke to my father
in a language even stranger than his. One
phrase they kept repeating,

which to my surprise he could follow.
'They are telling me: This is our house.' *But it's not, Dad.*
It's yours, I said. *Tell them.* 'They are on the road.
It's custom'. They'd been on the road since the Russians
a while ago. They stayed. I remember the vowels of their Pashto.
Mostly their long silences. They lodged on those beds outside,
charpoys, the wooden rickety frames we used for sitting
and sleep. The taut rope pressed its uncomfortable crossings
on my back, my sides, but in the stretched air

I slept well, dreamlessly. The tall Afghans helped cut
that wheat I could see when I woke, in the field between
the mountains and the house, squatting till evening, in sandals
the same way my half-brothers did, with a new-moon shaped knife.
In a fortnight they left, without a word, or taking anything.
But I've thought of them, if not often, their circular, sudden hats
on the horizon, their gaunt, pale, tall stubbornness
when I first saw them. This seated arrival is always
its own, unexpected occasion. *This is our house.*

Shaking Hands

I grew up said the poet from a cloud
Of the smoke from Mum and Dad's cigarettes

Days of snow formed a palm that held a crowd
Till words came and time blew both east and west

Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim
If there are two worlds I'll hand you their seam

And Farther Again

The motif, ‘Three Hares’, each chasing the scut
of his dead-spit, in front, is tricky in terms
of provenance;

catchable as Scotch mist, or haar out to sea,
it’s been traced to the Silk Road
and farther again,

tracked to the heels of the Sui Dynasty,
as a hieroglyph, as it happens,
of the verb

‘to be’. It’s on Mongol metalwork and a coin
from Iran that just missed Rumi’s
hand, dated 1281.

It’s a Christian sign too, an echo of eternity
or the trinity; again, hard to pin
down, or put an *x*

where this began. Whether bossed at crossed vaults
in gothic churches, or inlaid in floors,
see how the three

rotating hares share ears in common; heads linked
in the round, like the dots that eye
the teardrops in the Yin

and Yang. And now our words are of China,
I put a ‘Three Hares’ tile into your hand –
a gift that finds

a void – like the gaps within the mould. But its old
circular theme, set inside a square,
gets me thinking of Escher,

how the far ground becomes the fore, a fugue
that little Zaphyr could trace
around and draw.

And as you're telling me that a nail won’t get far
in the stone bricks above your door,
it brings up the three-

chaired counselling the two of us undertook;
how each hour was a strange loop –
where split hairs went

back and forth, over a hook, a theme to our patterns,
the gaps in the listening, repeated
to no end. So

it’s hard now to hear it, and from the mother of my son;
you put the tile down, we can’t get back,
you’ve moved on.

Empty Words

A for apple. Y
for Yggdrasil, Odin's ash
which echoes with twig.

'. . . slow / Horse. The color
of trust.' Wait. She wrote *rust*. From
nowhere, a letter.

Bark's reversed mirror
an old photo — Mum's pony –
on the back, 'Silver'.

Something's missing here,
a sixth sense, between forests
and hues … *Sylva*?

Birch – an alpha *b*
back when branch-like runes mothered
the words from the trees.

Boc. *Boc*, says my son.
A bark up the right tree . . . 'book'/
'beech' were once bound. One.

The night Max wore his
wolf suit . . . I begin again
in my oldest voice.

Classic. Thought we'd be
a 'Ulysses', not, instead
'The Dead'. Long story.

Mr Palomar –
named after the deep-space lens
flecked by dust and stars.

Two fingers to you,
Earth, 'soil'. *Zaffar*'s 'victory'.
Torn to say for who.

It's used too much, *heft*.
The centre goes with the load;
shifts weight off the *f*.

Didn't feel a thing.
BREAKING: Huge Quake, Hindu Kush,
Jolts Local Buildings.

Clanging the zen gong –
is it ego that I add:
Something keeps going

Where am I *headed*?
The chimera's answer's stark.
My tale's clear as mud.

From my grandmother
(a Scot) these mad, curled locks. Not
the strand that's 'other'.

How did Dad's abba
meet his end? – *Bit. Snake. He went*
barefoot wherever.

Beginning is in …
in the middle. And that *or*
sparked *the Word*'s big bang.

Dad's word for 'and': *aur*.
More like oar – than our – as in
out at sea. And or.

Lo – lo – log – logos
the Greek stutters. Makes a poor
fist of ‘speech’ / ‘word’ / ‘cause’.

Log: my dad’s ‘people’.
... In my son’s hands … *Here’s the church*
and here’s the steeple.

The poem sequence above, ‘Empty Words’, is part of a broken continuum, the title ‘Empty Words’ being used for another sequence which appears in the second chapter of this thesis. As in the first part, rhyme is used between the first and third lines. This rhyme scheme follows the example of Paul Muldoon, in sequences such as ‘Hopewell Haiku’, although Muldoon continues the rhyme across each haiku into a chain, where the second line of each haiku gives the rhyme word for the haiku five poems later in the sequence. I do not follow this form, nor would I call the stanzas *haiku*, although I exploit the conventional syllabic and stanzaic expectation that haiku are three-line poems that have five syllables in the first and third lines and seven syllables in the second line. Some sound patterns do follow through the sequence, but this is intuitively guided rather than following a pre-set pattern. Thematically, the stanzas branch into each other, although sometimes the links between themes and subjects, just as the end-rhymes can appear to be slight too. Broken continuity through language is a sub-theme for all the stanzas.

The first stanza in the sequence above returns again to alphabets and makes a link between alphabets and trees — a link that is picked up in another poem called ‘Ys’, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The link between alphabets and trees is suggested as relating to early memories of picture books where ‘A is for apple’. Then the Norse Yggdrasil — the ash tree, or world tree, connected to Odin who hangs from the tree and sacrificed an eye to gain knowledge and discover runes — appears in the stanza as an example word connected with the letter Y. Yggdrasil is translated as *Odin’s steed* and the next stanza has a misremembered quotation from Sylvia Plath about her horse, Ariel. The next stanza is

about an old photograph of a grey pony which my mother owned as a child, and which was called *Silver.* The following stanza makes a link between the arboreal word, *sylva* and suggests that something is missing, which may be taken to mean an *i* — which added into the word *sylva* might make *Sylvia.* I was also thinking about missing letters in correspondence. The word *hues* could be read as having another significance, and the link between *hues* and *Hughes* was made in another poem, 'Whose', which is included in the second chapter of this thesis. In the fourth stanza of this part of 'Empty Words', the silver birch is alluded to, which connects with the peeling sepia photograph of my mother's pony, and also to the runic letter birch, or B. This rune, *berkano,* is connected with motherhood, or the Great Mother, and B is the first letter of the runic alphabet, which brings us back to the first stanza in this sequence, and 'A is for apple'.

Digression: Only Connect – Poems Wavering Between Poems

The links between the poems I write feel to me to be as full of cumulative possibility as the poems themselves and help to create another sense of mixed identities. Though each poem, for example, in my first full published collection, has its own identity and works on its own terms, I hope the links across and between the poems build up into a wider narrative and a deepening sense of intertextuality. The book itself thus becomes a kind of poem, or at least the poems should hopefully have a sense of us-ness about them, despite their variety of styles. One example is the link described above between 'The Lyric Eye' and the poem called 'I'. The former poem also links strongly with 'Self Portrait as Bottom', most obviously because of the link with Shakespeare and with the idea of portraits. 'The Lyric Eye' has an epigraph from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which links to the character Bottom.

Self Portrait as Bottom

O I am translated.
The speech of numbers.
Here's me in them
and them in me. I spat
into the bottom of a test tube,
gob upon gob, and posted it
to a lab across the Irish Sea.
But before I dropped
it all in their SAE
I stared at that shiny
alembic's elongated U
and saw an elongated
face of me, staring past
my drool, trying to summon
– or glue, the way spit
does a stamp – the unconnected
unspeaking dead. Me. Or so
the science and the blurb says.
Let's get down to numbers.
What could be more prosaic?
I am split. *50 % Europe.*
50 % Asia. Figures that speak
to me and feel
like a thousand-year stare.
But the numbers, from *thousands*
of years ago didn't end there.
18 % they say comes from the narrow
island they call *Great Britain*

and then, just less, *17 % Ireland*;
8 % Europe West; *3 % Scandinavia*;
3 % Finland/Northwest Russia.
And *1 % Italy/Greece,* labyrinthine
lands of the minotaur, and the Fates
as weavers, and the lost thread.
And from my dad?
48 % Asia South. Which as good
as says that my father's
folk were converts in the near
past, perhaps lower caste, perhaps
believers in the many, in sky gods
cast in Sanskrit, or heavy Buddha,
or puckish forest figures,
winged gandharvas.
And the last *2 %* of my father's
half is from what they call
Asia West, or *Caucasus,*
which is anywhere, above
the Himalayas to the Black Sea,
and almost meets
Mum's small Italian/Greek,
but not quite.
And this bit, the almost meeting,
I've felt at some level,
a low level, mutteringly,
a kind of abysmal underneathness
or usness, under the heights
of language, which, ridiculously
I looked to see in that U-
shaped test tube, through
saliva's bubbled glass,

and to see it face to face
and not only in part,
or passing, or past.

Interestingly, and possibly falsely, Jonathan Swift linked the word 'pun' (see earlier digression) with '*Fundum*, a Bottom' [. . .] the handle of a Sword.'[31] In my poem, Bottom is both the Shakespeare clownish character and also a kind of fundament, or lowest level. It also signifies the bottom of a test-tube into which I spit so as to send the tube to a laboratory for a DNA test.

The act of spitting and the mention of numbered poetic speech which Bottom would aspire to, as opposed to prosaic speech, hints at another intertextual link. In Tony Harrison's 'Them & [uz]' poem[32], a teacher snarls at a younger Harrison: 'You're one of those / Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose.' My poem also links with my own earlier poem, 'Us', which is itself in conversation with a Harrison's poem.

Another link 'Self Portrait as Bottom' makes to other poems I have written involves the notion of high speech and low speech, and heights as representing literary or spiritual planes. For example, in 'Hill Speak', I write about my father's dialect which paradoxically translates as something like 'hill speak', or 'mountain speech', and yet is seen amongst its speakers as a low language, the earthy but rough tongue of peasants. It would not be viewed as a language fit for poetry, unlike Urdu which is seen as a refined and literary language. Again, my own reticence to write poetry and sense of wavering before beginning found expression in the idea of poetry as kind of unattainable height. The speaker in 'Hill Speak' feels that he is between high and low registers of language, and indeed between different languages, and that language has given him 'the runaround'.

In the last part of 'Self Portrait as Bottom', I speak of an 'abysmal / or usness, under the heights / of language, which, ridiculously / I looked to see in that U-/shaped'. The contraction of *underneathness,* a made-up word, into another made-up word, *usness* is

[31] Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Defence of Punning,* in *Prose Works,* ed. Herbert Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), vol. 4, pp. 205-6.
[32] Tony Harrison, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 122-123

itself a kind of pun. The line-break on ‘U- / shaped’ contracts the *us* in underneathness even further, to ‘U- /s […]’.

Because of the intertextual links to these and other of my poems where identity can come down to a letter, this *U* can be read both as *you* and also as a reaching towards the reader, and as a bowled container, like in the test-tube, that is trying to hold what is the bottom of things. The resonance of this partly owes to other poems in my collection that invest that word *us* and that letter *u* with a narrative beyond the poem itself, and beyond my own book into other books. This is another aspect of the wavering identity that the poetry speaks out of, and into. This gives a further resonance to the title *Us*, as including, or hoping to include what is beyond the book itself, and yet to seek a containment, even down to the wavering letter, as symbolised by the cupping letter *U*.

In another poem, ‘Luck’, the letter *u* becomes the shacked hook on a padlock, a *lock* that changes to a form of luck, something solid wavering through a vowel that there at the start of the poem:

Luck

Unused, as yet,
and left. Locked.
All the weight of a hand
if a hand wasn’t held.

And brand new keys.
There are three in the loop;
two spares, if one were
for keeps.

But nothing is. Not even this
heavy-hearted padlock –
the shackled U as bright as changed luck –
chucked, maybe dropped

among leaves and crisp packets in the road;
today's silver-lined present
fished up from the kerb,
a catch in its throat.

Wavering Vowels and Wands

W*nd

When I arrived
I didn't know
the word
for what I was.

I kept arriving.
Butting my head
against the shore.
A head with no word.

And one dayless day, I
heard. Or it heard
that what I was
was wind. The one
.
w*nd, I was
the rumour of my own being.
A groundless rumour
in residence.

*

Sure I said. Sure.
Though I wasn't
and have never
been. Shore I said.

Repeating their word
for where I had brought
them. But no shore
was ever a harbour

for me. Never home
entirely. Where are
all four directions
home? Or when?

Sure. I said sure.
Repeating their word
for this coastal state
where I'm never entirely.

*

W, w, w …
Between the wires
weather from elsewhere
becomes ours.

Another aloneness
checks in with us, checks us
where stops meet starts.
Entering like my old stutter.

Perhaps the beginning
was the ultimate abbreviation
or silver cord. Aeolus,
a god with all

vowels, but one, knotted
winds in an ox skin. All swirling
directions a word could go.
But not homeward. West, west.

*

Wis, wis. In the beginning
w, w, w … It's the *was*
not *the Word* I stutter at, before I
arrive, in *w* and *s*

at the aleph, or alif
that blows me into being.
To the in of the in. The black
of the star, reversed to when all that

was began, before solar w*nd,
intergalactic w*nd,
a first breath from beyond
my bond, my vowel.

A wavering oneness
or wand. One's shyest
earliest wound
unwound.

The poem 'W*nd' explicitly includes the word 'wavering' and is told partially in the persona of the wind, a persona looking for its origins. The letter *i* has been taken out of the word 'wind' and replaced with an asterisk in the title and elsewhere in the poem, again complicating the idea of the persona's identity, or sense of a speaking *I* and of the stability of words that might be able to root a sense of self. The poem is in four stanzas each of four lines. The number four – being connected with the directions, east, south, west, north – seemed appropriate as I was writing it, as did shorter lines, without wanting to be too prescriptive or bound by this. The asterisk that replaces a vowel becomes symbolic of the birth of a star or perhaps even the universe. This mirrors theological ideas about vowels representing the 'breath of God' or creation.

In a critical work, *The Words of Selves* by the poet Denise Riley, the second chapter is called 'Linguistic Unease' and in this chapter she connects anxiety around writing and taking on an identification with the workings of language, which bring on a guilty feeling of inauthenticity and even of dishonesty:

> Self-description is endemically inconclusive; this is its nature, not its weakness; neither an 'identity' nor a non-identity can ever quite convince. But the stronger case for its unease to be linguistic lies, I think, not in this very necessary hesitancy about being or failing to be anything, but in its common structure, shared with guilt, of a particular anteriority, a reversed and anticipating aspect.[33]

I hadn't read this work by Riley before I'd written the poem, but reading it now, I am struck by its relevance. The withdrawal of the vowel in the noun identification for the wind, which is both the speaker and the subject of the poem, is a result of hesitancy and uncertainty around using language as a fixed descriptor for the wavering self, as personified here by the wind.

This poem began as an attempt to speak in the voice of the wind, but paradoxically ended being equally a personal poem despite its wavering persona. It expresses long-held anxieties around language and my early experiences with stuttering and being a quiet, inward child, hesitant to commit myself in language, and yet feeling acutely aware that my

[33] Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 57.

sense of self felt plural rather than singular, without being able to articulate this, beyond perhaps a silence, and the stuttering that became a habit of speech.

Often when a subject is close and does not feel abstract, such as stuttering, or the grief of my mother's death, I find it difficult to approach, and when it emerges in poetry, it will be because I think I am writing about something quite different, for instance with 'Prayer' which began with a response to George Herbert's poem of the same name, where I thought I would write about my father saying a prayer into my ear when I was born, and ended writing about me talking to my mother as she was dying.

The moment of hesitation can hold in prismatic fashion all other remembered moments of hesitation. In this way a fraction of a second can fill with memories that encompass much wider scopes and frames of time. My experience of stuttering as child I think has sensitised me to the many directions a word can go before it is said, and also to the freight of all that comes before the hesitant moment in between words. Denise Riley has suggested the generative power of a pause, and also perhaps a reason for the anxiety behind the pause: 'The pause called pregnant is teeming with its barely restrained impulses to give birth to something irreversible'.[34]

The Homeric story of the knotted bag of winds, presented to Odysseus by Aeolus, which I've interpreted as being a singularity of sorts in the poem W*nd. The knotted bag of all the winds apart from the gentle east wind, the Zephyr, becomes a densely held breath, or the dense ball of energy that holds creation in, before the first moment. This links in a sense to Auden's economical formulation, that *poetry is a way of happening, a mouth*.

If poetry is a way of happening, then the poet is both an agent and the one who is acted upon, or even interrupted, and this dynamic makes the describing the process of creatively writing a poem challenging, if one is to attempt any accuracy. It would be much easier in a reflective account such as this to say a poem is prompted by an act of reading, say, or an idea one wanted to explore in a certain form, and then to describe how the poem went on in linear fashion from there. But this is rarely my experience, and often I am catching up with the meaning of a poem and the apparently intended shape of its

[34] Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 73.

thought so that the backdrop of its composition feels mysteriously like it is ahead of me. This is also hinted at by Denise Riley: 'Held by form, I work backwards, chipping away at words, until maybe something gets uncovered which I can acknowledge as what I might have had to say'.[35]

By withdrawing the vowel from the word *wind*, which begins as the speaker in my poem, I am perhaps also withdrawing a kind of agency, while at the same time speaking through a sense of self.

I kept arriving.
Butting my head
against the shore.
A head with no word.

And one dayless day, I
heard, or it heard
that what I was
was wind. The one
.
w*nd I was
the rumour of my own being.
A groundless rumour
in residence.

The space between the words *w*nd* and *I was* in the last stanza above, also amplifies a sense of hesitation becoming a kind of space for creation, a hearing before hearing; 'I

[35] Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 73.

/heard, or it heard /that was I was /was wind. The one //w*nd'. The enjambed stanza break also alluded to the leap that is a sense of self or oneness.

In the week I was writing the last two stanzas of W*nd, I was also reading the *Collected Poems* of W.S. Graham (Faber & Faber, London, 2004). One of the hallmarks of his poetry seems to be that is often as much about the making of the poem as much as the telling of a poem, and he often brings himself back to the topic of language and words, as he himself has written, in an essay first published in 1946, a rare occasion when he wrote about his process in prose, and outside of the poems themselves:

> The most difficult thing for me to remember is that a poem is made of words and not of the expanding heart, the overflowing soul, or the sensitive observer. A poem is made of words … Each word changes every time it is brought to life. Each single word uttered twice becomes a new word each time. You cannot twice bring the same word into sound.[36]

I was asked by the poet Rachael Boast to write a poem for an anthology celebrating what would have been Graham's 100th birthday. The first two stanzas of 'W*nd' were written while I was writing on the subject of wind for a radio project called *A Bag of Winds*, a piece connected to Homer's Odyssey. While re-reading Graham, I felt that these unused stanzas might fit well into a poem for him, as the uncertain persona here seems to be hitting its/his head against language.

The biblical phrase 'In the beginning was the Word' which has been alluded to elsewhere in my poetry, again came up while I was writing the third and fourth stanzas. My intuition was that four would be the right number of stanzas, without especially knowing why – as mentioned above, the four directions of the wind was one possibility; another may be that 'wind' is a four-letter word – and that phrase has a link with swearing, which is added to by the insertion of an asterix, usually reserved for what are called 'four-letter words'.

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[36] W.S. Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', in *Strong Words*, ed. by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe , 2000, p. 118

Graham himself, in the same essay quoted above speaks of how mysteriously intention and intuition along with language works while a poem is forming:

> The poem begins to form from the first intention. But the intention is already breaking into another. The first intention begins me (sic) but of course continually shatters itself and is replaced by the child of the new collision …
>
> Though I do move along words in a poem when, after all, as I am at the last word and look back I find the word changed and new word there, for it is part of the whole poem and its particular life depends on the rest of the poem. The meaning of a word in a poem is never more than its position.

It was not until after dwelling on the phrase 'In the beginning was the Word', and the idea of vowels held by constant consonants within the poem, that I saw that the word 'was' (the opposite of 'saw'), without the vowel, spelt Graham's initials – an abbreviation of himself. I did not want this to be pointed out specifically, and it could just as easily signify another writer further back in time, such as Shakespeare. I later added the word 'Wis' to the start of the fourth stanza – wis being an archaic word for 'to know' or be certain – and I felt this linked well with the second stanza about the idea of certainty – linking the liminal word 'shore' with the unliminal word 'sure'.

Again, the swapping of vowels and insertion of an *i* happens to change the identity of a word – in this case 'was', to 'wis'. I suppose the words and their stability are linked to the landscape of a poem, both figuratively (*sure/shore*) and also metaphorically.

The letter *W* as a beginning, in the term *the Word*, was the initial starting place. The third stanza starts with a stuttering *W*:

W, w, w …
Between the wires
weather from elsewhere
becomes ours.

It just so happens that the next three lines in the stanza was an unused fragment I found in my notes – and 'wires' connected well with 'was' and the later 'wis', as well as the initials, W. S. – as did the concept of weather from elsewhere. Wind is connected to vowels in the poem, as it is in Hebrew religiosity, where wind and spirit and breath are present in the word *ruach* from the very first sentence of the Hebrew Bible, where a wind (*ruach*) from God sweeps over the water at beginning of creation. In the Hebrew writing system there were no letters for what we know as vowels, as the twenty-two letters of the *aleph-beth* were consonants. The vowels represent sounded breath and that breath is the unfixable, wavering part of a word, the spirit perhaps. It is possible that the Hebrew scribes avoided creating a visual sign for vowels as they might make of an invisible spirit of breath something fixed.

One thing that connected my parents, despite their many differences, was their basic belief in God, whatever name they used, and a respect for the Old Testament which had influenced the Quran. This respect for the book and the fixed word coupled with my sense that the words and cultures my parents grew up with were very different perhaps underlies my attraction to exploring unstable, wavering elements in words such as the vowels. Perhaps also the idea of the written word as an alienating sphere with a fixity that worried me, an abstract fixity that pertained particularly to the idea of a holy book which is carried abroad, but unlike the wind doesn't alter as it travels. Edmund Jabes talks of 'People of the Book' being exiled in the word: 'Because being Jewish means exiling yourself in the word, and at the same time weeping for your exile.'[37]

This idea has resonance for me, perhaps in a different way, when I think of my father whose oral cultural background in his remote village in Kashmir felt very different from the respect he accorded to books, whether those books were readable or not.

Meanwhile in English, where 'The Wanderer' is one of the oldest written poems we have, the word *wind* when it means to turn, etymologically relates both to the word *wend* and

[37] Edmund Jabes, *Elya,* (Berkeley, Calif.: Tree Books, 1974), p. 72.

also to the word *wander.* Which seems apt for a word that implies movement and wavering.

Digression: Wavering and the Wand

One of the connections in my poems between the feeling of wavering and the act of writing, seems to come to a head in the word *wand*, which links the poem with 'W*nd' with another poem called 'The Long Causeway', which I'll discuss after this digression. The word *wanderer* also has a hint of wavering progress and the conflation of a journey with the action of thinking through the phonetically similar word *wonderer.* Etymologically the Old English *windan* means to turn, or twist. The sense of wander as meaning to stray in reference to thinking, rather than anything physical, is a later development. I've been thinking about wands also because my son has become fascinated with them, partly through the Harry Potter films. Also there seems to be a connection with the idea of affecting something without touching it, that the classic 'magic wand' seems to promise, and how the written word can affect a reader across distances of time and space. More pertinent to my poems is the feeling of distance between the word as a pointer and the reality I want the word to point to. In the act of waving a wand for a desired effect, there seems to be the intention to marry a word – say, for example the Latin *accio* which means 'summon' – with the waving motion and with the appropriate emotion which is concentrated into the pointed tip of the wand. I also remember vividly a conversation with the poet Christopher Reid, about Ted Hughes, who he edited, and we were talking about Hughes's idea of the pen and his sense that there was an energy running between his head and his hand, via his heart, he thought, when he was consumed in the act of writing a poem. This impression of an electrical energy is not something I necessarily experience at all, especially as I write on an iPad generally. However, the intention to link the word to something kinetic is pertinent as a desire, whether I feel that I've been successful in that intention or not. I'm very aware of the distances words seem to generate even as they offer to close that distance, for instance even my own name feels like it is close to me and also not mine at all, as I've explored in poems such as 'I'. The desire to connect a word to a thought, or even to something more concrete, is a desire is a I hover before, and that hovering feeling might be called an energised space. A wavering in that distance that

opens up between beginning to use a word and the desire for the word and its combinations and associations to communicate or conjure a presence that feels just beyond oneself. Causes of a poem are hard for me to pin down, as the cause often seems ahead of me, and at a distance from me and from my language, and this often becomes part of the subject or subtext of the poem.

A poem that made a great impression on me when I first read it was Ted Hughes's 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' – which I read in 1998 after Hughes died and while his death was in the news. A couple of weeks or so after he died there was a full moon and through Hughes's poem, the moon I saw in Clissold Park, London, took on the image of a fingertip pointing. Thus, in a small way, Hughes's poem had changed the way I saw something. And perhaps I associate Hughes with 'magic' in the sense of affecting from a distance, for this reason also. The word 'moon', said by his young daughter, as she points her finger at it almost has a planetary feel in the poem, the word itself seeming huge to its young speaker, a kind of magic summoning device. Perhaps I associate poetry with this poem, as it feels like one of the poems that initiated me into reading contemporary English poetry. I see now that this image of the moon as the visible end of a fingertip, pointing, coupled with my desire to understand how causation works mysteriously in poetry, may have helped me write a poem, decades later, prompted by a memory of my son waving a stick in the car when he was five years old.

The Long Causeway

We are driving higher and higher,
twisted steepness holding my hand to first gear;
some homesick, star-hung satellite making me climb
Smithy Lane, skyward, to Blackshaw Head, in a hired red Aygo.

Continue straight ahead. Which is not easy down here,
up and around the next bend. On black ice. *Boom boom boom*
Even brighter than the moon moon moon. Turning down the radio
so I can hear the satnav, and myself think …*'Cause baby*

you're a firework – all this time, catching sight of a stick
swoosh in and out the windscreen mirror – I ask my boy
whose car-seat faces back, if he's playing a game. *I'm making*
things happen, Daddy. Rounding the corner, the green dark

edge is taken off the horizon as we go over the tops.
On the turn, is a white page, more defined than the lost sheep
and hill clouds. *I'm Jack Frost*, he says. And behind
that cold stick he'd picked up, in the woods – like a new word

in the mirror, I see the brushstroke of a black road, tapered
to a point backwards – then before it, I see flashed
what was a 'sword'; that twig he'd seen to the hilt as gold
and now is differently sharp – a wand, delicate and moon-tipped:

conducting the snow's dance, beyond the stick's flourished
end, on a half-hidden Long Causeway.
I'm slowing now, to a stop.
Snow-wand, sword, branch; whatever
it is – the wave of it, or the first particle at its point –

paints all that is behind us with all that lay ahead.

'The Long Causeway' is a narrative lyric poem that looks at the idea of beginnings and wavering causality, partly through the idea of a wand which is waved – picking up another use of the word *wand* in the poem 'W*nd'. In that latter poem, the wand has more of a sonic resonance, as a chiming word with *wind* and *wound* and *unwound* where a vowel makes all the difference. In 'The Long Causeway', the wand is more figurative, a twig or stick picked up in the woods, that is waved and has a wavering identity in the mind of the young waver – as a sword that is swished, and then as a kind of magic wand. Rather than a

vowel switching the nature of the wand, here it is the fluid imagination of a child who is learning about agency and the beginnings of causation, and playing with the idea of his being able to change his identity and make things happen at a distance through the waving of a wand.

The poem is strongly autobiographical in that I do describe something that happened with my son as I drove from Hebden Bridge where he lived with his mother to Grasmere where I was living, in a hired car using satellite navigation on an icy day that became a snowy day. The memory of my son waving a stick saying 'I'm Jack Frost' stayed with me. Initially I wanted to make a connection between the snow and the white page and blur the line of causation with who is imaginatively behind the poem. As I wrote it and began mentioning street names, including that of The Long Causeway, the gravity of poem became the wand and the road and the idea of causation. Sometimes it feels like a poem comes through a 'back seat driver' at the back of my mind so to speak, and I was reflecting on this too, and on the wand as a distant pen that acts on the page without touching it. Another connection that formed the energy of the poem was with the idea of where the universe comes from – the first firework, or sparkler in the Big Bang, and this being the tip of creation, or a distantly viewed wand.

This also connects the idea of wavering with the idea of a beginning point that is full of energy and potential, again giving to the wavering state a dynamic creative potential, rather than seeing it as a disabling uncertainty.

In my poem 'The Said Frame', uncertainty around a word is also connected with sticks – in this case, the sticks that play on a dulcimer instrument, and this gives way to the image of divining rods, which are often associated with forked sticks. My later poem 'Ys' has this image of a branch leading in two directions and connects it with learning about printed language and also with the dendritic nature of thought and memory where one time can branch into quite another.

Ys

I've been a long time that I'm waiting
Nick Drake, *Northern Sky*

It was Monday, bank holiday, near the end
of May, rough middle of the day, year, and
of the country if the country is England.
Oak Apple, or Oak and Nettle Day, axis of my year
thinly plotted as my tree – the far end of our
thinning garden, in a border shaped to waver
like a child's drawing of sea – its clock-handed Y
where the trunk parted ways, a first rung that even
just turned seven I step onto, into the above,
this wobbly earth above earth. Wordlessly
I knew then, I'd later be gone, like possibly
my tree has, from that border, and my attention
divided thinly as the light, or is that time, through
the green-grey space I was sitting in as I

reached up for a branch, or is it balance, or
vantage? on this tentative level. A story

. . .

I can see myself in or on, just, nearly.
Almost. Its yearly trick. The sticking place.
I can reconfigure it in my head, that first
page, and the first word, that *M* and *y*
in the first novel I read. Nineteen.
Begun just before we left the house –
with the tree that was always there – finished
elsewhere. Mum left Dad in the summer
between school's end and the future. No literature.
Story books weren't for me till this late.
Or soon. But begin it did, literature and me.
My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred,
almost. In my book the line break was there.
It – or English lit. – had me at almost.

. . .

Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?
Where is the horse gone? Where the young man?
Uuere beþ þey biforen vs weren?
Where are those who were before us?
Hwær becomes *Uuere* becomes my *where*.
Where's gone Daddy? To the country called Back Home.
When is he back here? 'Autumn.' *Is that tomorrow?*
'No son.' *So today? '*No son.' Wise now, Mum pointed
through the nicotine-brown window. 'When all the leaves
fall from your tree.' The laburnum had bloomed
its yellow envelope in my birthday week. *When*
will a present come? had become *when's the lello flowers?*
The tree held court in that laburnum time
before letters stuck, like Dad, his story of when
he came here and stared up at shop signs
on Stratford Road – learning the shapes and the wares.

. . .

Nothing else would do. Autumn. October. Another season. Months. Moons. Later that summer I saw through the living room window a strange breeze shaking your birthday *tree, nothing else moving – only what we called your tree, down the end of the lawn – like something mythical.* When you went I felt you'd gone to a place like that, a shaping place. *What I hadn't seen was a small boy who understood even less than I thought, time on his little hands,* I can feel the powdery bark now, pushing in the border *between summer and autumn, looking up*

to see leaves
in their bowl
of full branches
hold time – not fall
as if stuck on purpose
. . . Disturbing the dust on
the bark was making you sneeze –
trust you to be allergic to your tree. God
knows why you'd always want to step into it later on.

But before you can remember, I watched you shake your tree with all your weight. You came in with eyes streaming and swollen, the intervals between breaths tight, *wheezing, asking why the tree wouldn't let Daddy come back. A fortnight later or was it more? the letter I posted would have arrived, a first letter to your dad, on pale blue airmail paper, a folding*

envelope of a letter, and your dad says that when he read the cramped words, posted from a red pillar box I'd guess, on the same road
where he learned to read English, *about how you pushed at what you didn't understand* – with all my weight, and more besides – *as if shaking all the green out of your tree would fetch your dad out of a blue sky, and how you pushed and stared up*

up into the stubborn
shadows and shapes between
the branches*, it made him cry, into*
the black ink he was reading – and it's your
telling of this I see and in each telling I'd imagine
the story, unfolding again, my memory shading into yours,

into the tree with the low fork, into times I sat in it, hid in its crooked space, absent-mindedly rubbing my eyes in the tree's dust – *till it all blurred,* every clear thing under later, unvisited weather, blotting into an English cloud. A grey smudge on a faint blue leaf. The last shape I see, in this fabled cloud of English, is the wide-armed first letter of

Yours,
remaining
under a vanishing
story, past all that yields
in time and all that won't, ever –
unpushable as a tree's clockwork – its *ours*
and whatever's up, above it, is unreadable. The sky,
at this illegible legendary stage, always becomes a thin blue-

grey page, held in my father's hands. One sky like tracing paper, held above another. Held above a laburnum.

My poem ‘Ys’ is set across five pages, with three loosely sonnet-like poems each beginning with a vertical space left above the first line of each section, so the poem in the book would look like it had begun halfway down the page, and then the final two pages feature words in italics from an imagined conversation with my mother as she recounts a story that is at the heart of the poem.

Whereas the poem W*nd was partially focussed around an unstable vowel, ‘Ys’ is a sequential piece which is focussed around a story, and even more particularly, around the consonant Y. Visually the forked shape of this letter links to a tree which roots childhood memories, and also memories and reflections around literacy and literary beginnings.

The tree anchors memory and becomes the centre of a poetic imagination. I had already written a piece of prose on the laburnum tree in the garden of my childhood home, and this essay was somewhere between a lyric essay and a prose poem and was called ‘Laburnum Time’. I was then asked by *The Poetry Review* to write an essay about a central place or object in my poetic thinking. And I adapted my reflections on the laburnum to fit. While I was at the Wordsworth Trust in 2014 I had tried to write about the laburnum tree in an abandoned poem called ‘Centuries’, which connected the tree to time.

The poem was particularly hard to begin as it felt like a story that had accumulated many layers and branched out infinitely. In the end the beginning that stuck was the idea of writing about the day and place when and where I was born.

This becomes the ‘axis’ of my year, in the way the tree becomes a kind of imaginal axis.

The tree in the border at the end of the garden flowered during the time of my birthday and was known as *my tree.* Writing about the tree was a chance to reflect on time and proverbial memory. Of all the poems by other poets that seemed most relevant, T. S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’, particularly the first section, ‘Burnt Norton’, lingered in my head as I was trying to fix on a way of writing it. The poem seemed also an entrance into hazy beginnings and to complicate the idea of time and causality. Rather than a long sequence, I decided to separate the reflections out into a rough sonnet shape, without attempting to be at all strict with form or length, and to let each piece develop its own internal logic, and to branch into the next.

It's possible that at the back of my mind was the example of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Clearances', a sonnet sequence where he writes about his mother. The last of these poems is about a chestnut tree that was 'coeval' with his birth – although I say this now as an afterthought, having since looked up Heaney's writings on trees, and realised a potential connection to where the shape of the poem may have branched from. Heaney also uses the image of the letter Y as a forked branch in a poem called 'Alphabets'[38] which again I hadn't consciously thought of while writing the poemm but is a connection that occurs to me while writing this.

Letters such as the letter Y have a rune-like tree appearance, and I wanted to replicate the idea of climbing into language and into time, which the tree came to represent in my imagination, as it taught me about time in that it's blossom was a kind of calendar before I could read calendars or understand the scale of a month. Visually the Y is a vertical line that forks in two directions. It could be taken as a dendritic or synaptic branch of thought and more concretely as a rooted tree trunk.

In this poem the tree becomes a particular laburnum, which is not a native British tree, and also a hybrid. Although this hybridity isn't referred to, the poem has an obvious interest in hybridity in the sense that Bhabha would have used the word, since the speaker refers to his mixed geographical roots and sometimes dislocated sense of time and space, and intertextually, to another writer who wrote of his own cultural hybridity and confusion. 'Ys' quotes from Hanif Kureishi's first novel, from the first line. This is a double beginning in more ways than one. It is also the beginning of an interest in literature. And a beginning that is double because the speaker of the novel, and of the poem that quotes it, has a sense that he begins in two places at once, despite a claim for Englishness.

This section of the poem continues from the first, and the beginning looks back and up to the previous poem. The looking back and up is re-enacted in the poem by the sentence seemingly carrying on from a previous statement, and by the space on the page left above the poem. This space of five blank lines continues throughout the sequence for evening opening section.

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[38] Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 1.

The blank space hints at hesitancy and delay, as well as the act of looking upwards into space. It also gives prominence to the idea of the page itself, the backdrop to the printed word. It also possibly suggests the absence of literature for the writer in the first part of his life. Glyn Maxwell in his book *On Poetry* writes: 'The other half of everything for the songwriters is music. For the poets it's silence, the space, the whiteness. Music for them and us – *does the work of time*.'[39]

The blank space of five lines above the poem could represent in this sense, time and the idea of wavering between beginnings, and being underneath a weight of time, as represented by the blank space or what Maxwell calls *whiteness*.

The hesitancy shows through more obviously in the words from the first line: *just, nearly. /Almost* – which suggest a speaker not even sure of the word to use for uncertainty.

That this is followed by two allusions to canonical English writers contrasts this uncertainty with the in-placeness of these texts on the collective page of memory. The *yearly trick* is both the laburnum tree's blooming each year at the same time, as well as repeating Larkin's words in his poem 'The Trees' – *Their yearly trick of looking new.*

The next line in my poem repeats another phrase from canonical literature, one that stuck in the poet's mind, this time spoken by Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare – *screw your courage to the sticking place*. The sticking place in my poem is both the tree which is 'sticky' in a number of senses, including being rooted to a spot and occupying a sticking role within the calendar, as well as within memory. The branching nature of poetic thought is also hinted at. As well as the connection between trees and the page.

And this connection also links to alphabets. The poet Robert Graves wrote about the link in folklore between trees and alphabets, in *The White Goddess* which was a very important book to the poets Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, both of whom also incidentally wrote more than one poem each about the laburnum tree. One of the things that made this poem so challenging to write was the many connections I could have made while writing it – being an intertextual a poem about time, memory and trees, as well as wanting to tell an autobiographical story that in a private way felt like a touchstone memory. And

[39] Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2012), p. 13

yet in order to tell the story I felt I had to talk about how memory links to learning about language and stories and letters.

On the one hand the laburnum tree is an omphalos in the sense Seamus Heaney used the term, a focus of rootedness for the poetic imagination, and on the other hand, the page and even letters as represented by the abstract shape of the letter Y are also a kind of omphalos. The way printed language takes root in the memory is a subtext of the poem. The poem is about what *holds* and this is at least a two-way process, hence the uncertainty of the speaker is possibly appropriate to the subject matter. The act of holding can also be an act of holding back and feeling delayed by the prospect. Poems like this are nebulous to write before the shape starts to arise, and it also feels nebulous to discuss the process behind them, in a linear way. But this again seems appropriate to the nature of the subject matter, if it can be called that. Anything else would be an evasion of that cloudiness and the paradoxical nature of a 'cloudy', wavering omphalos or centre, where the printed word and the changeable memory are affecting each other.

After alluding to Larkin and Shakespeare, the poem then refers to a memory of the first page of the first novel that the speaker read as an adult, reconfiguring the physical experience of seeing the first two letters on that page: 'the M and y'.

These letters are anchors for that memory, and are coincidentally on either side of the word *memory*, and after this memory of seeing the line that would stick, in what became a touchstone reading experience, the poem then moves to the memory of what was happening around me as I read that book, which happened also to be a touchstone event – my mother leaving my father. The tree in the garden becomes something that was 'always there', like literature in a wider sense, before I caught up with it: 'Story books weren't for me till this late. / Or soon'.

The words *late* and *soon* across a line break allude shyly to Wordsworth and a first line from his sonnet: 'The world is too much with us; late and soon' – and they also complicate the idea of arrival. Being a latecomer to literature and reading novels, it nevertheless felt like a jolt when I did discover literature as something that was after all *for me*, a jolt which felt like the opposite of something arriving slowly.

Following the word *soon*, is an assertive sentence that quite contrasts with the opening words of this part of the poem: 'But begin it did, literature and me'.

The word order being unusual, it again complicates the thought of a beginning and agency. In *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, which has been quoted here before, Edward Said argues that a beginning in a literary text is its own method.[40] This conflation of methodology with the nature of a beginning perhaps has some relevance for both the subject of the poem and the difficulties I had in pinning it down and also in now describing that process. But I realised that the poem should have different beginnings and one was not enough – and this is why it was written as a sequence, but then within each sequential poem a number of beginnings are alluded to and each exists in a liminal state rather than as a linear beginning. The breakthroughs in the shaping of the poem were often in finding a first line that suited the theme I was writing into, or back into.

The next line of my poem is a direct quote from the first line of Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* which also functions as a multi-layered beginning within the poem – the start of a book, or an interest in literature, and of a feeling that I, or my experience and identity, was somehow included within the forbidding world of literature. This shocking and pleasing revelation is enacted in the actual line break as it appears in the novel: 'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, / almost.'

It was this word *almost* which signalled the speaker's hesitant and mixed identity – and this exact place in the text was the 'beginning' or location where I had a shock of recognition. Although this was a prose book, the line break fortuitously added to the experience, in that way that a poetic use of enjambment and the white space around the edge of a line can amplify the meaning hinted at in the words and concentrate the energies within and between words across space.

This seems to link intriguingly with Said's idea that the beginning of text is also its *method*, which as a practising poet feels intuitively true to my typical experience of composition, while at the same time this being a challenging idea to explicate with any exactitude. It may also be that a beginning comes later in the history of the text, as I discovered was the

[40] Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention & Method* (London: Granta, 1997), p. 44.

case with Kureishi's first line, which was written after the novel ended. The words of Eliot in 'Burnt Norton' about the past and future pointing 'to one end, which is always present' [41]seem relevant to this idea of a non-linear account of creation that nevertheless places great weight on the role of beginnings.

Edward Said also argued that a beginning is preferable to an origin because a beginning point can be selected out of various possibilities, whereas an origin can only be acknowledged. Intention is important in locating a beginning point and this intention is perhaps where method meets beginning, in that the intention – finding a location to work from – magnetises whatever else follows from that energised point. The wavering beforehand is part of that energising. And perhaps this is hinted at by the final words in this section of my poem, where I suggest that English literature *had me at almost*. The hesitant word *almost* becomes a location, a form of self-positioning, but also a kind of springboard. An unstable point energised by how much uncertainty is concentrated within it, from before and after.

To hear from a practising poet, trying to put his own practice into words, this point is perhaps similar to the one raised and quoted earlier by W. S. Graham: 'The poem begins to form from the first intention. But the intention is already breaking into another.' In the same essay he continues:

> The poem is more than the poet's intention. The poet does not write what he knows but what he does not know. A man's imagination suddenly may inherit the hand-clapping centuries of his one language as his pitch … The poem itself is dumb but also has the power of release.[42]

The idea of *the first intention* is difficult to locate, and as Graham poetically continues, the creative imagination may 'suddenly inherit the hand-clapping centuries of his language' – locating the intention beyond the poet almost, or locating the poet as a source of mixed intentions. As a writer of mixed heritage who has always been very conscious of the

[41] T. S. Eliot *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 3.

[42] W.S. Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release'*,* in *Strong Words*, ed. by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe , 2000), p. 119

difficulty of locating a single beginning place, what Graham says about intention seems to mirror both the process of writing a poem which involves different beginnings being pulled together, and also the figurative content of many of my poems, such as *Ys* which is concerned with locating first places and rooting the moment of conception. This moment pans out and behind, to the language itself, and to connections to older beginnings in literature and memory. This perhaps relates to Graham's idea of *the power of release* and language as *pitch.*

If language is a pitch is then the individual letters in written language are perhaps pitched in a more rooted sense, and my poem 'Ys*'* looks at the letter Y as a locus, a point of rootedness and release. A source of location that is both wavering and fixed. 'The shape of all of us is in this language' Graham writes and in my poem 'Ys' the letter Y becomes both a shifting slippery location, as well as something fixed through time, and almost a solid shape that the speaker can climb up and into.

> Let the poem be a still thing, a mountain constructed, an addition to the world … A poem is a mountain made out of the containing, almost physical language, and with the power to release a man into his own completely responsible world larger than that outward solid geography. [43]

The letter Y as a shape is from the Greek 'upsilon' and entered the English alphabet originally as our U. In Medieval English writing 'i' and 'y' are interchangeable. In my poetry I have sometimes written about pronouns such as I and you and us – and the letter Y seems to sit somewhere between these. Indeed the title poem of my collection, Us, could be viewed as the plural of U.

So the letter Y occupies a liminal, hazy position in the poem and yet gestures, tree-like, to a fixity and rootedness. In the last section the word *Yours* is reduced to its 'wide-armed' beginning, Y – the last visible shape on a blotting page. The word *ours* is 'unreadable', as is

[43] W.S. Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release'*,* in *Strong Words*, ed. by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe , 2000, p. 120

the blurred writing in the airmail letter, a blurring that also blurs into the image of a clouded sky.

The letter Y can stand for all sorts of communicative beginnings as well standing for a particular tree which has no power of listening or talking. I was surprised by all the tree came to stand for, as an organising force for the poem, more than I would have knowingly planned when the poem began. Sylvia Plath in a radio broadcast for the BBC's *World of Books* in 1962, wrote of the different ways a yew tree may occupy space in a novel as compared to a poem she wrote called 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' [44]where the yew becomes a tree 'of the mind' in her poetry:

> I did, once, put a yew tree in. And that yew tree began, with astounding egotism, to manage and order the whole affair. It was not a yew tree by a church on a road past a house in a town where a certain woman lived... and so on, as it might have been in a novel. Oh, no. It stood squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard, the clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated it – everything! I couldn't subdue it. And, in the end, my poem was a poem about a yew tree. That yew tree was just too proud to be a passing black mark in a novel.

Plath here appears to pass the agency of the poem to the yew tree with its 'astounding egotism'. The poem, she almost says to the yew tree, is *yours*. Another refraction of the figure Y in my poem, apart from being the beginning of the word *yours* is that it is where an 'I' might branch off in two directions: 'the clockhanded Y / where the trunk parted ways'. Again this complicates the idea of where a voice begins in time and divides from other voices, or from silence, into a singularity, if it ever does. The drama of this situation is also replicated in my poem by the use of italics in the final section to represent my mother's voice, telling me a story about the laburnum tree, and my interjections to that story, which are non-italicised. Complicating the issue of voice even further, one of these

[44] Sylvia Plath, 'A Comparison', in *Strong Words*, ed. by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Newcastle: Bloodaxe , 2000), p. 146.

interjections is a direct and unattributed quote from T.S. Eliot, and the first page of 'Four Quartets':

> *to see leaves*
> in their bowl
> of full branches
> *hold time – not fall*
> *as if stuck on purpose*
> . . . Disturbing the dust on
> *the bark was making you sneeze –*
> *trust you to be allergic to your tree. Heaven*

The mention of the word 'leaves' and then 'bowl' and then 'purpose', leads to the quoted phrase from Eliot, 'Disturbing the dust' as it triggers a memory, or an echo, of Eliot's lines which feels nonetheless like a continuation of my mother's broken soliloquy or story:

> My words echo
> Thus, in your mind.
> But to what purpose
> Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
> I do not know.
> Other echoes
> Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?[45]

The ellipses in my poem between '*purpose'* and 'Disturbing the dust' perhaps also hints at a different kind of interjection, where the echo of a remembered poem asserts itself and temporarily becomes the voice of the speaker. That the remembered poem is concerned with time and memory and gardens adds to the sense of a shared 'mind' – in Eliot's poem, the words that 'echo / Thus, in your mind', are his own words, addressed to the unknown reader, the subject of 'your'. The dust on a bowl of rose leaves that is disturbed seems

[45] T. S. Eliot *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 3.

suggestive of a kind of mingling of past with a future reader in this context. The 'other echoes' that inhabit the garden might be read as other voices inhabiting the memory and complicating the situatedness of a single voice. Eliot's poem is also concerned with the intersection of time with the timeless moment, and echoes in the poem are musically suggestive, but also figurative, where images repeat throughout the poem and echo off each other.

In my poem, lines are set out in prose, and then across a stanza break are broken into narrow but increasing lines which creates a sloping shape that points upwards. The prose section breaks on the words 'l*ooking up' // 'to see leaves* / in their bowl'.

The short lines slow down the reader and the reading of *'to see leaves'* and also create a kind of pointedness and pointing up, particularly given that the subject is a child looking up from the ground at a tree. Poetry is figured as a heightened and heightening speech, one which is looked up to. The later line break on '*Heaven* / *knows why you'd always want to step into it later on'* emphasises through the break, the word *Heaven* and suggests another dimension of this heightened speech, as a heightened realm of a kind. Perhaps a place where language lasts, lives on, and is not ephemeral.

Later in the poem, a prose section again breaks on the action of staring upwards:

> where he learned to read English, *about how you pushed at what you*
> *didn't understand* – with all my weight, and more besides – *as if*
> *shaking all the green out of your tree would fetch your dad out of a blue sky,*
> *and how you pushed and stared up*
>
> up into the stubborn
> shadows and shapes between
> the branches*, it made him cry, into*
> *the black ink he was reading* – and it's your
> telling of this I see and in each telling I'd imagine
> the story, unfolding again, my memory shading into yours

Here the act of staring up also echoes with earlier references to my father learning to read English by staring up at shop signs, again conflating the notion of the text with that of a heightened and as yet unreadable realm. The 'leaves' on the tree could also be read as pages that linger in the memory. That act of pushing the tree to get the leaves off might be compared with trying to apprehend time and memory and situate one's voice among others that it has shaded into – until it is a personal voice – another voice that becomes yours.

Again, the obsession in the poem to return to a first site for the speaking voice, and maybe also a kind of continuous ground, which the laburnum tree comes to inhabit. In the poem, my mother says that the tree was called *your tree* and this again conflates the notion of the speaking subject with a tree, a situated and rooted being that contrasts with the wavering nature of the speaking identity. As with Eliot's poem, the garden becomes a timeless original location from which time begins to intersect.

The page is the heaven beyond the words. It is the future readers who see the words you do, but not at the same time. The page is also the place where the living and the dead can speak together and where beginnings can collide so a sentence begun in a different decade or era can be completed in the present, or shade into words written in the present. T. S Eliot feels an appropriate figure to reference in this regard, and also to some of the ways in which repetitions and echoes occur across my work as a pattern between as much as within poems. Steve Ellis has written:

> 'Four Quartets', as its title suggests is emphatically akin to music, in that its themes and phrases are continually repeated [. . .] Readers are constantly being invited to return to earlier parts of the poem – the meaning of which now becomes modified, just as 'Burnt Norton', originally an end in itself, later became a beginning – through the recapitulation of the themes, so that the meaning of the whole lies no solely in a

> sequential narrative, but in 'the pattern', the ever-present totality of all the parts in synchronic dialogue, the 'co-existence' in which 'all is always now'. [46]

Another kind of repetition that characterises the body of my work is that writers, such as Dickens for example, or certain key words will reappear in different poems, almost as though these words or even letters become *characters*, and hopefully this adds to a sense of recognition of the poems being in dialogue with each other, and also with the reader who is picking up on the connections. I like the idea of poems in a collection that speak to each other, and perhaps offer the kind of satisfaction to the reader that a novel offers in terms of picking up threads between the pages. Perhaps this desire to replicate something of the novel is why I quote or allude to so many novelists. The theme of recognising a link, across different times, often through language, is strong in my work, and so I would hope that this experience isn't simply mine but that is doubled in the act of reading. This is partly why I wanted to call the collection I published 'Us'. Writing about the novelist David Mitchell, Courtney Hopf writes about the importance of repetition in his work and of the act of recognition:

> Characters, themes, objects and stories consistently reappear and reconstitute themselves from narrative to narrative and novel to novel. These repetitions incite moments of recognition that serve to transform the literary subject and to encourage reader agency in the process of narrative meaning-making . . . When we read, we experience a conflation of subject and object because we produce meaning in concert with the text, and we do so by maintaining positions both 'inside' and 'outside' the narrative.[47]

Another novelist I mention is Jane Austen, and the characters of her letters become a theme, as well as a tree she mentions in her correspondence. The poem 'Jane Austen:

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[46] Steve Ellis, *The New Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. Jason Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.111.

[47] Courtney Hopf, 'The Stories We Tell', in *David Mitchell, Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited, 2011), p. 106.

Selected Letters', features the same laburnum tree as the poem 'Ys', but it begins not with my mother's words, or with mine, but Austen's, as though our lines existed in the same borderless moment of writing:

Jane Austen: *Selected Letters*

> *Then, each in its peculiar honours clad,*
> *Shall publish even to the distant eye*
> *Its family and tribe. Laburnum rich*
> *In streaming gold*;
> – William Cowper, *The Task*, 1785

1

Where shall I begin? she starts. *Which of all*
my important nothings shall I tell you first?
In her shortened sign-off, above, she'd *remain*
with Love,
Yrs affec JA.

I read names into that unwritten absence;
Julia Ann … who helped shape my initial scribbles
and kept an old card with first words in my hand:
from Zaffar
– the *ff* pointing backwards,

back to that consonant I couldn't then say;
stuck with my start, I was an Affer, or Faffer –
which proved true, Mum later said, of the latter.
Dawdler that I became. So here I am

taken aback by letters – their afterlife –
and how we draw together when they arrive.

2

We also talk of a Laburnam. – The Border
under the Terrace Wall is clearing away …

I go back and look at Austen's late *a*
in *Laburnam*. It's you, Mum, I remember
explaining to me how a soft Indian u
is equally an a. My dad taught me to say
'Mera nam Zaffar hai'. The first vowel
in my name like the last u in laburnum.

As a child I'd climb that tree, spend hours lost in
its grey-green limbs at the end of our garden.

Early days, at the registry, in Birmingham
Mum wrote out, in her own spelling … *Kunial*;
from Jat-Rajput-Kanyal – Dad's tribe or clan,
starting past those parts that talk of caste.
In *Austen*
that *A*, almost from the off, is a different sound –
more like the o in of, than the u in ground.

At the start of this poem, the quote from Austen – 'Where shall I begin?' – echoes a key question in this and many other of my poems, and by beginning with her question,

perhaps the thought in the context of my poetry could also be read as *where shall my poem, or my lyric I, begin?*

The wavering question becomes the start, both of a letter that Austen wrote and of a poem I am writing. 'Which of all my important nothings shall I tell you first?' Austen adds in the same letter. Again, the word *first* seems to be an attracting word for me, but I found the phrase *my important nothings* very moving when I first read it, and then what also became unexpectedly moving was seeing that Austen had signed her letter as *JA*. My mother often wrote her name into the books she bought at college, some of which I still have, and some of these were signed *J. A. Evetts*, and those two initial letters were familiar to me, letters I associated with literature. I wanted to tell my mother about this little thing, and also about the fact that I then knew that I was going to have a book published. The publisher is hinted at in the poem too, with the *ff* that I point backwards and can't write properly. I also wanted to tell my mother how I felt that whatever I wrote would somehow not have been possible without her, and that she felt present despite her absence, partly through letters. So this was the energy and the surprise behind that poem's beginning. A beginning that extended far beyond me, and distantly guided me.

Chapter Five

My Eye and Historical Light

Fielder

If I had to put my finger on where this started,
I'd trace a circle round the one moment I came to, or the one
that placed me, a fielder – just past the field, over the rope,
having chased a lost cause, leathered for six …
when, bumbling about, obscured in the bushes,
I completely stopped looking for the ball –
perhaps irresponsibly – slowed by bracken, caught by light
that slipped the dark cordon of rhododendron hands,
a world hidden from the batsmen, the umpires and my team,
like the thing itself: that small, seamed planet, shined
on one half, having reached its stop, out of the sphere of sight.
And when I reflect, here, from this undiscovered city,
well north of those boyish ambitions – for the county,
maybe later, the country – I know something of that minute
holds something of me, there, beyond the boundary,
in that edgeland of central England. A shady fingernail
of forest. The pitch it points at, or past, a stopped clock.
Still, in the middle, the keeper's gloves
clap at the evening. Still, a train clicks
on far off tracks. And the stars are still to surface.
The whole field, meanwhile, waiting for me,
some astronaut, or lost explorer, to emerge with a wave
that brings the ball – like time itself – to hand. A world restored.
But what I'd come to find, in that late hour
was out of mind, and, the thing is, I didn't care
and this is what's throwing me now.

You

The Electric Telegraph has saved us.
– Commissioner of the British Punjab, Donald McLeod

_____ *1857. Stop. Send help. Stop. Mutiny to come . . .*
Nine decades shy of the bomb
dropping from the sky on Dad's education
which stopped at the age of *maybe seven*.
'Mutiny', or 'Rebellion'? Words and words
only. And neither his. Or theirs. My dad
in his wordless sleep

would kick Mum in hers. Or in the heat
of the moment, ablaze, lit with drink, he'd
say *After you their Tempest planes bombed my school*
or *You are always king of divide and rule*
or *My hands are tied. My tongue can't make good fist*
of speech like you. Because of you. You. The English
second-person plural. Or singular

who arrived in the world in 1947.
A teacher. Five foot tall. I'd hear her. *Stop*

Sunlight

after Ko Un

short rectangle of you
on this prison cell floor
the lightest step to
the nowhere possible
less than an envelope
equal to its postage
stamp though faceless
o unstuck eye of light
sent anything anywhere
sends seas sends faces
sends all but the sender

Overture

we'd like to take you home with us
we'd love to take you home

Rushing down the hill the signs are the same.
At the end of Birchcliffe Road comes Birch Place
which for the *n*th time I read as Birth Place.
So many years, so many miles from my first room,
though the way the trains work now nothing's that far.
Who'd have thought the future would be this, that we'd
travel, pitched like music, dark matter, through
solid walls? Soon I'll be at the station, and back
in my first room's unnerving foothold. Once,
barefoot among toys, I shuddered. First thought:
(somehow pre-verbal) what's under my toes?
Second thought: I've stepped on a needle. Third:
the metal is HOT. After lifting my foot,
it took an instant before word and warm instinct
caught up with the worlds beneath me … wasp.
Dead, but not. I'd think of it when steel touched
vinyl and old beginnings revolved. Once,
Paul's voice, in the desert of Mono, shouting
FOUR – as in one two three … was my dad,
downstairs, calling ZafFAR, far past the closed
door. There were times it wasn't my name but DOOR
– as in Oi, close the … but it *is* shut I'd think,
turning, each time. Another disc, another planet.
'This is a stereo recording'. I stare then and now

at the sleeve. Around a drum, a crowd of stars.
Yogis, gurus, cut-out faces – Einstein, Dors –
Peel, who I'd seen as a kid in Mum's birth place,
a monument, ignorant of its patience or the lengths
it would go to. Once, I put a pin on an atlas –
ruled a line – between Mum's birth place
and Dad's. The exact centre would hold my start,
I'd decided. The dot fell in the Black Sea.
I lowered the needle once more on the album,
a lone heart in the middle – and it begins. *silence*
violins tuning, *unseen audience*, *a hum* –
the sound of background cosmic radiation.
A drum, a drum. At the start was the densest dot,
there was not even an around, around this
heavy sharpness – thousands of times more hot
than the sun's centre – a crescendo reversed,
so compact, you could pin the light down, perhaps.
Or light's first, closed, bedroom door …
I've arrived at the station, thinking how birth
is the A-side to death's B-side, and how fast
we travel, these days – dematerialised – gone –
made flesh elsewhere. A cloud of star dust, going in
and out of spheres. Each nebulous *me* reprised
to act *one* –
the act you've known for all these years.

Butterfly Soup

This butterfly comes from a bud
they call the small cocoon
it occupied before it was
this speckled, flitting bloom.

Back in that darkly shrunken space
it breaks down cell by cell.
Now, liquefied, its black-holed eyes
gape past that pupal gel:

that dense and nascent universe
that spooled our sent-out star.
This point that bore that point before

flaps storms to Palomar.

A Bag of Winds

I have nothing to declare. Nothing, continued
the wind. Okay, mostly nothing. Okay. Spores.
Yes, spores. Moss. Moss spores.
Mostly. You can't see the spores I smuggle
in my invisible pocket, till they land
and lay low, and grow slow green carpets
on bark and boulders. Or blow up
the highest walls, their straggly green campsite
pitched on tall bricks and tall borders.

I have nothing to declare apart from those.
Moss spores. Okay there is more.
There are words, war shouts, the back end
of stories, that disintegrate into empty sound
which I recalibrate and carry
to the four quarters, further than their oral
mortal breath. I carry old words
soundly, snatching their syllables
across the boundary of death.

Nothing, apart from those, and spores.
Okay, I carry pollens and the clatter
of their impossible thoughts. Landscapes are rolled up
in my invisible pocket. In my bag is chaos.
Undeclared, on my tongue, ghosts of war
old and new, clanking to the death. Okay, the wind
whispered, quieter, close to nothing. Yes,
I have something to declare. There are
invisible empires in my empty

bag. Empires in my breath.

Poppy

Who crops up wherever ground is opened, broken …
No, this is not enough.

Who crops up where acidic ground is neutralised – in Belgium
blasted bones and rubble added their twist of lime
turning the disturbed earth red …
No, this is not enough.

Then where seeds lay buried, dormant – those older than I am,
catching light, can stir from their long sleep in time,
like history, raising a hand, a head …
No, this is not enough.

Remember? Who's there in the first script, on a Mesopotamian
tablet: *Hul* and *Gil* – 'joy flower' – a cuneiform
cocktail, our earliest remedy …

Who begot war in China, was named by Arabs *Abou-el-noum*,
'father of sleep'; a bloody sign of love's martyrdom –
gul-e-lala – 'flower of red', in Persian and Urdu …

Remember? Beloved of Persephone; also found in the tomb –
like a watch, worn on the wrist – of Tutankhamun,
and on coins issued by Herod …
No, this is not enough.

You need more? … Who crops up, fringing the banks of Lethe
after Troy; who bridges forgetfulness and memory,
life and death, relief and pain …

Who was loved by Coleridge who wished: that I could wrap up the view
from my house in a pill of opium and send it to you – to be
seen, swallowed, whole again …
No, this is not enough.

Who was the *minded flower* Shakespeare partly saw, in all the drowsy
syrups of the world – a release from grief that calls for more
far-fetched relief, and, as morphine,

sent your sap through my mother's veins, while she still could hear me,
while warmth remained in those hands that first held me,
first calmed my small, fevered brain …
No, this is not enough.

Whose pupil is a void dilating with light, its first and last entry –
a compound eye, in whichever form – who sees
the black dot of the beginning …

Who's there on that date when all the 1s meet, looped in a wreath
year upon year, or poked through the eye
of a buttonhole. There. I'm done …
No, this is not enough.

Then: *Mother* – *Mother* – last word of that bleeding, wrecked soldier,
as heard by the last Tommy, the last link to living memory –
spoken for now, like the countless millions

of mouthless dead. There in the underworld. The fallen, heavy
head. The deaths we live with. Enough said. Remember?
This is you. Wake up. You're summoned.

No, this is not enough.

A Drink at the Door

As I had asked for a night-light, the chamberlain had
brought me in, before he left me, the good old
constitutional rush-light of those virtuous days …
– Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

That's what I'm reading here. I mean the Dickens.
That and some downloaded contemporary
I keep switching from, on my lighted Kindle.
But it's not the light that came with this reader
and candles the cold, framed screen; it's the trick
of the light in this pub that detains me.
And not in this place alone. What is it
this yellowed, well-thumbed light has borrowed from?
By a less lonely table, a dog's ear
twitches. Somehow the glow pooled round my pew
hosts its own table talk. As mahogany
is a wood of a certain age, so too
this light is dated, refracted by it
and the dark matter that's caked in the grain.
And it's refracted, beyond that, by smoke
at the back of this malt, death and life mixed,
as familiar as a browned penny,
particular as fog. And it picks up
a dim street in Dickens, a door that gives
to this light, refracted here by the din
and the sharp bark of that dog. The Bear.
That was it. Dad's early haunt. Those big doors
that looked locked. And there, ensconced, hours later,
the same filament in frosted, smoked glass.

Like a burr stuck in the folds of my scarf,
this light has trailed me longer than I knew.
Out there, the darkness also has a hand
in these refractions. That and the bitter
cold I'm in from. If I keep losing you,
please bear with the thought of light. Like this shot
of malt bears its long, peat finish, sea-noted, late …
There's a low fire breathing, and an argument
somewhere. And I've come to an inn. In Orkney.
1824. In his Irish burr,
I hear the landlord attempt to intervene.
Four generations later, his descendent
pokes at the grate of his pub in Aberdeen.
And his wayward daughter asks for a light
in a Midlands asylum, home for life.
And her daughter, between trains, wanders out
to Needless Alley, looks in at The Windsor,
catching the eye of my eventual father.
Shortly they'll see, in this same light, they share
the one brand of cigarette.
The refractions
will go on, past my stay; I'm only here
for one. A drink at the door. A last drop
trails down the glass. I'll pack my Kindle away.
Exit this light that has taken me in.

First Light

Did its case say *strike softly, away from the body*? If I remember right it was ENGLAND'S GLORY. With a ship. Not long as Vestas.
But it weighed improbably. The weight of beginning, which was everything. Present in a matchbox. Here's the story. Dad worked nights in a factory. Joseph Lucas Ltd. Those words lay lightly, on an unembarrassed folder I'd take in to secondary school, but this time was before. Primary years, when the union's Christmas party, at Lucas's, felt like a day trip to Willy Wonka's. My father made car batteries. A mystery to me. On the way from work he'd bring the daylight with him, and that day's *Mirror* with all its headlines and a packet of crisps. If awake, I'd wait at the top of the stairs in the dark dawn to hear morning turn the key. I'm getting ahead of myself. One Christmas, at my school, St Johns C of E, before the holidays, theirs and in a way ours, teachers set a game for all ages, every class. To fill a small matchbox with objects, as many as we could, and no two objects the same. And for the first time, my father who wrote in slow capitals, helped with my homework. His factory was streets away from my school in Sparkhill, a short walk, but that doesn't convey the cosmic difference. One morning. *Here.* Open your hand. Not crisps. I felt the weight of his factory. Everyone on his floor had helped. Each adding their own lexicon. Each grade of tiny screw, or washer, or cog, or bolt, packed, piled, anonymous and proud. An assembled load, like the first singularity before any difference explodes in metal or matter, or the grammar school Latin my mother knew, a mass foreign to me as *prima luce* though I'd heard of lucifer. And Lucas's. How heavy light's cargo. Heavy as when words box more meanings, compact in the drawer of one sound. Story. Or. Our. Material. Kashmir. Light. Grammar. Secondary. Primary. Nativity. Here. Cosmic. Lucks. Strike. Match.

> Mass. Weight. Eye. One. I *won. By a long way,* the head teacher said
> before the whole assembly. Overnight, word spread like a lit fuse
> in the din of the factory floor, to dawn. *By long way. We won. Won.*

'The beginning is everything'. This is a line from a poem I wrote about a matchbox which is small but somehow holds great distances, but the line could apply to the body of my work, the narratives of which often return repeatedly to the subject of beginnings and expand on them, or through them, often through focusing microscopically, prismatically, on a memory, and even on a word. The freight of a word, and the weight of beginning, is explored, for example, in the following poem – the first poem I will look at in full – which centres on a memory around a matchbox, and moves towards another creation story, the Big Bang.

The poem began as an attempt to capture a memory of the surprising weight of a matchbox filled with small objects from my father's factory, and to recount a narrative around it. As I wrote the poem, the matchbox and its weight began to signify something like the dense singularity from which the ultimate beginning is thought to derive. Then the matchbox also took on the analogy of a word that is weighted with different meanings 'boxed in the drawer of one sound'. One of the words I then mention, for example, is *or* which obviously can also phonetically can signify *oar* and perhaps more pertinently to this poem, *ore.* In Urdu, the word for 'and' is *aur.* As a child such convergences would confuse and delight me – *and* being the opposite of *or,* which chimed with my father's *aur / '*and'. I often come back to such memories, haunted by how a word can animate a desire in myself to hold waveringly opposite directions together as though they weren't opposite. In this sense a word can *move.* And single word has a surprising weight and depth in this regard. A heavy ore that can be mined. Or the source of a story, as if such a source could pinned down to a singular place and time.

The etymology of the word *light* and its double pull – along with its connection in my memory with the name of my father's workplace for two decades, Lucas's – is also a

source-energy of the poem. Like myself, and like many of the words in our language, the word *light* has Indo-European roots. The Greek *leukos* has a proto Indo-European ancestor in *lewk.* Meanwhile, Joseph Lucas was a lamp manufacturer and the founder of Lucas Industries, from Birmingham. The name Joseph additionally carries biblical associations with birth and nativity, and of course in the Bible there is a strong further association between 'the light and 'the Word' and beginnings. This links with other poems I have written including 'The Word', where my father stands in the doorway trying to pronounce something, and 'Prayer' which begins with the *Allah* and dwells on the first word, and words, that I may have heard at birth. Incidentally 'The Word' begins on the word *if* and 'Prayer' on *first*. Between the indeterminacy of *if* and the search for origins behind that word *first* is the wavering ground that my poems often seem to issue from, or go towards.

If light is a kind of pronunciation, an initiating energy, or first word, then this is alluded to at the end of the poem, 'First Light', where my father in the battery factory repeats *By a long way* to his fellow workers as *By long way*, missing the alpha-word, or indefinite article, before *long way.* If 'creation' or the universe really was born out of nothing, then maybe it's fitting to not have the *a* before this proverbial *long way*, as the article even though indefinite, is still a determiner.

I can't remember what the headmaster might have announced when I found out that my matchbox had won, but I remember hearing how there were considerably more objects packed into my box than any other, almost as if it were a miracle to get so much into a small place. I did think about including the word *miracle* but it felt too strong and too leading a word, given the references to Christmas which may have skewed the poem too heavily in a Christian direction which would miss the wavering point of where my poetry stands. By a chance synchronicity the headmaster at my school was called Mr. Long. As the word *long* appears in the poem in the second line and then again in the last line, I considered including the headmaster's name to add to a sense of the significance of words, but I couldn't see how the reader would believe it to be true, paradoxically, even though it was true. I would only use a name with a coincidental meaning in a poem if the name wasn't made-up artificially to fit reality. I'm far more interested in how names and reality are related by chance connections and making names up would undermine the

slight faith I demonstrate in this. Even though I love Dickens's caricatured names. Another small reason for leaving the name *Long* out of the poem, apart from the retaining a reader's trust, is that I remember Mr. Long hitting me with a metre stick once, in the headmaster's office, and perhaps I ought to write more fully about Mr. Long and his Dickensian metre-stick and his Dickensian name on another occasion. I might be able to make more in another future poem, of the subject of rules, ruling and names and the measure of memory. Perhaps a reader (if I'm lucky) might make a connection back to the 'First Light' poem, if it's still called that in the future, and – an even bigger, more uncertain, *if* – if I do write a poem featuring distant memories of Mr. Long in the future.

Ruling and naming features in a very different way in the following poem (which looks a bit like a metre-stick), called 'I'.

Wavering Between Subject and Object

I

stand, unfixed, behind the name Zaffar.
And before my father left this, my land
for good, I – meaning me – asked him
why he chose my name. Mum was two
weeks from dying. Two parents would
depart that month. I hadn't spoken to
him for a decade. 'It flew into my head
in waiting room when you were born so
small and shaking. They put you in that
box. But I remembered long time back
carrying bricks in new Pakistan, maybe
thirteen years old, I left home and heard
other workers say his poetries, which I
liked. Last king of India he was. Zafar.'
First I knew of it. I'd later look into it, to

histories. The written kind. Zafar's most
famous lines, scratched onto his prison
wall, in exile, a charcoal mirror in words:
I asked for a long life. I received four days.
Two were spent in hoping. Two in waiting.
I recoiled, recalled another self-pitying: *I*
wasted time, and now doth time waste me.
After a trial for mutiny, the British lifted
this chessboard king onto a bullock cart;
on its throne he was translated. To a cell
bed in Burma. Here, his signature lament
was scored on cement with a burnt stick.
This writing on the wall winged its way
to my father's head. Historians now say
Zafar wasn't behind that waiting couplet,
his far-flown epitaph. Its sad first-person
I (its Urdu *main*) threw the voice of that
broken subject, the last king – but these
prisoned lines came later, not by his hand.
Zafar. I was told is 'conqueror'. Anyway.
Here's how that poem, by whoever, began:
Lagtaa nahi hai dil mera ujre dayaar main . . .
No pleasure for the heart in this derelict land . . .

On the subject of names and naming, Denise Riley has said, perhaps punningly: 'A grave weight is imposed on any child named for the dead'[48]. On the idea of a distance between the name and the named, she writes:

[48] Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 117.

> In this way the business of naming and being named offers a sharpened instance of the working of words in general, with its blend of capriciousness and authority, its sway over its users. There are, then, sound reasons for this impression of the faint but lingering absurdity of being called at all. Inhabiting the life of language means, too, that you just have to tolerate being accompanied by this slight distance from your name.[49]

Although I hadn't read this essay by Riley at the time of writing my poem 'I', what she writes about the distance between oneself and one's name is very apt to what lay behind the poem. I was thinking of the poem as a kind of slab of self, an image I had explored before in a poem called 'The Shape Remembrance Takes' where the Cenotaph was taken as a kind of concrete or first-person-singular, a self which stands for unknown individuals.

My poem 'I' gestures towards being a concrete poem, suggesting the long narrow shape of the first-person pronoun, without artificially justifying the poem on its outer edge, to make both of its edges exactly straight. The title runs on, and the first word of the poem is *stand.* This has an intertextual link with the earlier poem 'Stamping Grounds', and its focus on gravestone slabs, and also my grandfather's name, Stan. The word *stand* rhymes across the first two lines with the word *land*, which repeats an internal chiming in my memory of my father's word for 'land', *stan.* In my poem I look at the fixity of the pronoun *I* and at personal names that indicate a continuous self, while experiencing wavering thoughts about selfhood and my own name.

As an adult, I discovered from my father that I was named after a Mughal king who was also a poet. This was a double shock as I also didn't know my father would have liked a poet enough to name a child after him, never mind that I had carried this name without knowing something like that, especially as I was writing and reading poetry myself by that time. I had gone to visit my father before he left the country to live in Pakistan after a period where we had not spoke for some years, and when we met I asked him a number of questions in case I would not see him again, one of which was the origin of my name, to which he memorably said that on the day of my birth: *it flew into my head.*

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[49] Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005) p. 127.

My father had remembered hearing lines of poetry by Zafar. When writing the poem *'Spider Trees, Pakistan'*, I used an epigraph from William Dalrymple whose book *The Last Mughal*[50] was about Zafar. The idea of a remembered line, and lineage, is central to my *I* poem. The Mughal king's most famous line, written while in prison and in exile, turned out according to Dalrymple and others, to be written by another poet writing in the persona of this broken king, and only attributed to Zafar.

When I heard about this king who had been sent to prison and who was rather ineffectual as a monarch, slow to act, a wavering king who dithered and liked poetry, the only reference point I could think of was to Richard II in Shakespeare. A very English reference, particularly so given that this play was the source of the famous *this sceptred isle* speech. It also has the famous line, *let's talk of graves, worms, and epitaphs* – and so it is a play I connect with names, and with England. Although the remembered line I mention in the poem links with Richard/Zafar's ineffectual but poetic self-pity: *I wasted time and now doth time waste me.* The poetic line that Zafar was said to scratch onto his prison wall in Burma, which became his epitaph, was said to be with a charcoal stick, giving another resonant image of an insecure 'line'. Furthermore, Zafar was the last Mughal king in a line that stretched back for centuries in India. I also mention the *new* country of Pakistan, which predated my father's birth (sometime circa 1940 he guesses), and so hinting at the idea of an arbitrary line of partition. The ultimate 'line' in my poem is that of the poem itself and that of the title, the first person singular, *I*, which could also be read as a Roman numeral, as in *Richard I*. Richard's crown famously becomes *hollow*, an empty object, and he describes himself in the play as 'subjected thus'. In my poem I also use the word *subject* which connects the idea of the self and the first-person pronoun with the changed status of a king. The *I* itself becomes a kind of prison, where one is both object and subject.

Zafar was an Urdu poet who composed ghazals, and in the poem attributed to him, from which I quote in my poem, the repeated word that appears at the end of each couplet is *main*, which means 'me' or 'I'. I use this spelling of *main* partly to link the first person pronoun with the idea of land, or an island, or mainland – the John Donne line from his prose 'Devotions': 'No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the

[50] William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

continent, a part of the main', was in my head in regard to the word *main*. Thus, *main* or 'me' or 'I', in this double register, across continents, can signify both a large landmass and also something restricted to a single self, a very large object, and a narrow subject. The narrowness of the subject being figuratively represented by the *I* and in the poem by the image of the box-like incubator I was put into as a baby at the start of my life, and the prison cell my namesake was put into at the end of his life.

In traditional Urdu ghazals such as the one I quote, the poet usually will include their own name in the last couplet, as a way of signing it off, but also to turn inwards as though speaking to the self in soliloquy. In my poem I conclude with a quote from Zafar's ghazal, which I then translate, blurring the line between speakers, both of whom 'stand unfixed' behind the same name, and in that last translated line, I share his sentiment and his lyric *I*.

The poem 'I' links with another poem called 'The Lyric Eye' where I look at a portrait of William Shakespeare and can dimly see my reflection superimposed on and into his face, which becomes a symbol of how a dead writer can speak for a reader later on, and also how two *I*s can merge and temporarily share a head, or mixed identity:

The Lyric Eye

Methinks I see these things with parted eye

– WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I've stood at your portrait at different times.
Scanned my own face, on and off, in the glass.
A cloud, eclipsed. Vaguely before, or behind
you. Half cast, at a loss.
Even the gloss
back then, at school, left me looking this blank.
In the dark. Not on the same page as you.

But when I stand, here, almost in a blink
I can place my eyes – glazed over your stare;
let you lend me your ear, your famous cheek;
let the flare of your nostril stretch thin air;
even try on your earring, from five feet,
four centuries apart. I swear by this lapse
the light on your mouth seems cast
half on mine
when I borrow the line between your lips.

This poem ends with the image of a visual line between the lips which can also be read as a line of speech in the process of being spoken. Both poems share this overlay of the first-person-pronoun *I,* with an interest in other kinds of lines and blurred lines of identification. The speaking subject can waver in identities and become merged with a dead object, for example, a portrait in 'The Lyric Eye', or in 'I', an epitaph scored on a prison wall with a burnt stick: *a charcoal mirror in words.*

The phrase *from five feet* in 'The Lyric Eye' suggests both the distance from which I stood while staring at the portrait of Shakespeare and also the metre of much of his writing, which contained five feet. Another kind of line that I see him through, or *from*.

Afterword

The sense of wavering between beginnings that I have discussed here was never a pre-planned poetic project, or a matter of positioning myself, but something I have reflected on as being a shaping and energising force behind the poetry, as well as behind the hesitation before the prospect of poetry. Each poem has helped me to write and edit other poems, and I have taken my time with publishing in order to allow this process to develop at its own pace. The wavering space *between* the poems is as important as the wavering within the poems. The finished text, if it is ever finished, has sometimes wavered between versions, such as in 'Stamping Grounds (Earlier)' and 'Stamping Grounds (Later)'. If there is a consistency it is in the knot of obsessions that underlie the poems and my commitment to producing something that works as a whole, as well as producing highly individual poems, and which I hope will gain a reader's trust and reward repeated readings.

This thesis has demonstrated how interconnected the poems are in their knot of obsessions, and how that interconnection is itself part of the reason why separations are not easy to make without misreading the poems. This is partly why I have tried to discuss my work from the poems outwards. In one poem, 'Spider Trees, Pakistan', the world becomes a webbed tree and perhaps this is also a configuration of the mind behind the poem that is seeing the tree. The attempt to hold differences together, involving time and space, through making web-like or dendritic connections, becomes a kind of gravity, where a world is held up by the connections around it.

The connectedness operates playfully but sincerely at different levels, through a focus on language, etymology, scripts, consonants, vowels and alphabets. Part of the aforementioned knot of obsessions behind the poems is an interrogation of language, which seems itself to relate to the wavering process behind the poetry itself, a journey *from* and within uncertainties, doubts and confusions — a digressive expansion on the idea of beginning rather than a linear journey towards an answer or conclusion.

Another aspect of the desire to connect is with the idea of a canon, both a personal canon of influence and writers associated with canonical texts. It is unusual and even unfashionable currently for a contemporary British poet to have a first book which references so many writers of the past, and often canonical writers such as Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Dickens, and so on. This conversation with other writers who are connected closely with British literature and occupy firm ground within it, is another aspect of my seeking a sense of belonging and beginning, from a wavering place of uncertainty. Where I begin from and where my writing *voice* begins and ends is never resolved.

Many debut collections of poetry by British writers take their cues from developments across the Atlantic, are less focussed on the past, and, to tentatively generalise even more, are perhaps more concerned with a performance of *voice* than with a preoccupation with language itself. Commentators on my poems have often referred to a quiet or hesitant voice, one that relates to the confusions explored in the poems. For example, one reviewer, Rebecca Watts, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, made a number of points which are helpfully pertinent to this thesis, and are worth quoting for that reason:

> Zaffar Kunial possesses that rare quality of negative capability which Keats first identified in Shakespeare (a guiding spirit in this, Kunial's first collection); the poems hold us among mysteries and doubts, without pronouncing or attempting to resolve . . . . . Lines and stanzas frequently turn on caveats and subtle qualifications, which cumulatively seem to slow down time to 'the one moment' in which reader and speaker are suspended . . . Kunial is obsessively attuned to the significance of individual words – as units of meaning, as tools of communication and as typographical events . . . Fundamentally, Kunial is interested in the forces that bind people together – that enable us to be imaginatively in 'two places at once'. [51]

I have tried to connect form with content in various ways and although my poems are often lyrical, I play with the idea of *address* and selfhood, and experiment with the line and where it breaks, reflecting a sense of being of a hesitant and a 'mixed identity'. I would like to think

[51] Rebecca Watts, 'Poetry in Brief', *The Times Literary Supplement*, January 25, (2019), pp. 65-66

that my poems resist easy categorisation, and do not fall easily into a particular 'family' or group identity. I have poems which are more prosaic than 'formal', and poems which experiment at the edges of form and use casual, even sometimes flat speech rhythms, and I have no particular allegiance to a school of poetry. My obsession with origins has led me to engage with the idea of literary origins and the canon, and I have found this a fruitful way to be in conversation with the past, and extend the time frame of that conversation, muddying the waters of the present 'moment' of writing.

Final Digression: Ur

My first collection, *Us*, ends with the word 'laburnum'. The laburnum is a hybrid tree, something I wouldn't point out in the poetry itself as it seems unsubtle to do so, but it is fitting nonetheless that this tree which I connect with pre-verbal memories and with hesitantly learning to climb, in years when I was learning about language and time, is rooted, forked, and hybrid. One might say that at the centre of the word *laburnum* is an *ur*, which as I have mentioned before, reflecting on the poem 'Prayer, is a phoneme associated with the sound of wavering, a hesitant *err*. The prefix *ur* denotes a sense of a first place, or ultimate origin, which is very much reflective of an inner obsession behind the poems I have discussed. Perhaps the nearest thing I can find to a unified sense of rootedness is through language, its sounds and its letters, whether its branches are reliable or not. The sound *ur* is also in the first syllable of my own first place, Birmingham. In the penultimate poem in *U*s, 'A Drink at the Door', the word 'burr' is repeated, both in the linguistic sense ('in his Irish burr'), and also in the earthier, rooted sense of a burr from a plant. The word *ur* is also contained at the end of *yours*, a word that is also on the last page of my collection, in the poem 'Ys'. From such knotted, intertwined beginnings, my poems grow uncertainly outwards and tentatively, *fromwards,* interlinked across distances I have been daunted by.

In the discussion of my poem 'Prayer', I have written about the word *her* became an organising force for the poem. This sounds like a decisive move on my part, but the experience of writing the poem was more like catching up with a latent decision, or connection, that I hadn't yet made. It does not always *occur* to me that a similar sound or theme is cropping up again in other poems when it does, and that a pattern is emerging

across the work, whether through sounds such as *er* or letters such as *u* or in concepts such as the importance of the theme of *letters* in both senses of the word, or that there seems to be a subtle subconscious desire to link trees with alphabets across my work. Just as I am in conversation with the literary past sometimes in my work – a past I feel that I am still catching up with – as a way of encountering beginnings and sources, I am also in conversation with myself, and with obsessions that show up as my own.

The word *ur* coincidentally perhaps signifies origins and primitive or earliest forms. It also maps onto other words such as *our* which also turned out to be important across several poems – for example 'Hill Speak', where a taxi driver says that his language is just *ours*, and is otherwise unnamed.

It is perhaps appropriate that if someone asked me to classify my poetry or say how it fitted into contemporary trends I might answer, not with an *our*, but a sound like *err.* This would obviously be a way of avoiding the question, but in its own way is an honest answer. I feel like I am doing this now, digressing, and answering at once, as the poems almost do.

One could argue that my book's last word *laburnum* also ends on the word *um* which is another vocable associated with hesitation in the face of questioning. The first word of the book is *if* which I discussed in an earlier digression, another in between word. The last word of the book, *laburnum* has a more rooted and rooting feel, despite the tree's hybridity, and that it is not native to these islands. The *urnum* suffix in Latin usually means 'belonging to'. There is a possibility that the name relates to *Labiatis* which suggests that the tree 'belongs to Illyria'. I like this idea because it knottily relates to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* and the scene where Olivia is washed up on an unknown shore and asks in utter uncertainty, but desiring to connect, 'What country, friends, is this?' – to which she is answered, 'This is Illyria, lady'. [52]

Illyria is a fictional place in *Twelfth Night* but the real Illyria was once occupied by tribes of Indo-European people, another kind of slippery *ur*-zone or original ground. Shakespeare's

[52] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p.48

play seems to hinge on ideas of doubleness and identity and *placing* a person – even the names seems almost anagrams of each other, Olivia, Viola, Malvolio, and so on. The exchange on the seashore about Illyria could have been the epigraph for my book, and for the poem 'Us', which begins with wavering and waves. Picking up on the link between wavering and waves, the final poem in my book, 'Ys', describes the laburnum as being in a garden lawn border, a border which is 'shaped to waver / like a child's drawing of sea'.

The laburnum tree at the end of my book, situated in the first place of a back garden, in a wavering border, is a bridging motif. It connects to literature in the poem, and to my early memories of reading – and to branching worlds I would later climb into. The tree is a bridge between the upper world of sky, heaven and changing weather, and the grounded, earthy world. Its forking trunk also bridges east and west with the story of my father being abroad and home in the east while my mother and I were at home in the west. Furthermore, the tree bridges beginnings and endings, and 'Ys' also alludes to my parents splitting up as well which coincides with the time when I read a first novel, and began engaging seriously with literature. The laburnum's position at the end of the book, and in a border, perhaps recalls 'Fielder', the first poem of my book, where I am in the borderland beyond a cricket boundary, beneath rhododendrons, trying to place something. The end is a kind of beginning – a mixing of a sense of *before* and *after*, a digressive wavering before the prospect of summing up, or having the final word – as one might say this afterword is.

Returning to the Afterword

The idea of a bridge is one of the motifs in my poems, from the epigraph to *Us* taken from Ishiguro, to the Bridge Street mentioned in the 'Stamping Grounds' poems, and formally my poems span traditional lyric approaches to more experimental, language-focussed concerns. Another binary my poetry possibly exists between is between the cerebral and the heartfelt – or being playfully punning and sincere at once. Another kind of bridge is between sound and shape – and I have tried to be sensitive to considerations of sound in a poem as well to visual and typographical decisions. These various wavering, or 'between' positions are as much lifelong impulses to unify than conscious writerly decisions. To explain *where I am coming from* ('Us'), it would be as appropriate for me to analyse my early childhood and the

effects in had, as much as to give an account of the literary, editorial decisions I am more conscious of making. For example I could say that one of my strong memories is sitting on the staircase as a child while a Kashmiri 'uncle' called Mushtaq asked me what my favourite colour was. When I said *yellow*, he told me that his favourite colour was green, which happens to be on the Pakistan flag. He then asked whether I was English or Pakistani. I remember looking towards the living room, where my parents were, and answering that I was just *Zaffar.* This anecdote is one amongst many, but it probably adds in accounting for the springs behind my 'practice', many of which feel, looking back, like my attempt to sit in between, in a bridging position, and to find words which do this for me, and provide an answer in placing myself. To some extent the poems themselves are an elaborate avoidance strategy in regards to placing myself, as well as an attempt to place myself in literature, often in a 'halfway' position, between times and even books. I have also discussed the many references to novelists and my intention for a poetry collection to potentially offer something of the experience that the reader of a novel might have in terms of enjoying how connections unfold and deepen across the poems. As though the connections become a bridge, or even a gravity that holds the poems together, something the reader hopefully can partake in. I was hoping this would be the case with my book *Us*, which is one of the reasons the title seemed appropriate, pointing also to a relationship between the reader and the writer, where one might meet the other halfway.

The idea of half-ness has also been discussed, and while poets before me have written about the experience of having dual or multiple heritages, I hope that I have been original in taking my experience as a metaphor and a reason for wavering thought itself, and have attempted to find a poetics for myself which reflects this layered sense of in-betweenness, and an obsession with bringing things together, including language and etymology. For example, I have discussed the poem 'Prayer' in detail, including how the line-breaks and the half-rhymes and echo patterns add to a sense of different poles meeting, and half-meeting, a poet between times, languages, texts, feelings and thoughts. Despite the preciseness of language in my poetry, the poems also show a mind at work, rather than a certain mind, a poet wanting to connect through language over time and space and in the ongoing processes of discovery, uncoverings, recoveries, reconsiderations, balances, juxtapositions and attunements.

If I summed up by saying that my poetry occupied a certain ground, or place, in contemporary British poetry, I would be misreading my own work, and misleading the reader in terms of how I go about my practice. One might say that my poetry stands within a 'tradition' of metaphysical poetry, and yet it is also sometimes lyrical, and yet it also sometimes prosaic. In various ways the poetry can seem to face in two directions at once, whether forward and back, or east and west, or up and down, and so on. My poetry concentrates on small things that add up in order to find a ground in words. It is unsure of its own moment and whether it belongs in that moment and that uncertainty is part of what defines it, but there is a desire to be honest about that uncertainty while at the same time offering at attempt at overcoming it. The title of this thesis, *Fromwards*, suggests a human impulse towards the reader, and towards understanding, as well as suggesting that the poems move from a centre outwards. There are allusions in the poems to the idea in 'big bang theory' about a singularity that prefigured the first moment – see for example 'Overture', 'Butterfly Soup', 'Six', 'Bag of Winds', 'W*nd' and 'First Light'. Perhaps this hints at a sense of my poetry springing from a densely knotted embryonic complex, that the poems are working within and attempting to reach back into, even as the poems go outwards or onwards, into the moment of their making — wherever and whenever that is. A wavering between worlds, gravities, memories, lights, hemispheres, directions, languages, roots, branches, letters, texts, sounds, waves. A wavering between beginnings.

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Appendices

Professional writing experience, publications, broadcasts, etc.

Books and Anthologies

- *Us* (Faber & Faber), 2018 – debut full poetry collection
- *Armistice* (Faber & Faber), 2018 – poem in forthcoming anthology
- *The Forward Book of Poetry 2019* – highly commended poem in forthcoming anthology
- *The Forward Book of Poetry 2018*
- *The Mighty Stream* (Bloodaxe), 2017 – two poems in anthology to celebrate Martin Luther King, ed. Caroline Forche and Jackie Kay
- *Aboreal* (Little Toller), 2016 – long creative non-fiction essay in nature writing anthology, ed. Adrian Cooper
- *The Map and the Clock* (Faber & Faber), 2016 – poem in anthology of British poetry history, ed. Carol Ann Duffy
- *Off the Shelf* (Picador), 2016 – poem in anthology celebrating bookshops, ed. Carol Ann Duffy
- *The Best British Poetry 2015* (Salt) – poem in anthology, selected by Emily Berry
- *The Pity* (The Poetry Society), 2014 – six commissioned poems on anniversary of WW1

Writing Honours and Awards

- 2011 National Poetry Competition – 3rd prize (£1000)
- 2013 Northern Writers' Awards – top poetry award (£5000)
- Faber New Poet 2014 – a pamphlet from Faber, mentoring and £2000 bursary

- ‘Christmas 2014: Best Poetry Books of the Year’, The Independent, for *Faber New Poets 11* and ‘Books of the Year 2014’, Herald Scotland, for *Faber New Poets 11*
- 2015 Geoffrey Dearmer Prize – for best poem published in The Poetry Review by a new poet
- The Guardian poem of the week, July 2018
- Poetry Book Society Wild Card Choice 2018 for *Us*

Writing Commissions include

- 2016 – The Globe Theatre, new work in response to old poems, read by myself on four nights
- 2017 – Manchester Literature Festival, poetry in response to artwork in Whitworth Gallery

BBC Radio

- The Verb, 2014 and 2017
- Poetry in the Making, 2016 – 15-minute essay on Radio 4
- Front Row, 2017 and 2018
- Book of the Week, 2017 – commissioned 15-minute poetic piece in response to the Odyssey
- The Echo Chamber, 2017 – half-hour broadcast on Radio 4
- The Essay, Radio 3, October 2018 – commissioned essay on Ted Hughes

Creative Writing Employment

- Creative Writer for Hallmark Cards, full-time salaried position (2008-2013)
- Wordsworth Trust Poet in Residence (2014)

- Ilkley Literature Festival Poet in Residence (2015)
- Ledbury Literature Festival Poet in Residence (2018)