Mirror, mask and fetish: representations of the mother-daughter relationship in contemporary women's poetry.

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Abstract

This creative/critical thesis examines the potential toxicity in the mother-daughter relationship within a patriarchal society's expectation of the role of women. It is the challenge of maintaining connection in a flawed relationship that is the focus of the work. Melanie Klein described the 'constant interaction of love and hate' between mothers and daughters, reflecting Sigmund Freud's theory of ambivalence. With reference to Jacques Lacan's and D. W. Winnicott's theories of the mirror of the other, and Winnicott's theories of good-enough mothering, and false and true selves, I explore how mirror, mask and fetish are significant in making and breaking the bond between mothers and daughters. I show how these issues are employed as metaphors in the poetry of Pascale Petit, Selima Hill and Carol Ann Duffy. I analyse in depth two of Petit's collections, *Mama Amazonica* and *The Huntress*; Hill's sequence 'My Sister's Sister', in *Violet*; and a selection of Duffy's poetry from *The Bees* and *Sincerity*. The relationship of Petit's daughter-speaker is damaged by the psychosis of the mother; Hill's daughter-speaker's mental illness is a barrier to her relationship with the mother. In contrast, Duffy's poetry portrays a rewarding and close relationship between mother and daughter: recognising the 'Russian doll' nature of the matrilineal relationship, Duffy's poetry is written from the perspectives of both mother and daughter. An examination of the history of the sonnet explores the challenge for women writers of finding space for creativity within a literary history dominated by men, revealing how generations of women poets have used the sonnet, Duffy's 'little black dress of poetry', to write of the mother-daughter relationship. The culmination of my research and analysis is a collection of my poetry addressing the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship. A preface to the creative section explores how the various theories directed and affected, and were in turn enhanced by, the creative practice. The backbone of the collection is a sequence of 'alternative mother' poems inspired by my research into the 'mirror of the other'.

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Introduction

> *'[A] daughter/will be the death of a mother'*[1]

> *'Has there lived a writer who claimed never to have been influenced in the smallest part, for good or ill, by their mother?' (Anthony Quinn)* [2]

The title of Quinn's Guardian essay is 'Made, marred, mollycoddled and inspired…how writers have been shaped by their mothers.' In my critical-creative investigation into the mother-daughter relationship, viewed mainly from the perspective of the daughter, the focus of interest is on the 'ill' and 'marred' aspects, the potential toxicity in the relationship. From that first, fundamental separation, the cutting of the umbilical cord at birth, through separation anxieties that lead daughters continually to seek reconnection with their mothers, my interest lies in the 'constant interaction of love and hate',[3] that is never satisfactorily resolved when a mother is physically or emotionally absent from her daughter for any reason, for protracted periods of time or forever. Several twentieth century women poets have written, from the daughter's perspective, of the disrupted relationship with the mother. Elizabeth Bishop wrote of losing a mother's watch.[4] Sylvia Plath compares her relationship with her mother to an 'old barnacled umbilicus/…Fat and red, a placenta'.[5] In the course of my work, I refer in passing to several contemporary poets

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[1] 'Exposed' lines 7-8, in the creative element, p. 86 below.

[2] Anthony Quinn, 'Writers and Their Mothers review – the legacy of maternal blessings', Guardian Review of Books—Book of the week (Dale Salwak, *Writers and Their* Mothers, Palgrave McMillan, 2018) March 10th 2018. < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/10/writers-and-their-mothers-review-the-legacy-of-maternal-blessings > [accessed 10 March 2018]

[3] Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and other works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage Random House, 1988), p. 306.

[4] 'One Art' in Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011), p. 198.
Elizabeth Bishop was separated from her own mother by her mother's mental illness, incarceration and death: they were never reunited. Given this personal history of the poet, the line 'I lost my mother's watch', could refer to a timepiece that the daughter-speaker inherited from the mother; equally it could intend 'watch' as care, love, concern, revealing the continuing longing of the daughter for emotional reconnection with the mother even after their separation through death.

[5] 'Medusa' in Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes, (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 224.
Sylvia Plath writes of the separation of a daughter from her mother: 'umbilicus' and 'placenta' are symbolic of the earliest connection to the mother, the means of life and sustenance for the foetal daughter. In an autobiographical context, Plath wrote that 'my umbilical cord never has been cut

who have written concerning motherhood: Carolyn Jess Cook, Rita Dove and Sandra M. Gilbert among others. My main focus, though, is on Selima Hill's poetic sequence 'My Sister's Sister',[6] two of Pascale Petit's collections, *The Huntress*,[7] and *Mama Amazonica*,[8] and poems from two of Carol Ann Duffy's collections, *The Bees,*[9] and *Sincerity.*[10]

I have chosen to focus my analysis on the work of Hill and Petit, because they create daughter-speakers exploring a maternal relationship damaged by mental illness, absence or death. They write in the voice of the daughter; both poets create daughter-speakers who are committed to reconnection with mothers lost in mental illness — in Petit's case, the mental ill health of the mother; in Hill's case that of the speaker of the poems. This reflects my aim to examine the mother-daughter relationship from the viewpoint of the daughter: 'daughterhood' rather than 'motherhood' as the primary focus. While concentrating on the daughter's perspective, I recognise that all mothers have also been daughters, a perspective that is explored in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy. I undertake analysis of a small selection of Duffy's mother-daughter poems, to show that her speakers are both mother and daughter, revealing how these two perspectives come together in an exploration of the inter-generational nature of the relationship between grandmothers, mothers and daughters. Duffy's mother-daughter poetry reflects the 'Russian doll' nature of this matrilineal relationship, the ovum that will potentially become the grand-daughter being already present in the ovaries of her foetal mother. [11] This fascinating fact alone led me to 'invent' my own missing grandmothers, whom I never knew, in my poems 'Grandma Was A White One' and

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cleanly', a point reinforced in her journals: 'I want, as ever, to grab my life from out under [mother's] hot itchy hands. My life, my writing, my husband, my unconceived baby. She's a killer…deadly as a cobra…': journal entry for March 29th 1951), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath,* ed. by Karen Kukil, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). Amazon Kindle e-book 2010, loc. 1133.

[6] Selima Hill, *Violet* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1997).

[7] Pascale Petit, *The Huntress* (Bridgend: Seren, 2005).

[8] Pascale Petit, *Mama Amazonica* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2017).

[9] Carol Ann Duffy, *The Bees* (London: Picador, 2011).

[10] Carol Ann Duffy, *Sincerity* (London: Picador, 2018).

[11] Sharon L. R. Kardia and Tevah Platt 'In your grandmother's womb: The egg that made you', at <https://genedoe.wordpress.com/2010/09/29/in-your-grandmothers-womb-the-egg-that-made-you/> [accessed 30th November 2018]

'Great Grandma Gouda'. In close reading of Carol Ann Duffy's poems, I was encouraged to conclude my creative section with a sequence of poems inspired by my relationship with my own daughter after she was diagnosed with malignant melanoma, reflecting on how this catastrophic event impacted upon our relationship.

In the course of my research, I examine how Petit and Hill employ the role of the fetish as substitute for the missing desired object,[12] the loving mother. I also look closely at the role played by mirrors and masks in constructing a daughter's identity, and how these relational mirrors are obscured in a flawed relationship. I show how these are elements of the poetry of Hill and Petit. The range of my research is reflected in my own body of creative work, 'Alternative Mothers',[13] the inspiration for, and creation of which, influenced by my reading, I refer to throughout.

The literary tradition, historically dominated by male poets, is the environment within which women poets must work — it is Duffy's 'fluent glittery stream' of poetry.[14] In considering the place of women poets within this literary heritage, I make a detailed exploration of the sonnet as a subsidiary of the stream of poetry: a traditionally masculine form that women have adapted to meet the needs of their own writing. I concentrate in particular on the way the sonnet has been used by women to explore the mother-daughter relationship.

I apply the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan and D. W. Winnicott, to a consideration of the psychological and interactive foundations of the complex relationship between mothers and daughters. I examine societal expectations of the role of women as outlined by post-Freudian feminist theorists, among them Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Jessica Benjamin, Simone de Beauvoir, Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, to explore the possible tension between successive generations of women in society's changing

[12] Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality', in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 65.
[13] The creative element of the work, 'Alternative Mothers', will be found below, p. 77-167.
[14] Carol Ann Duffy, 'Invisible Ink', in *The Bees,* p. 26.

expectations of women and their roles. I have chosen to focus on these predominantly mid-twentieth-century figures in order to capture the zeitgeist of the age in which my focus poets were growing up within a patriarchal-social construct of 'motherhood'. All theories have inherent limitations, and I am aware of the on-going conversation among feminist theorists, who dispute the exclusivity inherent in the phallocentrism of Freud's thought. Eva Figes, for instance, levels 'one serious criticism' at Freud: 'his inability to see beyond his immediate social situation…his obstinate refusal to recognise that his own present day was itself transitional.'[15] The 1970s feminist, Shulamith Firestone rightly disputes the literal truth of Freud's phallocentic psychoanalytic theory, suggesting that we should 'consider that Freud's genius was poetic rather than scientific'.[16] Luckhurst, however, while accepting of Freud's limitations, recognises that Freud may be 'the unavoidable foundation for theories of trauma' and that 'this is undoubtedly the case for cultural studies',[17] and so it seems apposite to refer to Freud when discussing the work of, in particular, Pascale Petit, which draws on childhood and domestic trauma. Melanie Klein was initially inspired by Freud's work, but extended Freudian thought to recognise the importance, not solely of the father's, but also of the mother's crucial role in a child's psychological development. I explore Winnicott's recognition of the importance of 'good enough mothering' to a child's mental health. I consider the works of Dinnerstein and Chodorow, who, in critiquing the prevailing patriarchy, make strong arguments for the societal construction and expectation of 'motherhood'. They argue that these are not essentialist constructions and they suggest ways in which these expectations could be subverted.

First and foremost I am a creative writer and a poet. This thesis is the culmination of 'practice as research',[18] combining traditional library research and literary analysis

[15] In Juliet Mitchel, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London; Penguin Books, 2000); first publication date 1974, p. 328.
[16] In Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* p. 346.
[17] Roger Luckhurst *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); e-book https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mmu/reader.action?docID=1222595 [accessed 25th September 2019] p. 8.
[18] Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), Amazon Kindle e-book.

with the drafting, redrafting and editing processes of creative writing, 'theory imbricated within practice',[19] culminating in the creation of a substantial collection of poetry. The psychoanalytic and feminist theories, and theories underpinning mirrors, masks and the fetish which I interrogate, furnish a body of knowledge to provide a critical lens through which to analyse the writing of my main poets, Hill, Petit, and to a lesser degree, Duffy; poets who, like me, were growing up within — and away from — the patriarchal constraints of the mid-twentieth-century. I engage with these theories as a creative writer, to illuminate my own creative process, and reciprocally, to enable my poetry to elucidate the theories.[20] I expand on this process in the preface to the creative section, 'Alternative Mothers'. Researching, reading and analysing the way contemporary women poets have written about the mother/daughter relationship, and exploring that most complex and ambivalent relationship in my own poetry, afforded Nelson's 'substantial insights',[21] based in 'experiential, haptic knowledge, performative knowing, tacit and embodied knowledge',[22] a form of what Nelson sees as fluid knowledge,[23] not codified but learned from lived experience. These 'substantial insights', and my 'lived experience', inspired my poetry collection, 'Alternative Mothers'. These critical analyses, and the body of creative work, are my contribution to the academic and literary conversations concerning the relationship of mothers to daughters.

[19] Robin Nelson, loc. 828.
[20] Robin Nelson, loc. 739.
[21] Robin Nelson, loc. 698.
[22] Robin Nelson, Fig 2.2, loc. 926.
[23] Robin Nelson, loc. 949.

The sonnet, the mother-daughter relationship, and the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.

In this section, I investigate the history of the sonnet to show how women have undertaken various experimentations with this traditionally male love poem as a tool for exploring the mother-daughter relationship. I show how Wendy Cope subverts and parodies the traditional love sonnet, and I explore how Rita Dove and Sandra M Gilbert have used the sonnet, and the sonnet corona, to write about the mother-daughter relationship. Dove's *Mother Love* is a full collection of poems inspired by the Demeter-Persephone myth; Gilbert's sonnet corona 'Belongings' explores a mother's concern for her 'things' after her death. Gilbert's sonnet corona pre-empts my investigation of the fetish in the mother-daughter relationship, and encouraged me to write my own sonnet corona exploring the intergenerational nature of the bond. I undertake an analysis of three of Carol Ann Duffy's sonnets, 'Cold', 'Snow', and 'Crunch' to show how she looks at the relationship from the perspective of both mother and daughter.[24]

It could be argued that a literary history in which men predominate is a microcosm of a society in which women's contribution to life was expected to be unambitious, self sacrificing and domestic. [25] In the following section, I explore the role of the

[24] If a sonnet is a form defined by fourteen lines, strictly speaking 'Snow' is not a sonnet. However, it retains elements of the sonnet: a sestet followed by ten lines and a turn, and would therefore fulfil Don Paterson's reflection in *101 Sonnets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) that a sonnet 'is pretty much in the eye of the beholder.' p. ix.

[25] I analysed eight anthologies of poetry in English from the first to the second Elizabethan era. This analysis revealed an average of 15.8% representation of women poets, with an average of poems by women contributing only 12.3% through all the anthologies. One anthology had almost as many poets called 'Thomas' (10) as it had women poets (11); another had no inclusions by women at all. The Skelton anthology of poetry from the thirties contains only one woman poet, Anne Ridler, from a time when Edith Sitwell, Vita Sackville-West, Kathleen Raine and Stevie Smith, among many other accomplished women poets, were writing. Anne Ridler, in a letter to Jane Dowson in 1992, recalls the difficulty for women poets to find publishers, 'and still more difficult to be treated as a poet pure and simple, rather than as a woman poet.' Even in the Bloodaxe anthology, the only one I analysed which was actually edited by a woman, only 20.4% of poets are women; only 13.9% of poems are by women: this from a publisher recognised on their own website as a champion of 'diversity and equality in British poetry.' It is symptomatic of this relative invisibility of women poets that we were almost a decade into the twenty-first century before the UK celebrated a female Poet Laureate. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was 'prominently mentioned as a possible successor to the poet laureateship' on the death of Wordsworth, but the vacant position was filled by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Other women poets, including Alice Meynell, Vita Sackville West and Kathleen Raine, were unsuccessfully nominated for the Laureateship in the nineteen-thirties. It is hardly surprising that

'testosterone-fuelled' sonnet in this patriarchal domination of the world of poetry.[26] As a traditionally 'male' form, the sonnet is a significant aspect of the poetry universe within which female poets have 'attempted the pen'.[27] I will demonstrate how women have taken the form and adapted it to explore the relationship between mothers and daughters, among them Rita Dove,[28] Carol Ann Duffy,[29] and Lorna Goodison.[30] Sandra M. Gilbert used the form to write about the death of a mother in her sonnet corona, 'Belongings'. [31] Gilbert's corona tells of the dying mother's concern for her 'things': her belongings that she took a lifetime to accrue, that represent her life and which she fears will be lost, as she will be lost, in death. This inspired my exploration of the importance of objects as fetishes, 'belongings' defining a life.

The sonnet is a poetic form that has been changed, developed and adapted by poets since its inception, probably in thirteenth century Italy, its origins grounded in the oral tradition of song.[32] By the fourteenth century poets were writing sonnet cycles, collections of love poems from the poetic subject, the male 'I', to the loved object, the female 'Thou', extolling the virtues of a chaste and unattainable woman, the epitome of purity and feminine perfection. Montefiore shows how these were 'mirror-lyric' sequences, the loved object of the poems fulfilling the effect of a mirror held up to the excellence, tolerance and devotion of the male subjective 'I'.[33] They were more about extolling the virtues of the male 'I', than celebrating the beloved 'thou'. The female object of these early sonnet cycles is given no voice, serving only

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feminist poets like Deryn Rees-Jones [*Modern Women Poets* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005)] saw a need to compile anthologies of poetry by women to redress the balance.

[26] Don Paterson, p. xi.

[27] Anne Finch's phrase, reproduced by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale 1979), Amazon Kindle e-book, loc. 782.

[28] Rita Dove, *Mother Love* (New York: Norton, 1995).

[29] Carol Ann Duffy, *The Bees* and *Sincerity*.

[30] Lorna Goodison, *I Am Becoming My Mother* (London: New Beacon Books, 1986).

[31] Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Belongings', at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51832/belongings-56d22fd735e2a> [accessed 15 August 2018]. See also, in the creative element below, my own poems, Churning', 'Spooning', 'Runner Beans' and 'Your Hands', p. 120, p. 122, p. 145 and p. 128 respectively, for poems about things that stand in for the mother. See also my exploration of the fetish, p. 28, below.

[32] Don Paterson, p. xi.

[33] Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry* (London: Pandora, 1994), p. 95ff.

to be that mirror, reflecting back to himself the narcissistic self-love of the male subject. Woman is effectively contained, imprisoned within, and silenced by, the sonnet. The loved object 'can never herself be a poet because she is "poetry".'[34] Tudor sonneteers in England continued this 'mirror-lyric' tradition. Shakespeare's sonnet cycle, first published in the early seventeenth century, maintains the 'I-Thou' dyad but the traditional 'male subject, female object' is disrupted by his addressing the first 126 of his 154 sonnet cycle to a beautiful youth,[35] who arguably still fulfils the mirror role that Beatrice and Laura respectively play in Dante's and Petrarch's earlier sonnet cycles. Paterson reinforces the view that the Elizabethan love sonnet was never really about the loved object, 'thou'; it became a 'testosterone-fuelled competition' between sonneteers concerned with 'proving one's lyric skill in the deft handling of the form as much as winning the heart of the beloved'.[36] Wendy Cope's 'Strugnell's Sonnets' are a feminist subversion of this traditional mirror lyric, taking the tradition of the (male gendered) Shakespearean love sonnet and parodying it mercilessly, retaining its iambic pentameter, its rhyme scheme, and its potential misogyny, but making the 'story' of the poems and their poetic effects ridiculous: 'I need a woman, honest and sincere/Who'll come across on half a pint of beer'; and 'For years I poured my unfulfilled desire/Into sad songs — and now to my delight,/Find women love a bard, however dire'.[37]

Throughout the twentieth century, women continued to experiment with the sonnet form to find their voice and place in the literary canon. Several women poets, myself included,[38] have used the sonnet form to examine the mother-daughter relationship. Lorna Goodison's 'I Am Becoming My Mother', the title poem of her collection, is an

[34] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman…* loc. 894.
[35] Stephen Greenblatt, *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 1916.
[36] Don Paterson, p. xi
[37] Wendy Cope, *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 'Strugnell's Sonnets' (i) and (iii), p.46 and p. 48.
[38] See the creative element below: 'Grandma Was A White One' p. 96; 'Great Grandma Gouda', p. 97; 'Inheritance', p. 106; and 'Spooning', p. 122, for examples of sonnets relating to mothers and foremothers. My sonnet corona, 'Mirror Images', p. 132-34, is a sequence that arose as a result of my research into the sonnet. It is a dialogue between a mother and daughter exploring the connection and separation of the mother-daughter bond.

adapted sonnet form;[39] Rita Dove's *Mother Love* is a collection exploring the tragic Greek mother-daughter myth of Demeter and Persephone,[40] exploring the pain of separation of mother and daughter:

Demeter Waiting

No. Who can bear it. Only someone
who hates herself, who believes
to pull a hand back from a daughter's cheek
is to put love in her pocket—
like one of those ashen Christian
philosophers or a war-bound soldier.

She is gone again and I will not bear
it, I will drag my grief through a winter
of my own making and refuse
any meadow that recycles itself into
hope. Shit on the cicadas, dry meteor
flash, finicky butterflies! I will wail and thrash
until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes
over. Then I will sit down and wait for her. Yes. [41]

This pivotal poem in the collection makes a political statement against the traditional (masculine) octave followed by sestet, by inverting the traditional form to present the sestet first. Arguably, Dove uses the device as a political separation from the canonical establishment as Demeter reacts against her own separation from Persephone, who must be with Hades for half the year. Starting and ending with single words, 'no' and 'yes', Dove portrays confusion, uncertainty. The sonnet is about a mother's grief at separation from her daughter: 'I will drag my grief through a winter/of my own making...' 'Drag' in this context suggests a weight of grief; 'wail and thrash' in line twelve show how painful and uncontrollable the grief is. But the grief represents 'a winter/of my own making' suggesting guilt: Demeter feels responsible for this separation, she has allowed her daughter to be abducted by Hades. She feels a failure in her maternal duty of care. The unusual line breaks in the second stanza reflect an unsettled frame of mind. The daughter 'is gone again and I

[39] Lorna Goodison, p. 38.
[40] Rita Dove, *Mother Love*, contains a sequence of sonnets from p. 7 to p. 13; there are several single sonnets in the collection.
[41] Rita Dove, p. 56.

will not bear/it…' Placing the line break at 'bear' strengthens the mother-daughter link, the mother has 'born' the daughter before this, physically and metaphorically. She cannot 'bear' the daughter again, and she cannot 'bear' the pain of loss at the separation, the 'it' beginning the next line, emphasised by the line break. But a mother's role is to wait and to reconcile: in the last line, Demeter 'will sit down and wait for [Persephone]. Yes.'

I had always read the Persephone myth as an allegory for the seasonal changes in the year, and of course it is; but after reading the human story in Dove's *Mother Love,* I became interested in the Demeter/Persephone myth at the level of the mother-daughter relationship, how the daughter's role is also to wait and to reconcile. I explored this in my poem, 'The Patience of Persephone', inspired initially by the painting 'A Game of Patience' by Meredith Frampton.[42] Images in the painting bring to mind the Persephone myth: the apples and grasses, the harvest scene outside the window all reminiscent of autumn; the black king turned up on the table allegorical of Hades. But the woman playing the card game is a real woman, someone's daughter: in my poem, Persephone, the daughter of Dove's sequence. My poem tells the story from the daughter's perspective, shows how protecting the mother-daughter relationship is a powerful motivator for a daughter whilst at the same time it is in danger of becoming a frustrating self-sacrifice. The mother 'can't have what she most desires,/that lost part of herself', the daughter who was at one with the mother in the womb,[43] but who must leave the mother to live her own independent life. The constant tension between daughter/mother and wife/husband is revealed in the final stanza:

> 'I know it's time to decide:
> the corn's threshed, the straw's stacked
> but I'll finish my game.
> This card says go—you owe him.
> That card says stay—you owe her.
> It's all one to me—it seems like
> nothing's owed to me.

[42] A reproduction of Meredith Frampton's painting is available to view here: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/a-game-of-patience-78276>

[43] 'The Patience of Persephone', in the creative element, p. 85 below.

But, sod it,
my patience wears thin!'

Many women poets have addressed the mother-daughter relationship in their work. Carolyn Jess-Cooke's collection *Boom* explores the experience of being a mother, adapting the sonnet form in several of the poems.[44] Her book, *Writing Motherhood* contains interviews, prose pieces and poems addressing the challenges women writers still face, even in the twenty-first century, on becoming mothers.[45] Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Bernadette Mayer's collection, *Sonnets*, is an irreverent celebration of the sonnet form — 'I always loved (your) Grace in 14 lines…',[46] — in which 'love' is a physical thing, where cunt and cock, and not the heart, are the instruments of love. 'Come' in Mayer's sonnets is a colloquialism for orgasm, and carries nothing of the aching longing that Christina Rossetti writes in 'Monna Innominata', published almost a century earlier.[47] The colloquial colour of Mayer's language became an inspiration for my own sonnet crown, 'Mirror Images', where I use the form in a dialogue between a mother and daughter:

'See the photo of me then
and my mirror self now: blood-flushed face
a street map of veins,
wattle chin, whiskers like thorns, tits
slapping my knees.

[…]

Fuck's sake,
that's what I said, that festival weekend
in Hyde Park. I met your dad there, we
shared a tent—shared a sleeping bag.
Shared a joint. He made out he'd smoked loads
but he was such a spliff virgin he got high
on a couple of puffs, said I forced him,

[44] Carolyn Jess-Cooke, *Boom* (Bridgend: Seren, 2014), Amazon Kindle e-book. See for instance 'Still Life, With Family', loc. 663, a poem of fourteen lines with half-rhymed end words; also 'Sleep Training', loc. 555, and 'Instrument', loc. 562, are poems of twelve and thirteen lines respectively, which may be said to fulfil Don Paterson's broad definition of the sonnet form.
[45] Carolyn Jess-Cooke (Ed) *Writing Motherhood: A Creative Anthology* (Bridgend: Seren, 2017).
[46] Bernadette Mayer, *Sonnets* (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 1989). All references are from the 2004, 25th anniversary edition.
[47] Christina Rossetti, 'Monna Inominata' original text from Chiristina Rossetti *Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1881)
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45118/england-in-1819> [accessed 15 August 2018]

laughed till he cried, called it spliffing rape.'[48]

Carol Ann Duffy has called the sonnet 'the little black dress of poetry',[49] showing its usefulness in a poet's wardrobe of skills. Of course, in order to adapt the sonnet it is necessary to understand the form in the first place. The sonnets in Duffy's collection *Rapture* retain the tradition of the love poem, but the gender of the 'I' and 'you' in the poems is ambiguous, recalling Shakespeare's adaptation of the form 350 years earlier.[50] Published six years after *Rapture*, the sonnets in her collection *The Bees* abandon the traditional love content and fourteen-line, strictly rhymed form of the love sonnet and instead engage with the long tradition of widening the content of the form to include domestic issues: parental death, burglary, and the relationship between mothers and daughters.[51] Some poems in this collection have thirteen or fifteen lines, which Paterson would still accept as an adaptation of the form.[52]

It is clear that women poets have had to carve space for themselves, been 'forced to work against social and poetic grains' in a male-dominated world;[53] but because the poetry inheritance is as it is, women have had to work within it, 'find a way to completely engage with what's gone before, a way to possess it,'[54] changing it from within, as Barrett Browning and Rossetti modelled in their work in the nineteenth century. Carol Ann Duffy, in her poem 'Invisible Ink', reflects on how, since the very first poet 'spelled from his mouth […] a call [the tribe had] met before/in their ears' when 'the air ever after was/invisible ink', all subsequent poets have dropped 'a wand into this fluent, glittery stream' of poetry, sharing a timeless and magical (and historically male dominated) poetic tradition:

'…the poets came; rhyme, metre,
metaphor, there for the taking
for every chancer or upstart crow

[48] See 'Mirror Images' in the creative element, p. 132-34 below.
[49] Carol Ann Duffy, at a reading of her work at the Nantwich 'Words and Music Festival', October 2017.
[50] Carol Ann Duffy, *Rapture* (London: Picador, 2005). See also p. 11, above.
[51] Carol Ann Duffy, *The Bees*.
[52] Don Paterson, p. ix.
[53] Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 1.
[54] Quoting Jo Shapcott, in Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, p. 1.

in hedgerow, meadow, forest, pool;
shared words, vast same poem
for all to write.' [55]

The western literary canon, however, is still a tradition within which women poets must work to make their poems, in much the same way that women have had to fight to make their mark on western patriarchal society, a challenge which is magnified for women from 'working class origins.'[56] The 'fluent, glittery stream' of poetry's history is where women poets 'swim', with or against the tide. Duffy, Cope, Mayer and countless other women poets — sonneteers — swim against the tide of this poetic stream and open the lock gates for modern poets to explore the sonnet stream in their own work. The schizoid nature of the 'woman poet' is summed up in Carol Rumens' poem 'Two Women', which explores the tension of the domestic role with professional work outside the domestic sphere. Inside these professional women

'[t]here's another woman
who bears her name, a silent, background face
that's always flushed with effort.
The true wife, she picks up scattered laundry,
and sets the table with warmed plates to feed
the clean-handed women.' [57]

These two versions of the woman writer cannot meet or touch; if they did 'they'd scald each other.' The 'true wife', ironically, is the domesticated one, the one serving the family, the male and her own professional alter-ego, 'the clean-handed' woman. If professional recognition was, and still is, difficult for these women writers,[58] most of them born into the upper and middle class intelligentsia, how much more difficult it was for women born or married into the British labouring class: women like my own mother, disinherited by her land-owning father for marrying my handsome,

[55] Carol Ann Duffy, 'Invisible Ink', in *The Bees,* p. 26.
[56] Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, p. 4. From repeated personal experiences, I understand the challenges facing women of ambition in the patriarchal environment that is the working class. When a woman is bound by expectations of hard domestic work and child-bearing/rearing, there is precious little time left for creative writing.
[57] Reproduced in Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, p. 175.
[58] Alison Flood, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/18/male-and-female-writers-media-coverage-reveals-marked-bias> [accessed 19 March 2019]

charming, hard-working father, a farm labourer. 'She came from the confluence of love and hate./She came to you as gift. Unwrap her slowly.'[59]

Carol Ann Duffy's poetry explores the mother-daughter relationship from both perspectives, recognising that a mother is also a daughter, a daughter a potential mother. She often explores the relationship through the metaphor of coldness, and of the effects of cold in a loving maternal relationship, explicit in three poems from her collection *The Bees:* 'Cold', 'Snow', and 'Crunch'.[60] In the sonnet 'Cold', the daughter-speaker is remembering the winter day she built a snowman, 'my toes, burning, cold/in my winter boots', and contrasting this natural, bitter cold with the restorative warmth of the mother calling her in 'from the cold', the warm 'kiss for both cold cheeks, my cold nose' an antidote to the bitter cold of the snow. But no extreme of cold matches 'the February night I opened the door/in the chapel of rest where my mother lay, neither young, nor old,/where my lips, returning her kiss to her brow, knew the meaning of cold.' The death of the mother is a vast desert of cold the daughter-speaker must learn to negotiate. In the poem 'Snow', the snow 'is like death, but it is not death; lovelier…/what will you do now/with the gift of your left life?' The recognition of the gap left by the mother's death is also an opportunity for reflection, to use wisely 'the gift of your left life': 'gift' is an uplifting and optimistic ending to a poem about death; and a recognition that this 'gift of your left life' has come originally from the mother. 'Crunch' is a similar poem, but from the vantage point of a mother-speaker—the daughter-speaker from the previous poem become the mother-speaker of this one—reflecting again through the medium of the snow, on her relationship with her own daughter. The daughter 'runs outside into the cold', suggesting through 'outside into the cold' that the space outside the care of the mother is a space of potential danger; the mother-speaker follows 'from the kitchen, in my hand an apple/I was about to peel and core.' In 'Cold', the daughter-speaker's mother has been 'peeling/and pooling potatoes into a bowl…' before stopping to kiss her daughter's face. The links between the three generations of women are manifest in the snow, the relative warmth and refuge of the mother,

[59] See the creative element, 'Inheritance', lines 13-14, p. 106, below.
[60] Carol Ann Duffy, *The Bees,* p. 58, 62 and 63 respectively.

the fruit and vegetable peeling depicting sustenance between a mother and her daughter; then between the daughter-become-mother and her own daughter, a continuous stream of maternal sustenance, warmth and reflection; a generational passing on of that fundamental relationship.

The sonnet, Duffy's 'little black dress' of poetry, is a useful form for exploring the mother-daughter relationship. The form has been employed in this context by several women poets — I have outlined how Rita Dove, Sandra M. Gilbert and Lorna Goodison all explored the form in reflecting on the relationship of a daughter to a mother/mother-figure. Following this long tradition of women poets, I also tried on the 'little black dress' to explore the mother-daughter relationship. 'Living Shovel'[61] is a sonnet inspired by Alice Oswald's poem 'Body', in which she describes a dead badger.[62] The phrase 'living shovel' brought to mind my mother's hard life as a farm labourer's wife and the mother of nine children. My sonnet reflects on her hard work, with the turn at line 11 recognising how the harshness of her life contributed to her death. I never got to know my grandmothers, who both died before I was born. It was only when I became a grandmother myself that I realised how much I missed them; by then it was too late to ask my mother for a personal history of my foremothers. Instead, I had to invent them, feisty women both, in a pair of sonnets, 'Grandma Was A White One':

> *'Fly where you're not wanted*, she taught me.
> *Land in a mess of family,*
> *redraft them for publication*…'[63]

and 'Great Grandma Gouda':

> 'She'd not spoil a butty for a ha'p'orth of cheese.
> Port to life's Stilton, she was lavish as a dill pickle.'[64]

In Sandra Gilbert's 'Belongings' I discovered the sonnet corona — also called a 'crown of sonnets' — a linked sequence of seven or fourteen sonnets in which the last line of one sonnet becomes the first line of the next. The last line of the final

[61] See the creative element: 'Living Shovel', p. 158, below.
[62] Alice Oswald, 'Body', in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 12.
[63] See the creative element: 'Grandma Was A White One', p. 96, below.
[64] See the creative element: 'Great Grandma Gouda', p. 97, below.

sonnet reflects the first line of the sequence. My sonnet corona contains seven sonnets, Sandra Gilbert's fourteen. In Gilbert's corona, a mother pleads with her family to retain her belongings, or at least to retain the hard-won value of them as some token retainer of her ebbing life, fetishistic reminders of her life after she's dead:

> '…her face is crumpling like a handkerchief
> don't give it all away don't give it up
> if *you* don't want it at least sell it off!
> don't let the *others* have it either stop
> the thieves before they drag it all away
> don't let my *belongings* go astray…' [65]

Having read Gilbert's crown of sonnets, I recognised it as a form I could explore as a vehicle for dialogue between a mother and daughter in my creative examination of the mother-daughter relationship. 'Mirror Images' was inspired by an exhibition at the Manchester Art Gallery.[66] I was particularly struck by the unsettling photographs of Bruce Gilden,[67] specifically one of an elderly woman, a grotesque full-face portrait, showing the ravages of age, juxtaposed in the exhibition with photographic displays of young women in the 1960s, self-confident, enjoying the new social and sexual freedoms offered by the decade. I thought how this grotesque old woman could have been one of the 'sixties girls' in her youth, and this was the initial inspiration for my sonnet corona. The mother uses the dialogue, the knowledge gained from experience of life, and the form of the sonnet corona to warn her daughter about life; but also to celebrate it. The complex relationship is depicted in dialogue between a mother and her daughter, and ultimately between generations of past mothers and future daughters. The dialogue explores connection, separation and reconnection; and the trans-generational nature of the mother-daughter relationship. This is the penultimate sixth sonnet of the corona, summarising the disillusionment of growing old, offering advice and warning to the daughter; which is

[65] Sandra M Gilbert 'Belongings', at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51832/belongings-56d22fd735e2a> [accessed 15 August 2018]
[66] 'Strange and Familiar', an exhibition of photographs; Manchester Art Gallery November 2016 to May 2017.
[67] These photographs can be viewed at <https://www.brucegilden.com>

unlikely to be heeded because daughters, in separating from their mothers, need to make their own mistakes based on their own life experiences:

> ‘Pearl grit? You swim in its motion
> you’ll get lost in that ocean, just like I did.
> Do you think I wanted
> to be chained to a sink, bonded
> to a broken old man?
> I was a daughter as well you know. I didn’t
> plan on turning into my mother either,
> like some horror plot; nor losing my own self, neither.
> Don’t fog up your lenses with self-deception.
> Trust me, life only goes in one direction
> and we all finish up with the wattle chin
> the barb-sharp whiskers, the hair growing thin.
> You swim while you can in the deepest water
> but don’t ever forget, you’re my daughter.’[68]

In this section, I have shown how women poets have drafted space for their own poetry within an historically male canon. I have shown how women have used the traditionally masculine form of the sonnet to write about issues that are of interest to women, not least the mother daughter relationship; and I have shown how research into the sonnet has impacted on my own creative output as a poet. In the course of my reading of Petit and Hill, I became aware of the importance of mask, mirror and fetish as metaphors in their poetry addressing the mother-daughter relationship. I will now turn to the psychological and feminist theories that underpin mask, mirror and fetish to show how these will be useful lenses for analysing the poetry of Petit and Hill.

[68] See the creative element: ‘Mirror Images’, p. 132-34, below.

Mirror, Mask and fetish.

I have shown how Carol Ann Duffy's mother-related poems depict a warm, satisfying relationship between the speakers of the poems and the mother and or daughter who is the object of the poem. But not all maternal relationships are this rewarding. The poetry of Pascale Petit and Selima Hill reveals relationships marred by mental illness, abuse, and emotional distance: relationships altogether more unsettling and difficult to negotiate. During my reading of Pascale Petit's and Selima Hill's poetry, I became aware of the recurring metaphors of mirrors, masks and fetishes impacting on the relationships of the daughter-speakers with their mothers. I examined these themes in depth in order to read the poetry from the focal points provided by these three issues and to gauge the impact of these on the difficult relationships depicted in the poetry. I will now outline the theory behind mirror, mask and fetish prior to analysing Petit's and Hill's poetry in relation to these metaphors. This introductory outline of the theory will be referenced to show how the metaphors are prominent in the work of my focus poets, and in my own creative work.

Mirror

A daughter comes to recognise who she is and who she could be through identification with her mother or other role model or carer. For a daughter, attachment to, and separation from, the mother remain important throughout her life, the nature of that importance dependent on the quality of the early and on-going relationship.[69] Social structures, cultural beliefs, values and perceptions are learned and internalized through family and social object relations. Children learn their place in the family and in society through their interactions with family and society members; girls — daughters — learn how to be women, wives and mothers through close contact and interaction with women, wives and mothers in their society.[70] The quality of that interaction, what Winnicott called 'good enough mothering', is fundamental to a girl child growing into a self-confident and fulfilled woman. The 'sense of personal identity…*can only become fact in each individual*

[69] Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) p. 53.
[70] Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism…* p. 54.

because of good-enough mothering…' [71] Winnicott did not exclude fathers from this loop: good-enough mothering includes fathers, but Winnicott uses 'mothering' and 'maternal' 'to describe the total attitude to babies and their care;[72] that early care, whoever is the provider, must be of the 'good-enough' variety in order to be effective in the child's healthy psychological and social development.

There is a mirror stage in child development — the stage when an infant sees herself as reflected in a mirror. For Lacan, it is the metaphorical mirror of the relational gaze, a 'mirror phase' when the infant recognises herself for the first time as a singularity independent of others. Laing called this 'the development of the self…as a person under the loving eye of the mother.'[73] Lacan saw this process as '*an identification*': the transformation that takes place in the subject when she recognizes an image of her self: the transformation from a sense of unity with the mother to a dyadic sense of separation and individuality.[74] As with most mirrors, this is a two-way process: in seeing herself reflected in the mother, the daughter also sees the mother seeing her daughter, confirming the daughter's sense of being in the world.[75] In Benjamin's words, we start from 'a state of dual oneness and wind up in a state of singular oneness.'[76] For Winnicott, the mirror is also unequivocally metaphorical of the gaze of the mother. The opening sentence in his 1967 paper states, 'In individual emotional development *the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face'* .[77] The gaze of the mother, and the infant's recognition of herself in that metaphorical mirror, predates her recognition in a looking glass for Winnicott. The infant recognizes herself reflected in the mirror of the 'other' with whom she identifies in order to gain an image of her self as distinct from other selves. As we have seen, for the female infant this identification is usually with the mother or

[71] D. W. Winnicott, *Home is where we start from* (London: Penguin 1986; 1990 reprint), p. 119. (Author's italics).
[72] D. W. Winnicott, *Home…,* p. 154.
[73] Quoted in Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 269.
[74] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 76. (Author's italics)
[75] Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism,* p. 269.
[76] Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 18.
[77] D W Winnicott, 'Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development', in *Playing & Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 111. Original publication in P. Lomas (ed), *The Predicament of the Family: A Psycho-analytical Symposium* (London: Hogarth Press, and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1967). (Winnicott's emphasis).

other female 'mirror'. Mitchell says the subjective self of the child is constituted by her presence — by being see-able in the mirror in tension with her absence from the mirror, her being unable to see herself in the mirror of the other's gaze.[78] An old African proverb says 'a person is a person through persons':[79] a child needs to see herself reflected in others, and to see herself being recognised in the other's gaze, to recognize herself as a subject in society. This is Benjamin's 'mutual recognition': two subjects recognizing each other as equals in subjectivity and agency, leading to a 'balance within the self.'[80] Of course, this does not always happen meaningfully. Some daughters do not enjoy a mother with a loving, self-affirming gaze. The daughter-speaker of Pascale Petit's collections has difficulty seeing herself reflected in the psychotic mother's gaze; Selima Hill's daughter-speaker, due to her own mental instability, does not recognise the self that is reflected by the mother's gaze. The difficulty of this mutuality — of the daughter being seen by the seeing mother who is concurrently being seen by the daughter — is explored in my poem 'The Bat And Not The Ball', which I will return to later in this thesis.

The mirror has long been a strong metaphor for poets and story-tellers. Shakespeare used the mirror image of twins for dramatic effect in *Twelfth Night*; fairy tales bestow upon the mirror an alternative power, as in Snow White, in which the Queen asks the mirror a question, fully expecting an acceptable answer; Alfred, Lord Tennyson has The Lady of Shallot viewing the world through a mirror. Tennyson was aligned to the conservative Cambridge Apostles,[81] who subscribed to 'the fixity of gender',[82] an underlying theme reflected in The Lady of Shallot, her mirror the vicarious means through which she must watch the world and weave what she observes. At the beginning of the poem, The Lady of Shalott is a self-sacrificing Victorian woman. She stays at home, unknown and unnoticed, invisibly carrying out woman's work, symbolized by her weaving:

[78] Juliet Mitchel, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism,* p.386.
[79] Quoted in John Redmond, *How to Write a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 6.
[80] Jessica Benjamin, p 53.
[81] Isobel Armstrong *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1993; Published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.) Amazon Kindle e-book, loc. 566.
[82] Isobel Armstrong, loc. 764.

'But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand? Or is she known in all the land…?'[83]

Her art is representational. She weaves what she observes in the mirror, but her work is not valued: she is unseen and unknown, 'the isolated artist, cut off from life...',[84] analogous with the historically sparse critical reception of much of women's art in patriarchal society. She has no subjectivity, she does what is acceptable for a Victorian woman to do, 'she weaves by night and day'. She talks to no-one in the poem; but from someone she has 'heard a whisper say/a curse is on her if she stay/and look down to Camelot.'[85] 'Stay' in this context means stop: if the Lady stops weaving, stops doing that acceptable female work and seeks self-satisfaction in some other means, she will suffer the curse; she knows not what the curse is, it is 'a coercive taboo whose source and meaning she does not understand,'[86] but she continues to weave to protect herself from the curse. This is analogous with the need of the artist to pursue her art: although weaving is an acceptable occupation for a Victorian lady, this Lady weaves what she views in the mirror in order to make sense of the world beyond her window. A mirror hanging by her is her only 'contact' with the world beyond her tower: 'And moving thro' a mirror clear/That hangs before her all the year,/Shadows of the world appear.'[87] The Lady accepts, and reproduces in her weaving, this shadowy glimpse of the world until, one night, 'when the moon was overhead,/Came two young lovers lately wed;/"I am half sick of shadows," said/The Lady of Shalott.'[88] This is a point of recognition for the Lady: she understands that something is missing from her life but she does not understand yet what it is. The lovers pass by in the light of the moon, that mysterious time of day when things appear differently. Her daytime life of reticence, silence, invisibility and obedience, her constant art of weaving, are insufficient once she has seen the lovers, who possess something she does not: a life outside her imprisoning domesticity. She

[83] Alfred Lord Tennyson 'The Lady of Shalott', (1842) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/poems/the_lady_of_shalott.shtml> [accessed 22 August 2018] Part 1, Stanza 3.
[84] Isobel Armstrong, loc. 1738.
[85] Alfred Lord Tennyson, Part 2, Stanza 1.
[86] Isobel Armstrong, loc. 1775.
[87] Alfred Lord Tennyson, Part 2, Stanza 2.
[88] Alfred Lord Tennyson , Part 2, Stanza 4.

is ‘half sick of shadows’, she half-hankers for the real world, not the shadow-world she sees through the mirror of her self-sacrificing world, but the world outside her window, outside her restrictive mirror. The climax comes when at last she sees Lancelot.

> ‘All in the blue unclouded weather
> Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
> The helmet and the helmet-feather
> Burn'd like one burning flame together,
> As he rode down to Camelot.’[89]

This wonderful knight and his armour, his mount and his saddlery ‘Burn’d like one burning flame together’. This is sexual desire, the emotion the Lady has been isolated from all her life. In that moment, she abandons her ‘Angel in the House’ self-sacrificing existence,[90] her weaving and her tiny world and enters the real world outside her mirror:

> ‘She left the web, she left the loom,
> She made three paces thro' the room,
> She saw the water-lily bloom,
> She saw the helmet and the plume,
> She look'd down to Camelot.
> Out flew the web and floated wide;
> The mirror crack'd from side to side;
> "The curse is come upon me," cried
> The Lady of Shalott.’[91]

It does not end well for the desiring Lady: in leaving her conventional and patriarchal world of obedience and duty to follow Lancelot to Camelot, she signs her own death warrant. She writes her name along the prow of a boat, lies down in it in her virginal white robe, which becomes dishevelled in the act, suggesting the disarray of clothing during sex: it ‘loosely flew to left and right’ as she floated down to Camelot,

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[89] Alfred Lord Tennyson, Part 3, Stanza 3.

[90] Coventry Patmore’s Victorian long poem *The Angel in the House* (1854, revised 1862) at <*https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/coventry-patmores-poem-the-angel-in-the-house*> [accessed 25 April 2018], offered a depiction of the ideal woman: domesticated, maternal, caring, emotionally supporting the man. Feminist writers in the twentieth century deplored this view of a woman’s role. Virginia Woolf claimed that "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer." See Elaine Showalter ‘Killing the Angel in the House’ in The Antioch Review Vol. 32 No. 3 Fall 1972: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4612511.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A7f77ffb17ddefeecfbd9f3b5fe454062> [accessed 25 April 2018]

[91] Alfred Lord Tennyson, Part 3, Stanza 5.

following her desire. And as she floats toward her desire, she sings her last song '…mournful, holy,/Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,/Till her blood was frozen slowly…'[92] By the time she attains Camelot, the location of the man of her sexual desire, she is dead. The revelling of knights in the castle stops and 'all the knights of Camelot…cross'd themselves for fear' of the desiring woman who had provoked her curse and followed her own sexual desire instead of continuing her life of selflessness and docility. Lancelot, the man she has desired and followed, sees '…she has a lovely face…';[93] so the Lady is objectified in death as she was in life. It is at the precise time that she assumes agency, follows her own sexual desire and takes action to leave the room that the relative security of the shadowy mirror cracks. The unknown 'curse' was against her subjectivity, her self-hood, her sexual desire, her readiness to abandon the prescribed and acceptable domestic role of woman in a patriarchal society and fulfil the exciting promise in the wider world that beckons. It is her active sexual desire, and her need to fulfil that desire, that leads to her death. In the patriarchal society in which the Lady of Shalott exists, the desiring, subjective woman is not permitted to live. Woman in a patriarchal society is 'dead' to that society if she desires other than the expected role of wife, mother, care-giver. This analogy may illustrate the case for the number of women writers in history who are subject to erratic life relationships.[94]

Isobel Armstrong makes the claim for Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' that 'the sensuous freedom of femininity which can break the bonds of custom is severely

[92] Alfred Lord Tennyson, Part 3, Stanzas 3-4.
[93] Alfred Lord Tennyson, Final stanza.
[94] The female writers Mary Woolstonecroft, her daughter Mary Shelley, George Sand, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath all had turbulent personal lives. This is not a definitive list. For one plausible explanation of this, see the sociological research reported by Raj Persaud, M.D. and Peter Bruggen, M.D. 'Is Female Success Bad for Romantic Relationships?' in *Psychology Today* (February 14th 2016) <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/slightly-blighty/201602/is-female-success-bad-romantic-relationships7689> [accessed 1 January 2019]. Desiring women *in* literature with similarly turbulent personal lives include Mme. Bovary, Lady Chatterley, Cathy Earnshaw, to name just three; I have already discussed the fate of the Lady of Shalott. On a personal level, I have lived through two failed marriages, attributable in part to my drive to achieve success in a career outside the home. My mother succumbed to the patriarchal stereotype but she was not fulfilled in domesticity: like the Lady of Shallot, she lived her life in a false mirror. A mother who is not recognised as one with her own longings, ambitions, and frustrations is unequipped to support her child's emotional and developmental needs.

restricted, and has repercussions in the wider politics of oppression.'[95] I will show how Pascale Petit has used the metaphor of the mirror as a reaction to female oppression in a similarly Tennysonian way in aspects of her poetry; and how this patriarchal oppression affected the relationship of the daughter-speaker with the mother in my own creative work.

Mask

The counter to the mirror of the other is the mask people wear to protect their true selves. The nineteenth century philosopher and psychologist, William James, recognized the use people make of 'masks', different versions of themselves, in order to negotiate life in society: 'A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him (sic).'[96] Research has shown that adolescents develop different 'selves' in different social situations. Harter et al scrutinize the idea that 'the self is multi-faceted rather than a monolithic, unitary cognitive structure. […] A critical developmental task of adolescence', they write, 'is the construction of multiple selves in different roles and relationships.'[97] They conclude that people — adolescents in their research context — develop strategies 'that normalize the construction of multiple selves, that allow one to selectively occupy those contexts in which self-evaluations are more favourable, and that provide for a phenomenological sense of unity through the construction of a meaningful narrative of one's life story.'[98] This need for protection does not change when the adolescent becomes adult. We all develop different selves in diverse social situations; this protective 'masking' continues throughout life. Each of these disparate 'selves' is a kind of mask protecting what Winnicott calls 'the true self',[99] developed within a 'facilitating environment', a good-enough environment in which the infant receives

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[95] Isobel Armstrong, loc. 1818.
[96] Quoted in S. Harter, S. Bresnick, H. A. Bouchey, and N. R. Whitesell, 'The development of multiple role-related selves during adolescence', in *Development and Psychopathology* 9, p. 835-853 (Cambridge University Press, 1997). <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/89BEAF4B26E09C3C78590CEA4ABB83B2/S0954579497001466a.pdf/development_of_multiple_rolerelated_selves_during_adolescence.pdf> [accessed 21 August 2018]
[97] Harter et al, p. 837.
[98] Harter et al, end summary, p. 851.
[99] D W Winnicott, *Home…,* p. 33.

positive reflection in the mirror of the other, thus developing a sense of a separated selfhood.[100] 'Any impingement from the child's environment causes a

> reaction in the infant, and the reaction breaks-up the going-on-being. If reacting to impingements is the pattern of an infant's life, then there is a serious interference with the need that exists in the infant to become an integrated unit, able to continue to have a self with a past, present, and future.'[101]

Winnicott sees 'impingement' as any negative feedback from the other; or, more destructively, the 'other' damaging the infant's self-image with a negative image reflected in the other's gaze. Such impingements lead to a reaction in the infant, which in turn interrupts subjective being, with resultant annihilation of self.[102] The false self, for Winnicott, is 'a defence designed to protect the true self.' [103] The 'false' self is a protective mask that shields a person's 'true' self-identity. How much more important will these various masks — those worn by the other and those the subject creates to protect her selves — be in protecting the delicate self-image of a daughter-speaker who has found the mirror of the mother's gaze obscured during infancy and childhood, for instance by the mental illness of the mother or the daughter, as will be evidenced in Petit's and Hill's poetry?

Masks serve many functions. They are facilitators of protection, they are devices to hide behind, they are enablers of role-play. Originating in classical Greece, dramatic performances have been inextricably linked with the donning of masks by actors and performers for centuries. The actor becomes the inner person, the disguised 'real' person; the observable person is the mask, the 'front' role the masked actor wants the world to see. Actor and mask, person and persona: below the surface of the public persona there is a different person out of view, a person 'concealed from view.'[104]

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[100] Paul C. Holinger, 'Winnicott, Tomkins, and the Psychology of Affect', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 37 (2009) 155-162, at <https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.mmu.ac.uk/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10615-008-0174-0.pdf> [accessed 25 August 2018]

[101] Paul C. Holinger, p. 160.

[102] Paul C. Holinger, p. 160.

[103] D. W. Winnicott, *Home…*: 'The Concept of the False Self', a talk at All Souls College Oxford dated January 1964, p. 65.

[104] Christopher F. Monte, *Beneath the Mask: an Introduction to Theories of Personality* (Orland Harcourt Brace College, 1999) p.9.

Masked balls have long been an element of society, originally events for the upper classes to meet and misbehave at court under the protection and concealment of the mask, which became the means of saving the wearer from recognition, effectively liberating the wearer to behave in ways not normally acceptable in quotidian life. 'Regardless of a person's gender and class, sexual licence was tolerated at masked balls so that men and women were free to indulge their sexual proclivities with persons of whatever sex and class they chose.'[105] Ralph Hexter highlights several perceived benefits of the mask, including hiding one's identity, and liberating the wearer's ability to express freedom of speech and voice, emotions and opinions without judgement; but he also sees a sinister purpose for masking. The focus of his article is on the Auber opera 'Gustav III', and the later Verdi opera treating the same subject. Both involve the assassination of the reputedly homosexual King Gustav III of Sweden, in a scene of a masked ball at which the assassination takes place, as it did in the historical account of Gustav's death. However, Hexter makes a strong claim for the masking of the concept of homosexuality and homosexual identity in both operas.[106] So, the masked ball is a liberating event, enabling the wearer of the mask to behave in ways that may be frowned upon in everyday life, but it can be a means of 'masking' the truth too.

Judith Harris sees the act of inventing a speaker through language as an act of masking. Creating a speaker 'is often a helpful device for poets who wish to explore the conflicted aspects of their own personalities. The dramatic persona covertly expresses something the poet could not express from within his or her own consistent identity.' The speaker is 'in some way differentiated from the writer's own self […] Such dramatization […] can be a therapeutic aid to self-understanding and

[105] Ann Ilan Alter, 'Masquerade and Masked Balls', in Valerie Steele (ed) *Encyclopaedia of Clothing and Fashion Vol 2* (Farmington Hills: Thomas Gale, 2005) p. 393, at http://www.encyclopedias.biz/dw/Encyclopedia%20of%20Clothing%20and%20Fashion-Vol2.pdf [accessed 28th August 2019]

[106] Ralph Hexter, 'Masked Balls', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Cambridge England Vol. 14 Issue 1-2 (Mar 2002) pp. 93-108. https://search-proquest-com.mmu.idm.oclc.org/docview/1437172?pq-origsite=summon [accessed 28th August 2019]

self-reconciliation.'[107] Petit uses this facility in her poetry. Her use of the myths, flora and fauna of the Amazon Rain Forest, which are frequent tropes in her poetry, are a liberating mask, enabling her to write about subjects too difficult to confront otherwise: the rape and abuse of the mother by her husband, and the daughter-speaker's own rape and abuse at the hands of her father. To paraphrase Rebecca Goss, the woman 'was fragile and damaged, but the poet was clear-headed and eloquent.'[108] Arguably, though, it is a form of masking that, although liberating, conceals an unpalatable truth behind the myths and flora/fauna of the rainforest. As Hexter eloquently writes, 'like draperies placed artfully over the midsections of nude statues, the act of covering simultaneously assumes knowledge of what is covered'.[109] A reader has access only to the text of the poetry, not the autobiography of the poet; but perhaps, ultimately, the mask fools no-one.

Fetish

In bridging the separation from her mother, a daughter may explore her relationship with her mother by reflecting on objects that reconnect her with the lost mother. These objects become a kind of fetish for the distanced or absent mother: Elizabeth Bishop's 'mother's watch' is an example of this kind of fetishism. [110]

The word fetish derives from the Portuguese word, 'feitico' relating to a talisman; feitico itself derives from the Latin 'facticium' meaning artificial. [111] Its use as 'fetish' is first recorded in England in 1603 in relation to witchcraft, where it was used to describe '…any object used…as an amulet or means of enchantment.'[112] 'To class an object as a fetish demands explicit statement that a spirit is considered as embodied in it or acting through it or communicating by it, or at least that the people it belongs

[107] from Judith Harris *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003); reproduced in Rebecca Goss 'The Dark Hollow of Her Pram', *The Poetry Review,* October 2019, p. 141-2

[108] Rebecca Goss, 'The Dark Hollow of her Pram', *Poetry Review* October 2019, p. 142

[109] Ralph Hexter, 'Masked Balls' in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 14 Issue 1-2 (Mar 2002) pp. 93-108.

[110] Elizabeth Bishop, 'One Art', in *Poems* p. 198. See also footnote 4, p. 5 above.

[111] OED online <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/69611?rskey=CDLoFx&result=1#eid> [accessed 25 August 2018]

[112] Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism: a new look* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), p. 14-15.

to do habitually think this of such objects…'[113] This describes 'fetish' as it is used in the context of the poetry I discuss.

Freud defined a fetish as a substitution for the normal object of desire, 'some inanimate object which bears assignable relation to the person whom it replaces'.[114] Catherine Bates reminds us that Freud's 'normal object of desire' was the female penis, missing through maternal castration, a signifier of female lack.[115] Feminist critics have sought to 'feminize the fetish', placing the castration complex in relation to 'other traumatic losses such as the loss of the mother's body at birth,'[116] supporting my argument that writing about objects fetishistically connected with the mother is a way of reconnecting with the mother herself, lost through physical or mental trauma or death. Bates questions the whole basis of Freud's narrow theory of fetishism predicated on a male interpretation of castration, denies it as a valid signifier of female lack and turns to the Lacanian concept of language as significant of a genderless castration, because all language 'is a form of lack', words being themselves metaphors for the meanings they name. Simone de Beauvoir knows words, the foundation of patriarchal communication and law, cannot fully speak for her:

> '…as soon as I tried to define their muted shades, I had to use words, and I found myself in a world of bony-structured concepts…I submitted myself uncritically to the Word, without examining its meaning, even when circumstances inclined me to doubt its truth.'[117]

'Bony-structured' suggests skeletal, reminiscent of death, and her capitalising of 'Word' conjoins language with law — 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.[118] De Beauvoir calls this 'the tyranny of language…in which everything is classified, catalogued, fixed and formulated…'[119]

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[113] Gamman and Makinen, p. 16-17; quoting from E. B. Tylor *Primitive Culture,* (written in 1871).
[114] Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality', in *Three Essays,* p 65.
[115] Catherine Bates, 'Castrating the castration complex', *Textual Practice* (1998), 12:1, p. 101-119; p. 102. See also Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', *The Psychoanalytic Review* (1913-1957), vol. 19 (January 1st 1932), p. 226-227.
[116] Catherine Bates, p. 102-3.
[117] Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 17. First published 1958.
[118] Gospel according to St John 1.1.
[119] Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs…,* p. 192.

Language supports the law of the Father, from whom patriarchal social organisation originates; it is 'the threshold of all possible meaning and value', crucial to social subjectivity, *the condition for meaningful existence of all other practices…';*[120] but it is also 'a bad idea…a veil/over the face of God…'[121] Being related to the patriarchal law and male power, language may be said to be gendered masculine: woman must find her space in this male-dominated power system. Language, therefore, substitutes for loss; it is a consolation for the lost phallus, but language cannot replace the lost object. In the same way, writing poems about things belonging to the mother, although providing a consolatory link with the mother, cannot replace the loss, merely provide a fetish, a substitution enabling reconnection with the missing mother.

Gamman and Makinen recognise three types of fetish.[122] I use 'fetish' here in the anthropological sense of an object that brings the absent person into presence: 'People mourning…parents… have been known to develop fetishistic behaviour, in order to cope with this loss…such behaviour is initiated by absence (not only death)…'[123] In this context, Carol Ann Duffy recognises the fetish as a token of remembrance in her poem 'Wedding Ring', in which the daughter speaker describes the moment the wedding ring is removed from the dead mother's finger and slipped onto her own hand:

Wedding Ring

When I eased it from her finger
and onto my own,
I married her absence;
the years between her passing and mine.
The small *o* in love and loss.[124]

The ring stops being the traditional symbol of the mother's marriage to the daughter's father: on death, it becomes a fetish for the daughter's lifelong marriage

[120] Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 39. (Author's italics).
[121] Carol Ann Duffy, 'Scarce Seven Hours' in *Sincerity*, p. 30.
[122] Gamman and Makinen, p. 14-15.
[123] Gamman and Makinen, p. 27.
[124] Carol Ann Duffy 'Wedding Ring', in *Sincerity*, p.37.

to the absence of the mother in 'the years between her passing and mine.' It is 'The small *o* in love and loss'. An 'o' being also the signifier of lack as 'zero', it is a small symbolic fetish reiterating the huge lifelong emptiness left by the departed mother.

The wedding ring in Duffy's poem is a fetish for the mother, lost in death, in the same way that the churn, or the sharpened knife, in my poems 'Churning' and 'Runner Beans', may be viewed as fetishistic in the daughter-speaker's reconnection with the absent mother.[125] The object '…becomes invested with presence, and so symbolically "stands in" for absence or loss…' in the way a religious relic — a splinter of the true cross or the body part of a saint — might stand in for the saint or deity.[126] In this context, writing can be seen as a coming to terms with the past and its losses. 'As Lacan sees it,' Bates points out, 'the purpose of analysis is to bring the patient fully to acknowledge loss and to accept the lack through which he is constituted.' It is feasible, then, that there is a similar motivation for writing about 'some inanimate object which bears assignable relation to the person whom it replaces', the lost or missing mother in the case of the poets whose work I analyse.[127]

Of course, inanimate objects are not the woman who is the mother; they are not 'the lost and desired object', however closely they are linked with the life she led. On their own, objects cannot speak, they are 'remarkably taciturn';[128] in poetry which explores the mother-daughter relationship, 'objects' can only speak with the poet's words. They cannot attest to the woman the mother was, only to the roles she played as perceived by the daughter-speaker, as further perceived by the poet. They may be seen only as metaphors, 'part of a story one is trying to tell…elements of a narrative' about the mother,[129] her life, and the difficulty she had, through real or emotional absence, in relating to her daughter.

[125] See the creative element: 'Churning' and 'Runner Beans', p. 120 and p. 145, below.
[126] Gamman and Makinen, p. 27.
[127] Catherine Bates, p.110-111.
[128] Peter Vergo, 'The Reticent Object' in *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), Amazon Kindle e-book, loc. 887.
[129] Peter Vergo, loc. 838.

Mirror, mask and fetish, then, are instrumental in our developing sense of self. I will now apply the theories I have outlined above to analysis of the poetry of Petit and Hill to show how they are powerful and appropriate metaphors for aspects of the mother-daughter relationship, addressed in their work.

Mirror, mask and fetish: the mother-daughter relationship in the poetry of Pascale Petit.

I will now analyse the poetry of Pascale Petit in relation to the themes of mirror, mask and fetish. My analysis of her poem, 'Love Charm', focuses on the fetish in her work; 'Love Charm II' examines her use of masking; 'My Mother's Mirror' and 'Bandaged Bambi' explores her use of the mirror and mirroring. Of course, these divisions are arbitrary, because each poem may include aspects of each theme: for instance, 'My Mother's Mirror' is as eloquent in the use of masking as a means of hiding from the mother-daughter bond as it is in examining the relational mirror of the other.

In Pascale Petit's two collections, *The Huntress* and *Mama Amazonica*, the daughter-speaker's relationship with her mother is obscured by the mother's psychosis. To find a way into this difficult and painful absence, Petit uses objects as fetishes for the psychotic mother. In Petit's poetry, replacement objects are more symbolic than real, creative metaphors for the difficulty of maintaining a connection with a mother lost in psychosis. They are often animals, birds, gods and goddesses of the Amazon Rain Forest, affording them a distance from the real, psychotic mother, rendering that maternal distance bridgeable. This is poetry recalling the genre 'Magical Realism', bridging the gap between the real world and the realm of fantasy, a 'battle between two oppositional systems…'[130] Hart and Wen-Ching relate this to the binary of colonial oppressor and oppressed colony, which in Petit's poetry, becomes an effective metaphor for the related binary of oppression by the domestic abuser, and the psychosis of the (colonized) victim. Magical Realism is sometimes known as 'Fabulism' for its relation to fable, myth and allegory; Petit uses the myths and religious rites of the Amazon Rain Forest as allegories for the abusive father, and for the mother's retreat into psychosis. The mother has been silenced by her psychosis following rape and abuse by the 'colonial oppressor', the rapist husband/father. 'The

[130] Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Ching, Ouyang (eds) *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005), p. 3. See also Stephen Slemon's chapter, 'Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse' in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, (eds) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 409.

shreds and fragments' of the domestic oppression of mother and daughter are given new 'codes of recognition' in which the abused daughter, and the psychotic mother, silenced by violence, 'can again find voice…'[131] Transmutation of the mother's psychosis, the mental hospital, the relationship of the mother to her abusive husband and daughter via the geography, myths and rites of the Rain Forest provide a context for mother and daughter to regain a voice from their silenced histories. The mother rarely regains her own voice: the speaker of these poems is the abused daughter offering a context in which the mother might be enabled to regain her voice.

The mother-daughter relationship in these collections is almost irreparably damaged by the mother's psychosis, but still the daughter seeks that on-going 'interaction of love and hate' that Klein describes. In order to find a way into writing about this painful absence, Petit uses objects as creative metaphors for the difficulty of maintaining a mother-daughter relationship with a mother lost in psychosis. In the poem 'Love Charm' the daughter-speaker reflects on the meaning of a gift her father has given her mother:

> **Love Charm**
>
> The man who surprises her with a marriage permit
> is also the boy who smeared slug slime
> on the stems of foxgloves to capture hummingbirds.
>
> The boy who threaded string through one eye
> and out the other,
> so his little gems would swing around him
> and be his playmates,
>
> is also the perfectly coiffed gentleman
> who offers her a hummingbird necklace
> he's kept since childhood, preserved for this moment.[132]

The poem's pleasant title is negated by the content of the poem, which suggests the root of the mother's psychosis is the abusive domestic relationship. The man she

[131] Stephen Slemon, 'Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse', in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, p. 422.
[132] Pascale Petit, *MA,* p. 21.

will marry is the same man who as a boy 'smeared slug slime/on the stems of foxgloves to capture hummingbirds.' Slug slime is an ugly image, made uglier by its juxtaposition with foxgloves and with the beautiful hummingbirds, analogous for the woman become wife and mother, caught in his trap. Plato described 'pharmakon', a substance which is both poison and medicine. It is a 'both-and phenomenon': both beneficial and harmful.[133] Petit has deployed this 'unity of opposites' in her use of the foxglove: the foxglove is 'pharmakon': the source of a strong poison, digitalis, deadly when uncontrolled, but which, when used in measured dosage, can heal the damaged — broken — heart. If the humming bird is metaphor for the beautiful and psychotic mother, the trap of the 'slug slime' is analogous for the semen expelled in the rape of the mother, the root of her psychosis, strongly hinted at in an earlier poem 'Macaw Mummy':

> 'What did he put in her drink?
> Whatever it was has given her
> a dream she can't wake up from…
> /…/
> Her scarlet feathers
> lie bravely under the ice
> of his deep frozen duvet.'[134]

Once the hummingbirds are trapped, he 'threaded string through one eye/and out the other,/ so his little gems would swing round him/and be his playmates'. This psychopathic cruelty is the only way he knows to make friends; and, in the analogy of rape, to make a wife. The cruel boy who trapped the beautiful hummingbirds is the 'perfectly coiffed gentleman/who offers her a hummingbird necklace/he's kept since childhood, preserved for this moment': that same man who trapped the beautiful woman in date-rape, leading to abusive marriage, signified by the surprise marriage permit in line one. The mother was lost in psychosis, even before the daughter-speaker was born, rendering a meaningful relationship between mother and daughter impossible. It is through the object of the hummingbird necklace that

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[133] Yoav Rinon, 'The Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida: Plato's Pharmacy', *The Review of Metaphysics* Vol. 46, No. 2 (Dec., 1992), pp. 369-386. Published by: <Philosophy Education Society Inc. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.mmu.ac.uk/stable/20129336?pq-origsite=summon&seq=4#metadata_info_tab_contents> [accessed 15 September 2018]

[134] Pascale Petit, *MA*, p. 19.

the daughter-speaker can write an understanding of her mother's psychotic absence and create a quasi-reconnection with her mother.

Both masks and mirrors play important roles in the development of a daughter's subjectivity and this is evidenced in the poetry of Pascale Petit. I explored how masks and mirrors impact upon the development of subjectivity of the daughter-speaker of Petit's poems, denied a rewarding relationship with the mother due to the mother's psychosis.[135] Her poem 'Love Charm II' demonstrates one manifestation of masking obscuring the daughter-speaker's relationship with her mother.

Love Charm II

He has ground hummingbird bones
into her powder compact,

so that when she gets up
from her dressing-table

her face flies towards him.
The wings of her eyebrows

have that startled expression,
as if flying backwards.

Her cupid's bow quivers
against his kiss

like he's a bird-eating flower.
Picture her, for the rest of her life—

an albino hummingbird,
feathers falling in a snowstorm,

her hair shocked white. [136]

Petit uses abused hummingbirds as a metaphor for the beautiful woman who was the mother of this collection, as she does in 'Love Charm'.[137] The abuser of the

[135] Rachel Davies, 'Masks and Mirrors: the poetry of Pascale Petit in *The Huntress* (Seren 2005) and *Mama Amazonica* (Bloodaxe 2017)', in *The North*, Issue 59, January 2018, p. 84-87.
[136] Pascale Petit, *MA,* p. 27.

hummingbirds, and of the mother they analogize, is the husband, the father of the daughter-speaker: 'He has ground hummingbird bones/into her powder compact', so that they become part of the make-up, the disguise she applies each morning. They become an element of the mask that obscures the mother from her daughter, making the mother, and therefore herself, difficult to know. The mother applies a false and abused beauty to her face, making it difficult for the daughter to know herself in the mirror of her mother's gaze. This beauty is the property of her abuser. Her startled eyebrows are wings 'flying backwards' to a time before her rape and abuse at the husband's hands.[138] The abused mother is being consumed by the 'bird-eating flower' of her abuser, obscuring from her daughter a recognition of the mother. The last four lines leave the conceit of the poem in a direct address to the reader: 'Picture her, for the rest of her life —/an albino hummingbird,/feathers falling in a snowstorm,/her hair shocked white.' She has lost her colour, her confident sense of who she is. She has been 'shocked white': colourless, indistinct, with 'shocked' also suggesting ECT as treatment for her psychosis. Medically, albinos often experience vision impairment.[139] 'Albino' as metaphor in line 13 suggests colourless, but also possibly sightless: it is difficult for the mother to see herself, and the daughter-speaker cannot see the colourless — translucent, invisible — 'albino hummingbird' who is the mother; and therefore cannot see herself reflected in the obscurity of this mirror.

The metaphor of mask and mirror is employed again in the poem 'My Mother's Mirror', which explores the relationship of the daughter-speaker to her mother through the object of a mirror on the mother's dressing table:

My Mother's Mirror

Your make-up mirror
has a milky blue cast over it
like the eye of a snake

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[137] Pascale Petit, *MA,* p. 21.
[138] See 'Macaw Mummy', *MA*, p.19, line5-line7,for the suggestion of drugged date rape: 'What did he put in her drink?/Whatever it was has given her/a dream she can't escape from…'.
[139] See 'Albinism', at the NHS website at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/albinism/> [accessed 25 August 2018]

preparing to moult.
I am standing naked in your room
and you're painting me blue.
I don't know how I got here
or why your face shimmers
like a mirage through the Gitane haze
as you fasten copper bells around my neck,
teeth bracelets around my wrists.
You lead me to your dressing-table
which is two steps away
but seems far off as Chichén Itzá.
When you push my face into something cold —
I know it's just a small make-up mirror,
not the Well of Sacrifice.
But when you tip it magnifying-side up —
jaws unlock
like a snake swallowing our house.
Into your mirror I fall,
down the long body of the Well,
past limestone shelves
ridged like a serpent's spine,
right into the rattler,
the tail cone at the bottom,
the silver sludge of the glass,
where I lie
for what feels like a thousand years.

I surface in the glare of the Mayan forest.
Archaeologists pull me
out of the stinking waters.
They reconstruct my last day
from fragments of painted ceramic jars,
bracelets of teeth,
copper death bells
and a carved stag antler
I might have bought in the market
before I came home to find the god waiting.
They say I was proud
to be chosen by the plumed serpent.
I arched my back over the rock
and let the priest knock out my teeth
for the next child's costume.
Through the red mist
that flowed from my mouth over my eyes,
I must have blinked twice
after the gold-plated knife
was plunged into my chest.

I must have seen my heart 50
raised up to the sky.[140]

A good example of Petit's deployment of magical realism can be read in this poem, as in many of her writings; the story of abuse is masked by Latin American mythologies. She hides her characters behind the animals, birds, flowers and gods/goddesses of the rain forest,[141] effectively telling difficult stories through the medium and mask of myth. The story of this poem, like the mother masked by her cosmetics and cigarette smoke, is masked by being transformed into a retelling of the sacrificial myth of one god, the 'plumed serpent', Quetzalcoatl. The first four lines of the poem are staccato in rhythm, phrases and clauses, portraying fear perhaps, but also seeming to show the daughter trying to make up her mind about the event she is recalling; trying, through the short, staccato lines, to sort it out in her own mind. The line break after 'snake' in line three, coupled with an intentional lack of punctuation, sets up the effect of blurring whether it is the snake or the mirror itself which is the subject of the next clause, 'preparing to moult.' If it is the mirror that is moulting its reflective surface, the ability to see an image in it will be obscured. If the mother's gaze is a mirror by which a daughter might come to know herself,[142] this make-up mirror is ambiguous: it facilitates the making of a cosmetic mask, but it is also moulting its reflection, obscuring the mirror of the mother's gaze, impairing the daughter's ability not just to recognize the real, un-made-up mother, but to know herself in the reflection of that impaired gaze, because the mirror 'has a milky blue cast over it/like the eye of a snake/preparing to moult.' Line five describes the vulnerability of the daughter, 'standing naked' in the room of the mother. In Freudian dream symbolism, a room represents a woman, or the womb.[143] The daughter is not safe, then, even in this room/womb, where she might expect protection. The daughter's confusion and fear are apparent in line seven: 'I don't

[140] Pascale Petit, *TH,* p. 15-16.
[141] Zoe Brigley, 'Confessing the Secrets of Others: Pascale Petit's Poetic Employment of Latin American Cultures and the Mexican Artist Frida Kahlo', in *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 9.2 (Bridgewater State College: March 2008), p. 25. <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.mmu.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&u=mmucal5&id=GALE%7CA229721300&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon> [accessed 20 August 2018]
[142] D W Winnicott, *Playing & Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 117.
[143] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 367.

know how I got here'. The mother's face is obscured — masked — by the smoky haze from her Gitane cigarette. Her face 'shimmers', a word depicting beauty and mystery, making of the mother 'a mirage'. A mirage is something that is not really there, apparently seen through a heat haze. It is a figment of the heat/fear-crazed imagination; but it is also a vision of something desired. A mirage in the desert, for instance, seen through the heat haze over an unending drought of sand, would be of an oasis, a watering hole. The mirage the daughter sees in this poem is of the desired loving mother. She imagines her, but cannot really see her. Being a mirage, she is an optical illusion, an unfulfilled desire. The image of the mother is obscured by the cigarette smoke and the 'milky cast' on the mirror. The mother, the 'you' of the poem, is painting the daughter blue. Blue suggests unhappiness; the mother is signified as the artist of the daughter's unhappiness. But 'blue' is also a colloquial adjective for pornography. The mother painting the daughter blue, then, also suggests preparing her for the pornography of sexual contact with the father, the 'god' to whom she will be sacrificed, the god who is waiting for her in line thirty-nine. In addition to being painted blue, the daughter is being dressed in a necklace of copper bells, 'death-bells' in line thirty-five; and she is given 'teeth bracelets around her wrists' in preparation for sacrifice to the god, the paedophilic and abusive father/husband. In line forty-two, we read that the sacrificial daughter 'arched my back over the rock/and let the priest knock out my teeth/for the next child's costume.' So this teeth bracelet that the mother is dressing her daughter in is made from the teeth of previous sacrificial victims. While recognising that the mirror is 'just a small round make-up mirror' it becomes something frightening when flipped to its magnifying surface. It becomes a beast, a snake with a mouth large enough to swallow the child. The mother pushes her daughter's face into the jaws of this magnifying mirror, which, for the daughter, has transformed into the jaws of a snake 'swallowing our house', devouring the security of the home. The snake here recalls the serpent in Eden, and in this context is also suggestive of illicit sex, as it was in the original creation story; symbolic of the penis and therefore the man, husband and father, and the sex act. The daughter falls into the mirror 'down the long body of the Well' of Sacrifice. If long objects like snakes are dream symbols representative of the penis; and narrow passages, hollow objects and vessels in dreams represent the

birth canal,[144] the snake-like jaws, the rattler, the 'long body of the well', are open to these sexual interpretations. The long passage to the snake's tail suggests a reconnection with the secure relationship to the mother just before that original separation, the act of birth. The daughter falls down the metaphorical birth canal of the Well, but instead of being born to a loving, caring mother, she falls directly into the dangerous snake's 'rattler/the tail cone at the bottom', falls into the act of abuse by the father where she lays hidden 'for what feels like a thousand years' until archaeologists pull her out 'from the stinking waters', a reference to a tainted amniotic fluid, a presence in the womb that is impure and unwelcome. This is also a reference to her being finally free of 'the stinking waters' of sexual abuse so she is able to escape the abusive father and reconstruct her life as it was before she 'came home to find the god waiting': the abusive father and/or the complicit mother, represented by the plumed serpent, Quetzalcoatl to whom she has been sacrificed. The daughter-speaker's sexual sacrifice is graphically described at the end of the poem as the victim remembers it vividly in the closing lines. The 'red mist' at line forty-five describes the blood from the tooth extraction that will facilitate the making of the next sacrificial tooth bracelet, but it is also a phrase suggesting anger; the 'red mist' of a daughter recollecting the abuse she has suffered at the hands of those very people who should have protected her, her father with the mother's complicity. This make-up mirror, then, represents the birth relation to the mother; it is an unhappy connection and a frightening separation. But it also suggests a longing for reconnection with the early relationship in the safety of the womb before the abusive husband/father devoured that relationship. The mother, and her apparent complicit relationship to the abusive father, is a frightening and hostile element of danger in *The Huntress*; a far cry from the mother's gaze as the mirror of the self; and a far cry also from the 'good enough mothering'[145] which leads to a growing sense of personal identity and subjectivity.

[144] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* p. 367-370.
[145] D. W. Winnicott, *Home…*p. 11.

The theme of the mirror is further explored in the poem Bandaged Bambi, which appears to conflate the identity of mother and daughter.

Bandaged Bambi

1 Bandaged

In the kitchen with the one gas ring
she has to learn to cook on,
a fawn is helping,
its body tightly bandaged.

2 Bambi

Her right leg is in a splint,
as is her left elbow
and he's bandaged up her chest.

She wonders where he's put her breasts
now that she's a fawn.

Only her rump, with its spots like hail,
is exposed to the air.

She remembers the hailstorm,
a mirror shattering
and slivers of ice

snaking towards her.[146]

The mirror in this poem cracks at the point of the mother-speaker's acting on her sexual desire for the man who subsequently becomes her abuser, recalling the 'crack'd' mirror in Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott'. Petit's poem is in two parts, each taking one half of the title as a subheading. The first stanza comprises four lines. It describes the manner in which the new bride is incarcerated in one small room, mirroring the Lady of Shalott's three-paces-wide tower. Like the Lady, the bambi-mother of this poem is undertaking 'female' domestic tasks. The smallness of her existence is depicted in a description of the room: 'In the kitchen with the one gas ring/she has to learn to cook on…' describes her forced domesticity. This is not

[146] Pascale Petit, *MA,* p. 26.

spacious, elegant living; she is not married to a man who wants to give her the best of everything. She has been trapped and is confined in a small space. 'Confined' is a word with two meanings, one in incarceration and the other in childbirth. 'A fawn' helps her with the cooking. This suggests a vulnerable young animal; an infant then. The fawn's body 'is tightly bandaged' — in the amniotic sac, itself tightly wrapped in the mother's body; the 'fawn is helping' by giving her a reason to survive this incarceration, because it gives her a reason to cook; a reason to care for herself. There is a strong mother-daughter connection in this last line of stanza one.

In the second part, the fawn is the mother: mother and daughter are fused in this poem, one and the same, inextricably connected, and both victims of the sexual violence of the husband/father. The leg and arm splints and the bandaged chest support the fact of domestic abuse, violence and injury. The bambi's limbs are splinted 'and he's bandaged up her chest.' The chest bandaging could be due to physical thoracic damage as a result of violence: broken ribs for instance. Equally, the chest is the anatomical seat of the heart. 'Heart' is often conceived as a metonym for 'love'; the bandaged chest also suggests damage to the heart, the metonymic seat of love: emotional damage as a result of the sexual violence perpetrated on her by the man she had assumed loved her, her new husband. Equally, the chest bandaging serves to flatten the breasts, rendering the mother a child: 'She wonders where he's put her breasts/now that she's a [tightly bandaged] fawn.' She'll need her breasts to feed the infant, which is tightly bandaged by her own body. 'Only her rump, with its spots like hail,/is exposed to the air': this couplet recalls the sexual violence of the preceding poem in the collection, 'Bestarium', in which Petit describes the mother's rape from the rear:

'He comes like ninety
wolves leaping through the air
[…]
she'll go on all fours for him
he'll bite her by the scruff
the bed his watering hole
for all the night-beasts
you are *mine* he repeats

you are thinking of *me.'*[147]

The 'rump, with its spots…exposed to the air' in 'Bandaged Bambi' continues the suggestion of violent rape from the rear in 'Bestarium': 'she'll go on all fours for him'. The spotted rump is suggestive of hail, a cold, hard image: her feelings are frozen in ice. 'She remembers the hailstorm,/a mirror shattering/and slivers of ice/snaking towards her.' So her violator came in a hailstorm, raped her in ice; the shattered mirror recalls 'The Lady of Shalott' who loses everything, including her life, when she leaves her tower to follow the desired Lancelot. This bambi-speaker of the poem has been similarly cursed. Her desire for the man she married is cursed: her marriage has turned into a violent nightmare — the marriage bed is a 'watering hole/for all the night beasts…' The seat of love, the heart, is damaged and bandaged tightly in the chest; but, unlike the Lady of Shalott, she does not have the release of death. Her only release is in the oblivion of her psychosis. Her husband owns her: 'you are *mine* he repeats'; she has become subordinate to her husband, subservient to his desires, effectively his property. She has been forced from womanhood, and his potential equal, to the subservience of a child. The slivers of the broken mirror, her broken self-image, are 'ice/snaking towards her.' Snaking is a strong verb, suggesting a hidden, surreptitious approach from a predator; but snaking is also suggestive of the serpent, eternally linked to sexual sin through the Biblical creation story.

The obscured mirror is a recurring trope in the poetry of Pascale Petit. The device of the mirror appears again in 'Giant Jewel Beetle Ear Pendants',[148] in which the mother looks into the mirror while the father shrinks her head: he has abused eighty beautiful beetles to make the mother ear-rings to decorate her shrunken head, as an Amazonian shaman might, drawing again on the mask of the magical realism genre. The mother and the beetles are victims of abuse; this is the mirror in which the daughter must see herself, as she too becomes a victim of the abusive father. In 'Extrapyramidal Side Effects' there is a 'dark mirror/of biting glass' reflecting 'a

[147] Pascale Petit, 'Bestarium', in *MA,* p. 25.
[148] Pascale Petit, *MA,* p. 29.

cloud/of crystal mosquitos/she swats away': the mirror is 'dark', therefore difficult to see into; the cloud of mosquitoes is representative of the mother's psychosis, her mental breakdown resulting from abuse at the hands of her husband, and which also obscures the daughter's reflection in the mirror of the mother.[149] In 'Jaguar Mama' the daughter/speaker says 'Sometimes I'd glimpse her drinking her reflection', an image of the constantly moving mirror of the river's surface, in which the reflection is distorted, obscured and ultimately devoured. [150] Despite her broken relationship with the mother, the daughter-speaker continually looks for reconciliation and reconnection.

I have shown how Pascale Petit uses the metaphor of the obscured mirror in the difficult relationship of her daughter-speaker with the mother of her poems. She uses masking, in the form of cosmetics, smoke from cigarettes, disturbed reflections in water; but also the narrative of her poems is masked by her use of the Amazon Rain Forest, its myths and religious rites. Amazonian myth also furnishes her use of the fetish in the flora, fauna and religious artefacts that allow her to write about the mother in a distanced way. Petit's use of the mirror, and masking, inspired my own reflection on the relationship of my own daughter-speaker with the mother of my collection. It forced me to go deeper than surface issues to understand what might make a mother maintain emotional distance from her own child.[151]

Selima Hill also uses mask, mirror and fetish in similar but different ways from Petit. I will now turn to an analysis of Hill's sequence, 'My Sister's Sister' to show how the entire sequence is built on the psychological masking and mirroring of the 'sister' of the sequence; and how she uses the fetish of hospital 'things' and the doll, Violet, in her writing about the impending death of the mother of the sequence.

[149] Pascale Petit, *MA,* p. 65.
[150] Pascale Petit, *MA,* p. 69.
[151] See the creative element: for instance 'The Bat and Not the Ball', p. 105, and the linked pair of poems 'Just how it was' and 'This is also work', p. 112 and p. 113; also the poems dealing with the death of an only son, from p. 136 -59, in the creative element below.

Mirror, mask and fetish: the mother-daughter relationship in the poetry of Selima Hill.

In this section I analyse the use Selima Hill makes of mirror, mask and fetish in her sequence 'My Sister's Sister'. Hill's sequence is similar to the focus collections of Petit in that the mother-daughter relationship is impaired by mental illness. However, in Petit's work this was the chronic psychosis of the mother; in Hill's sequence it is the mental ill health of the daughter-speaker that renders the relationship difficult. My focus is predominantly on the following poems: 'My Sister's Sister', in which Hill uses mirroring and masking as metaphors for her daughter-speaker describing the fetishistic objects that surround the mother in her last illness; the mask is also examined in 'My Sister's Secret Rule'. The role of the mirror in determining a girl-child's role in society, and the daughter's resistance to this role, is explored in 'Giant Cows' and 'My Sister's Kitten'. I examine her use of the fetish in the poem 'My Sister and I in the Lift', in which a childhood toy, the doll Violet, is a substitute for the dying mother.

Selima Hill's entire sequence 'My Sister's Sister' is predicated on mirroring and masking. In my reading of this sequence, 'my sister's sister' is 'me', in a psychological form of masking and mirroring. The daughter-speaker uses 'splitting' as a mechanism for personal protection, giving her an anxiety-reducing sense of control over the mother's illness. A sister is a female sibling. 'My sister's sister' could be another female sibling: another way of saying 'my sister'. But, in that case, why not just call her 'my sister'? It is, I argue, because the daughter-speaker ***is*** *'*my sister's sister'. In Hill's sequence, 'my sister's sister' refers to 'me', an aspect of the daughter-speaker's self she does not want to own. 'My sister's sister' is both mirror and mask. A mirror is a reflecting surface; but it is also a distortion. It reflects back a 'mirror-image': a reverse image of the gazer. 'My sister's sister' is a reverse image of the daughter-speaker of the poems, a distortion of her self. Being that distorting mirror, reflecting back a reverse image, can also be seen as a form of masking, hiding the true identity of the daughter-speaker of the poems behind the mask of the imaginary sister. The 'sister' of the sequence, in my reading, is an internalized version of the daughter-

speaker herself, split off from her ego, a 'sisterly double',[152] which allows Hill's speaker to confront her relationship with her mother in a relatively safe way, rendering 'my sister's sister' and 'I/me' of the sequence one and the same. Julia Kristeva shows how Melanie Klein proposed that the infant ego splits good and bad aspects of relational objects, in the first instance the good and satisfying, nutritious breast from the bad and punishing breast that is unavailable on demand.[153] This splitting serves the purpose of preventing the bad aspects from contaminating the good aspects. The breast is the infant's first contact with the 'other' who is mother; splitting enables the infant to cope when the introjected breast/mother is out of sight, unavailable. In addition to the splitting of internalised aspects of relational objects, the ego is able to 'split off and disown a part of itself.'[154] For Klein these two aspects of splitting are mutually operable. In 'My Sister's Sister', this is what the poet has done for the speaker of the sequence: she has written a split-off sister/self for the speaker which results in a protective alter-ego that will give the speaker some control over her adult anxieties.[155]

Evidence for this reading is in the following poem, which addresses the distress of having visited the hospital where the speaker's mother is dangerously ill:

My Sister's Sister

Every night before I went to sleep
I wrote about our day at the hospital,
and what I hoped, and what I feared, and why;
I wrote about the flowers by her bed,
her cards, her pills, her weight, her temperature,
everything, in fact, except my sister.
I do not want her in my private books
where everything exists because of me.
I do not want her rootling around

[152] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman,* loc. 10948.
[153] Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 62.
[154] Juliet Mitchell, *The Selected Melanie Klein* (New York: Macmillan Free Press, 1987), p. 20.
[155] Melanie Klein describes several examples of 'splitting' as defence against anxiety; see for instance chapter 17, 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States', p. 262 ff. She shows how the subject uses splitting of the ego as protection from internalized threatening relational objects; this process of splitting begins in infancy but can last into adult life.

as if she has to stay because she's true.[156]

Situated following a visit to the mother's hospital bedside, the poem describes a scene of anxiety around the illness of the daughter-speaker's mother. Anxiety is evident in the comprehensive list of the mother's objects — fetishes — the daughter-speaker feels able to write about because writing about the mother is too stressful. The phrase 'except my sister' gives the reader a picture of the 'sister' as threat to the daughter-speaker's equilibrium. The frenetic list for diary writing, 'the flowers by her bed,/her cards, her pills, her weight, her temperature' describes 'things' standing-in for the mother, separated from the daughter in her final illness. The daughter's list is a manifestation of all the mother represents, and is represented by, in the hospital and includes everything except the 'sister': 'I do not want her in my private books […] I do not want her rootling around'. These are negative impressions of the 'sister', who would be an intrusion into the speaker's privacy; she would be 'rootling around', being furtively intrusive, making public thoughts the speaker of the poem would prefer to remain private, the most private of which, ironically, is the imaginary 'sister'. The 'private books' exist because of the speaker who, as an adult, wants them to have nothing to do with the split off part of her own ego. The books are an example of the Derridian concept of writing as 'pharmakon': they contain both benefit and harm: the benefit of remembering — she 'lists' things that stand-in for the mother whom she is unwilling to write about — but carry within them the 'unity of opposites'.[157] Derrida shows how 'under the pretext of supplementing memory, writing makes one even more forgetful….Writing does not answer the needs of memory…',[158] because it is an off-loading of thought onto paper. By writing her thoughts down, they are conversely allowed an opportunity of escape from memory, with the possibility of the harm of forgetting, because those written words no longer have to exist in the daughter-speaker's memory. 'Rootling around', an untidy rummaging, an unsystematic search for information, will mess with the speaker's thoughts, mix them up, confuse them and

[156] Selima Hill, p. 23.
[157] Yoav Rinon, pp. 369-386.
[158] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination,* trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Contemporary Thinkers, 1981), reprinted 2000, p. 100.

her and be the cause of further anxiety, another harmful element of the 'pharmakon', negating the benefit of writing her thoughts down. This mental 'rootling around' supports the reading of the 'sister' as an internalised self, a split-off aspect of the speaker's own ego rootling around in her own private thoughts, which can only be accessed mentally, and via an illicit reading of the private diary. The 'sister/self', split off from her own ego, is a protection against the speaker having to confront the imminence of the mother's death. By concentrating on the internalized 'sister' and keeping her at bay, she does not have to think about the mother, except in terms of the fetishistic objects that represent the mother in her hospital setting. The items on the list are all hospital-based fetishes for the mother in her last illness, which the daughter-speaker is mentally incapable of confronting. Melanie Klein saw splitting as a coping mechanism that enables an infant to manage and rationalise the threatening aspects of her life, a protection against just this kind of painful anxiety.[159] In 'My Sister's Sister', the daughter-speaker is attempting to rationalise and manage the split-off sister/self by eliminating her from any involvement in her nightly writing about the objects associated with her mother—'good breast'—that enable her not to write about stress of her mother's illness—'punishing breast'. The mother's 'things', her flowers, pills, cards, even her treatment chart, are fetishes for the mother, allowing the daughter-speaker an unthreatening reconnection with the mother.

Pretending and lying, may be seen as ways of masking the truth. The following poem engages with this form of masking, reinforcing the idea that the 'sister' is not real, that she is a mirror/mask of the daughter-speaker of the poem

My Sister's Secret Rule

My sister has a secret rule: *pretend.*
Pretend we are two normal human beings.
Pretend we are too well brought up to lie.
Pretend our mother's feeling *twice the person.*
Pretend we are not lost. But we are.

[159] Melanie Klein, *LGR,* chapter 17, ' Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States' (1935), endnote p. 432.

The falling snow may smell of violets
but it is falling snow nonetheless.[160]

Hill expresses the sense of anxiety in the staccato sentences, one sentence to each line of the poem. The key word for the 'secret rule', is 'pretend'. A pretence may be construed as a lie. The daughter-speaker pretends the sister and she 'are two normal human beings./Pretend we are too well brought up to lie.' As we read them 'pretending' they are normal, we come to see that the sister is not normal, Hill has written her as a pretence, a lie; the 'two normal human beings' of the poem include the daughter-speaker, suggesting actually a lack of normality, because she exists within the pretence of the 'sister' she has created, therefore she is living in a lie. Revealing the ambivalence of the love relationship to the mother, the fourth line describes the speaker and her 'sister' lying to themselves that the mother will recover, 'Pretend' she is 'feeling *twice the person'* she has been feeling. The pivotal line of the poem is 'Pretend we are not lost. But we are.' With the terminal illness of the mother, and facing the mother's imminent death, the daughter-speaker faces her own extinction. Klein theorized how a child perversely works hard to increase her independence from her mother, to weaken an attachment to the mother whom she has seen as the font of all goodness and of life itself. Klein views this as psychological matricide, a desire for the death of the mother to loosen the strong bond. However, fear of losing the mother through death, Klein showed, can be construed as fear of dying oneself, as self and mother are inseparable in the child's mind.[161] The daughter-speaker's sense of subjectivity is built on her identification with her mother, which, by lying to herself, she is denying. The fear of losing her mother in death is, in Klein's analysis, a fear of dying herself, mother and daughter being inextricably linked in the daughter's mind. The final couplet in this poem shows the futility of pretending that the strong mother-daughter link does not exist: whatever perfume you use to disguise 'the falling snow…it is falling snow nonetheless'. However you try to mask the truth with pretence, truth will out.

[160] Selima Hill, p. 21.
[161] Melanie Klein, p. 321-2.

In ‘Giant Cows’, Selima Hill’s daughter-speaker looks into the mirror of her mother and sees a reflection she cannot subscribe to. She shows love for the mother, who appears to accept her patriarchal role of primary carer; but she also exhibits resistance to becoming a mirror-image of her mother in that role, a role the girl child might be expected to identify with and replicate within the monolith that was the twentieth century western patriarchy.

Giant Cows

It’s in a dream but they don’t know it yet.
Sunlight bathes the children on the lawn.
Everyone is dressed in white and laughing.
The giant cows are paddling in the stream.
Smell the lilac. Smell the famous roses.
It’s in a dream. The dream has got it wrong.
I look at her and realise she’s the one.
I have to go immediately. *Forgive me.*
Afraid, polite, my mother will obey.
She does not know that childhood is over.
She does not know my sister is the one
I want to be contained until she’s still,
I want to be absolved, like a moth,
I want to be absolved and pacified,
softened, crumbled, charred and turned to powder,
I want to say *it’s over* to, and touch;
but in the dream it’s only just begun.
It looks as if it’s perfect but it’s not.
I watch them as they laugh and drink their tea
as if they’re Them, like That, and never won’t be—
and walk away, unable to explain
the day’s a dream but they don’t know it yet. [162]

The idyll of the children playing in the sun, ‘Everyone dressed in white and laughing’, the summer flowers, the cows paddling: all these things exemplify that familiar feeling that, in memory, childhood always happens in summer and the summer days are perfect, suggesting in turn that the existing social order is perfect with the women and children behaving as expected in a happy and untroubled environment. But the daughter-speaker sees ‘it’s in a dream’ and ‘the dream has got it wrong’, it’s not perfect at all in the daughter-speaker’s reality. ‘I look at her and realise she’s the

[162] Selima Hill, p. 31.

one.' 'The one' of line seven is, in my reading, the speaker herself, but also her split-off 'sister', as one of the children playing on the lawn, viewed through the lens of the 'wrong dream'; the mother subscribes to this idyllic dream, she appears to be happy with her role in it, but the daughter-speaker cannot see herself in this mirror of the mother. The view of 'the one' being both the speaker and the 'sister' is reinforced at line eleven where she explicitly says her mother does not realise 'my sister is the one'. The speaker 'breaks the fourth wall' at line eight, steps out of the poem and addresses the mother of the poem directly: 'I have to go immediately. *Forgive me*.' The mother is too 'polite' or too 'afraid' to ignore the daughter's plea for forgiveness for her disruption of the pastoral idyll. She displays 'repression, passivity and compliance', traits instilled into women by patriarchy,[163] that is to say, the very traits the daughter asks forgiveness for escaping. The sister, i.e. that agitated split-off aspect of the daughter-speaker's own self, needs 'to be contained until she's still.' The way Hill writes lines thirteen to fifteen demonstrates how the 'sister' and the speaker of the poems are merged: from the choice of line breaks and the starting of lines with 'I want…' there is ambiguity about whether she wants her self or her 'sister' to be absolved, pacified, contained; and the distinction is irrelevant in my reading of the status of the sister, since the poem's speaker and her sister are one and the same. But absolution or stilling can never be achieved; the 'sister' follows the speaker throughout the sequence of poems. She cannot 'be absolved and pacified', she cannot be 'softened, charred and turned to powder' like a moth, because she is part of the speaker's psyche, a split-off aspect of the speaker herself, who recognizes that the idyllic dream of the poem is over for her; she [they—the poem's speaker and her 'sister'] walks away from this summer dream 'unable to explain/the day's a dream but they [the mother, the other children, the cows] don't know it yet.' She wishes to escape from her prescribed 'ideal' patriarchal constraint viewed in the mirror of the acquiescent mother. She has only her 'sister', that split-off part of her ego, for protection against such a future: 'as if they're Them, like That, and never won't be'. She knows she cannot be like Them, like That.

[163] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 64.

The daughter-speaker's resistance to the patriarchal role of women reflected in the mirror of the mother is revisited in the poem, 'My Sister's Kitten'.

My Sister's Kitten

Our mother likes to feed me perfect veal;
and two invisible drops of Radiostol
are wobbled on my morning toast by nurse—
a special little wafer, like a host.
She feeds my upstairs sister next to nothing.
At least, that's what my upstairs sister thinks.
And when I try to move her head I can't.
And when her little kitten starts to lick her,
bit by bit, as if she were a skyscraper
a tiny Tippex brush is painting white,
I run into the yard to greet the wasps,
and let the licking carry on all night—
my sister on her bed, and me outside,
my naked body smeared with marmalade.[164]

The daughter-speaker is determined to demolish the boundaries of the patriarchal role ascribed to women and exemplified by the mother-carer, who 'likes to feed me perfect veal', suggesting motherhood as a perfect state. Freud saw woman as castrated man;[165] and in a patriarchal society, there is some truth in this: in a society where possession of a penis is a perceived prerequisite for success in the world outside the home, a woman is metaphorically castrated. Klein saw the fact that the woman's 'achievements in life do not usually attain to those of the man is due to the fact that in general she has less masculine activity to employ in sublimation.'[166] She is, in fact 'being' rather than 'doing', in Chodorow's words.[167] Hill has her daughter-speaker defying this prescription. The other carer in the narrator's life is probably a

[164] Selima Hill, p. 12.
[165] Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality;* Freud's essay 'Female Sexuality', p. 371ff, suggests a 'castrated' woman is constantly trying to find a replacement for her missing penis. Unsurprisingly, alternative feminist readings, among them Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, have disputed Freud's castration theory, placing it not in human psychology but in patriarchal prescription of women's roles. see also my outline of feminist resistance to Freud in my introduction, on p. 8 above.
[166] Melanie Klein, p. 75
[167] Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism…*p. 23ff. This compares with Dorothy Dinnerstein's theory in *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* (London: Souvenir Press, 1978), in which the woman is tasked with the passive role of domesticity while the active man goes out and constantly remakes the world.

woman too, the 'Nurse', who wobbles 'two invisible drops' of Radiostol, a Vitamin D supplement, prescribed to correct "deformity" in the recipient, onto the narrator's toast to make 'a special little wafer like a host.' This is motherhood and caring elevated to the height of religion, an illustration of the Victorian patriarchal view of woman as 'The Angel In The House'.[168] The supplement is invisible, suggesting its insidiousness: it is a prophylactic against the deformity of rickets, used as metaphor for the deformity of the female role, or more potently, for the deformity of the speaker thinking to break free of the patriarchal constraints—without its recipient even noticing its existence. The 'upstairs sister', that is, that split-off part of the speaker's own self, is outside this caring circle, she is fed 'next to nothing/At least that's what my upstairs sister thinks.' The 'sister' thinks this because the feeding — the passing on of patriarchal values — is insidious, 'invisible'. The sister is an oppression to the speaker of this poem; more correctly an oppression to that aspect of the speaker's ego which refuses to conform to most of the norms of daily domestic life. The sister is more domesticated, evidenced in the fact that she has a kitten, a domesticated animal; this shows the ambivalent feelings the daughter-speaker has towards domesticity and patriarchal constraint. The image of the 'tiny Tippex brush' undertaking the huge task of painting a skyscraper, suggests the attempt to escape domesticity is a near-impossible job. The Tippex brush is also, arguably, a symbol of secretarial work, one career outside the home which may have been acceptable for a young woman within the constraints imposed by patriarchy; or symbolic of the speaker's own ambition to become a writer, which is evidenced in later poems in the sequence. In order to escape the constraints of the prescribed female role, the daughter-speaker has to 'run into the yard to greet the wasps', symbolic threats of life outside the domestic realm. Half of her psyche, the half she calls 'sister', whom she has created as a defence mechanism, is indoors, constrained in the domestic sphere, doing what society expects of her; the real half, the adult persona herself, is trying to escape domesticity: 'my sister on her bed, and me outside, my naked body smeared with marmalade', suggesting she is welcoming the unknown, albeit frightening, elements of a future outside the domestic sphere of the

[168] Coventry Patmore, 'The Angel in the House'.

woman 'castrated' by patriarchy, a constraint that has been accepted by her mother. She encourages, entices, those 'wasps' with jam in order to resist the mirror image of her mother, and unquestioningly accepting a domestic role.

Hill also uses fetishism in this collection as a way of retaining connection with the mother disappearing in death. In having to face the imminent loss of the mother, the daughter-speaker resorts to the fetish of an early toy, the doll Violet, which she and her 'sister' shared as children.

My Sister and I in the Lift

Every day I dread stepping out.
I dread the ward. I dread the corridor.
I dread the sight of seeing her in bed.
I dread the rush of sweat inside my clothes.
I dread the hours of having to be brave.
But failing to be brave would be much worse.
Or maybe failing's being braver still.
Can everybody please leave the ward.
I want to be alone with my mother.
They lost her in the bowels of the hospital.
She waited in her wheelchair all day.
My sister must be bodily removed.
Injected with a sedative if necessary.
The two of us are sisters it is true
but have you ever noticed how we never speak?
We used to have a doll called Violet
that used to smell of violet cachous.
Or did I just imagine it? The kisses?
Did I just imagine them as well?
Give us back the bald velvet face
stuffed with straw that creaked
when we cuddled her, give us back
the cheeks we kissed to shreds,
so we can learn tenderness again.
Please remove all the other patients,
or let them die, if they want to, too.
Bring them wild flowers. Nothing else.
Listen to them. Listen to them. Listen to them.[169]

[169] Selima Hill, p. 20.

The doll, Violet, is a fetishistic substitute for the mother, enabling the daughter-speaker to reconnect with an earlier memory of her mother as a healthy woman. The first five lines reveal the daughter-speaker's distraught frame of mind: the use of 'dread' six times; also the short, staccato sentences for the first thirteen lines of the poem, illustrate the daughter's anxiety at impending permanent separation from the mother through the mother's death. Hill has deployed the stylistic devices to build that anxiety, the need to concentrate on what is being said, one thought at a time. The daughter-speaker 'wants to be alone with my mother' even at the expense of the protective 'sister', revealing her longing to reconnect with the disappearing mother. The shared doll, Violet, is symbolic of the mother of the daughter's childhood. This view is supported by the poem 'My Sister's Doll',[170] in which the 'sister' dresses the mother like a doll, trying out 'different positions/as if she's still alive, which she's not/or barely is…' The doll, Violet, 'used to smell of violet cachous'. The snow in the poem 'My Sister's Secret Rule',[171] also smelled of violets, a metaphor for delusion: 'The falling snow may smell of violets/but it is falling snow nonetheless.' The doll is also a delusion, a fetish standing in for the lost mother of childhood, the 'bald, velvet face' a substitute for the beardless parent, the mother. The mother is the fount of that tenderness the daughter-speaker wants 'to learn again', the reconnection she wishes to establish with the dying mother whose 'cheeks we used to kiss to shreds.' The daughter wants all the other patients and everybody else, including her 'sister', to be removed from this hospital scene so she can reconstruct the close, loving relationship with her mother she enjoyed in childhood, Klein's 'constant interaction of love and hate'.[172] The poem describes the daughter-speaker's anxiety as she travels in the lift to the ward; she has not reached the mother's bed yet, as witnessed in the poem's title and its first line, 'Every day I dread stepping out' from the lift. From the time the infant first perceives the mother as a good and/or a punishing breast, to this declaration of love and dread en route to the potential deathbed of the mother, Klein's 'constant interaction' between love and hate is acknowledged in this poem.

[170] Selima Hill, p. 21.
[171] Selima Hill, p. 21.
[172] Melanie Klein, p. 306.

In these two sections, I have shown how Selima Hill and Pascale Petit both use mask, mirror and fetish, albeit in different ways, in poetry that explores the mother-daughter bond. I became aware in my creative practice that I was reading these poets in my role as a writer: as a result of my analyses of the poetry of Petit, Hill and Duffy, I have used the metaphors of mirror, mask and fetish in an exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in aspects of my own work. The effect of masking is explored in my poem 'Cuckoo' for instance, in which daughter and mother are unknowable to each other. The butter pats, the cold board and the boning knife are used as fetishes for the emotionally absent mother in my poems 'Churning' and 'Runner Beans'; the sequence of 'Alternative Mother' poems are all grounded in an exploration of the mirror of the other. I was inspired by Petit's use of animal imagery to explore this as a trope in 'Alternative Mother #11: A Three-toed Sloth' and in the poem 'Code'. I will turn now to a closer examination of the impact on my own poetry of the writing of Petit and Hill, in which I will consider mirror, mask and fetish in these and other of my own poems.

The impact on my own creative work of Pascale Petit's, Selima Hill's and Carol Ann Duffy's poetry.

In this section I consider how my research into critical theory, and my reading of Petit, Hill and Duffy influenced the creative aspect of the work. As I researched Hill's and Petit's use of the fetish, I was empowered to explore this in my own poetry. I looked at tools my mother used to fulfil the role of wife and mother, and examined the relationship of daughter to mother through those tools. In these poems, museum artefacts replace the absent mother in a longing to reconnect with her. 'Churning', 'Spooning', and 'Your Hands' are three poems that explore the fetish in the mother-daughter relationship.[173] Unable to recognise, in my relationship with her, my mother as a woman with desires outside the domestic, I remembered her best through the things she used in her everyday life as a farm labourer's wife. These poems attest to the distant relationship she maintained with her daughters. In 'Churning', the mother is an extension of the family task of making butter, almost another sibling in the line. The 'wooden (butter) pats on a cold board' are the tools she uses directly, and they are hard and cold representations. In 'Spooning' she is the handle-end of a spoon used for discipline. In 'Your Hands', the daughter-speaker is aware only of the hands, and the tools they hold. The dialogue in this poem is imagined only: the silent 'if' beginning stanza 4 attests to this: '[if] Asked…' The question has not actually been asked. All the objects in these poems may be seen as museum artefacts in an exhibition of my mother's life. The churn, the spoon, the tools for cleaning eggs can be seen as 'fetishes' for the lost and desired object, the loving mother.[174] The relationship is transposed onto her tools for work, things I have endowed with 'the strong life of the inert',[175] artefacts for forming butter, cleaning eggs; or, in 'Spooning', for crowd control, maintaining discipline among a recalcitrant brood. Love, affection, the mutual recognition that comes from 'the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other',[176] is nowhere in these poems. The mother makes no personal contact with the daughter and vice

[173] See the creative element: 'Churning', 'Spooning' and 'Your Hands', p. 120, p. 122, and p. 128, below.
[174] Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', in *Three Essays,* p351-357.
[175] Jean Sprackland, 'Crystallography', in *Green Noise* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), p.39.
[176] Jessica Benjamin, p. 23.

versa; any contact is via the fetishistic replacements for the emotionally absent mother.

Analysing the surrealism in Selima Hill's sequence, and the animal imagery in the two collections of Pascale Petit, and recognising how Carol Ann Duffy's poetry explores the role of daughter-become-mother, I was inspired to apply these issues to the mother-daughter relationship in my own creative work. In 'Code', a father has suffered a cerebrovascular accident following the death of his only son. Drawing on Petit's use of animal imagery, I used an eel as metaphor for the challenge of communicating with the father whose speech centre has been impaired by the stroke. I used an adapted Oulipo exercise, N+7, to choose the father's words:[177]

> Lipstick! toadmouse trapmouse
> mould ras-ras-rascal searaft
> wattle-weave ears-years ears-years
> Lipstick fucksake!
>
> > What are you saying, Daddy?
> > Words are sliding out of your mouth
> > like slippery eels that keep wriggling
> > long after they're chopped up
> > and dead in the bucket.[178]

Hill's use of surreal juxtapositions was the stimulus for my poem, 'Exposed' which employs similar surreal imagery in describing the mother's longing for a boy child:

> *leave your girls*
> *without protection or breast, a daughter*
> *will be the death of a mother.*
>
> Still
> I like to think she lay awake nights
> wondering where I washed up
>
> but really I suppose she slept, happily
> dreaming of pulling all her teeth out.[179]

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[177] 'A Brief Guide to Oulipo', at poets.org: <https://m.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-oulipo>There is no author credit to this poets.org article. [Accessed 23 August 2018]

[178] See the creative element: 'Code', p. 152, below.

[179] See the creative element: 'Exposed' p. 86, lines 6-13, below; see also my poems 'Cuckoo'

Freud claimed that 'dreams with a dental stimulus occurring in women have the meaning of birth dreams' and in my interpretation, of giving birth to a son: given that dental dreams in males are symbolic — for Freud — of male masturbation, and that male dreams of having teeth pulled by someone else are symbolic in Freud's work of castration anxiety,[180] it seemed a short creative leap to conjoin Freud's metaphorical claims for dental dreams in women with the male genitalia; hence my interpretation of dreaming of the birthing of sons. Having rid herself of the unwanted daughter: '*…a daughter/will be the death of a mother*', the mother dreams of having her teeth pulled in this poem, a metaphor I have constructed for the mother dreaming of birthing boys, the mother's vicarious access to the phallus.[181]

My research into psychoanalytical and feminist theories, and into masks, mirrors and the fetish, also impacted upon my creative work. Writing of a daughter's first (psychological) separation from closeness to the mother, Juliet Mitchell recognises '[t]he girl's Oedipal situation [as] a complete displacement of her mother-attachment on to her father. And as with all displacements, what has been displaced remains highly vocal.'[182] This continuing influence of the early mother-attachment is explored in my sonnet corona, 'Mirror Images', where the daughter-speaker says '*You're my speaking, my thinking, my idiom,/It's your language I speak — with your tongue.'*[183] The relentlessness of the mother-daughter relationship, explored in this poem, is a constant throughout life and 'it will be at their peril that their prehistory…will continue to dominate in their lives.' [184] The perilous 'prehistory' of girls is the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother, a relationship that, for Mitchell, dominates the lives of daughters throughout life. Claire Buck agrees that 'a pre-

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p. 107, 'Pirate Copies' p. 101, and 'Lunacy' p. 102, which are also attributable to the surreal influence of Selima Hill.

[180] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 401-2.

[181] Shelley Phillips, *Beyond the Myths* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.108. This book was first published in Australia in 1991.

[182] Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism,* p. 110.

[183] See the creative element, below: 'Mirror Images' pp. 132-34; the final sonnet in the crown, lines 3-4.

[184] Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism,* p.110.

Oedipal history…still intrudes on the [female] subject who is supposedly safely installed in the symbolic world of mature sexual identity'.[185] That is to say, in the post-Oedipal world of prescribed attachments and identifications: the relationship with the mother, and the societal identifications that are involved in that relationship, are fundamental to a daughter's subjectivity; and no matter the difficulty of the relationship — through mental ill health, separation or even death — connection, separation and reconnection within that relationship are continuing psychological umbilici throughout a girl-child's life. This is the 'peril' that Juliet Mitchell refers to. It is exemplified in the work of two of the poets I have chosen to study closely, Pascale Petit and Selima Hill; and also in my own writing about the mother-daughter relationship.

Although Carol Ann Duffy's mother-daughter poems describe a satisfying relationship, some daughters do not enjoy a mother with a loving, self-affirming gaze. The daughter-speaker of Pascale Petit's collections has difficulty seeing herself reflected in the psychotic mother's gaze; Selima Hill's daughter-speaker, due to her own mental instability, does not recognise the self that is reflected by the mother's gaze, splitting her self into self-and-sister. The difficulty of this mutuality — of the daughter being seen by the seeing mother who is concurrently being seen by the daughter — is explored in my poem 'The Bat And Not The Ball', in which mother and daughter fail to recognise each other, fail to see each other; until the daughter is old enough to reflect on this absence of recognition in her adulthood:

> 'for years it hurt to see you couldn't see me
> like the worn out pushchair waiting in the hall
>
> I sulked because you tried hard not to know me
> while you were as strange to me as Senegal…'[186]

The poem consciously explores Jessica Benjamin's 'mutual recognition' theory.[187] The daughter-speaker recognizes the *two-way* importance of the mirror of the mother and no longer feels resentment at the lack of mirror in the mother's gaze. It

[185] Claire Buck, 'Introduction', in Jan Montefiore, p. xix.
[186] See the creative element: The Bat and Not the Ball', p. 105, below.
[187] Jessica Benjamin, p. 23-31.

is not only the daughter who does not see herself, cannot know herself. The daughter also recognizes that the mother has never been known to her daughter as a subjective self: 'you were as strange to me as Senegal'. The 'worn out pushchair' suggests a long career in childbirth. The emotionally absent, and seemingly chronically depressed, mother is an ineffective mirror for the daughter's developing sense of self; but also ineffective as a means of the daughter being able to see the mother reflecting the daughter back to herself. In recognizing that the mother wants to be 'the bat and not the ball', the daughter is recognizing the mother's need for subjectivity, for agency: for the active role of the bat and not the passive role of the ball. The ending, 'what if chopping onions/turns out more rewarding than a smile', makes explicit the mother's depression — chopping onions suggestive of tears — at the lack of recognition she has among the members of her large family, at her unrecognized selfhood. If the mother is a person without agency, without subjectivity, there can be no mutual recognition between her and her daughter; the daughter will not be able to see herself developing in the mirror of mother as relational object.

As a child growing up in the patriarchal and feudal society of agricultural labour, I experienced patriarchy as the norm. I made a conscious, creative decision to explore feminist theory in the poem 'Just How it Was': 'she' is defined only by the domestic role she holds, whereas 'he' is powerful, omniscient and omnipresent, able to heft horses on his back, command the weather; the universe is his space, 'he' is 'god',[188] reflecting the claims Chodorow and Dinnerstein make that women fulfil th4e domestic, men go out and own the world. In recognising the patriarchal bias against women, and particularly mothers, I looked for ways in which external factors can impinge on the ability of a mother to be an effective mirror for her daughter's subjectivity. The poem 'Painted Lady' shows a growing realization that the mother is a person with desires of her own, not just a product of the desires of her husband and children; her subjectivity as 'woman' is being strangled by her maternal and

[188] See the creative element: 'Just How It Was', p. 112, below.

wifely function.[189] The poem is focused on a birthday present from the father to the mother, a gift that reveals more about his desire than hers. The parents are clearly complete opposites: the father, 'the July heat', likes nights at the pub, likes the women he meets there. He is a man with agency. The mother, 'made of snow' seems to melt and disappear in her subservience to him, in her role as 'mute substratum',[190] waiting passively 'for years' at the window for his 'drunken home-comings'.[191] In the poem, 'Lunacy',[192] the mother's 'waiting' — for the absent husband or for her own fulfilment — continues. The daughter is unsure of her own identity, born to the mother who has 'wasted years at that window, waiting'. Like a latter-day Lady of Shalott, the mother's gaze is turned away from the daughter, is directed out of the window, beyond the domestic, beyond the prescribed setting of the mother's 'place' in the home towards some desirable and inaccessible other existence beyond the home. The gaze, because directed away from the daughter, is ineffective as a mirror for the daughter to know herself. The daughter attempts to construct an alternative identity from an old photograph of her mother as a young woman with ambitions of her own: 'the victrix ludorum cup,/the gold medal round her neck', and a different possible father, the 'moon-man' who will one day 'claim me back'. She 'can make out the waxing moon through the curtains': the 'moon-man', she thinks, is coming to claim his daughter. When he comes, the daughter at last will know herself.

As I read and analysed Petit's and Hill's poetry, thought about the role of mirrors in the development of a sense of self, I considered alternative mother-mirrors, experimenting with the possible developmental gazes of aunts or other women I knew; or with my heroes from history and literature. The 'Alternative Mother' sequence is the eponymous series of the collection. How would subjectivity develop if reflected in these alternative mirrors? I have considered men as well as women, also places of importance in my growing-up, even looked at the biological characteristics of animals in this sequence of 'alternative mothers', reflecting that if

[189] Elizabeth Grosz, p. 120.
[190] Elizabeth Grosz, quoting Luce Irigaray, p. 121.
[191] See the creative element: 'Painted Lady', p. 104, below.
[192] See the creative element: 'Lunacy', p. 102, below.

all the speaker had as a role model was, for instance, a three-toed sloth, seeing herself

> '… as passive philosopher
> examining the energy of predator
> and arriving at the ergo of leaves…'[193]

what kind of a possible self would be mirrored back to her?

The 'alternative mother' sequence reflects on the impact of effective, or ineffective, mirrors of the 'other' in a daughter's growth of subjectivity. It was inspired by my reading of Winnicott's theory of 'good enough' mothering. 'Maternal' is a concept describing 'the total attitude to babies and their care', and within the scope of this, Winnicott includes fathers. [194] 'Good enough mothering' is not uniquely definable, but is definable in individual child-care situations.[195] Mothering is 'good enough' if it causes no impediment to healthy mental and physical development. 'The basis of mental health is being actively laid down in the course of every infancy when the mother is good enough at her job…'[196] The concept of 'good enough mothering' is instrumental in my sequence of 'alternative mother poems'. It is relatively easy to see how a positive 'mirror' like Boudicca, whose 'eyes are/vengeful swords you sheathe from me' and who was 'there when I cried out to you…',[197] could lead to a positive self-image in a daughter; but if a mother was like Mary B, exacerbating her 'bronikal chest' by inhaling Park Drive toxins and irritating her ulcer by visiting her local every day

> 'where you leave me out
> on the pavement in the pram
>
> with a bottle of coke
> and a bag of ready salted
>
> while you down whiskeys
> *for medi-sigh-nal purposes',*[198]

[193] See the creative element: 'Alternative Mother #11: A three toed sloth', p. 123, below.
[194] D.W. Winnicott, *Home….,* p. 154.
[195] D.W. Winnicott, *Home…,* p. 119.
[196] D.W. Winnicott, *Home...,* p. 179.
[197] See the creative element: 'Alternative Mother # 2: Boudicca', p. 87, below.
[198] See the creative element: 'Alternative Mother # 8: Mary B', p. 108, below.

what would be the chances of developing healthy mental and physical well-being? I even explored place, the Fens where I was born and grew up, as a possible mirror of a daughter's subjective development.[199] The 'mirrors' I chose as alternative mothers are not necessarily ideal role models. We do not always see what we want to see when we look in a mirror. We all know from the fairground Hall of Mirrors that mirrors can distort as well as offer true reflections and I have long suspected that the changing rooms in fashion retail outlets use a form of distorting mirror that makes the seer look slimmer than they really are. The sequence of 'alternative mother' poems may be read as metaphor for the random hand we are all dealt at conception.

A catastrophic event in the lives of mothers and daughters can significantly affect their relationship. In the Selima Hill sequence, the daughter-speakers' own mental state and the terminally ill health of the mother are significant events affecting the mother-daughter relationship. For Pascale Petit's daughter-speaker, the catastrophic event is the rape and abuse of the mother and her subsequent psychosis. The daughter's abuse at the hands of the father, 'the archangel beast',[200] the 'cockroach',[201] is also an element of the distance between mother and daughter. A significant event in a child's life can fundamentally affect the relationship of a mother to her daughter and effect a separation that seems unbridgeable. The death of the only boy child in a family of nine siblings might be seen as a 'significant event'. My poem 'How to wind a fat gold watch' attests to a perceived subordination of a girl child to her male sibling. The poem is an instruction to a mother to love an infant despite her being a girl child: 'Don't look on her and see the tadpoles missing from your beck…' A son is a precious commodity in a large family of girls, a mother's vicarious access to the phallus,[202] therefore it is easy to see how the death of that only son would be a very significant event in the relationship of a daughter to her mother. I explored this hypothesis in a sequence of multiple-voice poems dealing with such a death and its impact on the family. The mother is increasingly lost to the

[199] See the creative element: 'Alternative Mother #5: The Fens', p. 98, below.
[200] Pascale Petit, *MA,* 'The Jaguar', p. 107.
[201] Pascale Petit, *MA,* 'Madre de Dios', p. 58.
[202] Shelley Phillips, p.108.

family in these poems,[203] which describe aspects of the separation of mother and daughter following the traumatic event of the son's/brother's death. They find no re-connection, just an ever-widening emotional distance. The poems explore the traumatic event that has caused this separation, but do not achieve reconciliation, they merely reflect on the death of the brother and the effect on family members of that traumatic event. In 'The Secret of Eternal Life' the sister-speaker reflects on the longevity of grief. We assume a sister because 'You were seventeen when you found it,/I was fourteen. Now I'm older/than Grandma was then, you're still/seventeen.'[204] This is a younger family member, who is now 'older than grandma', suggesting a female speaker, younger than the youth who has died, but of the same family — the shared 'Grandma'. Two generations later the sister still recalls the trauma of the death. The youth is assured his hallowed place in the family mythology, and the mother's heart, through his untimely death: 'eternal youth' suggests something of value; but in fact it is 'easier to find than haystack pins.' All that is required is an early death.

Several poems in this series are in the voice of the sister of the dead sibling.
In 'June 1962', the sister is reflecting on things that happened at the same time as that traumatic event. Having listed several high-profile national and international events from the news in that month, the final couplet tells of the loss of the brother: 'You went into Stoke Mandeville hospital./I never saw you again.'[205] 'Lillingstone Dayrell Churchyard' tells of the trauma of the funeral. The son/brother is buried 'like the treasure you were', lost to his mother and his sisters. That day the sister-speaker lost, not just a brother or her faith in God: 'I came face to face with God./I turned my back'.[206] She also lost her mother to emotional distance. This is made explicit in 'On Losing Your Only Boy', describing the mother's grief at the loss of the son. The daughter speaker sees the mother 'turn your face to the north/tunnel into the

[203] Included in the creative element, 'Alternative Mothers', is a series of poems relating to the death of the only son, p. 136-59, below.
[204] See the creative element: 'The Secret of Eternal Youth', p. 140, below.
[205] See the creative element: 'June 1962', p. 136, below.
[206] See the creative element: 'Lillingstone Dayrell Churchyard', p. 149, below.

permafrost.'[207] This tells how the relationship between mother and daughter has been damaged: the mother becomes cold, her mood 'permafrost'. The mother's emotional absence will not be reconciled quickly. 'You let me know I am your ice pick' places the focus for her pain on the sister/daughter who remains after the loss of the brother/son, being a focus for her grief. The mother has lost her 'treasure' and has only her undervalued girl-child left. 'Code' charts the effect of grief leading to a cerebro-vascular accident for the father following the shock of his only son's death. The father has lost his power of intelligible speech, and, drawing on Pascale Petit's use of animal analogies, 'you're making eel words […] and my eel nets are torn.'[208] He has not lost his understanding though: 'Fucksake…' ending each outburst from the father shows he wants to be understood but knows he is not. The mother is absent from this poem too, withdrawn to 'the permafrost' of grief in the last poem. It is the daughter, the sister of the dead brother, who is left to provide care to the father, disabled through grief. She is fulfilling the caring role of the emotionally absent wife/mother, in a form of virtual reconnection of the daughter with her mother, fulfilling by proxy the wifely duty of care.

[207] See the creative element: 'On Losing Your Only Boy', p. 144, below.
[208] See the creative element: 'Code', p. 152, below.

Conclusion.

Mother Goddesses — Demeter, Isis, Kali among others — have been honoured in world religions; indeed, the cult of the mother is the foundation of western religious and cultural history. Often this is a 'shadow tale', revealing both sides of the woman-become-mother: Madonna and whore; the unsullied Mary versus the sinful temptress, Eve; the good — though often prematurely dead — lost mother of fairy tales versus her replacement, the wicked, self-seeking and vindictive step-mother. Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House'[209] cemented into the Victorian consciousness an idealised view of the mother as self-sacrificing, dedicated to the comfort and care of home and family, putting aside her own desires in the interest of others' needs. I have shown how, historically, this patriarchal view of motherhood made it difficult for women to be taken seriously in anything but the domestic role, including as poets and writers. An in-depth analysis of UK based poetry anthologies covering work from the first to the second Elizabethan ages, shows an overwhelming bias towards male poets. I focussed on the sonnet form to show how women poets have had to produce their poems by adapting their own needs as writers to historically male-oriented forms, of which the sonnet is only one example. In the course of this aspect of the research, I discovered, and explored in my own work, the sonnet corona, or crown of sonnets, explored by, for instance, Christina Rossetti,[210] and Sandra M. Gilbert,[211] and how this has been a tool for women poets in their own exploration of the mother-daughter relationship. My own sonnet corona, 'Mirror Images' explores the intergenerational nature of the mother-daughter bond.

Research into the complex mother-daughter relationship reveals how this self-sacrificing 'Angel in the House' is a false scenario: women, including women who become mothers, are desiring — though possibly unfulfilled — subjects; daughters are desiring subjects. Jessica Benjamin pinpoints the need for mutual recognition in the development of subjectivity. Sometimes the separate desires of mothers and

[209] Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* offered a depiction of the ideal woman as domesticated, maternal, caring, emotionally supporting the man.
[210] Christina Rossetti called 'Monna Innominata' a 'sonnet of sonnets'.
[211] Susan Gilbert's sonnet corona, 'Belongings', inspired me to write a corona of my own, 'Mirror Images', in *Alternative Mothers*, p. 126-128.

their daughters do not coincide, and may even clash. Freud claimed that boys are better able to deal with ambivalent feelings towards their mother by directing their Oedipal hostility onto their father; girls have no secondary outlet and must direct their hostile feelings towards their mothers in order to grow away from them and become independent subjects, and here lies the inherent potential toxicity of the relationship. Freud describes the ambivalence of the mother-daughter bond, in which the daughter's 'attachment to the mother is bound to perish, precisely because it was the first and was so intense.'[212] Melanie Klein showed how the 'constant interaction' between love and hate in this ambivalent relationship lasts a lifetime. This is illustrated in Lydia Davis's microfiction, in which the daughter can never please the mother, can never do enough to please the mother. The interaction of love and hate is the unwritten, between-the-lines text of this piece, in which 'hole' suggests grave, leading to the ironic joy for the mother on the annihilation of her daughter:

> The Mother
>
> The girl wrote a story. "But how much better it would be if you wrote a novel," said her mother. The girl built a dollhouse. "But how much better if it were a real house," her mother said. The girl made a small pillow for her father. "But wouldn't a quilt be more practical," said her mother. The girl dug a small hole in the garden. "But how much better if you dug a large hole," said her mother. The girl dug a large hole and went to sleep in it. "But how much better if you slept forever," said her mother.[213]

It is the flawed, potentially toxic nature of the mother-daughter relationship that has been the focus of this thesis. I have shown how daughters become women, and potentially mothers, in the mirror of society's gaze, notably in the gaze of their primary care-giver, usually the mother. Problems arise in the relationship when this mirror-gaze is obscured, for instance by mental illness, forced separation or impending death. I have analysed the poetry in one sequence of Selima Hill's work,

[212] Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, p. 382-383.
[213] Lydia Davies, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (London: Penguin, 2013); Amazon e-book, loc. 1394.

in which the daughter-speaker's reflection in the mother's gaze is obscured by the daughter's history of mental illness, and the mother's impending death. The focal point for my analysis of Pascale Petit's two poetry collections is the impairment of the daughter-speaker's bond with her mother, due to the mother's psychosis. In both cases, the daughter-speaker seeks reconnection with the lost mother. Hill and Petit both use the power of the fetish to help them reconstruct that impaired relationship, seeking the lost desired object, the loving mother, in symbolic artefacts. Petit employs the myths, flora and fauna of the Amazon rainforest as fetishes for this lost connection; Hill's daughter-speaker seeks her lost mother in the objects that surround the mother's deathbed; or in the metaphor of a doll, Violet, remembered from her childhood. When the mirror of the other is obscured, I have shown how daughters and their mothers use masks to hide themselves from the other's gaze; how, in Winnicott's phrase, they build 'false selves' in order to protect the 'true self' that becomes vulnerable in a flawed relationship. In contrast to these difficult maternal relationships, Carol Ann Duffy, writing from the perspective of both mother and daughter, within loving relationships, shows how the maternal relationship can be a satisfying, intergenerational, matrilineal link with past and future. Throughout, the research has inspired my own work as a poet in a collection of poetry that reflects upon questions raised concerning the prescribed role of women in patriarchy and a girl-child's resistance to that prescription; and how these conflicts impact upon a daughter's relationship with her mother. It is in my critical analyses of the poetry of Petit, Hill and Duffy, and in the publication of the poems in my collection, that my interaction with the on-going conversation about the mother-daughter relationship will be heard.

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Preface:

This is a project grounded in Practice as Research, the academic foundation of which is 'theory imbricated within practice',[214] in which the various theories and the creative practice overlap like the scales of a fish, or tiles on a roof.[215] I came to the work as a poet, a creative thinker and writer. Researching psychoanalytic, feminist, mirror, mask and fetish theories was new ground for me. In order to attain a working understanding of the theoretical aspects of the work, I had to immerse myself in theoretical reading, in depth and for many months. By applying the theories to analysis of the poetry of Pascale Petit and Selima Hill, the theories acquired new life and meaning for me. This had a conscious effect on my own creative work, and early in the work I made conscious decisions to apply the theories to some of my poetry. This is evident in several ways.

A large part of a Practice as Research degree is the need for reflection, on the theory and on the practice, and on the interaction between the two. For instance, in a short analysis of my poem 'Exposed', on page 63 above, I reference Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams,* where he described 'tooth-pulling' dreams as having a sexual interpretation: masturbation or castration if dreamed by men, giving birth if dreamed by women.[216] This is an ekphrastic poem, after 'Flood' by John Everett Milais; it was written from my own life experience, where boy children were privileged above girls, and I was aware of Freud's dream interpretation when I wrote it. The theory resonated with me. What I hadn't appreciated when I wrote it was Shelley Phillips claim that boy children are the 'castrated' mother's vicarious access to the phallus.[217] I encountered this piece of theory later in my work, and it added a further dimension to the poem for me; but it also went some way to elucidate my relationship with my mother, a relationship inherent in the anger and regret outlined in the poem: recognition is a mutually reciprocal thing. My mother was 'castrated' in the sense that she was devoid of power beyond the home. Reading Phillips's book

[214] Robin Nelson, loc. 828.
[215] https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/imbricate
[216] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 401-2.
[217] Shelley Phillips, *Beyond the Myths*, p.108.

highlighted that mother's access to the 'phallus' was indeed inherent in her boy child. We girls were doubly devoid of the phallus: being girls, we were without phallus, so we brought no vicarious phallic power to our mother either. This recognition of mother's sense of lack led to another conscious application of theory to creative practice, in the poem 'The Bat And Not The Ball', which illustrates and elucidates Jessica Benjamin's theory of mutual recognition; in being lost by not being recognised by the mother, the daughter-speaker of the poem comes to realise that the mother also lacks recognition. I have analysed this in detail on pages 64-65 above. These inclusions of theory were conscious, creative decisions.

However, far more interesting are the ways in which the theory unconsciously impacted upon the creative practice. In undertaking a long period of study, the mind becomes embroiled in the theme of the study. I attended several writing workshops and residentials whilst I was working towards the PhD, and I was aware that, whatever the offered prompt, a poem relating to the mother-daughter relationship was most often the product. The poem 'Alternative Mother #17: Alice' is an example of this, from a Kim Moore workshop themed around notions of audience/reader: who are we talking to in a poem? Alice was a response to an invitation to write a poem related to a book or reading activity. My favourite book as a child was *Alice In Wonderland.* Alice, of course, is the eponymous child heroine in Lewis Caroll's book, but she has become a mother in my poem, carrying within her recognisable elements of her childhood, as Klein recognised.[218] I hadn't intended to write a 'mother' poem; but that was the creative space I was working in at the time. So the child Alice becomes an 'alternative mother'.

Some of themes in the collection are planned: the poems dealing with the death of a brother and its impact on the family, for instance. But other, unconscious themes are also present. Several of the poems have an ekphrastic stimulus, for instance. I'm not a poet who normally uses ekphrasis and yet in this collection, reflections on artwork, music, the intertextuality of poetry is evident; for example, in 'Alternative

[218] Melanie Klein *LGR* pp. 317-320

Mother #1: Kali', 'Usurper', the sonnet crown 'Mirror Images'. All of these poems were written after a visit to the Manchester Art Gallery, taking notes from artworks on display, allowing these into the creative space inhabited by mothers and daughters. In addition, 'How to wind a fat gold watch' references Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song'. I take a poem in which a new mother writes of her love for her newborn girl child to implore a mother to value a daughter as equal to a son. In 'Pirate Copies' there is a reference to Mendelsohn. Perhaps Duffy's 'fluent, glittery stream' flows with all the arts, not just poetry.[219]

Several of the poems rely on the trope of the fetish. 'Churning', 'Spooning' and 'Making Cakes' were written early in the project, the tools and equipment being the means of bringing the lost mother to life in poetry. They recall the lost mother through the tools she used or the jobs she undertook in her role as mother/wife. 'Your Hands' was written after I researched the fetish theoretically. It differs from the early poems in that it concentrates on one part of the mother's anatomy while undertaking one of those jobs. It exhibits aspects of psychoanalytic theory, feminism, fetish theory in questioning the mother's constricting role in the patriarchy in a poem that recognises the sense of lack the 'castrated' mother felt: 'Asked would you like to free the hens from their cages,/bin the eggs and fly away to swim off Santorini/you'd have said *In Santorini, though the hens run free,/still the cock is king.'* This is a woman is without power then, a woman castrated by the patriarchal construct of a mother's role.

Seeing, observing, looking; self-image reflected in the mirror of the Other: these theories recur in the poems: 'How to wind a fat gold watch' closes with the lines 'Notice her. Make sure/she notices you noticing her every day.' This is an illustration of how important 'gaze' appears as a theme in the collection. The entire 'alternative mother' sequence is based in Lacan's and Winnicott's mirror theories: how a daughter grows to know herself in the mirror of the Other's, usually the mother's, gaze. In this sequence I explored what a different self might develop in the mirror of

[219] Carol Ann Duffy, 'Invisible Ink' in *The Bees* p. 26.

alternative gazes. A daughter of 'Alternative Mother #8: Mary B', left on the pavement outside the pub, 'with a bottle of coke/and a bag of ready salted' would be a different subject, one imagines, reflected in a different mother-mirror, for instance 'Alternative Mother # 2: Boudicca': 'You were there when I cried out to you'. Equally, the daughter of 'Alternative Mother #9: Cynthia' would possibly gain a different view of the disposability of the latest 'must-haves' if she saw herself reflected in the mirror-gaze of 'Alternative Mother #18: Ted', who values the soil the peonies are grown in above the peonies themselves. Masking is also inherent in these 'alternative mother' poems: the 'real' mother is disguised behind the mask of these 'alternatives'; or more correctly, the daughter applies the mask to the mother in order to consider alternatives. Indeed, four of the 'Alternative Mothers' have been accepted for publication by the Writers' Café Journal, 'masks' edition.

These poems were consciously exploring 'gaze' as reflected in the mirror of the Other. But the trope of 'gaze' is evident in other poems, unconsciously written from the creative space I lived in when I was working on the collection. 'Hair', for instance, has a speaker who looks enviously on a schoolfriend's blonde hair, 'smooth as snow on a piste/silver silk/spinning down her back/weaving me jealous', culminating in the speaker trying on a blonde wig in a department store as a young adult, gazing at the effect in a mirror only to realise the reflection doesn't match the long-held desire. In 'The Bat And Not The Ball', the daughter-speaker regrets that she has been invisible to her mother 'it hurt to see you couldn't see me/like the worn out pushchair waiting in the hall'. This reiterates the importance of the mirror of the Other's gaze in the developing self of the daughter. In 'Cuckoo', the daughter-speaker smiles at the camera for a school photo, but 'my eyes are staring at the lens like lasers'. 'Alternative Mother #11: A three-toed sloth' foregrounds the importance of the gaze of the Other by starting each stanza with 'see yourself…' These were all poems written following my research into the mirror theories of Lacan and Winnicott, but the theory was not consciously employed: I did not set out to write a series of poems exploring 'gaze'. My intention with the 'alternative mother' sequence was indeed to explore the mirror of the Other, but the trope of looking/seeing permeates the work in other, less conscious ways.

Les Murray described the creative writing process as requiring, in the fullness of it, the coming together of mind, imagination and body: three elements to make the poem whole.[220] The most 'whole' poems in 'Alternative Mothers' arose from such balance. Without the unconscious 'imaginative', *and* the power of the conscious mind in the composition, *and* the physical process of drafting, redrafting, editing, publishing, there can be no poem worth its space on the page. It is in the creative space created by the theory, and in the composition of the poems themselves, which explore ways in which theory can enhance, and be enhanced by, creative writing that the originality of this work exists; and it is in the publication of the poems, and the peer scrutiny and review that are elements of their publication, that the contribution to knowledge — knowledge shared with the reader of the work — will be evident.

[220] Les Murray 'A Defence of Poetry' at http://www.lesmurray.org/defence.htm [accessed 1st October 2019]

Alternative Mothers

The creative element

Rachel Davies

List of Contents

Motherhood

having or relating to an inherent worthiness, justness,
or goodness that is obvious or unarguable

she knows love is more than new shoes, a roof to sleep under,
a full belly

midwives told they must respect mothers who decide
not to breastfeed

she expresses milk into sterilized bottles
goes out to find her lost self

enthusiastic, anxious, joyfully fecund, heartbreakingly infertile

somewhere a spermatozoon is swimming towards her

she carries baby in a papoose close to her heart
where she will always hold her

she loves the smell of babies straight from the bath
dusted with Johnson's baby powder, loves the smell
even when they sick up clotted milk on her best silk shirt

she understands that babies are shit manufacturing plants

she sings nursery rhymes so loud and long
the childfree couple next door complains about the noise

'photographing motherhood' focuses on the mother-child bond

she knows the lonely struggle of motherhood,
sits for hours with baby at her breast
or tucked onto her hip like an extension

woman posts about the realities of working as a new mum

she knows the catch 22 of child care
needs childcare to enable her to work
needs to work to pay for childcare

motherhood, the unfinished work of feminism

she knows the stigma of benefit culture, the tabloid shame of the claim
wants the best of motherhood and self

woman writes to husband asking for his help raising kids

she gets to discuss role reversal with her baby's father,
who knows there is more to a mother than her baby

motherhood is a great honour and privilege, yet
it is also synonymous with servanthood

for the love of her child she will suffer the last resort of the food bank

she doesn't ignore her baby's cries even in the middle of the night
when all she needs is the oblivion of sleep

post-partum depression is not 'the baby blues'

she comforts her baby even when she is so tired
she can't remember her own name

she has to conquer the world even when she hoped
to meet herself in a peaceful dream.

the rocking of the cradle and the ruling of the world

he rocks the cradle and is happy with this
knowing phallus comes in many sizes

she knows a baby won't get in the way of running a country
says a prime minister's womb is nobody's business but her own
takes a short maternity break, returns to the affairs of state

motherhood: all love begins and ends there

she has a library of stories about the night her baby was born
and which fair of face, full of grace day it was.

[*The italicised lines are random motherhood quotes taken from an internet search.*]

Alternative Mother #1
Kali

after *Housewives With Steak Knives by Sutapa Biswas,*
Manchester Art Gallery, February 2019

She's seeing red, and it's not the first time:
it's in her shirt, the rose, the flag,
her hands are stained with it,
her tongue a crimson haka.

Her steak knife has grown up,
it's a machete now, held high
in her top left hand, its blade
stained with his blood.

In her bottom left hand
the surprised head
of her seventh spouse
who was still breathing a minute ago.

Her top right hand is held aloft
in triumph; she's forbidding me
don't say a word.

In her other right hand
Mister Lincoln, a blood red rose
perfectly unblemished
and a flag with instructions how
to shrink this head to thread
onto her gruesome necklace
along with husbands one to six.
She can do it without the recipe now.

One of them's been cut off in a grotesque smile,
*the hilarious declaration that life is worth living.**

* Sean O'Casey

Long Meg and her Daughters

On that magical day heralding summer
Meg brought her enchantment of girls

to wash their faces in the dew
as dawn rose behind their virgin skirts.

One hypocritical elder
slanders the euphoria of women

and he's lauded as saint, sees the dancers
hounded as witches by the villagers.

The snake venom in the standing prick
of that horny zealot paralysed their dance.

Petrified, yet they still seem to move in the ring.
Count them if you can. I dare you.

The Patience of Persephone
After 'A Game of Patience' by Meredith Frampling

She waits for six months in a year
then waits again for six.
She can't have what she most desires,
that lost part of herself. Listen!
That's her rummaging upstairs,
another fruitless search in the loft.

I sense the black king's impatient
for his alabaster maiden, his ice queen.
From reaping to sowing he thinks he can thaw me
with his red hot pomegranate flesh,
his spiked wine.
He blows on my neck but I don't melt.
So he waits all over again, from sowing to reaping.

I know it's time to decide:
the corn's threshed, the straw's stacked
but I'll finish my game.
This card says go — you owe him.
That card says stay — you owe her.
It's all one to me — it seems like
nothing's owed to me.
But, sod it,
my patience wears thin!

Exposed
After 'Flood' by John Everett Milais

The goat herd, brought here
by the old nanny, found me.

He said I floated downstream for days
with only the black mouser, ready
to jump ship. Time crawled in our wake.

An ancient prophecy says *leave your girls
without protection or breast, a daughter
will be the death of a mother*.

Still
I like to think she lay awake nights
worrying where I washed up

but really I suppose she slept happily
dreaming of pulling all her teeth out.

Alternative Mother #2
Boudicca

In your footsteps, pearl-wort, loosestrife
and purple orchis grow. You are Andraste the Invincible,
moon goddess, tall as an ash tree, your hair
a fire-fall that consumes empires.

Let me trace the hot threat of war-paint
colouring your cheeks as menace, widening
your wolf wife's eyes. Make the cold twists
of gold at your throat simmer.

Moon-mother, you are fearsome. Your eyes are
vengeful swords you sheathe from me; in fury
you roll up meadows into proclamations, stanch rivers,
rip up cities to skim on the sea's surface.

You were there when I cried out to you.
Scabbard your anger in his back, warrior mother,
make revenge a magma flow,
become a new stratum in earth's skin,

broadcast your battlecry as clarion then
make your wake a feast of nightshade, arum lily.
You can be no man's trophy.

Usurper
After 'Flood' by John Everett Milais

What about this baby reminds me of you?
The hair's all wrong — fair where yours was dark —
and the eyes are wrong — blue where yours were brown —
and the smile is wrong — you hadn't time to smile
for red-faced crying.
The crib then, it's the crib —
how I took yours to the banks of Whittlesey Wash
and launched you eastward to the sea.
And the cat of course — the cat was black.
I taught it tricks — to jump through a hoop,
to kick a ball, to sit on your face.
They said it was sibling jealousy.
It wasn't.
I just never liked you.

Still life with a broken arm.

I didn't think about my foot
catching in the gate
throwing me to the flagstones
snapping my arm.

I just wanted to be in their gang,
it's tedious still being kid sister,
the hanger-on even
when another one arrives.
I rushed at that gate to grow up.

I blamed you and I blamed her—
that bawling baby. You only put
the gate there to keep her safe.
But what about me?

Incantation for a missing sister

If I collect all the things that remind me of you,
like Tokyo, Carcassonne,
baguettes and cheese, a glass of chilled chablis,
ginger cats called Geraldine,
hairy spiders in the bath,
tiramisu,
ice cream and slippers,
traffic cones and contraflows,
strong opinions, a warning hand

and if I take back the things I said
that hurt you in the long years
we were still friends, if I could remember
them, every one; and not mind, turn a blind eye
when you borrowed without asking
my new silk shirt or my baggy boots;
and if I forgive you for turning down the corners
of *The Woman in White* or scratching my *Otis Blue*
at *your love is growing cold*;
and if I let you win at tennis
when you look the part and I'm
playing in jeans;

and if I make a list
of all the women who remind me of you,
who look like you or nearly do whose faces
bring you to mind or nearly do just sometimes
at a certain angle like
Christina Trevanion
Lisa Starbuck
Moira Pollock off Coronation Street
that woman who read her poetry at the event
I went to last year in Birmingham
the woman on customer services in Tesco —
though we both know you'd *never* work in Tesco

and if I put all these things into a lantern,
and light the wick then call your name
again and again
will you see the flame?
Will it bring you home?

Alternative Mother #3
Alysoun, Wife of Bath

I'm your secret but not your shame,
clearly. You had me in this motherhouse
when you were just a girl. Now I'm
your skeleton closeted in a catacomb

and you're married off, no questions asked,
to some old bloke firing blanks, so no more
birthing cramps for you, no heirs to share

the takings and I'm stuck here
suffocating for your sin while you take
your *choicest quoniam* to the market place,
making sure your remedies for love bring
no more secrets. It's just me then, enduring

Vigils, Lauds, Nones,
Vespers, Compline,

The Great Silence.

Quoniam: female genitalia. Possibly a modern derivative is 'quim'.

Love comes at a price

if you keep a goldfish in a bowl
you pay a pinch of seed as the price of love

if you keep a cat
you pay a shredded sofa as the price of love

if you keep a dog
you pay the long walks, the carry-it-home bags
the broad wet kisses as the price of love

if you keep bird in a cage
you pay the lumps raised by a frustrated beak
as the price of love

if you keep a man at the centre of your life
the frog you kissed will be the price of love

if you keep a mother at the centre of your life
don't be surprised if you pay in salt

Legacy

They say she has her mother's nose,
her hair is from her father's head
so has she nothing of her own?

Her eyes—her dad's—are conker brown,
her height's from mother's brother Ted
who tells her she's her mother's nose.

Her granddad taught her how to knit,
she took her Grandma's love of red;
so, nothing she can call her own?

She sketches just like Auntie Pat,
sews seams as fine as Great-aunt Kit,
who envies her her mother's nose.

She has a mole like Nana Jones
who passed it down through cousin Jed.
So has she nothing of her own?

Her stubbornness is Uncle Jack's,
her kindness comes from daddy's dad
who wonders at her mother's nose.

She likes to get lost in a book
away from family ties that bind.
Though she may have her mother's nose
Miss Havisham's room is all her own.

Hair

Mine
an explosion of black
Afro unruly
filling the house like a mattress
butting jokes about crows and nests
untameable
making school photos manic.

Kathleen Kilsby's
blonde
smooth as snow on the piste
silver silk
spinning down her back
weaving me jealous.

Years later
Westgate House Department Store
hair pieces, extensions
toupés and full wigs then
the complete blonde Kilsby,
the hair she crushed me behind the door for
when hair was given out.

I felt it, smelt it, drooled over it,
tried it on of course

but

Alternative Mother #4
Jean

For fun, you push me round the lounge
on the Ewbank till I beg you to stop, teach me
hula hoop, two-ball, how it's good to laugh.

You soothe my grazes with Germolene,
say a hug helps, say it's alright to cry.
You know the healing power of a biscuit.

You hand-sew my wedding dress,
stitch into a secret seam a blue satin ribbon,
a lock of your own hair, all the love it takes.

You take my daughter out, keep her
for bedtime stories, forget to bring her home
so I worry she's followed the rabbit down the hole.

You make me dance, even on those days
when the music died in me. You teach me
the euphoria of champagne.

You bake scones so light they float down
to my daughter's daughters like hot-air balloons.

Grandma was a white one

flew a turbo charged Fazerblazer:
heated seat and pillion, power assisted
bristles. Her coven wasn't impressed though,
snubbed her at the crossroads,
black-balled her. *Jealousy's the new ducking stool,*
she laughed, helping herself to what she wanted
from the cauldron without so much as a couplet.

She didn't waste the old hubble-bubble, just
threw in a word or two, a wow phrase,
a strong verb, the merest pinch of adjective.
She spelled each stanza as if it was her last.
Fly where you're not wanted, she taught me.
Land in a mess of family,
redraft them for publication.

Great Grandma Gouda

She'd not spoil a butty for a ha'p'orth of cheese.
Port to life's Stilton, she was lavish as a dill pickle.
Mind, cross her and she fermented, could hold
a grudge in one hand, a grater in the other for longer
than it took to say sorry and mean it. Family myth:
there was this bent grocer, heavy bags, light sugar,
tight bugger short-changed her by a ha'penny.
Grandma Gouda's elephant memory recalled it
every time she shopped there, checked her change
as if his life hung on it, turned customers away
with her vintage revenge. Profits melted, debts
soared. Grandma Gouda bought the shop, built
a strong cheese empire with France and Holland.
She'd have voted Remain.

Alternative Mother #5
The Fens

If landscape has mountains, forests,
a river forcing its course to the sea
she is no landscape.

If her horizon is fourteen miles away
your eyes will see for fourteen miles
across her sea-drained bed.

If goddesses reach down to touch her soil
there is nothing between their fingers
and her fecundity.

Her sky though, look at her sky,
high and wide as heaven!
She celebrates all the literature of skies,
their cumulonimbus poetry,
their war and peace.

How To Wind A Fat Gold Watch
After Sylvia Plath

Open yourself like a rose that welcomes the ladybird.
Open yourself like a rose that the ladybird will crawl into
then fold your petals around it like a womb.

Empty the lap of your life to make a beanbag soft seat
for a story. Share with her your own story,
the stories of your grandmothers.

Share with her those gifts your mother gave you,
teach her to pass down those gifts like heirlooms
to her daughters' daughters.

Don't look on her and see the years creeping like slugs
but see the pace and plot of her, how her story
is just beginning, how it needs a middle, an end.

Don't look on her and see the tadpoles missing from your beck
but see her as the clear water of the beck trickling from you,
notice her laughing stream, her eddies, her rocks and banks,

their wildflowers and willows, their soaring larks.
Listen for the skylark's aria. Notice her. Make sure
she notices you noticing her every day.

Alternative Mother #6
Pope Joan

*Duos habet et bene pendentes**

I learned the hard way the drawback
of lacking a pair, not to have them
dangling nicely.

After you dropped me on the street
between the Vatican and Lateran Palace
they tied you to your horse's tail
and dragged the life out of you.

They said you betrayed the Father
of Fathers. They said you delivered
a boy; but they thought you were a man,
so what did they know?

They erased you from Church history,
dismissed you as fiction and myth.
What need, then, to sit their new Pope
on the *dung chair* with the holey seat,
feel reassurance in the Papal plums.

* Two he has and they hang well

Pirate Copies

Her hair wasn't always silver—it was black
as a mermaid's purse, waved like an ocean.

She wanted him to sing her sea shanties like a pirate,
feed her oysters, wanted to swim forever in the lagoon
of his arms; in a past life they hummed Fingal's Cave

into the ears of Mendelsohn, never dreaming the sea
would bring its silver scales to hone their claws.

Lunacy

She's wasted years at that window, waiting.

I don't belong to him, I'm certain of it. Some day
the real one will arrive disguised as a moon-man
to claim me back. And I'll go, I know that much.

I saw the photograph once, the victrix ludorum cup,
the gold medal round her neck, his moon face smiling,
her Caesar dipping his toe in the Rubicon.

I can make out the waxing moon through the curtains.

Alternative Mother #7
Fawlty Towers

First up
your stairs are steep, your beds hard,
your pipes noisy, your showers cold,
your central heating thermostat so out of control
the clothes I packed in Manchester are sweat blankets.

And while we're at it
your chef can't cook.
Your porridge lumps could be amputated fingers,
your soup's cold, your carrots so undercooked
they carry poignant memories of the garden.

And how could you even think it was a good idea
to have him sit half-poached eggs and mushrooms
on soggy toast in a pond of bourguignon sauce,
call it *ouefs meurette*
hoping I won't notice it's really
this morning's left-over vegetarian breakfast
with gravy?

You're clueless.
You tell people he's got a Michelin Star
but you and I both know how he found it
on the greasy floor in Kwikfit.

Painted Lady

He
worked hard
so he played
hard: tankards of
Whitbread, toss of darts.
She didn't do pubs, watched
at that window for years for
his drunken home-comings. He was
the July heat, she made of snow so

that face powder and blood-red lipstick
he gave her for her birthday said
more about him than it did
about her. Did he want
his Bull and Butcher
tart for a wife?

She was worth
so much
more.

The Bat And Not The Ball

what if being loveless was protection
a carapace a breastplate a firewall

not disappointment at a missing member
not a statement about lack of love at all

for years it hurt to see you couldn't see me
like the worn out pushchair waiting in the hall

I sulked because you tried hard not to know me
while you were as strange to me as Senegal

and what if I didn't notice all you wanted
was for once to be the bat and not the ball

and consider this what if chopping onions
turns out more rewarding than a smile

Inheritance

She came from a long line of Amazons
who could catch a flying fuck
and make a poem out of it.

She came from the bloodline of Boudicca
her hair the flames that could ignite Rome.

She came from the flatlands
where the North sea is a lament
calling itself back through cuts and dykes.

She came from the soil, grew
wild as bulrushes, untamed
as the brambling hedgerows, fruitful
as a codling orchard.

She came from the confluence of love and hate.
She came to you as gift. Unwrap her slowly.

Cuckoo

She's looking at me as if she hasn't a clue who I am.

Her real daughter was stolen from the maternity ward.
I'm telling you, aliens lifted her from her crib, left me,
a mysterious doppelganger that she can't know.

Remember that school photo, the one
where I'm sitting bolt upright, smiling at the camera
but my eyes are staring at the lens like lasers?

I tell people I'm her love child with Ming the Merciless.

Alternative Mother #8
Mary B

You're always complaining
about your *bronikal chest*
or your *drastic stomach*.

You say your chest's
like a bit o' raw beef
but that doesn't stop you

lighting up a Park Drive,
sucking its toxins
deep into your lungs;

and the ulcer doesn't stay
your daily visits
to the Hare and Hounds

where you leave me out
on the pavement in the pram

with a bottle of coke
and a bag of ready salted

while you down whiskeys
for medi-sigh-nal purposes

I ❤️ Watford Gap

their tee-shirt says *I ❤️Zante*
and on the back, *In Zante without panties.*

I think of the trip we took after our results,
being driven at speed in boyfriends' cars

along the new M1 to Watford Gap services
for frothy coffee, feeding the jukebox,

Lesley Gore singing 'It's My Party'
the boys calling us their birds and us

preening our feathers, chirping to be fed
how we used to before we read de Beauvoir

and Greer, before we burned our bras.
I can't imagine the legend *I ❤️Watford Gap*

on a sixties tee shirt; but that was how
we severed the school tie, cut the umbilical cord
travelled from school girl to woman.

Boys only want you for one thing, she said

But what if I never find out what that is?
I'm climbing the steps to that bumpy slide
at Wicksteed Park though ladders confuse
my sense of being right side up in the world

but he's behind me so there's no way back,

and when I get to the top, I'll have to sit
in the little house with my feet overhanging
that chute with a hundred miles of metal
humping between us and solid ground.

Now he's pushing me
and I'm learning about exhilaration

Alternative Mother #9
Cynthia

There are days she doesn't even leave her bed
except to got to the bathroom.

Last week she binge-watched all eleven series
of Vampire Diaries until she could taste blood.
She looked at me like I was a roast beef dinner
cooked rare.

If she does make it downstairs
she lounges in her D&G leopard-skin onesie
in the Barker and Stonehouse leather recliner
paid for by the sugar daddy. She's never worked,

thinks she's Kim Kardashian, the world comes to her.
And the world wouldn't want to offend her:
she wears a grudge like a body-con.

I don't remember her ever actually using
the Bugatti touch-sense kettle or the electric Aga
in the kitchen. We mostly eat Domino's,
McDonalds, take-out from The Great Wall.
She flirts outrageously with the Deliveroo man
who pretends he can't speak English.

My friends never visit. I don't invite them.

Just How It Was

she
was wet sheets in the wind
the broom, the mop, the cloth
the cylinder of Vim
the garden for his grain
soil and water, hoe
the oven, the rising loaf
the breakfasts lunches teas
the blueprint mirror plan
she was mum

he
held the house in his open hand
hefted shires on his back
saw through walls, tin-opened roofs
propped the sky up, calmed its wrath
dusted it off if he wanted sun
whisked up cloud if he needed rain
walked the equator in a day
sprinted the universe before lunch
he was god

And This Is Also Work

We never see him.
He's always out doing
whatever it is men do.

She's the one teaches us
what work is — up at dawn,
porridge simmering on flame,

hot suds — cracked hands,
iron heating on range,
broom mangle muscle

as power; carrying, bearing,
suckling, midnight nursing.
She even works the farm —

butter churning, potato picking,
beet singling, cleaning eggs
for market. He's told her

she can keep cracked eggs
in lieu of wages. She does
what she has to do.

Angel in the House

she is conjuring trick
pulling time from her pocket
a reptile
Madonna and whore
a fallen angel a griffon
wild and untameable
from the pages of an illustrated bestiary
halo or vulva an enigma
something bright and distant
a red light or a candle guttering
gold falling through water
sunlight refracting she is
a broken marionette
a reaction
of wings legs and light-splashed feathers
dashed perfection
wearing jesses
her ring's a choker her apron a bondage
and the man holds her
and the man holds her
and the man pulls her strings

A 'coupling' with first and subsequent italicised lines from Helen MacDonald *H is for Hawk (London: Vintage 2014)*

Bedtime Story

Once upon a midnight, 1953,
a loud knocking at the door.
A little girl, call her Mary, can hear
our protagonist, the mother, talking;
another voice Mary doesn't recognize,
a piquancy of danger in their words,
Mary's father saying *well of course*
you're not going

but just this once, the mother refuses
to honour and obey, she goes anyway,
leaves little Mary, leaves husband, house
joins other women from the village.
The mother drives 30 miles
through the black Fenland night.

In the distant past, an evil genius —
call him Cornelius — borrowed Kings Lynn
from the sea, and on this midnight, 1953,
the town is inundated by the North Sea
surging along the mouth of the Wash
calling in Cornelius's debt.

The mother works all night, a Fenland
Grace Darling, rowing, rescuing,
carrying to safety folk whose belongings
are rubber ducks bobbing in a bath.

There's no happily ever after though:
this story ends with a predatory shark,
patient under the flood waters.
And what big teeth he has!

Witch

Grandma thinks I need a man but
I've been reading about a village where,
when her husband dies and her sons leave home,
a woman's worth is less than pebbles.

To live, she has to sell herself cheap
to horny men heading home. Imagine them
arriving upright at her door, dressed in their purity,

the dark night both confidante and witness. See
how they mount her, come and go with their purity
unstained then call her the filth that must be scourged

and when the scourge begins, one strong woman
designated *witch* is all that stands between widow
and ducking stool, stoning pit, burning faggots,

how she dresses them in the robes
of their punters, marches them through the village,
a voiceless shout against hypocrisy.

There is a bond in women standing together
stronger than manacles and chains.
Grandma thinks I need a man; but
I would be that witch.

Alternative Mother #10
That Woman Waiting for the Rochdale Tram at Victoria

The poor only have themselves to blame
you say. Workshy. Scroungers.
It's true, you say.
But what about the homeless, I ask.

They're not homeless, you say, they're immigrants
coming over here taking our jobs.
After Brexit there won't be any immigrants

you say after Brexit, Johnson'll
send 'em all home. *Good bloke, Johnson,*
you say. *One of us*, you say.
I say, he's not one of us, Ma, well
he's not one of me anyway. I say

Q: How do you know when a Brexiteer's lying,
A: Their lips are moving.
You don't laugh. You cuff my ear instead.

A homeless man on the platform tells me
he has mental health issues,
asks for the price of a brew—
he doesn't read the tabloids Ma, I say, he wraps
his body in them to keep himself warm,
wipes his arse on the Sun.

I just want to be warm, he says. I give him some cash
but you say all the Manchester ''*homeless*''—
you actually manage to pronounce the quotation marks—
they all get together at the end of the day to share the takings
then go home to their comfortable houses.
You've seen them on the tram, going home, you say.

But what about charity, I ask.
Charity begins at home, you say.
But what if you're homeless, I ask.
I start singing *there's a hole in my bucket*.
You pick up today's copy of the Daily Mail.

Origami Girl

Vega and Talitha shimmer
at her breast and waist,
stars she sets her course by

her faceless face is
sandwiched between curling aura
and stiff ruff that ensures
there's no looking back

she's spurned the comfort
of the drawing room, the Minton cups,
the girl circle, turned her back on suitors
lurking in her peripheral vision,
bent on colonizing,

chosen instead to dance
the independence path
not being one for a dark knight.

No-one darns anymore

No-one darns any more. It's a shame
we ever did.
We were taught to darn a sock
in domestic science — domski we called it,

as if it was a Russian conspiracy
and perhaps it was, a way of making us all
good Babushkas. A wooden mushroom
was tucked into the heel behind the hole

to keep the hole taut for sewing, then threads —
the warp of a loom — drawn across the hole,

the weft woven with bodkin and wool
until the hole disappeared under warp and weft.

Well done, an average pass.
Next lesson: make a patch
for that hole in your skirt.

Churning

See the churn, a pot-bellied pig on wood block feet
scrubbed, sterilized, the iron handle fixed to paddles.

It has the sickly smell of breast fed babies. Now
hear the cream shushing like a tide as the handle

turns the paddles. Enthusiasm becomes effort
in the sweat and ache of cream thickening.

Pass the handle to the next sibling in line, up to Big Sis
the alchemist who churns base cream into gold.

Watch the ceremonial handing over of butter to mother
to knock into shape with wooden pats on a cold board,

see the magic of that emerging image of yellow, rolled, ridged,
its wheatsheaf or thistle print, its bold statement of luxury.

Pickled Walnuts

The tree, the English walnut
overhangs the drive
from Mary Loder's garden.

You watch week by week as the flowers
swell to fruit, hang in pairs, heavy green testicles.
Every summer, Mary Loder gives you bags full
of semi-ripe walnuts, perfect for pickling.
You carry them home precious as treasure.

We stick darning needles and bodkins
deep into the walnuts' flesh, testing for shell.
Our fingers, stained like sixty-a-day smokers from oil in the skins,
drop the pricked walnuts into a baby bath filled with brine.
We leave them to soak for days.

You lay them out in the sun to dry, later
bottle them in kilner jars filled with spiced vinegar.
Days pass. Weeks become months.

And on Christmas morning, there they are
decanted onto plates of ham for the festive breakfast.

Pickled walnuts still come to our Christmas table.
They're bottled by Opie these day, but still
our first taste of peace on Earth, goodwill.

Spooning

What I remember of the spoon is
how it was her crowd control at mealtimes
how she held it upright in her hand,
its handle to the table-top, how it tapped
a rhythm like a slow drum

how when we laughed we knew the spoon
would greet us with a firm handshake,
a spoon shaped bruise would raise itself
on the back of our hands, how we tried
not to laugh but it was a contagion

how you tried to drown your laughter
in a cup of tea but one snort spread tealeaves
across your face like freckles and we laughed,
laughed so much we knew. Here it comes now…

Alternative Mother #11
A three-toed sloth

see yourself as someone who relinquishes
digits to evolution then patents
what you save in your own slow show

see yourself as acrobat
so your ceiling rose is hearth rug
the laminate floor your roof

see yourself as worshipper of inertia
so downtime is your vocation
daydreaming your life's career

see yourself as passive philosopher
examining the energy of predator
and arriving at the ergo of leaves

see yourself as someone who could be
a human sin but can't even be arsed
to crack a smile at the irony of it.

What I remember of the kitten was

how she had in her fur all the colours of cat
how she was feral, nameless, employed
        as an assassin of mice
how when she sat on my lap she purred
        like a chain-saw at a tree trunk
how when she sat on my lap her arms
        found their way to my neck,
        one on either side, seeming to hug
how her tail was a lexicon
how her voice was a quiet word of greeting
how she was the animation of love
how I needed her more than she needed me
how she could have slept on a clothesline
        curled up like a Danish pastry,
how I watched the front wheel of your car
        break her like a biscuit

Test Card

ITV's been a thing for three years
by the time Dad buys the television.
Suddenly the wireless is passé

and we're watching George Dixon
—*evenin' all;* we're rocking
with Pete Murray, high-kicking

with the Tillers, falling for
Digger Dawson, hearing the call
to nursing.

Sitting in your chair by the fire,
head cocked to catch the words,
you're asleep before DSI Lockhart

has even buttoned his gabardine.
Head nodding, mouth ajar,
soft snoring. We're keeping quiet.
It's way past our bedtime.

Stone Soup

When I used to read that story
to your grandchildren, the way
the trickster gets the poor woman
to make soup from a stone,
I used to think of you
cooking soup from Sunday left-overs.

Like in the story, your soup began with water in a pan.
You dropped into it like a stone the carcass
of Sunday's lunch, picked clean;
an Oxo cube or two, some onion, carrot,
pearl barley, sage, potato, turnips, salt and pepper.
I listened as it simmered away slowly
my mouth watering.

I could smell the flavours mixing, impatient
for you to serve it up, spoon
fisted in anticipation. You made loaves of soda bread
we broke into rafts to float in our soup lakes.
I didn't know about making ends meet,
to me your soup was a feast.

Once, aged six, bridging the loneliness
between school and home,
I tell Miss Bacon—wishing out loud—
that we're having soup for tea.
All afternoon the lie lays in my stomach
like a stone.

But as I walk from the school bus,
up the path towards the kitchen door,
the bouquet of soup welcomes me home,
a nose full of tummy rumbling goodness
drowning the lie.

Making Cakes

When I think of you baking, it's about love—
the way you lay out your ingredients, set
out bowls and spoons before you begin. You
work in your own way, no recipe, you say going
to a recipe book is a waste of time—shortcuts like
weighing eggs, then equal measures of butter, sugar, flour: a
perfect Victoria sponge, this is your way. Your cakes are fat
monuments to Demeter, spread with jam and that gold
impersonator, buttercream. I just pull up a chair and watch.

With acknowledgement to Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song' for the first line which became the end words of this 'golden shovel'

Your Hands

Rough-knuckled, raw from hard labour,
your hands slap, scrub, chop wood, wring sheets;
they aren't hands for bestowing love.

In your left hand you're holding an egg,
in your right a wooden block the size of a boot brush,
covered with fine sandpaper.

The egg's shell is a collage of chicken shit, birth blood,
brood feathers. You stroke the sandpaper over the egg
more tenderly than you handle your babies,
cleaning off the shit and blood as you might polish
field mud from your work-boots with a brush.

Asked would you like to free the hens from their cages,
bin the eggs and fly away to swim off Santorini
you'd have said *in Santorini, though the hens run free,*
the cock is still king.

You lay the cleaned eggs in a straw-filled basket
the way a new mother might lay a milk-gorged infant to sleep.

You're allowed to keep any eggs you crack.
But you hate breaking eggs: the running snot of them
the unfulfilled promise.

Alternative Mother #12
Mary R

You say *there's none so blind*
as them as don't want to see.

You buy me a scarlet coat
so I'll stand out from the crowd,

knit me rainbow socks on four needles,
make me feel their colours.

You show me how even
silent laughing can be loud
if you listen hard enough.

Your bosom
is a plumptious pillow for a story;
you tell me there is no tumbler in this life
that isn't at least half full.

Be true to yourself, you say.
Live in peace with others
but always be your own lover.

Fingertips are as useful as eyes,
you reckon, knuckles as feeling as fingertips
for finding your way out of dark spaces.

If her bed could speak it would say

bugger off with his snoring,
he's less fun than a rusty spring.
You plump up your pillows, read for a bit, lights out.
He's asleep before you reach the end of the chapter.

I used to look forward to seeing you both once,
the bounce of me was tested—more tumbling then
than the gymnastics floor event at the Olympics.

I remember when he could keep it up all night,
bump, grind, yes-yes, after-smoke then
press repeat. Now, he converses in farts,

and my damp sheets say more about loose sphincters
than slippery passion. I used to be made up for you;
now my sheets are turned back on chilling apathy.
These Nytol nights are too quiet for my liking.

Alternative Mother #13
Rhona the Ratgirl

and is your entire world
this pen in this tent
this animal skin
this thigh bone
these rats?
So where do I fit in?

You recline on a bale of straw
draped in that mangy leopard skin
in a distant approximation to sexy,
while the public comes in to oggle.

You stir the somnambulant rats
with a Brontosaurus thigh bone—
like everything about you, it's fake.

Of course the rats are too
out of it on benzodiazepines
to move around much.

When that kid tittered at your tits
all you said was *You're supposed to be looking at me rats.*
Well, what did you expect—an Oscar?

The ambition it must have taken for you
to become the Ratgirl, Rhona.

Every day I promise myself...

Mirror Images

I'm looking in the mirror
at a lardy old woman; but here
in the photo, Hyde Park '68, I was thin
as an elf, confident, full of myself:
Quant make-up, leather jacket,
geometric hair, first generation mini-skirt,
burned bra.
See the photo of me then
and my mirror self now: blood-flushed
face a street map of veins,
wattle chin, whiskers like thorns, tits
slapping my knees.
I get that life's a burlesque but
you landed the role of grotesque.

Oh, I landed the role of grotesque alright,
short rehearsal, nervous first night
on the casting couch, marriage
then a rickety bridge
of worm-riddled wood
from feisty young woman to motherhood.
I learned how a girl
who dreams of the wide world
diminishes when she stops roaming.
Being house-bound's too choking.
Life stretches thin to fill the space
between festival girl with elfin face
and whiskery grotesque. It's a bugger, the heart.
You'll go with your head if you're smart.

Yes, I'll go with my head. I'm smart.
I've seen how love highlights
a girl's sense of lack. I've watched you
bio-degrade from mini-skirt girl with elfin face
to whiskery crone. I might've been born
a reflection of you but I'm not your clone.
Reflections are distortions:
where you're right, I'm left.
Love's a lifebelt for paddlers
afraid of the depths, it tows you in,
spits you out, plundered. Maybe one day
I'll get down and dirty with Pampers
but I'll keep swimming till I do.
I'll be the one waving, not drowning.

You'll be waving, not drowning? Fuck's sake,
that's what I said, that festival weekend
in Hyde Park. I met your dad there, you know.
We shared a tent—shared a sleeping bag.
Shared a joint. He made out he'd smoked loads
but he was such a spliff virgin, got high
on a couple of puffs, said I forced him,
laughed till he cried, called it spliffing rape.
We had fun in '68; he was a beautiful boy
but look at him now: like a favourite toy
grown out of, broken. Believe me, waving
will just have your arms aching.
We grotesques know the tide keeps turning
and waving won't save you from drowning.

Oh, waving'll save me from drowning,
you'll see. I'll grow gills, unfold fins, swim
against the shoal, only wave to the washed-up
on shore when I resurface. I'll be mermaid,
be shark. I could become oyster—
if I'm tossed on the beach I'll roll round in it,
work with it, up my value.
I don't see myself pushing a hoover or a pram.
I won't drown like you did, a shark in dry dock.
That sink was your ocean, you were a catfish
in a tank, too constrained to swim, too crushed
to keep waving. I won't need a buoy to keep me afloat.
My horizon will be wide as the ocean:
in its motion, I'll learn to pearl grit.

Pearl grit? You swim in its motion
you'll get lost in that ocean, just like me.
Do you think I wanted
to be chained to a sink, bonded
to a broken old man?
I was a daughter as well you know. I didn't
plan on turning into my mother
like some horror plot, losing who I was neither.
Don't fog up your lenses with self-deception.
Trust me, life only goes in one direction
and we all finish up with the wattle chin
the barb-sharp whiskers, the hair growing thin.
You swim while you can in the deepest water
but don't ever forget, you're my daughter.

How can I forget I'm your daughter
when you're there in my mirror every day?
You're my speaking, my thinking, my idiom,
It's your language I speak—with your tongue.
Our history is banked in my head,
I was shaped from your clay,
from the clay of our grandmothers.
When I'm ill it's the hug of your soup I need,
when I'm scared it's your songs I hum.
We might be podded peas or chalk and cheese
but it was you I drank in with our milk.
We were joined by a cord, but I am who I am:
a funfair distortion that feels like it's real
when It's you looking back from my mirror.

Alternative Mother #14
Audrey Hepburn

The elfin face, the well delivered line,
the designer clothes — these things are
the screen's. You make Givenchy extraordinary
by your childlike frame. There are rumours
of an eating disorder, but you enjoy food.
In *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Charade*
you barely stopped eating; you understand
how some things taste better than thin.

You use cosmetics like an artist, so
your own face is what I grew up with —
you never turned to the knife, you let your face
tell the story of things you've seen. When
I look in the glass, it's me, not a Rimmel mask
that looks back. That's all down to you.

June 1962

that was the month

the Steptoes first hauled their rags on BBC TV

George Martin unleashed Beatlemania

I sat in the library at the grammar school reading
about a Wall dividing Berlin to keep communism pure
or to keep capitalism pure; no, to keep propaganda pure
but people didn't want purity they wanted their lost families
and they risked their own lives to be reunited on the other side

Khrushchev sent missiles to Cuba while the world held its breath
and even Peter Parker, bitten by a radioactive spider,
even Spiderman himself, couldn't sort that one out

Marilyn was fired by 20th Century Fox for not turning up
and no-one seemed to notice that her world was falling apart
and she had begun her sad descent to the infamous nude scene
in that lonely bedroom

and you went into Stoke Mandeville Hospital.
I never saw you again.

One trick too far

All I'm saying is, dying was out of order.
You were strong, life stretched ahead of you
like a red carpet. You had it all: doting parents,
acquiescent sisters, friends — lots of them. A dog.

You had the swagger that comes from knowing
you're the only trousers in a roomful of skirts.

Yes, you pissed me off sometimes. Like
when it was my turn to choose the cake,
remember — our birthday treat to choose first
before the next sibling's birthday.

I had one day,
just one day for first dibs.
I wanted to choose the rum truffle —
I was impatient to grow up.

Mum piled the plate high
with yellow cakes, pink cakes,
cakes virginal in their whiteness, humped
with cream, topped off
with a jelly tot or a piped flower.

And on top of them all, my spherical
chocolate-vermicelli-coated-sickly-sticky-rum-truffle
but you couldn't even let me have that
could you?

Before I could reach out, you licked your finger,
wiped it on the truffle,
asked *which one's yours then?*

I watched you take the first bite,
prayed it would make you sick

but dying was out of order.

Alternative Mothers #15
Jack

whenever I see
colouring-in that seeps out of the lines
or a boy's drawing of his mum with arms growing from her ears
or a story that ends *then I woke up*
or the misplaced apostrophe in Fish and Chip's;

whenever I see
Adidas leggings with a Reebok top
or strappy stilettos with thick black tights
or the wrong pocket in a dress from Pause a Second
or one wrong button sewn among the right ones on a shirt;

whenever I see
a five leafed clover
an albino hedgehog
clean snow gone mucky
a green chrysanthemum
a blackbird's white tail feather
bottle-bottom lenses and hearing aids
untrimmed branches on a manicured hedge

I think of that Christmas and you
throwing away two dozen mince pies hot from the oven
because juice had bubbled out
from the geometrically measured hole in your
precision-placed lids.

I didn't ask for sainthood

…truth is, it hijacked me that summer
out in the fields, helping strong men
harvest hay; fangs in the groin,
theatre, surgeons, counting
backwards from ten then
the eternal sleep.
I'd rather be
annoying
you.

The Secret of Eternal Youth

You were seventeen when you found it,
I was fourteen. Now I'm older
than Grandma was then, you're still
seventeen. No portrait
in the attic, no
foul elixir,
no
fresh
clear spring
from the summit
of Mount Olympus.
You discovered the key,
unlocked *forever young* and
it's a weird truth. Eternal youth:
easier to find than haystack pins.

Alternative Mother #16
Meg

Teach me to build a den down by the beck,
how to pond-dip water snails, sticklebacks;
teach me to pick kindling sticks to build
a campfire, how to mount a stone surround
to keep me safe; teach me how to light it,
let it burn to embers before baking sour-
dough bread on willow sticks; teach me how
to live without the essentials: running water,
flushing toilet. You. Teach me how to forgive
a lover who doesn't deserve me, how
to raise a family alone. But don't teach me

how some days feel so dark you won't ever
see daylight again; and please don't teach me
how a bridge over the M1 is the only way out.

Staff Nurse Valentine

In that photo, the last one,
I'm holding your hand on top of the covers
the claw of a dead bird, a model in winter twigs.
Your eyes are sunk in grey shadows
cheek bones sharp as broken ice
even though it's June.

Three weeks ago you'd have caught my attention,
flirted, invited me to the pictures when you got out
but not now, the effort to look anywhere
at anything is just too great.

I remember saying then, *come on mister,*
out of that bed, you're going home today
and you saying you'd rather stay where you were,
you didn't feel well and I thought you were joking,
finding a way for me to stay with you.
But your life signs told a different tale.

I've watched you ride the helter-skelter
of sepsis, promised us both I'd be there
when you reached the bottom.

A Young Girl's Grief…

19th June 1962

Dear Mr.and Mrs.____,
I am very sorry indeed at your terrible (~~tsos~~) loss.

Nothing one can say can be of much comfort to you. Only those who have had to bear such things can fully understand. Those of us who have children can try to — no more, I suppose, than that. Try as we do, we simply cannot fully understand, I am sure.

However, we feel for you and yours very deeply indeed, and are sorry you should have to undergo such harrowing experience. May you be given (~~strngth~~) strength to see over this affliction.

Yours sincerely,

Headmaster

...is hardly grief at all

19th June 1992

Dear Headmaster,
Your note, written on a school compliments slip, complete with typing errors and crossings out, was in my mother's effects when she died. She kept it for thirty years, because you addressed the envelope to the son she'd lost (you couldn't even get that right) and it brought him back to her for a while.

She didn't know how you delegated this writing chore to your deputy on the same week you shut me in the library on Saturday morning to do the homework I hadn't handed in. I didn't tell her about the detention, her head was too full of death.

Did you have a thesaurus of platitudes about loss? Well, chew this over: I was one of 'you and yours'. I didn't feel you feeling very deeply for me. Because a young girl's grief is hardly grief at all, is it?

Do you remember Deidre Harrington, who died about the same time as him? She's also buried in Lillingstone Dayrell Churchyard, just at his feet. Deidre's parents were on the PTA. I'll lay a bet they got the full headed notepaper, no typos.

Yours in grief

On losing your only boy

the sun still rises in the east,
blazes its southern trajectory,
melts below a western horizon.

But grief grows a winter pelt.
You turn your face to the north,
tunnel into the permafrost.

I know I am your ice pick.

Runner Beans

I watch you slicing beans.
You wield the slick stiletto blade
of the boning knife you've sharpened
with a quick wrist-flick of the steel.

You wield the slick stiletto blade,
slicing perfect bite-sized diamonds.
A quick wrist-flick of steel,
and the saucepan fills with runner beans.

You slice perfect bite-sized diamonds
with the precision of a surgeon
and the saucepan fills with runner beans
seasoned by grief you can't find words for.

With the precision of a surgeon
and a boning knife you've sharpened,
seasoned by grief we can't find words for
you go on slicing beans.

Looked at dispassionately

I lost my only boy.
Strong he was, young — a life unlived.
I wish I could say he died from some tropical disease
picked up on a foreign holiday; or that he wrapped his car
round that tree at the bend near Akeley.
At least then he would have lived a bit.

Sometimes I find myself wishing
he'd been struck down by a psychotic attacker
for the ten bob's worth of loose change
in his trouser pocket; then I'd have someone to blame,
someone to hate. I know this to be unreasonable.
I feel I could take anything but this innocuous,
unfathomable stealth.

Then I look at all these girls and wonder
why him? Why did Death claim him?
These girls are bargain basement, he was high end.

One of them asked me once
did I ever wish it had been her instead,
less noticeable in loss, easier to mourn?

I wanted to say no, wanted to be able
to say no. But I just closed my eyes,
turned away from her.

Alternative Mother #17
Alice

She keeps disappearing.
When it's all too much for her
she clears off and we're left
asking the fat caterpillar,
the grinning tabby
if they've seen her.

She keeps disappearing.
You can be playing cards,
but you trump her red queen
and pfft!
she's gone.

One minute she's there, peeling spuds;
the next, peeler and spuds by the sink,
frilly pinny on the dining chair back.
Call all you want
she won't answer.

Sometimes, even when she's there
in front of your eyes
there's no talking to her.
You can see she's away with the bunnies.

Yesterday she was baking jam tarts
lifting them carefully from the oven.
Next, boiling jam and pastry
all over the kitchen floor
and she's nowhere to be seen.

Mushrooms are the worst.
She's a different person
when she's chopping mushrooms.

She just keeps disappearing
like a pool of tears
or grass stains on washday
or tea stains on a dormouse
or words left too long in the sun.

Last time she disappeared
there was a strong smell of damp earth,
the acrid stench of the grave.

Lost in a book

When I was Alice I followed the rabbit.

When I was the rabbit I avoided the Queen.

When I was the Queen, I lopped the head
of anyone who pissed me off.

When my head was lopped
I replaced it with a rolled up hedgehog.

When I was a rolled up hedgehog
I cursed the flamingo.

When I was the flamingo I ate the deck of cards.

When I was the Ace of Spades
I trumped the Cheshire Cat

When I was the Cheshire Cat I grinned
like a Hatter and no-one
could wipe the smile off my face.

When I was the Mad Hatter, it was
a questionable diagnosis. I consulted
the March Hare for a second opinion.

When I was the March Hare I said *you should
say what you mean and mean what you say*

and now I'm weeping a sea
so I can row my boat out of this book.

Lillingstone Dayrell Churchyard

rifle-range silver spoon the paddles
of a waterwheel in a porridge millpond
Sterling Moss racing the Munich air crash
Dansette playing *Leader of the Pack*
Brown Eyed Handsome Man
a mini-van
not nearly enough

*

It stands in the middle of a field,
a church with no parish, just a few houses,
loose teeth in a broken denture.

The giant yew trees bring foreboding,
the church squats beneath them playing hide-and-seek:
it's been counting to a hundred since Norman times.

The thick oak door wears its iron furniture like a threat,
but it's never locked. Go inside, feel the chill emptiness,
smell the decay of damp prayer.

And it's not warmed by needlepoint kneelers
or the bright posters advertising Christingle, Lent,
the church fete. There's no stained glass
to filter a rainbow from the sun.

Come out into the graveyard, see this gravestone:
Loving wife and mother. *Loving husband and father.*
Beloved son and brother.

This is the exact spot I stood the day they opened this grave,
placed you in it carefully, like the treasure you were,
threw the first spade of soil onto your oak bed.

That was the day I came face to face with God.
I turned my back.

*

Can you hear the whine of cars from Silverstone,
the wind susurrating the needles of the giant yew?
They're mourning.
Listen. Listen!

The grass pushes its head through the soil at your feet,
its effort screeching like chalk on slate; flowers
still appear at your headstone fifty years on.
Someone remembers.

Flowers decay as we all do, a sliding scale
in a work of requiem.

But see the windhover; hear the scream
of startled rabbit. That's you, I think,
telling me you want out of this confinement
to run again reclaim your laurel crown.

*

that sense of what the fuck
knowing God isn't
they clung together
dumbstruck heart shattered
for years
did they even shed tears?
I don't remember tears
they never asked how we grieved
if we grieved
we got by together
faced *after this* together

how often did she wish it was one of her
ten-a-penny girls
not her boy in the ground
not her only boy lonely in his earthy bed
not her prince so strong
so beautiful so young
so…

Breaking the Line

The blood red sky
sheds tears. Fresh milk
curdles. Now I know

my heartbroken father
left the house with
chisel, mallet — after dark

he's out there hammering
like a minor god. Grief begins
to surface from the cold stone.

Code

Lipstick! toadmouse trapmouse
mould ras-ras-rascal searaft
wattle-weave ears-years ears-years
Lipstick fucksake!

What are you saying, Daddy?
Words are sliding out of your mouth
like slippery eels that keep wriggling
long after they're chopped up
and dead in the bucket.

Listless! listless! tonsil-worm-work
bread-breast heard-word stupid
Listless fucksake!

What do you want, Daddy?
You're making eel words
and I can't quite catch…

Liversausage! stare-wands
bridge-welly maaa-market trump-toast
Liversausage fucksake!

Slow down, eel Daddy.
I'm just learning eel. I'm trying
to catch you
but my nets are torn.
Eel Daddy, swim slower.

Wearing thin

In a past life he built houses.
In a past life he built cities full of houses.
In a past life he walked miles for the fun of it,
ran marathons for charity
climbed mountains because they were there.
In a past life, he gave her everything she asked for
at the drop of her mouth.
She enjoyed that, being his *raison*.

Now he can't even tell her he's sorry,
can't tell her he misses her.
He's the shell of the nut, empty, discarded.
I do what I can for him but its like dressing
a dummy, no interaction, not even the nouse
to be embarrassed that his daughter
wipes his arse, holds the bottle while he pisses.

She should be doing it really as some sort
of payback. But she says she's too ill,
too weak, too busy caring for herself to care for him.
I know what's wrong with her,
so I keep wiping his arse, holding his bottle.

Then I put them both to bed in separate rooms.

Alternative Mother #18
Ted

Sometimes dreams can be nightmares.

You wanted most of yourself to be buried, to become
an enrichment of the fenland soil you loved so much,
your heart and lungs to be thrown into Whittlesey Wash
to feed the eels you knitted your nets for.

Oh, you were generous. You gave me some peonies once,
dug up from your garden. You shook the soil off though—
that soil's worth three thousand pounds an acre you said.
I looked for the smile but there wasn't one.

One night your skeleton grew out of the earth like a myth.

Like Penelope

I weave the shroud of my days
from the remnants of hope and love

unpick it in those lonely nights
while suitors compete to possess me;

no, not Antinous, Nikos, Peisandros,
not Bob or Tom or Jim.

Frustration, Anger, Disappointment, these
are my lovers; and the tunnel of empty years

looking in the glass and seeing
a woman I no longer recognize,

to these I'm in danger of losing myself.
I've already lost my Telemachus.

My husband journeyed for years
on his lonely odyssey from brain bleed to death,

losing speech, his senses, his way, himself, me.
He never regained his Ithaca.

Where were you?

if I hadn't been the one
to give the night report to matron;
if the sun that day hadn't risen
over the Co-op dairy;
if my pupils hadn't shrunk
to dust specks;
if I hadn't been suspected
of raiding the drugs chest;
if Dr Ross hadn't talked
of morphine silting the bottom
of an unshaken bottle of cough syrup;
if you had only listened, really listened;
if you'd been there for me, well
we might even have healed.

Love

What a strange word.
It sits on the tongue like the unused wish
you don't want to waste
when you squandered the other two
years ago.
Because wishes are gifts we squander.
I believe she loved him once
when she looked at him and found
her first wish—
she wasted that, and the second
on marriage and childbirth.
And now
love is a word that sits on her tongue
like salt. She drinks it up like a love leech
and still thirsts.
I have to keep offering her love
because I know her third wish
and it's impossible.

Living Shovel
after Alice Oswald

she shoveled soap flakes into cauldrons of boiling water
she shoveled the public faces of her humiliation into the suds
she shoveled the east wind into the billowing sheets
she shoveled the sloughed skins of generations into the garden soil
she shoveled King Edwards that grew in the sloughed skins of generations
she shoveled salt into vats of boiling water
she shoveled potatoes, onions, and cheap cuts of meat into the vats
she shoveled three meals a day into the gaping maws
she shoveled days of waiting, years of watching it all pile up
    on the shovel of herself.
With the living shovel of herself
    she cleared the path to her grave.
With the living shovel of herself
    she threw soil onto her own coffin.

Loss

Twenty five years since you died
and I'm thinking how I held your hand ,
tried to reach you across the desert
you withdrew to that summer;

how I held your hand and waited
as your breath changed from shallow
to rasping, rattling, one long hiss
like a puncture
and no more chances to regain ground;

how I tried for years to reach you
and even that night I couldn't find the way.

I thought we might have made it then
but I'm still in a place where everything
has a familiar strangeness,
a sort of half remembered landscape

where he still is, where he's always been,
still seventeen,
still the same oppressive absence
that pushed you away that summer.
As far as I can see
the only one who was ever missing
was you.

Alternative Mother #19
Auntie

you sit in a garden chair upright
as a music stand, your hands
resting in a sharp lap not built
for bedtime stories.

The grass is growing
under your feet
going to seed.

You used to sing for princes. Now
your canary is the only one in tune
and, hard as a thrush's beak, your lips
have become a tight-stringed purse.

Good Breast Bad Breast

Exhausted by the boy child I'm carrying,
by your energy, by your unremitting *again,*
by winding the teddy, by hearing it sing

again
winding it
again winding it
again winding it
again again again

I throw teddy across the room.
Shocked, you stare at this frightful
facsimile of your mother.
If I can do this to teddy, I can do it
to you. Your face crumples,
big salty teardrops.
I thought you loved me.

Ashamed, I scoop you up
dry your tears.

I often wonder if you remember,
not daring to ask you in case you do;

in case you don't, not asking.

Biopsy
A tiny room a doctor two nurses
you me a trolley a bed gloves masks
gowns a small jar a scalpel.

At last we'll see it cut down to size,
a raisin in a raspberry jus, tamed
evil in a plastic jar. The nurse

slaps a label on, puts it in a bag
for the lab—a foreign body,
a pernicious collection of cells

turning back on themselves,
mutating, rolling time into an avalanche.
Look, it has ambitions to rule the world,

a tiny Brain of Morbius breathing.
I can feel its little pulse, hear it
croaking malice to other samples

in other jars in white coated labs, massing.
As we sip our coffees it's multiplying,
rallying under the stare of the microscope.

We'll see. We will. We
wait. Wait. Just wait.

Foreshadow

What the sea gave me was tears,
its pulse and throb a sobbing.
I skimmed the mirror of its skin
to a place where the future was a notice
pinned backwards on a board.
I thought of you somewhere out there,
our minds meeting, yours a granite cliff face,
mine fragile as skin. In that moment I faced

how it could be at the end: a longing
like child birth, like hope; a hole in the heart
of being. And the sea will steam as the sun sets red,
hissing and I will be anger and I will be vengeance
and the grass will bleed and the earth will turn
vampire and I will be emptied, knowing there is
nothing
        after this final betrayal.

Scream

There is a scream inside me
that turns Edvard Munch's scream
into an emoticon, an OMG.

My scream is made up of the breath
of grandmothers,
of grandmothers' grandmothers,
the breath of every woman who put the tiniest stitch
into the fabric of your DNA, even that woman

who dropped the stitch, purled a knit, lost her way
in the pattern so she made a hole for a mole
to crawl through. There is a scream inside me
that I've locked away so tight you'll never hear it.

One day it might escape.
On the dark side of sanity,
a butterfly is flapping its wings.

The Moles

Their moleskin pants are designed by Molinari.
They buy their Rayban shades at Sunglass Hut.

They mine the soil in nice suburban gardens
to use it raising hills on grass well cut.

They use white sticks in subterranean tunnels,
in daylight, leave them in the brolly stand.

They carry a brace of useful on-board shovels
so they're ready for retirement castles in the sand.

They give their name to tide-breaks, whistle-blowers
and pigment patches that could be beauty spots

except sometimes the patches turn psychotic.
They grow and grow like porridge in magic pots,

they grow and grow till molehills seem like mountains:
big bad-ass moles make ugly beauty spots.

They ride down shinbones like a sledge on snowdrift,
a game psychotic moles dig more than soil

then when they're bored, they turn to Hammer Horror.
Using Ultra-S-F-X to summon ghouls

they spook the likes of leukocytes and lymph nodes,
blow raspberries on the blades of surgeons' knives.

They know they're marked so you should see them party!
High on shots of morphine, they live their lives

like a *dance macabre* under theatre lights.
Moles won't give up the dance without a fight.

The Worst Cocktail Bar in Manchester

Waitresses dressed as nurses come to the tables,
greet you cordially, take your order: Strangled
Gland, Corpse Reviver, Black and Blue, Lacy Legs.

You consider Lacy Legs, but settle for Black and Blue.
You knock back two glasses, pull a face, wait 15 minutes,
take a chaser. You look around, see people downing

orange cocktails, yellow. Babs sips a blue-white liquid
like breast milk. You pour another glass, retch, hold
your nose, keep it down. Something in it smells

like aniseed only not quite. You swear you'll never drink
Pernod again. You save the last shot for just before the scan.
Really, you say, this is the worst cocktail bar in Manchester.

You try not to lick your lips, begin to feel the blood heat
coursing. On the way home you ride with the windows down.
I ignore the December freeze, drive with my gloves on.

Just Because

…all my life I wanted to meet you and because you were
late by three weeks and the cocktail I drank while I waited,
nervous, for you to arrive slid down my throat like orange
frogspawn while I gagged over the stainless sink and

because when you did come you chose the secret hours
for our bonding and because you came with a name
so I felt as if I'd known you all my life and because
meeting you made me feel I had achieved something,

like the first woman ever to do it so that I was too high
to sleep after and because back in the ward in the
next bed was a woman more aware than me of the way
the sand runs quickly and because I noticed her empty
crib, grieved her empty womb, I just wanted to say…