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Devour Everything

and

‘A Landscape of Mutability and Ferocious Life’:
Mark Doty and Jo Shapcott’s poetics of illness

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Annie 'Nan' Stewart, 2018 - 2020.

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Abstracts

Devour Everything is a collection of poetry written and collated over a period of three years, in which I explore a wide range of topics, including but not limited to: illness and bodily frailty, suppressed female voices, the remote islands of Shetland and their rich dialect, anticipatory grief, class, and anxieties around performance. My work in this collection has been informed by the poetry of Mark Doty and Jo Shapcott, in that I pay close attention to tiny things (in my case, the pieces in a board game, the eye of a bird, the fleck of paint in a portrait) while wrestling with bigger themes. I write as a woman and a Scot who sometimes finds that the ‘right’ word cannot be found in English. My subjects are often historical or fictional characters, and I like to work from paintings, or imagined artworks. Several poems explore the parallel themes of creation and destruction. The collection also plays with metaphysical imagery through its use of illusions, mesmerism, and visitations from the dead. I hope the collection’s themes of disappearance and loss are counterbalanced by humour and surprise.

In the accompanying critical thesis, I explore the poetry of Mark Doty and Jo Shapcott as they navigate the unpredictable experience of sickness. Though Doty and Shapcott are stylistically dissimilar, I focus on their points of coherence. Through close readings, this thesis probes the recurring preoccupations shared by both poets, exploring these in broader biographical and historical contexts and considering their implications for the critical medical humanities.

Lay Summaries

Devour Everything is a collection of 75 poems exploring themes of female power, anticipatory grief, creativity and class. Tonally, the work moves between elegiac and darkly humorous or self-satirising; read together as a manuscript, the work offers lightness as well as darkness, levity alongside frailty.

'A Landscape of Mutability and Ferocious Life': Mark Doty and Jo Shapcott's poetics of illness presents close readings of the work of two contemporary poets, investigating the techniques used by both in their explorations of sickness and grief. By examining Mark Doty's poetry written from the perspective of a carer, and Jo Shapcott's work written from the perspective of the patient, the thesis unpacks the recurring themes shared by both poets, situating these in broader biographical and historical contexts.

Section A:

Devour Everything

The Conville Circus Vanishing Act, 1898

It failed. The trapdoor opened too soon,
before anything was there to catch her,
and she vanished, for real this time,
plummeting into the black with a snap.

Even the tarot girls were stunned.
The milky-eyed clairvoyant
drawling futures from his corner,
the courtesans - all were silenced,
peering past dust-thickened drapes
at the space where she last stood.

One of the lion-tamers began to weep.

She was hoisted into the spotlight
(which nobody had thought to turn off)
and dangled there: neck broken,
lipstick still intact. Bright.
Bright in the brightness.

Animal Magnetism

“The greater number of the somnambulists were completely insensible ... we might pinch their skin, so as to leave a mark, prick them with pins under the nails etc, without producing any pain, even without their perceiving it.”

- Royal Academy of Medicine Commission on Mesmerism, Paris,
1825

Lines of fragile, excited women,
armpits darkening with sweat.
The private back room
rendered uncertain
by dripping candlelight;
warmth tempered
by an erratic draft.
Outside, rain like lambswool
deadening the sound,
the chattering queues.

Your trance is pellucid.
You see everything:
buckets of fishguts
in your mother's kitchen,
the corona of foxgloves outside your church;
dots of blood on your crepe-de-chine
from a failed mending; how you have flailed.
How you have slipped
through the years, a good girl,
temperate, accommodating -

his hand is pressed upon your crown.
You can do nothing about it now.

Caddy Lamb

Already, the ewe is disappearing,
ribcage strummed by the wind.
She left behind a fragile-legged lamb,
so weak we have to bottle-feed it.

We approach, clumsy, half-afraid;
my red jersey snags as I climb the fence.
The milk is cold, but she guzzles it down.
We both know it might be kinder

to let her starve -
on that peat-scarred spit of land
she can have only days
before the plunge of a skua or a fox.

On the way home we say nothing
about how long she will last,
or the growing tear
in my sweater. I don't look back

at the scrap of red,
fluttering
above the pitch-dark blanket
of bog and turf.

Valkyrie

Thunder of hooves,
gleam of breast-plates
we hammer
towards the battlefield -
salt-licked, hollering.

How sweet
to charge in a pack,
closed ranks, the taste
of conquest. Bright-faced,
impregnable,
the braids of our hair
flecked with blood.

We'll use severed heads
as loom-weights,
intestines for thread:
our battle tapestry
darkening and thickening,
row after row after row.

Vesta Surveys Pompeii

I'm sorry. To this day
I don't know why I did it.
You are still clutching dice
from the morning's game,
curled under a table
which holds a glazed bowl
of eggs, perfectly preserved.

The mosaic tiles at the door
read *cave canem*. Your dog
with its hot breath,
its readied claws,
suffocated too.

Nights, I dream
of inhaling the wreckage,
gathering the spilled lava
and torrent of stone
into my own body

until mouths and ears
unclog, people stand,
dust themselves off,
and speck by speck
all my damage is undone.

Blood

In Superdrug, security have grabbed a woman
about my age, all skinny jeans and freckles:
she's screaming *it's for ma daughter ye cunts!*
and I believe her - stuffed inside her jacket
are boxes of tampons. She's kicking and writhing
so hard the deep veins of her neck bulge,
and I'm not the only woman who steps forward
saying *just let her go, please, I can pay for them*

but they wave us away. The police arrive,
clean-shaven boys with sweaty foreheads,
and cuff her into silence. As the van doors slam
I think of her daughter, imaginary or not,
wadding toilet paper between her thighs,
afraid to leave the house.

The Dalry Road Piano Showrooms

They were closing for the day,
the salesgirl said:
off limits, no exceptions, *nae chance*,
but my man had a Southern drawl,
could talk his way into anything.
She waved us through.

I took a baby grand,
white as a new tooth.
Memorised Chopin poured like milk -
until I tripped,
bucking and cantering to the end.
I never liked that bastard extended trill.

The salesgirl smirked.
My cowboy looked diminished.
I struck the minor third
and floundered at the finish.

All that night
it rained, and I traced my mistakes
up and down his spine -
fourth finger, second finger,
third finger. Trill.

Alta Velocita 524: Roma à Pisa

I am alone, heartbroken, and on a fast train
sitting in a carriageful of nuns, who are noisier
than you might expect. Italy doesn't know I exist,

but I keep moving from city to city, adoring it all
with the wanton commitment of an ignored lover:
the shuttered *tabaccherie* in the long afternoons;

the jab of morning espresso; starlings circling
another mediaeval church at dusk. My sickness
can't be healed, and prayer has never been a salve

for me, but as I watch the sisters gesticulate,
something starts to mend. Their good faces
rise from their habits like a row of little suns.

Blackbird

“Not one thing the writer sees – not one bird, tree or stone – has in its possession the name he gives it.”

- Don Paterson

What are you, to yourself? A missile
of muscle, feather and bone, twitch
in scuffed leaves, a fine-ringed eye?

Dim warble of dawn, sharp cossetting
of a nest, a ruffle among siblings.
Loop-the-loop through ebullient cloud,

swallow of long worms in soft dirt.
Speckled shells beginning to crack,
calculated landings. Folded wings in rain.

Knapping

knapp (verb – to speak English, as opposed to the Shetland dialect)

When I ask my mum
to translate a word
from Shetlandic

she'll put on
an English accent:
gebe shot? it means

lantern-jawed
and she will stretch
the 'aw' of *jawed*

until it travels
from Mid Yell
eight hundred miles

south, landing
in the grounds
of a Surrey country house,

where *com dee wis*
becomes 'do come in'
and *fulskit* is 'lively'

and *döless*
means 'indolent'
or perhaps, more accurately,
'lacking in ambition or drive'.

Epistaxis

New York gave me nosebleeds.
An unclutching
as the train rose on the bridge's harp;
surprise of light,
stars and stripes flattened
on the uptown Q's tinny sheen.
So much blood. Three seats away,
a homeless man yelled at tourists from Tulsa,
with their open faces:
If I was the President, I'd do what I god-damn liked too!
He had been beautiful once, this man
with rheumy eyes and dried-out lips,
and he turned to all of us,
the whole subway car -
I get very emotional about this country, y'hear me?
I get very emotional about this country
as I leaned forward,
remembering the doctor:
apply pressure. Don't look. In time, it will stop.

The Arctic Arms, Dundee

Sociologists claim our quality of life peaked in 1978, the year Archie Gemmill scored a World Cup goal for Scotland; Sony invented the Walkman; Superman was playing in cinemas. That summer, my parents went into a pub, ordered two pints. “We don’t serve pints to ladies,” the barman said.

My mother did not flinch. Coolly, she asked for two halves, decanted them into a pint glass. I like to picture her, backlit by the jukebox in the pub’s smoky fug, raising that tarnished gold to her lips.

Witchcraft

I have blacked out,
spasming and juddering,
twice in six months.

They tap fluid from my spine,
pock an arm with holes,
stick electrodes to my scalp.

I pray.

Later, my memories will be foxed,

as if seen through old glass
as if dunked

in dark water.

Japanese Wind Telephone

When you asked me for a love poem
I told you about a glass booth

containing one object,
a disconnected rotary phone:

black, shiny as whale-belly
from which the grieving

can dial the numbers
of their lost ones, speak

to the listening dead.
I promised

that after you were gone,
I would keep telling you things:

how our children are growing;
how the blown apple blossom

fills the gutter
outside our house;

how our neighbours
still make love so loudly

and when they wake me
I find I have reached again

for your hand.

Lethe

Here the dead drink the water
to slip free of their earthly souls.

The river is brackish; memories
dissolve gradually, each one

a tiny swell of shock. Before oblivion,
the last thought dredged up by the dead

is not what you might imagine:
never the curve of a lover's back

or the ochre blur of a sunset,
but the taste of things:

honey, ripe figs, warm wine,
the first gasp of cold winter air.

Simmer Dim

“Shetlanders are a secret people.”
- Hugh MacDiarmid

The inexact science of words
will not let me describe
the salt-blandness of bannocks
slowly baking: doughy silence
tasselled by scorie-song
and whine of subarctic wind.

Bindweed, buttermilk,
peat-crackle, tick
of grandfather clock,
a Bakelite radio
with a broken dial.

It won't let me show you
how black the air smells,
the islands' serrated edges

smaller
smaller still
petering out

or our dialect, so rich
in its words for hunger -
fantin, hocken.
I cannot give you
the taste of razor clams
or clove and rhubarb jam

but please take this:
nineteen hours
of daylight, followed
by the night's cool throat:
flowering silverweed,
selfheal, eyebright, yarrow.

Icarus As a Girl

Vivid, the lit flicker
of each gauzy wing:
every hair
on the back of my neck
catches alight,
my locks kindle
from damp flax
to flaming torch

I drop

bare arms flapping,
useless.

The story
has been mistold.
I'm girl, not boy,
got further than you think

(that giddy soar, that scrape
of the fireball's cusp)

invincible. Or not –
this flailing mess
of feather and wax.

Who's to say
how it sounds,
the glaze
and crackle
of my skin?

Who's to say
what I cry out
as I plummet?

Domestic

Swift tie and untie of apron. Years
of slipping away as a well-scrubbed hand
touches your hip. Pewter-grey dawns
on your knees with the hearth billowing
ash and soot. Cold. Thin blankets,
mice scrabbling, the attic window
veiled with ice. Not seeing or hearing:
arguments, thrown champagne glasses,
bloodied sheets. Thinning memories
of home, of the huddle of cottages
fifty miles away, distant as the moon.
Fortnightly hair-washing, coil of grease
pinned at the nape of your neck. Acres
of parquet buffed to a painful sheen.
Letters home. *Dear mother and father,
how are you? I am very well. Yesterday,
we had junket with blackberries.*

Cocktails with Anna Akhmatova

Anna drinks fast
and says very little.
She just looks at me. The odd geometry
of her black fringe, her long nose.
She's hush-hush
about her abandoned law degree,
the suicidal suitors,
how she ran through Paris
drunk with Modigliani.

So I ask her about Leningrad:
the seventeen months in prison queues
where she waited to visit her son,
in blizzards, in blood-stained snow,
and this is what she said:

*a younger woman turned to me
and asked: "can you describe this?"
I looked at the line of broken wives and mothers,
their lips blue with cold, the filth
of the prison walls, and finally
back into the woman's watery eyes.*

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I can."

Kidnap & Escape of the Wife of Germany's Biggest Marzipan Manufacturer

When they come for you
you are wearing a satin dress
in cornflower blue,
ochre kidskin slippers
with gilt fastenings.
You do not fight.
You were not raised to fight.

The brougham jolting,
lozenge of light in the cobbled dawn.
Everything a-jangle.
Chitter of diamonds heavy on your earlobes.
Mud-slurry, the horses toiling,
the factory spewing its monstrous cloud.

A big house, emptied out.
You are only a little afraid.

The one left to guard you
has limpid green eyes, defeat
in the set of his shoulders.
After two nights, when you kneel
to open the lock with a hairpin,
you see the high polish
of his black boots. He is snoring,
or pretending to.

You burst into a fine garden
hemmed by walls, scrabble for a door
under a mantle of ivy and moss.
Finally, battered oak and a rusted ring.
The handle slowly turning. Beyond,
the river fattening in its girdle,
and the frosted road
where you hail a horse and rider,
point north. Just a small run
in your silk stockings.

Swimming

I never loved anything as I love that first immersion in salt,
the sand shelving, dipping through ribbons of tepid and cool.
Strange that I, so fearful, would want the mystery of it,
haul of tide, tangle of bladderwrack at my feet,
trailing fronds. The pink bathers on the shoreline
shrink and shrink again, aligning their towels,
unpacking picnic boxes of smaller boxes: juice, crackers, raisins.
The blue deepening, pulling, as I spot my family waving
from a sickle of sand, contained in a cowl of blinding light.

Heliotherapy

Impossible
to grow up here
and not worship the caress,
the muggy dream,
of warmth.

I will show you our altars.

Mouthfuls of sand
on wind-lashed beaches;

a woman ironing
in her tiny front garden,

men working topless
on scaffolding, in 13 degrees -

tenement windows
all aflame, gleaming.

The plain daylight of it -

bowls of our valleys
charged

with sun, damp air
dislodged, all winters

forgiven.

Ghazal for a Small Town

Wild garlic, damp coolness
of the overgrown woods, deep tangle

of the road south. Moon hung in the mist.
My mother unplaiting my sister's hair-tangle.

Shafts of light bisecting the library stacks.
We test ourselves: vodka, cigarettes, untangling

our limbs from childhood bonds. Dented bracelet
of the bay encircling the sea; wild tangle

of seaweed, bladderwrack. Beached jellyfish.
It will take me years to untangle this:

a muddied helix of love and stillness,
those hours of boredom tangled with joy.

Scotland?

a version of Wislawa Szymborska's *Vocabulary*

"Scotland? Isn't it terribly cold there?" she asked
and tilted her head a little to the side.

"Madam," I want to say. "I can barely find the words
to tell you how cold it is; we are hardly literate,
because our schools close so often, due to pupils
freezing to their chairs. We carry pick-axes
(yes, all of us!) to hack through iced-up ponds
and rivers, or we would have no water. Our lips
stay blue for much of the year. When we make love,
a sure sign of orgasm is that the teeth stop chattering
but only for a few seconds.

You wouldn't believe the amount of whisky
we have to consume just to get through the winter."

That's what I want to say.

But she means well.

"Sometimes," I reply.

This is a True Story

I would not marry into that house.
I couldn't condemn
my unconceived children

to their strange bloodline:
oddly shaped ears, a mad uncle,
small boys packed off to Eton,

and an imperious matriarch
reigning over the tea-table.
God, the mother loved to bake.

I was suspicious of her flirtation
with domesticity, seeing as
they had *staff*, but she was a pro

with the first incision,
opening up Victoria sponge
like a neurosurgeon. I marvelled

as they turned near-miss into legend:
He almost rowed for Oxford, you know!
Giles practically climbed Everest in '92!

Years later, I found a photo of us,
grinning for the camera
at a table full of cakes.


I'd told the story to so many -
this incredibly rich family! -
that I could barely recall

how much of it was theirs,
and how much mine. I confess,
the Mater held no scalpel

in the shot; the light was kind,
the cakes appeared delicious,
and all their ears looked fine.

Celestial Planisphere

a glow-in-the-dark jigsaw for ages 7+

That box held the moon and the sun and more,
a stash that made you superheroic,
expert on constellations and the zodiac,
the universe studding your bedroom floor.
When it was finished you took it to school,
and everybody laughed. Of course you knew
the danger signs (hide box! abort mission now!) 
but you stood firm till one of them shoved you.
Crash landing, a hard concrete collision;
stars exploding in your field of vision,
and the brute taste of loss in your mouth
as you spat out blood and a wobbly tooth.
Somebody's mum hauled you to your feet.
Galaxies had shifted. Your voyage was complete.

Line Manager

She even *sounded* wealthy:
the clink of silver bracelets
and clip of Russell and Bromley heels –
and she exuded
a tremendous boredom,
always yawning, [SEP]
or giving a little laugh.
I liked her languid, decisive way
with a deadline; all in all,
she wasn't the worst boss I'd had

until the lunch of lamb
and merlot, when she asked:
Now what exactly does your father do?
and the starched linen [SEP]
widened between us, until all I knew
were her narrow blue eyes, [SEP]
the scrape of cutlery on porcelain –
as the wine filled my throat,
sharper and warmer suddenly, like blood.

The Dead Go to the Theatre

Curtain up! The dead
have corralled their bones
for the spectacle.

Here's a world so lush,
vividly coloured in plum,
carmine and gold -

flecks of glitterball light
hit a collarbone here,
an ulna there.

The best of them
still sit among us, arrayed
in splendidly polished shoes.

Interval. They minnow
toward the orchestra pit,
reach into a tuba's dark mouth

run a tongue along
a rosined viola string.
Every pot of ice cream

will have a tiny scoop
taken from it. Backstage
they stir chaos:

clouds of face powder,
greasepaint on the wigs.
Are you surprised?

At the final curtain
the dead want only
what we want.

Portrait, c1658, artist unknown

The small mole on the curve
of her neck; the tiny lace whorls
of her dress. Whoever painted her
did so with love.

The background's plum gloom
holds a carved dresser
and a chipped jug, glazed
with a single trickle
of what might be wine. She holds
a book loosely, index finger
saving the page.

Her eyes, massive and black, float
in the whiteness of her face. Her waist
is laced to the width
of a man's hand.

At the edge of the painting,
there is a hint
of wavering light
which could be a mirror on the wall,
or a river outside
carrying the world
as it slips slowly by.

Illusory

“Behind the illusion of everyday life lies the reality of dreams.”
- Werner Herzog, *Fitzcarraldo*

in the way that you turn on to a street
you knew when young and catch your breath;
its dimensions calcified, unchanged

in the way that a stuck door creaks opens
to reveal a garden full of honeysuckle,
sheened with snail-slime, netted with cobwebs

in the way that orderly rooms, scrubbed clean,
lose their patina of interesting dirt -
watermarks, spilled ash, candlewax, bluebottles

in the way that your fingers will find the chord
on a piano, knowing the claw-stretch
after years without playing

in the way that the moon will sequester / release
a view of spires and slates
on a bed of staggered indigo

in the way that a man walks out of the smoking ruins
clutching his workbag, still wearing
the sameshoes samesuit samecoat as this morning -

in the way that you are falling
through barred cloud, streaked bronze,
dropping like a stone,

in the way that we are animals
and our bodies remember things.

Cluedo

I loved its smallness
(those secret corridors,
that minuscule dagger)
and its bigness (the body
slung across the bannister,
the blood pooling
on the parquet floor)
but most of all
I loved the resolution,
when justice was done
and every piece slotted
neatly back into the box -
as if the world could be
made so tidy; as if
we could pack
any savagery
so carefully away.

Revenant Visits Her Old Bedroom

You, stranger, sleep here now.
I present myself at night,
but I have no sinister intention

running a finger along the glass
of milk half-drunk, rim
ghosted with residue.

I may try on your clothes,
buttoning the shirts slowly
as if on vacation.

Here is your desk lamp,
the light lemony, condensed
in an upturned cup of shadow.

I will read your notebooks,
the postcards above your bed.
Here are your hopes

strung up high. Here,
the arrowed sweetness
of your pins and hairclips.

I will leave like anyone else:
stairs, front door, cold grass path
towards the woods.

There I slip from this world
slowly into water;
ankles, knees, waist -

the river thick,
darkly glimmering,
very still.

Self-Portrait as Submariner

I was not always this way. Once, I gambled
for a bag of tiny fish at a funfair, and swung
the knotted plastic to and fro, all the way home.

I sizzled bream on its back, watched
from a quayside as speckled cod thrashed.
I shimmied a knife under salmon skin,

tucked a linen napkin into my shirt,
cracked open lobster with a little hammer.
Now, I would be more merciful:

I live in the wreckage, though I could slither
through a porthole and leave at my leisure.
The sweeping stair with its rotting carpet,

its vanishing tendrils and swirls. Lacquered panels,
heavy goblets stowed in rows, empty as mouths.
At this depth, I am weightless, exploratory:

the grand piano, lid aloft,
canopied with barnacles -
the quiet shoals swimming through.

First Dates

Byron. Those dark curls, the aristocratic nose.
I know what you're thinking,
but it wasn't like that. When he kissed me,
he cupped my face so gently in his hand.

Keats was early, waiting for me
outside the Tube station. He asked questions,
he knows how to talk to women. So fragile:
his white throat, the blood-splattered hankie.

Tennyson was late, bringing in the cold,
his cheeks ruddy; in no time at all,
his hand on my knee, a skein
of IPA foam on his beard.

Browning had nice eyes,
but wouldn't shut up about Italy.
Kept drumming his fingers on the table,
nails bitten down to the quick.

Hopkins fiddled with his white collar,
sketched me on the back of a beer-mat,
suggested we step outside
to watch the sunset. Pointed out birds,

told me to keep looking up.

Travel Agent

after Krystyna Dabrowska

I organise trips for the dead, who travel
just like we do. They pack too much,
fidget in queues, hate the middle seat.
They need me: the dead are watchful
but cannot always cope
with new technology.

When they arrive at their destinations,
slipping through familiar front doors,
there are no weepy reunions,
no clutching or hands grasping,
no cakes baked in their honour,
no banners or balloons.
Someone may ask

is it chilly in here?

reach for a scarf,
observe the quiver
of cut flowers on the mantelpiece.

56.9° North

Even the sun is cool here,
shot through
with the North Sea breeze.
The particular silence
of a church hall
in late summer:
residue of sticky-tape
dotting the walls; lost bulletins
for bake sales, charity runs.

Latticed shadow
of sycamore trees,
deep leafy curve
of the route out
where my friend
drove off the road –
engine still running
as he blinked blood
from his eyelashes
under thrushsong
and honeyed light.

Crumbling outdoor pool
filled with the ocean,
the worn, grainy depths of it.
Flakes of blue paint
stuck to wet skin.

My childhood recedes
as though seen from the window
of a car travelling at speed
towards the south.

Sales Pitch of an Honest Estate Agent

after Vernon Frazer

The height chart scrawls on the kitchen wall
will acquire a frightening sadness. You will argue

in the bedroom, the kitchen, and in hushed tones
at the bottom of the garden while a barbecue,

complete with popping corks, reaches its climax
closer to the house. In ten years you will ask yourself

if that flooring imported from Rome was worth it.
The shed will always smell like resin

and old tennis racquets
and that beguiling view will shrink

when the neighbours build their awful extension.
Don't imagine for a second

that you'll ever get around to replacing that bath;
an avocado so glossily ugly you could lick it.

Dear Former Valentine

Before you and I were lovers
we were friends, and once
I stayed at your house near the airport
before a cheap pre-dawn flight.
When you drove me to the terminal
I observed your beautiful wrists
and decisive gear changes,
and that was our moment of greatest romance.

With the collisions still to come
(that garden in the Val d'Orcia,
you peeling oranges for me,
the bed we broke in San Francisco,
the curdling, the sourness)
that night remains: chaste, wakeful.
I remember a Star Wars duvet cover
washed to threadbare softness,
and a red plastic alarm clock.

Bellville, TX

The town came out for it: corn on the cob,
rippling flags, sweat on cooling cans.

Streets narrowing with flesh.
Candy stacked like apples, the stricken line

of the highway east. Sun stitching the wound
of deep-ploughed fields.

Iced tea in a plastic glass:
the morning's easy weight.

That unlit corner - a hand in the leaves
in the garden of a dead man.

Those in line for the Ferris wheel
were restless and happy.

I too was waiting, under green vines,
for my life to detonate in front of me -

overhearing the psychic in her stifling tent,
The Hierophant, The Hermit, The High Priestess.

For the Mother in the Crowd at Shea Stadium

‘An announcer stepped to the microphone and said: “Don’t worry - the Beatles are here.”
And from that moment, nobody could hear anything but screams.’

- *The Daily News*, August 16, 1965

When the camera veers from the infield diamond,
panning over the audience, you are hard to spot;
outnumbered by your tearstained daughters
who clutch their faces, their hair, grab one another
in a glee that looks closer to pain. It’s too hot,
and they are pink-cheeked, toddler-sticky. Severe
in your butterfly-wing glasses, low heels,
and sturdy black handbag, you have the look
of a doctor, one who can dispense
and restore. But they don’t turn to you, do they,
these long-limbed, delirious children;
your composure, your dutiful stillness
is what allows them to lurch forward,
screaming, ecstatic, full of fever.

Dream of a Man with Hidden Face

In the dreams you are never one thing.
Sometimes you are a sculptor, chiselling
marble into submission, or a surgeon,
with your implacable scalpel and covered mouth;
in another dream you ride for miles through desert
with the sun at your back, a Stetson worn low;
or you captain a ship, roll it alongside icebergs
so close your passengers can reach out a finger
and scratch the ice. In none of the dreams
do you have a name, but in one of them
you leave a note in the grass, dug in
deep with a sharpened stick.
In that note, you explain everything:
name, blood type, catalogue of sins, penances,
sports affiliations, what frightens you at night.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Derelict Home of the Fallen Dictator!

Financially, the summer house was his final mistake.
The gilded corridors, the swathes of velvet and silk;

the days it took to dig a path through the swampy dirt
to the brothel he had built in the grounds. Try to imagine

the musk of frangipani and orchids transplanted
from the hothouse to scent his route towards the girls.

Here, the half-finished head and shoulders of his image
in marble. The sculptor stopped when the money ran out;

that night, the dictator's roars unsettled the lake,
making the water shudder. Go ahead - you can walk

in what were his gardens. Be aware though, that sometimes
when it rains, you will see a glint of white in the ground.

The Sonographer Sees the Complication

At first, I thought I was mistaken.
Often there are odd crenulations,
ridges, swirls. But it clarified
as the jellied transducer circled.
It did not look, to me, like a child,
or a kidney stone, or anything human:
it was blinking and starred all around,
complex like latticework.
I knew, then, looking at the patient
she would have to be told:

*you have conceived an asterism -
a puzzle of rogue stars,
and you cannot birth them.
They will shrink and condense,
taking you with them,
until you are matter:
lost, minuscule, a twinkle
in the deep curve of a stranger's eye.*

Beam

My childhood communion
with flight:
silver and violet diagonals
of my leotard; thud
on scuffed suede; seconds
of weightlessness -

now when I wake,
scrabbling, believing
the daughter we never had
should be in the room
and I can't find her -

deep in my brain's neural pathways
a girl runs light along a beam
launches herself
into chilly air, particles
of chalk spinning
in her wake.

The Patron Saint of Lost Things

As I sit with my love in the pew, his knowledge makes him foreign:
when to stand, when to bow your head and murmur *Amen*.

I don't recognise his face as he shakes hands at the head of the line,
the hush of mourners saying *sorry for your trouble, sorry for your loss,*

so sorry, god bless. As a child, he was always the one to find things:
lost keys, the dog's lead, loose change for mass. I think of him

running child-speed through the rooms that now sit dark,
hunting at the gravel-lined edge of the garden next to her lavender,

under her neatly-made bed, or in her press full of laundered sheets.

Mijas Pueblo

Let the lemons ripen on their trees; let those that drop
fleck with rot and house insects. Shutter the windows,
double lock the door. The sun will still crawl
up over the horizon; patient blinkered donkeys
will clip through cobbled streets, and each morning
when the tide tows its mist back towards the deep,
a black-clad woman will sweep up debris in the square –
cherry blossom, ice-cream wrappers, or discarded tickets
from the bull-ring, where cheap seats are marked
sol and expensive ones *sombra*. There will be celebrations,
the little church encircled by bridal flowers, wreaths.
The village will go on without you, revolving
in its remarkable unremarkable way, as rain falls,
cooler dusks come, and the tethered animals
turn and sigh in their stalls.

Sylvia Plath as Heart Surgeon

Sylvia is the steadiest hand on the team. Early for every surgery, scrubbing her fingernails, sporting a surgeon's cap patterned with clowns (she specialised in paediatric cardiology graduating first in her class, after divorcing Ted).

Sylvia sleeps soundly and rises early to bathe in the ponds at Hampstead Heath. She likes building fires, the patina of rain on glass, the way it feels to palpate a tiny heart, the way it feels to haul small souls back from the light.

Prognosis

The lengthening days strung
like laundry on a dark line:

sky neither blush, nor apricot,
nor anything

but itself. I cannot conceive
of a world without you.

But I'll take this,
if this is what's on offer:

a glimpse of other seasons,
billowing sheets,

beachcombing, bare feet,
outdoor cocktails crammed

with umbrellas, flamingo stirrer,
sticky cherries, lit

by a moon
distilled

to a sliver
of eau de nil.

The Three-Legged Dog

On my fastest 5k
on the brittle canal path
I see a three-legged dog
outpace a four-legged dog.

Snowdrops clamour
their way through the soil,
the water is daubed with silver,
the netting of the leafless trees

accumulates magpies and finches.
As the crooks of my elbows
earn their lines of salt,
I want to devour everything:

the way the dog looks so happy,
the way the aqueduct slips along,
the sun valiant
in its calaboose of cloud.

Inspector Morse Extra, 1989

On screen for just seven minutes:
I am kissed in an Aston Martin Lagonda
under cherry boughs, wood-pigeon calling,

my strapless taffeta gown a poison green.
I'm squired by a ruffle-haired man in a tux,
Tobias? or Lucian? -

perhaps Felix.
My boarding school motto
inscribed on my signet ring:

Fidelis in Parvo.
I have high cheekbones,
hopes of a First. My body

is found two days later:
dragonfly sheen of my sodden dress,
crushed netting between my legs.

Adrift, rolling in the mossy light
under the arches of the Isis,
fingernails full

of the dirt beneath:
o my drowned brain

a colosseum emptying
of all its trapped animals.

Anatomy of a Painting

'I started to think about the anatomy of a painting: the layering, the pace and tempo of the painted surface.'

- Jenny Saville,
2012

She needs full-body lunges to get the curves right. It's faster, this kind of painting, more viscous: spillages and trickles as the image is captured and flung against stretched cotton weave. In the corner, emptied pots of colour: **Rose Dorée** for lips, **Naples Yellow Light** for a swathe of buttery thigh, **Cobalt Violet** for veins. Finished, it's vast: rolls of fat, folds and hangings, waterfalls of human flesh. When she leaves the room, the empty space recalls something loving - how the tiniest pin-prick of white can denote light in an eye; the smallest circle of black the dip of a bellybutton.

Nobody Talks About Elizabeth Bennet's Wedding Night

Her bonnet was set aside carefully;
his breeches folded, their best shoes
in a row, both of them so courteous
you first ... no, really, you ...

or

petticoats kicked aside
blush spreading up her throat
his frock-coat flung
over a spindly chair

her hair stayed in its pins,
mussed and dampened
with nervous sweat;
her thighs white, dimpled

or

he loved the dark weight
of her loosed hair,
her thighs were all muscle
(due to the long walks)

it hurt: her gasps were pain,
the starched sheets adorned
with unexpected blood

or

it didn't hurt at all
there was no blood,
only a rising astonishment

they made love at midnight
cocooned in heavy blankets,
glad of the dark, tentative

or

early evening sunshine streamed
through cracks in the shutters;
they fucked in honeycombed

light

but I think we can all agree
they slept well
set like spoons
almost certainly

entwined at the ankles.

Afternoon Tea in a Time of Horror and Chaos

Lightning claws open a sky
milky
like an offered bowl

diminishing the garden's peacock
to a flash of tail-feather
framed by stained-glass doors.

Ignore each strike embellishing
and dimming the room,
making the china stutter.

Cut into sponge
sodden with syrup,
tease apart sticky dates.

Sip, swallow,
as hammering rain
darkens the flagstones.

When the maid offers
to lower the blinds, say
no, there is no need. Say

plump the cushions
at my back, please. Call
for a fresh jug of cream.

The Charity Shops of Aberdeen

October. The boredom of loitering
while my mum went through the rails
with high-speed concentration;

the focus of those who love clothes
and know overdrafts. She had an eye
for Aztec prints, bracelet length sleeves,

anything *real* – silk, leather, wool.
I learned from those coppery afternoons
scented by instant coffee and damp coats.

Now, the best thing in my wardrobe
has a 60s Neiman Marcus label,
a batwing top, all hand-stitched sequins,

possibly worn by a long-dead
martini-swilling divorcée. A useful piece
that announces itself

before you open your mouth.
Isn't this the truth of us,
the things we lust after?

The dream of transformation
in every new clasp or neckline;
that gorgeous, refracted autumn light.

Miniature

I've been working so late
on this matchstick version
of our neighbourhood:

its tenement rows, the bungalows
around the park. I melt sweets
to make the church's stained glass;

its amber so translucent,
like skin held too close
to light. I soften wax

over flame to seal the corners,
cover it with my arms
when traffic shudders outside.

The cobbled streets are made
with pomegranate seeds
sucked free from their casing,

and every shop in the arcade
contains stick people, fashioned
with pins and neat twists

of my own hair. Each time
I think it's complete, another
street occurs to me, another

remembered office block
or swimming pool. So many years
have passed since I began;

it is damaging my eyes, hunching
my spine. When I set it alight,
I will pay attention as it kindles

to a blaze of scarlet and black,
so I can write it, remake it,
as the buildings flatten to ash.

Opening Scenes of a Never-Made 1980s Thriller

The big white house -
a sharp-razored sugarcube
of balcony and glass
the drop
to the spilled turquoise
of a cold pool
filter bubbling
in the hush. Birdsong.

A woman reclines
on a striped lounge:
acid yellow swimsuit
ten neat toenails painted coral
posed like a mannequin
or a voodoo doll
awaiting pins.

Along the shadow
of a high stucco wall

(alarm disabled, guard dogs silenced)

creeps a man.
No shoes
Hawaiian shirt
gelled hair
reflective aviators.

Before the jump-cut to black
we see her, reflected
in his sunglasses

tiny-boned, oblivious -
one languid leg extended
vivid
as a hummingbird.

Dinner on Ithaca

I should be better at this:
de-shelling a king prawn,
cracking
the lacquered carapace,
running a fingernail
through the digestive tract
trying not to think

downstream, in the treeless dusk
of 1969, my mother finishes a shift
in the crab factory,
a smeared table
of sharp knives.
She's dreaming:

*sometimes we'd put our names and addresses
on paper under the wrapping
in the hope that a rich man
would rescue us*

Now, they bring raki
flavoured with rosewater,
I lay crumpled notes
next to the bill

dirtsmell of seafood
still on my hands.

Lady Macbeth Assumes a New Identity

Lady Macbeth doesn't plot any more; she diets,
starving herself to the slimness of youth.
She's great at removing stains from carpets,
stiffening shirt collars, polishing boots.
Her voice is so quiet it's almost a whisper,
her kitchen has the gleam of the righteous –
those who choose to iron their knickers
and consider two white wines outrageous.
Lady M makes extensive shopping lists,
bakes ornate cakes for birthdays, reminds
her new man to take vitamin pills. Her wishes
are simple and pure: rain for the garden, kind
words from the neighbours. At night,
she folds her hands and dreams of knives.

European Expedition Notes

after Wislawa Szymborska

Everything tasted different. There was a tinge
of metal in the water. Grass underfoot
felt thicker. Razors rusted and blunted
faster. I can't explain. Somehow the bus seats
felt less comfortable than those at home
- thinner? narrower? higher? -
there were always bells chiming, always,
and they told me in winter there was smog.
No matter. The city shimmered in high summer
like a fairytale or a mirage; its fringes
of deep leafy green, the way it wore its river
like a necklace.

Weekend in the Country, November 1913

The lightest of rain is falling at breakfast,
embroidering the latticed windows.
A fresh jar of marmalade; the meadow
too damp for croquet. A hint of new frost.
Captain Lawrence Cole admires the library,
its sliding ladder and trophy chest,
portraits in oil; the gilded family crest.
Beyond the walled garden's topiary
he sees a pool carpeted with leaves,
mildew-soft and starting to decay.
Later, the packed-full Paddington train,
the unheated barracks, a pot of stewed tea.
Our man sleeps in rough white sheets.
The part in his hair. His long schoolboy feet.

The War From Here

after Sophie Ristellhueber's *Eleven Blowups*

cratered road, rubble
in front of palm trees

a burnt-out bus

remains of a red plastic
road blockade

from when barricades
served a purpose

from before

the road is empty

no hooded captives
or bleeding amputees

just a long stretch
of black

that once carried

goats
lemons
coca cola

people

it once carried people

towards the city
for lunch in the shade:

children playing
on cool mosaic floors

The Poison Garden

Everything in this place could kill you,
so really, only you are the threat;

but what would coax you forward
to swallow a soft bell of foxglove

or lace your fingers around a stem
of wolfsbane? You only came to stroll

between hemlock and monkshood
as if it were any Sunday,

in any garden. In time, though,
the place's heavy alchemy

fogs your brain, veers you
off the path. You wake

to find yourself lying
in the shade of giant hogweed -

caked in mud, your mouth ablaze -
looking at hands

you no longer recognise.

The Dark Forest

Love, I have moved us backward.
We are in the cabin again,
built from halved logs raw
and dripping sap. The clock
has stopped - the cuckoo
sits half-out of his carved chalet.
In the pantry, rows
of thick jarred honey
with undertaste of fir,
shelved next to wild game
and cherry sauce.
Outside, the lake swills
in its crown of pines.

We are fireside in armchairs
with goblets; contained,
braced for happiness.
You are leaning forward
as if to stir the fire.

Now, the condensation
from our breathing.
Now, the weight of your arm
slung across my body.

But the cabin, the cuckoo,
the tiered hopes
of our early months?
Gone. Irretrievably gone.

Sweetheart

I want to make you good things.
To simmer and fold
until cream and sugar clot
into caramel; to roll and unmould
dainty madeleines or macarons.
It's no use. I'm better at pickles,
ribbons of courgette cut and plunged
into vinegar. Show me love,
and I'll show you hands smeared
with vermillion chilli, crushed garlic,
splinters of ginger
under every fingernail.

Places to Hide at Parties: A Guide for Introverts

Forget about the kitchen.
People will be in there,
high-fiving, doing shots, snogging
behind the open fridge door.
You have to be more inventive.
Try the bedrooms. In extreme cases,
there will be a pile of clean laundry
soft for burrowing. Yes,
you could just go home - but what's home

with the dresses still scattered
across your bed, tissues
blossoming with lipstick,
iron cooling in the silence?

Rearrange the coats, match-make
so the oversized trench
folds its arms lovingly
around the striped blazer,
or the zippered leather slings an arm
over the denim jacket as if to say
Hey. I understand. Let's go.

Life Model

after Lisel Muller

If I moved an inch,
I would crack like a glaze.

My body plucked of clothes, rendered
in blotchy shades of chickpea and ballet slipper.

Hours arrayed in a sliver of breeze, pinpricks
of flesh rising on my thighs.

Stray hair over my eye nagging
like a half-remembered tune. Stilled

by the fourth-floor light
from the high art-room windows, I'd listen

to the city below feverishly
destroying and rebuilding itself.

No matter how long I'd lie there,
some parts they could never get right:

sunspot on my cheek, mole at my elbow,
the scar meandering over my heart.

The House Where My Mother Was Born

Here is the skeleton of a but'n'ben.
With each visit there is less to see:
tile chippings; a fright of mirror;
a milk pan rusting in long grass.
It is all pieces, a little chambered tomb.

Her childhood has ossified,
deep in the lines of mica and peat,
where I stand in the rubble
breaking and resetting
a poem's delicate bones.

You Ask Why I Seldom Write About Men

Dear husbands, brothers, fathers,
it was not my intention: I forgot
to paint you in. Perhaps you exist
dead centre of the canvas, busying yourself
with a task in the crowd: churning milk,
combing your hair. **Keep looking.**
Is that you? Slip of pale face, deep
in the twist and scar of the oils?

I can't say for sure. You're at the edge
of the frame, maybe, gazing outwards:
your expression inscrutable, placid. Wait,
there you are. Lower right-hand corner,
arm raised as if to attract attention,
obscured by the letters of my name.

The Calligrapher

When you began to work in lampblack, vitriol, narcissus liquor,
you thought you would be no longer imprisoned in the material world;
that the covers of blind-tooled goatskin, the half-life of liquid drying
into immortality, might offer some redemption

but all you found were callouses, fading sight,
a tiny fleet of ghost ships sent into the mist.

Backwards

after W.S. Graham

I walked backwards through my life.
It was quick; it did not hurt; my feet
hit concrete grass tarmac parquet
scree the rough green carpet
in our Mintlaw council house. I knew
the ground I'd played on. I knew
the taste of the gravel. I loved it
all over again. Every streetlight,
every clipped bus ticket, every wasted
Sunday afternoon. All the times
a sliver of sea came into view.

Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Clinical Report

First, they wish they'd found courage
to be themselves.

Random phrases from this regret:

Tango Lessons, Tattoos, Am-Dram, Yellow Polka-dot Socks

Secondly, they wish they had worked less,
spent more time with loved ones.

Random phrases from this regret:

Peppermint Rock, 74th Birthday Party, Bedtime Stories, So Fast

Third, they wish they had shown more emotion.

Random phrases from this regret:

Bottled Up, Too Much Whisky, Dog-eared
Photo, Just Chopping Onions

Fourth: a wish that they had kept friendships alive.

Random phrases from this regret:

Close As Brothers, Emigrated, Interlocking Necklace, Mail Not
Forwarded

Fifth: they wish they had let themselves be happy.
Here, we found no relevant phrases, only the fact
that the dying,
if they could do it all again,
would laugh more.

The Pantone Colour of the Year is Green 2252c

I want to live
with green things
all around me
the chartreuse
of early crocus
the mantis
of a football pitch
the cyan
of sea-glass
gathered from the ebb
the pistachio
of softly-folded gelato
the myrtle
of blown branches
starting to bud
in all this green
I will sleep
waking
to a hysteria
of birdsong

How to Leave a Party

after Jane Yolen

The air will be glacial,
shot through with fir and pine,
as the path ahead fills
with rapidly falling snow.

Feel it crunch underfoot:
a meringue of broken glass.
Your toes will quickly numb.
Slip your hands into gloves.

It will taste shockingly cold
this sluice of night, this rattle
of bones, like ice cubes in vodka.
Don't turn around. You risk

seeing your reflection,
blurred in the lit warmth
or hearing your own voice
calling you back indoors.

The End

This is how I imagine it. Twilight.
Trees stripped of their leaves,
clouds unbraiding themselves
dissolving into billows of silk,
shreds of dessicated coconut.
The low bushes swagged with late berries.

Two children run past
with toy walkie-talkies.
You are happy. You greet
strangers with ruddy cheeks
collecting conkers. The path
beneath your feet is crunchy,
the colour of old pennies.

You reach a library,
set neatly on an oblong
of frosted lawn. Inside,
silence, the musk of old books,
a cantilevered staircase
and a ceiling ribbed
in palest blue.

Pienza

When we stopped for shade in a courtyard –
cold mosaic tiles, baskets of jasmine –
we opened water bottles and stale *pasticcini*
and talked about the hike up and how small
the town was and how happy we were
to be asked for directions on the road
though we could only say *non siamo di qui*
and shrug. The air was thick with birdsong,
incense and (somewhere) weed and then
we heard the singing, a choir, no instruments,
an old, crumpled priest conducting younger priests
the light seemed whiter and more radiant
falling on the graffiti and chipped ochre and blue;
we froze with our lukewarm water and pastries
afraid to move in case we disturbed them –
it was heaven. I am telling you now
it was heaven and we had no idea.

Section B:

‘A Landscape of Mutability and Ferocious Life’:
Mark Doty and Jo Shapcott’s poetics of illness

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for in-text citations:

HC

Heaven's Coast (Doty)

LSH

Literature and Science Hub at the University of Liverpool (Rees-Jones)

OM

Of Mutability (Shapcott)

Shapcott, Ambulance

Interview conducted by Sarah Crown, "Jo Shapcott: I'm not someone chasing her own ambulance" in *The Guardian*, 24 July 2010.

Shapcott, BOL

Interview conducted by Kira Cochrane, "Jo Shapcott: the book of life" in *The Guardian*, 27 January 2011.

TSS

'To See the Suffering: The Humanities Have What Medicine Needs' (Charon)

Introduction

As a writer who owes her life to the NHS, I have always been fascinated by the human body, the ways in which it can go wrong, and the language we use to talk about sickness. Born with a double ventricular septal defect in 1979, I had open-heart surgery as a two-year-old, leaving me with a 15-centimetre scar on my chest, a visual reminder of trauma I cannot even recollect, although I remember the regular hospital follow-up appointments: the scans, the residue of stickers on my chest from echocardiograms, the gradual awareness that every birthday was a milestone achieved thanks to a medical team at Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary. As a result, a number of the original poems in the creative part of this thesis explore my own experience of illness, both lived and witnessed, and in my critical work, I unpack the means by which two contemporary poets – Mark Doty and Jo Shapcott – navigate their own poetics of illness. I also examine the overlap in Doty and Shapcott's thematic preoccupations and aim to interweave the principles of narrative medicine into my analysis of these poets' work.

Doty describes Cape Cod, where he nursed his partner Wally Roberts until Roberts's death from AIDS-related complications, as 'a landscape of mutability and ferocious life' (Perrine 47). *Of Mutability* is the title of Jo Shapcott's 2010 poetry collection written in the wake of her diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer. How do these poets articulate the 'mutable and ferocious' experience of sickness – the experience of our bodies surprising us, the experience of our bodies misbehaving?

Doty and Shapcott negotiate illness from completely different perspectives: Doty is American and male, and his poems are frequently set in tercets and run over multiple pages; Jo Shapcott is English and female, and much of the work in *Of Mutability* is more contained – over half the poems in the collection have fewer than sixteen lines. Furthermore, Doty presents us with the narrative of the carer, helplessly observing a loved one suffer, whereas Shapcott offers a re-imagining of patient experience. But, when I began to examine how these poets explore sickness, several overlapping themes and images emerged. Water is one of them: the exploration of porousness, of boundaries vanishing; a sense of a speaker becoming one with his or

her environment (whether that environment appears as the natural world, or as dazzling man-made surroundings). Transformation is another recurring theme. Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, both poets engage with the generative power of performance, dressing-up, stepping into the spotlight.

This last shared preoccupation was not one I expected to encounter, but in both Doty and Shapcott's poetics of illness, performance appears as a site of resistance, a space for play and ambiguity that offers an escape from detached clinical records, medical jargon, and scheduled hospital appointments. Indeed, Hillman and Maude, in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, argue that 'In confronting us with the legible materiality of the body, literature often provides powerful forms of resistance to socially instituted perceptions and demands' (4). I'll explore this notion in more depth in the context of Jo Shapcott's Mad Cow poems, published 18 years before *Of Mutability*, and in relation to Mark Doty's paeans to drag queens and dressing up. But if we consider what the 'socially instituted perceptions and demands' of illness might be – fragility, obedience, acquiescence, all paradoxically aligned with the expectation of resilience that is implicit in the familiar language of battling with disease – such demands are powerfully contested by both Doty and Shapcott through poetry that resists closure and foregrounds liminality and uncertainty.

It is important to clarify that this liminality and uncertainty is counterbalanced by a thread of consolation in both poets' work. Doty and Shapcott are both writing, as Plumly writes about Keats, 'on death watch' (Plumly 153), but the cold reality of impending loss counterpoints a growing regard for the mundane-made-sacred in their work. Although it would be somewhat reductive to claim that poetry offers comfort during times of illness – I favour the poet Nick Laird's approach when he writes in his poem 'Crunch' that 'poetry / is weather for the mind / not an umbrella' (Laird 63) – as I began to delve more deeply into Doty and Shapcott's poems, essays and interviews, I found consolation interwoven through their writing, even when their poems were exploring subjects as stark as chemotherapy or HIV-related delusions. There was fear, there was pain, and there was – plainly stated – joy.

Returning to academia after many years in industry, I found myself extremely hesitant to situate this research in any particular school of critical thought. I think this

is partly a legacy from my professional work as a book editor, where I strive to meet the work on its own terms, and have always believed that my job is to scrutinise and enhance a text without hammering it into a form that pleases me, or makes more sense to me. (To be midwife rather than plastic surgeon, to labour the medical metaphors.) I am interested in poetry's capacity to unsettle, to trouble boundaries, and to give completely different experiences to completely different readers, and so I am drawn to Attridge and Staten's suggestion that a piece of literature might be interpreted 'with the way music works in mind, rather than the way a journal entry or a letter or a historical account works. This is not about the deployment of sound textures – though that may be important, as we've said – but about attention to what is happening as the work proceeds instead of asking what meanings the reader will be left with at the end' (137). I also find useful orientation in the work of Hurley and O'Neill, who point out that 'Contexts matter. But context is not all that matters; and indeed, contexts may be best understood when texts are placed at the heart of the critical process' (Hurley and O'Neill 15).

This approach to literary criticism, which allows readings of poetry to be 'dynamic, complex, evolving negotiations' (Attridge and Staten 1) dovetails with the core principles of narrative medicine, a field which grew out of the increasing use of technology and machinery in healthcare in the 1960s, was solidified into an academic programme at Columbia University in 2000, and is currently being incorporated into teaching frameworks at medical schools worldwide. Narrative medicine is the clinical cousin of the medical humanities: an approach that aims to instil narrative competence in doctors and to foreground patients' stories by paying attention not only to what patients say, but what they don't – pauses, elisions, metaphors, euphemisms and body language all playing their part.

At the heart of narrative medicine is a plea for more listening and less rigidity in clinical interactions; more scope for recognising, absorbing and interpreting patients' stories in medical diagnoses. I will consider how Doty and Shapcott's work might offer implications for the field of critical medical humanities, and the practice of narrative medicine in particular, in my conclusion, but I want to begin by foregrounding the work of the academic and clinician Rita Charon, Director of the Programme in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University. Charon spoke in her 2018

Jefferson Lecture about the benefits of humanities study for medical students.

Studying literature or patients' narratives of sickness, or sharing their own experiences through poetry and story, helps medical students cope with the demands of training, gives them solace, and crucially, can 'humanise and make more effective the care we provide to others' (*TSS*). Significantly, Charon spoke about her determination to help her students 'move beyond the fixable' towards an engagement with patients' 'complex lived experience'. Charon may use 'fixable' in terms of diagnosis and treatment, but I take it in a broader sense to mean that which can be pinned down or fixed in place. In this way, the techniques of narrative medicine can be pressed into service as useful tools as we explore literary journeys of sickness; as poets, and indeed as critics, we also strive to move beyond the fixable, to travel beyond what can simply be denoted, and into the territory of connotation, allusion – the complex web of our embodied experience. This surely necessitates space for ambiguity, paradox and surprise. If we can conceive of poetry as experiential, it is something that is necessarily unfixed, dialogic and historically contingent. In this way it continues to evolve with every reading, a kind of literary contagion that is uncontrollable, just as our somatic experience is continually evolving and, for the most part, beyond our control.

This thesis will explore in detail the techniques used by Mark Doty and Jo Shapcott as they navigate the unpredictable lived experience of serious illness, in a way that identifies their thematic crossovers, while accommodating the hypothesis that when it comes to poetry, 'in reality, interpretation and analysis are always in process' (Attridge and Staten 1).

Mark Doty's Elegiac Process of Intensification

Born in 1943, Mark Doty is the author of nine poetry collections and three memoirs (including the *New York Times* best-seller, *Dog Years*). He has been the recipient of the National Book Award and the National Poetry Series Award in the US, and was the first American to win the T.S. Eliot Prize. My research here focuses on three of Doty's collections: *My Alexandria* (which explores Doty's anticipatory grief as he nurses his long-term partner, Wally Roberts, through AIDS-related illness), and *Atlantis* and *Sweet Machine*, both of which respond to Roberts's death and Doty's grief.

Doty's poetry offers a different route in to thinking about sickness; one that does not depict the conventional sickness narrative of a long battle, but instead renders the experience of gradual loss in tender, exploratory and often surprisingly celebratory terms. Colm Tóibín observes that the poems in *My Alexandria* 'don't depend on the medical details ... they seek instead, desperately, to find images and rhythms which will make sense of this illness, a scheme which can accommodate this illness, however fitfully and sadly' (Tóibín 3).

Doty has frequently spoken of his engagement with the concept of 'negative capability', a term first coined by Keats in 1817. In Keats's words, negative capability is 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' (Sharrock 179). In a 1994 conversation at Provincetown Arts Festival, Doty said: 'I began to see AIDS almost as not a thing in itself ... it means so much to me that it's not even a word ... it's an acronym and therefore has a larger negative capability, as Keats put it' (Stauder 5).

I would contend that Doty's poetics of illness successfully eschews any 'irritable reaching after fact or reason'. His work is in a continual process of negotiation with itself, with the constraints of linguistic representation and the limitations of the material body; it is underpinned by the solace of beauty (found in the natural world, but also in the gaudy and kitsch excess of drag clubs, in paintings, in drugstore windows). It stretches backwards and forwards in time, incorporating dreams, flashbacks, memories and expectations; but the present moment, with its attendant painful temporality, is the

nerve centre of these poems. Although Tóibín is correct in saying that the poems ‘don’t depend on medical details’, the contents of *My Alexandria*, *Atlantis* and *Sweet Machine* do offer a rough chronology of illness: we see Roberts’s diagnosis, initial symptoms, his increasing frailty, and ultimately Doty’s attempts to move forward after his death. Doty’s poetics of sickness can be contextualised as a narrative, but each poem holds its own fragile, transient beauty, and in attending to the present moment, attempts to ‘outwit the temporal’ (Hirsch 5).

Why does this approach work so well in attempting to chronicle a subject as vast as losing a loved one – in this case, to AIDS? In Doty’s poetry of illness, AIDS plays such a vast role that it has almost disappeared, as though the poet is too close to see it. Faced with the colossi of AIDS and personal grief, Doty goes in two directions.

Firstly, he deconstructs and dissolves images, often through his use of rhetorical questions, both simple and profound, as we see in ‘Chanteuse’: ‘what was our city / but wonderful detail?’ (36-37), and in ‘Lament-Heaven’:

isn’t everything so shadowed
by its own brevity
we can barely tell the thing

from its elegy? (65-68)

At the same time, and often in the same poem, he feverishly builds and creates, piling up image after lavish image. If this sounds contradictory, it is; Doty’s poetry, at its most successful, is paradoxical. In one hand, he holds transience; in the other, permanence. Private behaviour / public health. Bodily experience / spiritual consolation. Surface images / emotional depth.

This polarity creates an interesting parallel with the process of clinical diagnosis itself. When Rita Charon makes the case for a new kind of medical care that pays closer attention to the story of the patient as a whole, she observes that in medical diagnosis, ‘the story of sickness comes out chaotically, achronologically and interwoven with bits of life and the past’ (Charon 99). In encouraging her medical colleagues to look at both the patient’s overarching story as well as the fine detail of their symptoms, Charon suggests ‘Nonnarrative knowledge attempts to illuminate the universal by transcending the particular; narrative knowledge, by looking closely at individual

human beings grappling with the conditions of life, attempts to illuminate the universals of the human condition by revealing the particular' (Charon 9).

Transcending the particular ... revealing the particular. If we can acquiesce to this dichotomy, allowing space for the Keatsian idea of 'being in uncertainties', the picture begins to clarify. Faced with the looming shadow of AIDS, Doty does not simply attempt to chronicle his pain. Instead, he 'transcends the particular' with observations on beauty, hope and love, but also 'reveals the particular' by elaborating his wildly diverse poetic subjects (tidal marshes, jewellery, subway platforms, drag queens, dogs, inner-city New York, Delft tiles, boarding houses, Venice glass, turtles in a bucket). Ultimately, Doty's poetics of illness is hungry for experience, imbued with a sense of joy, and deeply appreciative of the *stuff* of life.

It is important to situate Doty's work in the context of elegy. *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* defines elegy thus: 'in the modern sense of the term, is it a short poem, usually formal or ceremonious in tone and diction, occasioned by the death of a person ... in the larger historical perspective, however, it has been most often a poem of meditation, usually on love or death' (Brogan 66). Unsurprisingly, this definition is troubled by a whole host of robust alternative definitions, from Peter Middleton's observation that 'Elegies are ways of forgetting as well as honouring memory. They ought to help the living untangle the debts attached to the dead, and redirect the love and fury once elicited by the dead towards the poesis of a new society' (Middleton 61) to Abbie Findlay Potts's position that *anagnorisis* (translated variously as *recognition*, *revelation* and *disclosure*) is 'the very goal of elegiac poetry' (Potts 37).

In considering Doty-as-elegist, I find Jahan Ramazani's work on the genre helpful. Ramazani highlights a shift 'between epochs' around the time of Thomas Hardy's late Victorian writing, marking 'poems that recall the lost consolations of one era and anticipate the hard, dry aesthetic about to be born' (Ramazani xi). For Ramazani, there is a crucial difference between 'normative mourning (i.e. restitutive, idealizing) and the melancholic (violent, recalcitrant)' (ibid, xi). Ramazani, observing in 1994 that 'We should turn to (the modern elegy) expecting not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings' (ibid, ix), was writing a year before Doty's *My Alexandria* was published; how fascinating it would have been

to see Ramazani's analysis of Doty's work in his *Poetry of Mourning*. In an article published in 2006, Ramazani suggests 'we would do well to remember the examples of the unflinchingly anti-consolatory elegies of the last century' ("Can Poetry Console A Grieving Public?"), which extends his argument that we might view contemporary elegy as a site of dislocation or dissonance. A compelling argument, but one which does not accommodate Doty's transcendental reaching towards hope, nor the generative through-line of consolation that knits together his poems about grief. Therefore, we might consider Doty's poetics of illness as sitting *outwith* Ramazani's modern elegy; it can perhaps be more fruitfully aligned with Potts's 'elegiac process of intensification' (Potts 56), and we might find Doty's elegiac praxis in more comfortable company with the canonical English elegists (even back as far as Milton and Spenser) who explore the compensatory aspect of mourning.

For Doty, consolation often appears through his preoccupation with immersion, or the sense of the departed existing in material, textual ways; for every traditional exploration of comfort found in the cycles of nature, there is a cocktail bar, a velvet dress, a painting, a Venetian glass bowl. Solace can be found in surprising places. In this sense, Doty's revelatory, transcendent moments arise from observing these material subjects just as much as they are prompted by tides, sunsets and starry nights. In a recent interview in *PN Review*, Doty shared his own interpretation of contemporary elegy:

Elegies do two things. They memorialise someone, they try to conserve the past, and they also try to find meaning, or a point of consolation, something to hold on to in place of this loss. Elegy for the twentieth century becomes more concerned with the person who has been lost, and often represents a crisis of meaning-making around loss. (McCann 34)

Doty responds to this crisis of meaning-making with loving attention to both the sacred and the mundane, in a series of poetic dialogues with his dead lover and the world at large, building towards what Sinéad Morrissey convincingly calls a 'transubstantiation of the ephemeral body' (Morrissey 223). In order to unpack Doty's depictions of illness and loss, I will approach *Atlantis*, *My Alexandria* and *Sweet Machine* thematically. I plan to examine the means by which Doty depicts the deeply intimate

experience of caring for a partner with AIDS while also deriving consolation from the beauty of both the natural and man-made worlds.

i. **Dissolving the Future**

The virus seemed to me, first, like a kind of solvent which dissolved the future, our future, a little at a time. It was like a dark stain, a floating, inky transparency over Wally's body, and its intention was to erase the time ahead of us, to make that time, each day, a little smaller ... I no longer think of AIDS as a solvent, but perhaps rather as a kind of intensifier, something which makes things more firmly, deeply themselves. (Doty, *HC* 2-3)

One key image appearing throughout *My Alexandria*, *Atlantis* and *Sweet Machine* is that of liquid, which appears most frequently as the sea, but is also depicted as rain, dew, saliva and blood. The idea of evoking the experience of the body through liquidity is not new: David Hillman points out that 'in early modern culture, bodies were thought of as spongy bags or vessels containing various liquids and vapours which, in their internal imbalances and external interactions with the world, made them who they were...' (4). In perceiving the body in liquid terms, early modern culture viewed the self as mutable, closely affected by the environment, prone to fluctuations and continual change. Hillman's quote is worth setting out in full. He explains that Galenic ontology places great emphasis on:

the inclusiveness of its concept of personhood, *the imbrication of the human body-self and environment* (my emphasis); both were made up of essentially the same materials, affecting each other reciprocally and in multiple ways ... This enmeshing in the world ... suggested a literal continuity between individual bodies and their environments, a contingency and openness that spanned and blurred the boundaries between inner and outer, self and world. (Hillman 42)

Precisely such enmeshing and blurring of boundaries are central to Mark Doty's representations of pain and loss, particularly in his depictions of marshland, tidal barriers, flooding and storms. In 'Becoming a Meadow', a twenty-stanza poem set in Doty's trademark tercets, the story of a visit to a bookshop in a seaside town in the early days of his partner's sickness expands into an extended riff on an imagined flood. Initially, Doty is 'allowing myself / simply to be comforted by the presence of stories'

although he can't help thinking of 'the little hell opening in every violated cell, // the virus tearing / away - is it?' (36-38).

The question mark here denotes that the poem is on unsteady ground already, with the unusual foregrounding of 'away', and the poem enacts this growing instability with enjambed verbs, until the figurative turn in the final stanzas:

And then the whole place, the narrow aisles and stacks,
is one undulant, salt-swollen meadow of water,
one filling and emptying wave, spilling and pulling back,

and everything waves are: dissolving, faster,
only to swell again, like the baskets of bread
and fish in the story, the miracle baskets. (49-54)

Doty uses the imagined water meadow as a kind of liminal space which allows him to articulate sensations of limbo, corresponding to the couple's heightened awareness of time running out. The water meadow (traditionally, an area irrigated to increase agricultural productivity) can be seen as representing growth and renewal, along with the 'miracle baskets' hinting at possibilities of afterlife; although Doty is careful to frame those miracle baskets as part of a 'story', more suggestive of fiction than fact, and the presence of salt acts to unsettle notions of fertility. The water meadow, a space that is not quite water but not quite land either, acts in a similar manner to another recurrent motif in Doty's work: the tidal marshland. In Doty's depiction of marshland, the sea seems to represent some kind of eternity beyond our temporary lives, while the revealed ground beneath, in its infinite variety, shows the glory of minute detail. 'Description', the opening poem in *Atlantis*, offers the tidal marshland as:

all the hoarded riches

of the world held
and rivering, a gleam
awakened and doubled
by water ... (57-61)

Whether depicting a water meadow, marshland or eroding coast, Doty uses these indistinct spaces as sites of 'contingency and openness', allowing him to draw attention

to the uncertain channels between life and death in a way that is unflinching but (crucially) not despondent. To return to 'Becoming a Meadow', the voice becomes increasingly defiant throughout until the long sentence of the final two stanzas:

And if one wave breaking says
You're dying, then the rhythm and shift of the whole
says nothing about endings, and half the shawling head

of each wave's spume pours into the trough
of the one before,
and half blows away in spray, backward, toward the open sea. (55-60)

The notion of 'half' a wave blowing away links back to the virus 'tearing away' earlier in the poem, and the image of halving suggests the couple's eventual, final parting. 'Backwards', too, leads us towards memory, the remembered history of the couple's life together. But despite this retrograde movement, the overlap between bodily experience and the natural world creates a sense of renewal, or at least the consoling power of nature: the poem's final movement 'toward the open sea' hints at the possibility of redemptive space. This positive 'imbrication of the body-self and the environment' is a trope Doty returns to time and time again, and it is powerfully wielded in his figurative enmeshing of body and liquid.

We can see a similar process taking place in the poem 'Human Figures', in which Doty witnesses an injured homeless man lying outside the New York Public Library, and interlinks ideas of gradual disappearance with the suggestion of immortality by paying close attention to a pool of blood. Again, the poem moves from its grounding in reality into an extended imagined scene, the liquidity of which denotes a sense of things becoming uncontained and unstoppable:

... Suppose the ambulance
hadn't come and he'd kept on bleeding,
a stain larger than his own body
darkening the cement and all the paper

blown along those windy steps?
Imagine he'd kept on publishing himself
until his outline were larger than anything
the police could chalk, uncontained,

the shapeless bulletin of the news you can't buy... (41-49)

Doty's reimagining of the scene acts as a representation of the seemingly uncontrollable AIDS epidemic, but it also creates a literary space – 'publishing himself' – in which the lost, nameless vagrant becomes *more* than himself, taking up more space, drawing more attention, making an undeniable stain with his blood. The spilled blood and the 'news you can't buy' become corollaries – not giving voice to the vagrant's story, exactly, but rather painting an unequivocal visual representation of bodily suffering.

Furthermore, the line 'the shapeless bulletin of the news you can't buy' offers scope for analysis on both a micro and macro level. On a micro level, we have Doty's personal background; I am conscious that by conflating poet and speaker I could be accused of being reductive, but in a collection dedicated to Wally Roberts, I think we can safely say the poet/speaker wants his lover to be remembered. On a macro level, Doty is writing during the AIDS crisis where hysteria and fear were common public responses, and millions of men died in pain, often alone and without support from family. (Doty alludes to this desperate anonymity in 'The Wings', a poem about the AIDS memorial quilt, which acts as a visual reminder of the toll taken by the pandemic. I'll explore this poem further on page 116). In the 1980s and early 1990s, widespread anxiety about the burgeoning AIDS crisis meant the disease was too often perceived as a plague or a curse; Doty's *Atlantis* was published only three years after a 1992 conference in Atlanta was publicised under the banner 'AIDS: Bubonic Plague of the 21st Century?', and Denis Altman points out that 'in the twenty-year history of the epidemic ... it has become common for particular individuals who can be defined as "AIDS carriers" to become convenient scapegoats for a whole set of unexamined fears and phobias' (Altman 145). In 'Human Figures' Doty situates himself as an observer, but is careful not to align his experience with that of the gawking crowd: 'I didn't want to be like them, / didn't want to look' (33-34). In simultaneously situating himself inside and outside the 'gawking crowd', Doty gives us a speaker torn between reality and fiction, but the reality is inescapable; a piece of bloodied newsprint blows across his shoes.

The schism between reality and fiction mimics the literal tearing of the poem's opening lines: the speaker watches a man on a San Francisco bus tearing up newspaper and fashioning it into 'something intricate between his broad hands / something he doesn't want anyone to see' (14-15). This poem opens and closes with a depiction of an alternative, unexpected art form; the man on the bus is secretive about what he's making, but he is still *creating*: 'figures molded / into something intimate, something to hide' (55-56). The poem, in all its bloody, messy glory, acts as a foil to the traditional concealment or 'tidying away' of death common to contemporary mourning and vividly rendered by Ramazani in his discussion of Thom Gunn's elegiac work. Ramazani states that 'Gunn's clear-eyed elegies for friends, like the panels of the AIDS quilt, are triumphs over the mute indifference of the media, the state and a normativist society... (they) are powerful refusals of the modern taboo on death and grief - imaginative acts that may finally be prodding our society beyond denial and embarrassment and toward reaffirmation of the human work of mourning' (Ramazani 365). Similarly, the vagrant's blood in 'Human Figures' is a powerful force, washing over the day's news and obscuring the print, so that this particular, anonymous loss (a homeless man's death, outwith the parameters of conventional society) cannot be denied: 'the stain already drying / on four columns of news. Soon, / it wouldn't even be recognizable...' (37-39).

Deborah Landau notes that 'The poems emerging from this epidemic perform a variety of functions: they provide a historical record, commemorate the dead, console readers directly affected by HIV, encourage empathy from those not yet touched, rage against public mismanagement of the epidemic, and forge alternative narratives' (Landau 194); all of which Doty deftly manages in the fourteen stanzas of 'Human Figures'.

Another alternative narrative is forged in the opening poem of *Atlantis*, 'Description', where Doty once more delves into images of beach and sea - this time, the 'hoarded riches' of the salt marsh in the tourist town he calls home:

A million minnows ally
with their million shadows
(lucky we'll never need

to know whose is whose) (10-13)

As before, this mention of anonymity echoes not only the vast scale of the AIDS pandemic but hints scathingly at the ignorance surrounding it for much of the 1980s and 1990s; ignorance so clearly exemplified by that bubonic plague reference in the 1992 Atlanta conference banner. Tonally, Doty shifts from the caustic ‘lucky we’ll never need // to know whose is whose’ into a more sincere, urgent voice as his description of water leads us into a space of purity and honesty:

what I need to tell is
swell and curve, shift

and blur of boundary,
tremble and spilling over,
a heady purity distilled

from detail. (29-34)

The notion of something pure, but crucially, *heady* arising from Doty’s ‘distillation of detail’ is important. The intoxication threaded through Doty’s narratives of sickness is often depicted as a kind of fever or hunger, for example in ‘The Ware Collection of Glass Flowers and Fruit, Harvard Museum’:

transparent colour telling the live mottle of peach,
the blush or tint of crab, englobed,

gorgeous, edible. How else match that flush?
He’s built a perfection out of hunger,
fused layer upon layer ... (19-23)

At other times, that exhilaration or heady purity is powerfully denoted by liquid images like flooding and waves surging, as we see in ‘To the Storm God’ – ‘It was a pelting storm, // the air throbbing with pulses / of rain, the bay frothing...’ (12-14). The strong verbs used to set the scene for ‘To the Storm God’ are undercut in the poem’s last five stanzas, which soften into gentler verbs and a quieter music; note the careful consonantal weave of ‘p’ ‘d’ and ‘b’ here:

let me live in these estuaries'
blue and salt edges, washed
in the headlong currents

that rise beneath sleep
and spill into the day
like tidewash, mist

out of nowhere veiling
the day-lashed harbors ... (64-71)

The sea, for Doty, mimics a bodily cycle of sex or grief – great swellings of heightened, feverish emotion, softening into more reassuring pulses that mimic heartbeats or breath. In this way, the sea becomes the perfect vehicle for him to delineate Wally's sickness and his own frustration – a restless, never-settled sensation that peaks into crisis and then releases again. Linked to this narrative of crisis and release, as Doty bears witness to the pain and suffering of a sexually transmitted infection, it is impossible to ignore the sexual undertones of his writing about the sea's destructive power: in 'A Letter to the Coast' we see drag queens wearing veils 'seedpearled with the first rain', and the poem closes with:

... Something about pleasure
and excess: thousands of foamy veils
a tidal wrack of emerald, glamor

of froth-decked, dashed pearl bits. (61-64)

Sinéad Morrissey, writing about Doty's later poem 'Murano', which is set in Venice and addressed directly to a dead lover, notes that Doty 'has a particular fascination with sea creatures; crabs, jellyfish, mackerel, and the shapes such bodies take in life and during life's dissolution' (Morrissey 220). One wonders – why sea creatures? Perhaps because they are innumerable, anonymous, constantly on the move; it is also tempting to think of Doty's formative years in New York, where he moved after leaving his wife. The city contains large, shifting spaces where swathes of people move like tides; and where the AIDS pandemic moved uncontrollably through so many lives. I suspect Doty is preoccupied with sea creatures because they are voiceless, at

the mercy of tides, difficult to individualise. They vanish and are swiftly replaced in a continual act of disappearance and reappearance, a dissolution that could represent a disappearance of biographical narrative (young lives abruptly curtailed) or a powerlessness (an inability to contain the spread of disease). At the same time, in Doty's metaphorical hinterland, dissolution also represents freedom, uncontested space and endless variety. Paradoxically, his poetry moves beyond embodiment into a place of boundless possibility.

Doty himself writes about the effect of water on his writing in his memoir *Heaven's Coast*: 'The body is not me. I am my body, but I extend beyond it; just as my attention laps out, as my identity can pour out into the day. I have learned more about this, living beside water; as if the very fluidity of the landscape gets inside us, and encourages our own ability to slip our fixed bounds and feel ourselves as extended, multiple, various' (31). To 'slip our fixed bounds'; to know one's body, but to simultaneously extend beyond it, is to enact a paradox: corporeal experience alongside spiritual or imaginative reckoning. Andrew Bennett, in 'Language and the Body', situates canonical Romanticism in the context of the sublime's essentially paradoxical nature: the focus on the senses is crucial, but then the senses are transcended in the apprehension of a lofty spiritual realm. Bennett highlights 'the paradox of embodiment embedded within the Romantic sublime; the sublime both requires and resists, rejects and transcends the sensory ... while being fundamentally premised on an embodied perception of the sublime object (the song of a bird, a mountain, the ocean, the stars and so on)' (81).

This fundamental paradox is pivotal in understanding Doty's poetics of sickness, which enact bodily experience alongside spiritual consolation. His close attention to images of liquid, especially the sea, continually ripple outward into a fertile network of associations, so his poems become 'extended, multiple, various' - fluid narratives within which the conventional stories of sickness and grief can be reconfigured.

ii. Shine and Seem

In this chapter I turn to consider Doty's (arguably obsessive) focus on light and fire. Metaphors of light and fire run through Doty's poetry like recurrent motifs in a symphony, or an artist's favoured shade of paint. Indeed, Doty's use of 'glow' is so pronounced that the critic Ruth Padel, reviewing Doty's sixth collection *Source* in the *New York Times*, wrote 'my biggest complaint may be an overabundance of glow. Words like "flame," "golden," "rippling," "gleam," "pearl," "halo," "flare" and "glass" are staples of Doty's palette, and cannot always carry the weight so often put on them' (Padel 15).

For Doty, such criticism was not new; his 1998 collection *Sweet Machine* pre-empted this kind of assessment with the inclusion of two short poems, both titled 'Concerning Some Recent Criticism of His Work':

- *Glaze and shimmer,
lustre and gleam ...*

- What else do you do
with what you adore

but build a replica? (1-5)

The poem goes on to add that 'what's the world but shine //and seem?' (29-30).

I can't disagree with Padel's observation: Doty is irresistibly attracted to light, to dazzle, to shimmer and lustre and gleam, and it would be easy to dismiss this as over-reliance on one metaphorical domain. But in the very same review, Padel concedes: 'Doty is a poet of glow. The surface glow does not merely delight us, but also leads us deeper in, to insight. The important variety in Doty is not rhythm or vocabulary but situation: all that iridescence is there to tell us something about being human.' Doty's focus on what shines is always interlaced with what lies *beneath* the shine; his use of light works in a similar way to his treatment of liquid, with its essential paradox of surface and depth. An attendance to 'shine and seem' foregrounds neglected subjects, and forces the reader to think in terms of what lies below, where meaning can be found underneath the layers of rich description.

This technique serves Doty well as he embeds social criticism in his poetry, or shifts it into politicised space. Ross Chambers, in the essay ‘Attending to Aids’, describes the ‘communitarian impulse’ created by the US government’s ineffective response to the rapidly developing AIDS crisis of the 1980s at both a national and local level: ‘this communitarian impulse also entailed a desire to bear witness ... This was the genre of the “coming out”, one that felt deeply intimate (it was a kind of confession) but also (and simultaneously) culturally and politically *necessary*’ (383). Doty maps this intimate *and* public act of ‘bearing witness’ on to a metaphorical landscape which allows him simultaneously to draw a personalised study of the AIDS crisis, and to imbue the victims of that crisis with a kind of warm light (often depicted in late afternoon or autumn: for example, the ‘late afternoon glimmer’ in ‘Almost Blue’ (67), the ‘suspended glow, later afternoons’ in ‘Chanteuse’ (14), or the ‘unmatchable colour things come to / when the green goes out of them’ in ‘The Wings’ (75-76)).

The second poem in *Atlantis*, ‘Four Cut Sunflowers, One Upside Down’, is a poem in couplets which ostensibly celebrates the Van Gogh painting of the same name. There’s a delicacy to the poem’s music, with amassed polysyllables – ‘odalisques’, ‘withering coronas’, ‘intricate precision’, ‘elaborated dialogue’ – reflecting the fragile subject matter (flowers plucked from their life source, then subsequently painted, so the poem’s focus is already twice removed from reality).

Unsurprisingly, though, this is not a straightforward ekphrastic poem. The poem’s second line is a rhetorical question: ‘What is any art but static flame?’, leading us towards a consideration of the paradoxical nature of art: ‘static’ does not generally denote life; but flame is living. Art can be alive and dead at the same time. However, the core of Doty’s attention is the brightness of the flowers: their ‘brilliant flickering’ as they continue to dazzle, although they are already starting to die:

Even drying, the petals curling
into licks of fire

they’re haloed in the pure rush of light... (12-14)

Flame can be comforting or damaging, but it is by nature transformative. 'Four Cut Sunflowers' takes that concept of transformation-through-fire one step further towards transubstantiation with its religious imagery: 'haloes' elevates the poem's metaphorical ground into one of the afterlife and eternity, which is echoed in the fierce closing couplets, where Doty accepts that 'soul' is a beleaguered word, but insists it is the word he needs:

They are a nocturne
in argent and gold, and they burn

with the ferocity
of the dying (which is to say, the luminosity

of what's living hardest). It is a human soul
the painter's poured

into them – thin, beleaguered old word,
but what else to call it?

Evening is overtaking them.
In this last light they are voracious. (26-35)

Doty's careful focus on the luminosity of the flowers in the fading light allows him to draw attention to the act of creating a poem, to the very act of selecting words: 'but what else to call it?'. The sunflowers become a metaphor for all successful art: something trapped in place, no longer living, but still glowing, resonating, *voracious*. The 'ferocity of the dying' is only matched by the ferocity of the witnessing gaze; the ferocity of the carer's protection and determination to notice and mine every last detail as the clock runs down. 'Evening is overtaking' both patient and carer; the challenge of making art is surpassed only by the challenge of trying to keep a loved one alive.

Images of light collide with the challenge of artistic representation again in 'Fog Suite'. In this three-section poem, Doty foregrounds the craft of writing and the limitations of language. In a 2005 interview, Doty addressed this directly: 'what do we believe, as poets, that language can and can't do? Is our work the representation of experience (say through narrative), the representation of subjectivity (say through lyric) or making poems that are language-acts themselves, demonstrations of a mind at work moving through words?' (Perrine 55).

What I'm trying to do
is fix this impossible
shift and flux, and say

how this fog-fired
green's intensified
by sunlight filtered

through the atmosphere's
wet linens - a green
you could almost drink!

No trick of light
I'm talking about
but defiant otherness... (28-39)

'Fog Suite' is a 'language-act' parsed through metaphors of light in rich, celebratory detail. As Doty describes fog enmeshed with light, he situates language *between* artist and the represented object, as something which separates the artist from the object, while also allowing the object to become conspicuously clear - almost as though language and fog (or indeed illness) act as a sort of magnifying glass (or, in Doty's description of AIDS, an 'intensifier'):

What I love about language
is what I love about fog:
what comes between us and things
grants them their shine. (51-54)

We find a further example of this process of magnification or intensification in 'Long Point Light', which sits roughly halfway through *Atlantis*, and, perhaps fittingly, contains a balance of pleasure and encroaching grief. The poem opens with a sense of ghostly doubling in the depiction of Long Point peninsula as 'apparitional' - with its lighthouse 'like a tower's ghost'. The poem is imbued with an eerie sense of anticipatory grief; and yet Doty observes simply:

It seems cheerful enough,
in the strengthening sunlight,
fixed point accompanying our walk... (13-15)

Again, Doty draws attention to the act of writing:

... And so I invite it
into the poem, to speak

and the lighthouse says:
*Here is the world you asked for,
gorgeous and opportune...*

here is nine o'clock, harbor-wide
and a glinting code: promise and warning.
This morning's the size of heaven.

What will you do with it?
(26-34)

The lighthouse is both ghostly and protective, becoming a cipher for both 'promise and warning', echoing the polarity held in tension through so much of Doty's writing, and the single line stanza, ending on a question, foregrounds his resistance to closure, offering us a glimpse of boundless, undefined space. Although 'Long Point Light' is geographically and temporally specific, situated in a hazy morning in Massachusetts, it recalls the panoramic scope of Mary Oliver's 'The Summer Day':

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what will you do
with your one wild and precious life? (18-20)

The expansive sense of a world 'gorgeous and opportune ... the size of heaven' appears in explorations of nature in much of Doty's poetry, but a more comprehensive reading of his work must include the alternative 'dazzle': that is, the urban or suburban, brightly-lit, high camp that sits within 'Lament-Heaven', *My Alexandria's* final poem.

'Lament-Heaven' begins with imagery of birch trees and a lapping harbour, but swiftly veers into new territory, as the speaker imagines death:

like the carnival we saw one night,
late, off the freeway on the South Shore,
countless circuits of lightbulbs,

hazing through thickening spring fog,
the ferris wheel's phosphorescent roulette,
fog-haloed, blazing

Then letters blinking on—
G-H-O-S-T—
and the linked cursive of *train*:

a funhouse locomotive of spirits,
passengers on the white air... (32-42)

This heady, carnivalesque reimagining of death might fruitfully be explored through the lens of the Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson's 'hysterical sublime' - 'a kind of peculiar exhilaration of the individual subject unaccountably generated by the trash and junk materials of a fallen and unredeemable commodity culture' (Jameson 359). Jameson posits this exhilaration, as Susan Sontag does, as 'camp'; 'it is to be seen in the very gleam and glitter of the automobile wrecks of photorealist paintings, in the extraordinary capacity of our own cultural language to redeem an object world and a cultural space by holding firmly to their surfaces' (Jameson 359). This poem's funfair *dazzles* in all its trashy strangeness: 'an amusement park alien in its glitter.' The word 'alien' also gestures back towards the poem's opening, which contains the defamiliarised rendering of a bucolic scene. Doty's use of conditional verbs here helps to convey a sense of uncertainty:

green fountaining
frothing champagne;
against the dark of evergreen,

the skyrocket shimmer. I think
this is how our deaths would look,
seen from a great distance,

if we could stand that far
from ourselves... (7-14)

The 'fog-haloed, blazing' suburban carnival of 'Lament-Heaven' meanders towards another place, another time, and draws us closer to the existential heart of the poem: that of the embodied self who is facing mortality. The poem closes with the speaker

and his lover standing in an empty 'gold-ribbed' church listening to a young girl play the violin:

I heard it, the music
that could not go on without us
and I was inconsolable. (149-151)

The directness of 'inconsolable' is remarkable for Doty, ending the poem with a simple assertion of his pain, while the violinist's youth and the religious backdrop intensify the poignancy of the scene. Despite the starkness of the final line, it is noteworthy that 'Lament-Heaven' moves swiftly from trees, to a roadside carnival, then to SingSing, and finally to church, so that the 'gleam and glitter' of the ghost train, and the glimpse of the notorious prison, are bookended by natural and spiritual spaces which contain the possibility, at least, of redemption.

A similar interplay of the urban or artificial with spiritual radiance is found in 'Mercy on Broadway', the penultimate poem in *Sweet Machine*. Here, the speaker describes turtles for sale in a bowl on the sidewalk; initially, the turtles are depicted in carnal terms, in parallel with the people searching Manhattan for sex:

I can't make out the woman
beside me saying *You want buy turtle?*

I don't want any one of this
boiling bowl of coppery citizens

longing for release - a dozen maybe,
or nothing at all. So much to want

in this city, the world's bounty
laid out, what's the point in owning

any one piece of it? (30-37)

This poem, set in the wake of Roberts's death, introduces a potential new partner for Doty: 'a new man next to me who's beginning /to matter' (90-91). However, this emotional momentum is undercut by the appearance of what Jameson might term 'commodity culture'. The introduction of the potential new partner is abruptly interrupted by urban dissonance: the blare of a radio, with the speaker wryly catching

the lyric 'it's going to take a miracle' in passing (91). But, as with 'Lament-Heaven', the poem works as a hybrid of the somatic and the spiritual. Urban hustle interrupts philosophical musing; but in the following stanzas, consolation also interrupts urban hustle. They interanimate one another. The jumble of noise and commodity culture is swiftly muted as Doty shifts away from playful sexual metaphors - 'Broadway swallows it all' (60) - to a register of expansion and consolation:

Unthinkably green now, they're inseparable
from the sudden constellation

of detail the avenue's become
- this boulevard continuously radiant

if only we could see it... (100-105)

The radiance is there all along, under the city's grime; which chimes with the sentiment found in the earlier poem 'Lament-Heaven': 'Who can become lost in a narrative / if all he can think of is the end?' (26-27). As the tone of 'Mercy on Broadway' shifts, Doty assigns Broadway a kind of satisfying durability. Broadway - like the AIDS memorial quilt, which I will discuss on page 116 - will endure because it belongs to everybody, and is in a continual state of evolution or mutation: 'Broadway's no one / and Broadway lasts' (143-144).

As the speaker kneels (there is a noteworthy conflation of religious and sexual imagery in this pose) on the sidewalk to look at the turtles, Broadway acts an unexpected site of redemptive power; a place that can grant reprieve:

I looked into that shiny cup
of ambulant green and I thought

*Somebody's going to live through this.
Suppose it's you?* (136-139)

It is noteworthy that the cup of turtles is 'shiny' as Doty contemplates his future. In Doty's poetics of loss, the future, even when unpredictable, frightening, or barely discernible, always *shines*. As Padel states in her *New York Times* review, 'all that iridescence is there to tell us something about being human' (Padel 15). The poem 'Atlantis' takes this a step further, alluding to the inescapable unpredictability of the

embodied self in the poem's fourth section: 'I didn't understand what's to come / was always just a glimmer...' (3-4), and:

... Tomorrow's unreadable
as this shining acreage:

the future's nothing
but this moment's gleaming rim. (29-32)

The idea of the future as insubstantial, then incomprehensible, then almost non-existent - 'nothing / but this moment's gleaming rim' - seems to shrink the poem down to a position of utter nihilism. Doty's conjuring trick is to make this nihilism hopeful - the 'gleaming' means there is light somewhere, surely? His acceptance of lack of meaning, with a situation and a world beyond his control, paradoxically acts to give meaning. As Nietzsche would have it, 'It is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meaning in things, to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world *because one organizes a small portion of it oneself...*' (Nietzsche 341).

'Atlantis' ends with the speaker urging his love to look at the lost world 'emerging from the half-light, unforgettable, / drenched, unchanged' (45-46). Of course, the world cannot remain unchanged; but the cycles of nature go on, aligned with the speaker's mourning, which has no foreseeable end point. Doty's interplay of fertility and erosion helps us to see meaning through cycles, through process, through movement: or as Doty himself puts it, through 'the shifting zone of change and transformation' (*HC* 18).

Doty's preoccupation with light extends to the natural cycles of night and day: the 'half-light' in 'Atlantis', or 'evening is overtaking them' in 'Four Cut Sunflowers' (34), or 'Migratory', which opens 'Near evening in Fairhaven, Massachusetts...' Twilight operates as a useful liminal space in Doty's poetics of sickness, with its associations of darkness, endings and death. It stands not only as a robust metonym for encroaching loss, but draws our attention to the disquieting experience of peering into dusk or dawn without the clarity of daylight. This obfuscation of light gives a glimpse of both helplessness and the transformative potential of writing - if we are not sure those things in the distance are trees, could we imagine them as monsters? Doty

operates in the interstices between darkness and light, passionate love and enduring grief, and his focus on 'lustre and gleam' in the dim allows him to carve out space for solace, and even celebration, as he negotiates the painful, contingent spaces of illness.

iii. Endless Reconfiguring

Throughout *My Alexandria*, *Atlantis*, and *Sweet Machine*, Doty's exploration of fluidity, surface, depth and 'gleam' extends to a fascination with images of couture, spot-lit performances and drag queens. Doty's writing about clothing, and drag in particular, creates space for a multiplicity of voices, which acts to highlight the vast losses of the AIDS epidemic, while simultaneously playing with the boundaries of the 'self'; or, to be more specific, the embodied self as a fluid counterpoint to the bindings of assigned gender. Doty's poems featuring dresses, dressing up or drag queens allow for a space of endless reconfiguring where he can manipulate notions of transformation and resurrection.

In considering this notion of limitless space and redemptive possibility, I'd like briefly to focus on form before moving on to explore Doty's use of drag and dressing up. Sinéad Morrissey identifies 'what might plausibly be described as Doty's signature stanza (three lines, each one indented further right than the one before, with a return to the left-side margin each time a new stanza begins)' (Morrissey 225) and this is in evidence throughout much of his work. It's important, however, not to rely on this as a constant: indeed, *My Alexandria* contains equal numbers of poems in quatrains and tercets, three in couplets, and two in sestets. Set halfway through *My Alexandria*, 'The Wings' is a vivid example of Doty's playfulness with form. A long poem in five sections, with a title that gestures towards flight, immortality and a sense of waiting on the brink, 'The Wings' moves through tercets, into quatrains, then to couplets, tercets again, and concludes in quatrains. What this offers me is a sense of building to a climax, followed by fragmentation, where the speaker enters a kind of stalled linguistic space as he observes a field of wild asters from a car window:

I didn't even stop, but that brief

yellow-eyed punctuation in a field
gone violet and golden at once,

sudden and gone, is more than I can say. (102-105)

But the stanzas solidify and lengthen, until the poem closes in an interaction with a boy ‘with wings slung over his shoulders’ (238) who offers a sense of certitude:

I let him bend over my desk and speak
in a voice so assured you wouldn't know
anyone was dying. *Any music's*
made of waiting, he says. (247-250)

This frequent shifting of stanza length in a single poem offers the reader a sense of mutation and flux, before coming to land on more solid ground – reminding us, perhaps, that Doty ‘is a poet of the unmaking and remaking of the world’ (Dean). Returning to what Morrissey calls Doty’s ‘signature’ stanza, his use of tercets in long-form poems echoes this sense of unmaking/remaking – often offering us a fractured series of snapshots, set within an aesthetic regularity.

In considering Doty’s ‘unmaking and remaking’, his depiction of men performing as women raises interesting questions about his poetic preoccupation with surface, or what might be dismissed as kitsch or superficial; what Jameson, as we saw in the last section, might read as ‘the hysterical sublime’. In this section, I’ll explore Doty’s focus on dressing up and performing, and argue that they come to signify transformation and vitality in his poetics of illness. For Doty, drag is similar to his description of living beside the ocean: it is something that helps people ‘slip fixed bounds and feel ... extended, multiple, various’ (HC 31).

Although drag may be interpreted as an overturning of stereotypical heteronormative behaviour, it is not by its nature subversive. Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, is at pains to situate drag as a site of ‘ambivalence’: ‘Although many readers understood *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalisation and reidealisation of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms’ (Butler 125). Butler also argues convincingly that ‘being a man’ and ‘being a woman’ are internally unstable affairs anyway, so we are on volatile ground in any case, but the word ‘denaturalisation’ is crucial here. In this context, Doty extends the notion of denaturalisation to foreground the porosity of the self and

privilege the unknowable; for Doty's poetry, drag features as an act of multiplicity, openness, or an act of 'slipping fixed bounds'. In the same way that the natural world often features as a limitless space full of redemptive possibility in Doty's narratives of sickness, the joyous artifice of drag and the dazzle of the urban environment also hold transformative potential.

In Doty's poems, both drag and the city can be reframed as magical, shimmering, lavish. Nature may be a site of redemption and healing, but the urban environment and its smoky drag clubs have their own comforts to offer, signifying physical and metaphorical spaces to play and extend the self beyond the confines of established gender constructs. For example, in 'Esta Noche', a drag queen named Lola appears more significant, indeed majestic, when dressed as a woman:

...She's a man
 you wouldn't look twice at in street clothes,
 two hundred pounds of hard living, the gap in her smile
 sadly narrative - but she's a monument

in the mysterious permission of the dress. (17-21)

The key here is 'mysterious permission' - *mystery* denoted by drag's artifice (make-up, wigs, high heels) and *permission* as Lola stands 'unassailable' with 'the rippling night pulled down over broad shoulders' (43). As the poem says, 'the costume is license', and perhaps these drag queens are a perfect example of 'what's living hardest' from 'Four Cut Sunflowers'; by extending and blurring heteronormative roles, they are being multiple, fluid. Tim Dean suggests that for Doty, 'the drag queen represents a hybrid figure that combines "blur of boundary" - "shifting in and out of two languages like gowns / or genders" - with the achievements of artifice. The drag queen, like the poem, is a work of art; and it is Doty's inclination to find works of art in the unlikelyst of places, to find loveliness in ruin' (Dean).

'Esta Noche' extends this notion of 'loveliness in ruin' to its fullest conclusion. We don't expect 'two hundred pounds of hard living' to be elegant, but Lola is: 'her spine's / perfectly erect, only her fluid hands moving' (34-35). Lola, described as both still and fluid at the same time, comes to occupy a liminal space, and it is no coincidence that her dress is 'the colour of the spaces between streetlamps' (30). As we

find so often in Doty's poetry, the turn-key moment is situated in the final stanza, where the dark mystery of the night sky (with its allusive potential of death) is elegantly reduced to the image of a sequinned dress. In this closing image, the act of dressing up denotes the notion of yielding to the present moment, with its painful combination of love and encroaching grief, and night and cloth co-mingle:

She says you could wear the whole damn
black sky and all its spangles. It's the only night
we have to stand on. Put it on,
it's the only thing we have to wear. (49-52)

In the memoir *Heaven's Coast*, Doty explains that '... the artifice of making oneself be whomever one liked always revealed the reality beneath, and therein lay its failure and a good part of its charm' (96). In the poem 'Chanteuse', this 'revealed reality' is made precious, and the act of performance is not only charming, but actually life-affirming. The beautiful drag queen's act of creating herself becomes redemptive for both performer and audience:

As she invented herself, memory revises
and restores her, and the moment
she sang. I think we were perfected,

when we became her audience,
and maybe from that moment on
it didn't matter so much exactly

what would become of us. (97-103)

Submission, the act of capitulating, is what salves the speaker's pain in 'Chanteuse', along with acknowledging the impermanence of both the drag act and the couple's life together. In becoming the audience, giving in to the experience, the speaker and his lover are 'perfected'. Bearing witness to the drag queen's act of reinvention functions as a kind of a balm for their anticipatory grief. Doty and his partner are 'restored by / the radiance of her illusion, / her consummate attention to detail' (105-107) and the poem closes with a celebratory amalgamation of the lover, the drag queen, the city, and the artificial: 'my torch, my skyrocket, / my city, my false, / my splendid chanteuse.' (113-115).

Submission also plays a key role in ‘Nocturne in Black and Gold’, which features a direct excerpt from Keats’s letters. The stanzas below foreground Keats’s pleasure in the small joy of a visiting bird; his experience becomes porous, as he absorbs the ‘existence’ of the bird:

... Keats: *If a sparrow
come before my Window
I take part in its existence*

and pick about the Gravel.
If we’re only volatile essence,
permeable, leaking out,

pouring into any vessel bright enough
to lure us, why be afraid? (28-35)

Doty extends this imaginative space, expanding the notion of a mutable and fluid selfhood, aligning it with the materiality of dazzling clothing. As with Lola’s assertion in ‘Esta Noche’ that ‘you could wear the whole damn / black sky and all its spangles’ (49-50), ideas of performance, dressing up and transcendence begin to coalesce:

...Haven’t we wanted,
all along, to try on boundlessness
like mutable, starry clothes? (58-60)

For Eric Eisner, ‘both Keats and drag condense for Doty, a complex of ideas about identity and imitation, song, desire, beauty and truth’ (Eisner 389). The complex of ideas allows Doty a degree of multivocality: Doty’s poems about drag and clothing are often where multiple (lost) voices are at their most distinct, although they rarely appear as specific characters or personas, but are denoted through meiosis and images of absence. This is perhaps best demonstrated by returning to Doty’s long poem ‘The Wings’, which takes us directly to an exhibition hall containing the AIDS memorial quilt:

... They’re reading
the unthinkable catalog of the names,

so many they blur, become

a single music pronounced with difficulty
over the microphone, become a pronoun,

become You. It's the clothing I can't get past,
the way a favourite pair of jeans,
a striped shirt's sewn onto the cloth;

the fading, the pulls in the fabric
demonstrate how these relics formed around
one essential, missing body. (123-133)

Doty narrows the focus from a 'blur' of loss down to a painful specificity:

... how the stitches pressed against skin
that can't be generalized, but was
irretrievably, you, or yours (143-145)

Judy Elsey explains that the AIDS memorial quilt is constantly evolving, as audience members viewing the quilt are also invited to write directly on a large square in the corner: 'it literally changes shape as more panels are added to it' (Elsey 191). For Elsey, the project, 'with its emphasis on individuality in community, practises in textiles the heteroglossia Bakhtin identifies as essential to the novel. Bakhtin's sense of heteroglossia as "a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other" describes precisely the multivocal nature of these quilt groups.' Graham Allen highlights the root meanings of the term heteroglossia in *Intertextuality*: 'Given that *hetero* stems from the Greek word meaning "other" and that *glot* stems from the Greek for "tongue" or "voice", we can define *heteroglossia* as language's ability to contain within it many voices, one's own and other voices' (Allen 29). This heteroglossic language 'shifts from individual author to a concatenation of voices within and outside of the text(ile)' (Elsey 191) - as we saw in 'Esta Noche '... you could wear the whole damn / black sky and all its spangles. It's the only night / we have to stand on' (49-52). Ramazani highlights the generative lack of uniformity in the quilt, arguing that its tendencies are 'intimacy, idiosyncrasy, ambivalence, self-reflexivity, self-mockery, nontransparency, appropriation and resistance to inherited forms, and scepticism about the artifact's recuperative efficacy' (Ramazani 364), but at the same time, that very scepticism is a part of a larger, truly sincere attempt at compensatory

mourning – Ramazani acknowledges that the quilt ‘may also be helping to break the grotesque silence imposed on open mourning by Anglo-American culture’ (364). Doty’s engagement with the complex, evolving universe of the quilt allows him to produce work that is both an individualised expression of unresolved pain and a sincere attempt to give life to a ‘concatenation of voices’.

Multiplicity, dressing up and the urban landscape are drawn together again in ‘Crepe de Chine’, which takes the reader through Manhattan, viewing the city both from microscopic close-up and birds’ eye view. The perspective zooms in and out: from drugstore windows, to an Italian bakery, to a wild imagined wig, described as ‘tiered and stunning as this island’ (36). The island of Manhattan, reimagined as cloth, is a tactile presence in this poem, where the body and the streets begin to mingle:

That’s what I want from the city:
to wear it.
That’s what drag is: a city

to cover our nakedness,
silk boulevards, sleek avenues
of organza, the budding trees

along the avenue flaunting their haze
of poisonous Caravaggio green... (37-44)

The sensuality of this poem intersects with a kind of hunger: the hunger for experience that drives the poem forward with the repetition of ‘I want’:

the Italian baker’s hung a canopy of garlands
and silver shot, bee lights and silk ivy

high over the sugary excess
of his pastries, and I want
not his product but his display... (26-30)

Crucially, it is the garland that fascinates the speaker: not the product, but its adornment. Here, Doty returns to the notion that there can be solace in decoration, in beauty for the sake of it, no matter where it is found. The drugstore window that opens ‘Crepe de Chine’ is described in cinematic terms, and is depicted as a spot of pleasure in a landscape of banality, echoing the carnival by the side of the freeway in

'Lament-Heaven': 'These drugstore windows / - one frame in the mile-long film / of lit-up trash and nothing...' (1-3)

There is a defiance to be found in these configurations of ornament and excess. If we return to 'Couture', the speaker's tone begins as wryly philosophical, as he describes lavish high-end dresses: 'Who's it for? / Who's the audience / for this bravura?' (55-57). But the tone becomes defiant three stanzas later, settling on:

Maybe the costume's
the whole show
all of revelation

we'll be offered.
So? Show me what's not
a world of appearances. (64-69)

The lines 'show me what's not / a world of appearances' strike me as crucial. This is Doty writing his way through sickness: wry, a little jaded, but freighting his words with the possibility of what might be hidden beneath the shiny surface. He transitions into the familiar space of autumn, of fading light, and back to quote Keats:

Autumn's a grand old drag
in torched and tumbled chiffon
striking her weary pose.

Talk about your mellow
fruitfulness! Smoky alto
thou hast thy music,

too; unforgettable,
those October damasks... (70-77)

Doty is borrowing Keats' clothes, briefly, overtly, in a way that is playful and wry: this intertextuality is a kind of linguistic dressing up, layering Doty's narratives of loss into complex and resonant music. In his work exploring drag, performance and couture, Doty's poetics of illness are figured and reconfigured, becoming more and more multivocal. Just as crucially, he finds pleasure and even hope through artifice. This approach engenders a representation of loss that manages to accommodate polarities in an allusive web that is transformative, mutable, and regenerative.

Jo Shapcott's Meditations on Mortality

Jo Shapcott, born in 1954, is the author of four poetry collections: *Electroplating the Baby*, *Phrase Book*, *My Life Asleep* and *Of Mutability*, as well as a book of her versions of poems by Rilke, *Tender Taxes*. She has won the National Poetry Prize, the Forward Prize and the Costa Book Award, and in 2011 was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

I am particularly interested in Shapcott's 2010 collection, *Of Mutability*, which explores the poet's experience of breast cancer, her treatment, and her subsequent recovery in a series of poems that allow her to renegotiate her relationship with cancer and the wider world. Doty and Shapcott are very different poets, but I recognise in both a need to seek a poetics of illness that accommodates a sense of ambiguity and levity as well as attending to fear or grief; a levity engendered by a deep and immersive focus on the *stuff* of life. In the same way that Doty 'transcends the particular and reveals the particular', Shapcott's figurative landscape is an unsettling place with a remarkable democracy at its heart, a place where microscopic cells are given as much attention as galaxies. At one moment she is narrowly focused on the hairs on a lover's arm; the next, she shifts into an expansive register of spiritual and psychic consolation.

In a 2011 interview, Shapcott referred to Virginia Woolf's essay 'On Being Ill' as she spoke about her own experience of illness: 'It is like stepping into a different world, where there are different rules, ways of behaving, ways of seeing ... And that means you see life anew - you're open to the sky' (Shapcott, *BOL*). The final line of *Of Mutability*'s eponymous opening poem reads 'Don't trouble, though, to head anywhere but the sky', which chimes with Woolf's depiction of illness as forcing a change in literal and figurative perspective:

Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up to look, for example, at the sky. (Woolf 12)

It is vital, of course not to elide poet and speaker, which Sarah Crown addresses in her 2010 interview with Shapcott: ‘Reading the poem (‘Procedure’), knowing of her illness, I casually elided the gap between speaker and poet; when I let this slip, she pulls me up. “It shows how complicated the whole business is. When I wrote that poem I wasn’t thinking of myself – I was imagining the experience of somebody else. In fact, in the first draft, I had a detailed abdominal operation. It really wasn’t about me at all” (Shapcott, *Ambulance*). Shapcott added in a 2011 interview in *The Telegraph* that the poems in *Of Mutability* ‘... are more meditations about mortality. They are emotionally autobiographical’ (McKay). That said, in the same interview, Shapcott acknowledges the reason for her heightened awareness of physicality throughout *Of Mutability*: ‘That has always been there in my work, right from the beginning ... Where the body stops and where the world begins. It’s heightened here because of the experience of illness.’ In this essay, investigating *Of Mutability* without assuming Shapcott’s direct presence in each speaker, I found Medbh McGuckian’s epigraph to her collection *Captain Lavender* a useful marker. McGuckian opens her collection with a 1944 quote from Pablo Picasso: ‘I have not painted the war ... but I have no doubt that the war is in ... these paintings I have done’ (McGuckian 9).

This insight, whereby a speaker is lessened or felled by illness but at the same time handed a new perspective, underpins Shapcott’s poetics of sickness. Lavinia Greenlaw, in her introduction to *Signs and Humours*, observes that the experience of the failing human body ‘calls for a mode of articulation which will accommodate rupture, an expressive structure which puts in place the experience of being out of place. Poetry is suited to this. It offers a *coherence of sensation rather than meaning* and its structures are more a form of pure arrangement than an organism or a machine’ (Greenlaw 16, my emphasis). Although I would argue that poetry offers both a coherence of sensation *and* meaning, Shapcott, like Doty, tends a poetic space that is flourishing and dying at the same time, fundamentally dialogic, as we find in ‘Composition’:

... My brain’s not right,
really:
its latent inhibition so way out

that even a hangnail thrilled:
I was drowning in possibility
while underneath the world

an ice shelf collapsed into the sea... (10-16)

As Shapcott explores the sensation of defamiliarization, of being, as Greenlaw puts it, 'out of place', I am intrigued by the poetic form she turns to in *Of Mutability*. Shapcott gravitates towards the sonnet form for much of the collection: eighteen of the book's forty-five poems contain fourteen, fifteen or sixteen lines. I find this formal containment curious in a collection that offers such a deep exploration of altered perspectives, shape-shifting and mutation, but perhaps that's precisely why it works – Shapcott harnesses a short, familiar form, one that is easily memorisable and accessible, in the service of kaleidoscopic images and destabilising semantics. Moreover, considering the widespread use of the sonnet in contemporary poetry (Don Paterson suggests that 'the sonnet has flourished ... to the extent that it has become a quite unremarkable part of the contemporary poet's armoury' (Paterson xiii)), it seems a fitting choice as a spine for Shapcott's 'emotionally autobiographical' collection written after breast cancer, an experience that currently affects one in seven women in the UK.

I will explore the poetic techniques used by Shapcott in circles of enquiry which parallel Doty's territory of dissolution and performance, then close with an investigation into Shapcott's manipulation of perspective, asking how she uses this to unsettle her reader and more fully evoke the rupture and uncertainty of living with serious illness. In this final section I want also to briefly turn to Shapcott's parallels with Ovid; Fiona Cox goes so far as to describe Shapcott as 'a female Ovid, beset by anxieties about her own survival in this dangerously strange, yet beautiful, twenty-first century' (Cox 9).

i. Dissolution and Duplication

In this section, I will look more closely at the means by which Shapcott ‘accommodates rupture’, rather than attempting to narrate a straightforward chronology of illness. I will also consider how that rupture can generate creativity and allow for transformation. In 2010, when selecting *Of Mutability* as one of the *Times* Books of the Year, the critic Paul Batchelor described it as ‘moving seamlessly between mortality and desire; or between science and poetry’ (*OMi*). This sense of seamless movement is fitting for a collection that highlights the uncontrollable and transformative nature of sickness.

This sense of movement is rendered through images of liquidity in several of the poems in *Of Mutability*, beginning with the third poem, ‘La Serenissima’ (literally, ‘the most serene’), a sonnet set in Venice. Analogous to Mark Doty’s ruminative exploration of mortality in ‘Murano’ (which is also set in Venice, though it examines the art of glass-making) Shapcott evokes a city where water appears fathomless and uncontained, permeating everything, dissolving boundaries:

I was on land, but the land didn’t belong
to earth any more, was allowed to rest
in floating patches here and there.
The pavement rippled under my shoes.
Everything I could see belonged to water;
liquid churches, theatres, monuments, houses,
liquid sun and sky. My hands wandered
into water, cupped water... (1-8)

These images of dissolution generate a sense of permission-through-submission, which recalls Virginia Woolf’s essays on illness: ‘They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream’ (Woolf 12). In ‘La Serenissima’, the land ‘allowed to rest’ and ‘everything I could see belonged to water’ denote a sense of the speaker accepting (or acquiescing to) limitations. Added to this is a voiced dislocation, a speaker not quite in control, as Shapcott foregrounds a sense of aimless movement: ‘my hands wandered’. In ‘La Serenissima’ the body and the water-filled city reflect one another:

I could feel the membranes

in my body tremble with the fluid
they contain, and the stately flow of lymph,
the faster pulse of blood. (9-12)

The plosive sounds of these lines, when read aloud, create an impression of liquid bubbling under. The pivotal, cancer-carrying lymph is depicted as ‘stately’ (the word offers up the allusive potential of powerful and self-assured) but also *invisible*, acting as a metonym for the disease itself; something critical that the speaker is keenly attuned to, but which is hidden from any observer. Shapcott experiences the landscape as embodied as she blurs the boundaries between self and world, until this contemplation is interrupted by the mechanical: ‘... A boat’s engine / vibrated through land, through waves, through my feet / into my torso’ (12-14). If we are to read Venice as the speaker (as the poet and the landscape subsumed into one another), it is tempting to interpret the jarring interjection of artificial/man-made energy as symbolic of the months of chemotherapy the speaker is about to endure. Despite the discernible sense of rupture after the poem’s turn, the speaker’s steady onward progression continues to the poem’s stately close: ‘Slow – slowly moving, I stepped on’. The sickness may be developing, but the speaker is not yet ‘felled’ by it, to use Woolf’s word.

As we begin to explore the means by which Shapcott mines bodily experience for poetic material, it is vital to take into account the influence of the artist Helen Chadwick. Shapcott writes in her acknowledgements for *Of Mutability*: ‘The artist Helen Chadwick is the presiding spirit of this collection. Many of the poems, including “The Oval Pool” and “Piss Flower” refer directly or indirectly to her work’ (*OMv*). Chadwick, who died suddenly after a heart attack aged just 42, was the first woman to be nominated for the Turner Prize, and her work explored the vulnerable or decaying human body – she frequently photographed her own skin, and turned images of her own cells into artwork. Shapcott’s poem ‘The Oval Pool’ is named for *The Oval Court*, which in turn is part of a larger conceptual piece of art called *Of Mutability*, an installation by Chadwick given a whole floor in London’s Institute for Contemporary Art in 1986.

The Oval Court featured giant blue-tinted photocopied images of Chadwick’s naked body alongside a cornucopia of fruits and flowers, described by *The Guardian* as ‘images of Chadwick seemingly dead, a macabre Ophelia floating in a pond with

fish, lambs, assorted fruit, rotting around her, a distinctly Rubensian image of life on the turn, plunging into over-ripeness and decay' (Chadwick). In the same article, Chadwick explained: 'I'm trying to make images of a kind of physical identification of the self through exploring physical matter - and by implication mortality, desire, all those kinds of words, all that kind of vague region - because it's a kind of space that none of us can really know for ourselves and because, for many people, it's a troubled terrain'. This raises for me a number of connections, primarily with Hillman's 'imbrication of the body-self and the environment' and his assertion that 'Literature's enmeshment with the body offers not a loss of control but an acknowledgement of the illusory nature of control over our bodies' (Hillman 42); but also with Doty's liminal, undefined territories of marshland and twilight. Chadwick is exploring the same terrain: the physical identification of the self is 'a kind of space that none of us can really know for ourselves'. As such, this unpredictable space proves fruitful for artists willing to render 'unknowable' elements such as the deep water and replicated images found in 'The Oval Pool'.

Shapcott's exploration of this uncertainty, this mysterious 'vague region', includes a frequent destabilisation of a unified poetic voice, as we see in the ironically-named 'La Serenissima'; she frequently uses water in order to evoke the wayward or ungovernable nature of bodily experience. This porousness and alertness to dissolution is especially interesting when our contemporary metaphors of illness, especially cancer, tend towards disease as a fight to be won or lost: Craig A. Irvine has argued that 'medicine naturally tends towards closure ... even its commitment to doubt, to question all conclusions, to be transparently self-reflective, is enclosed within a comprehensive, identifying epistemology' (Irvine 13). Medicine may bring out our metaphors of battle and desire for definitive answers, but in the artistic space staked out by Chadwick and Shapcott, decay and liquidity prove creatively fruitful due to their sheer uncontrollability, and thus act as a corrective to any idea of control or dispassionate diagnosis.

The sense of illness as an unsteady but fertile province catalyses Shapcott's poem 'The Oval Pool', just as it does its namesake installation. The poem unfolds in eight couplets that straddle notions of immortality, reproduction (both sexual and artistic), decay and loss:

All that's left of me are a dozen copies of my elastic self in blue,
molecules trapped in time, my image - arching, breathing,

prone - across a dry and azure pool. There will be no evaporation.
My twelve blue selves embody our contract with pleasure, sing

the hymn of praise for impurity. I was semi-permeable.
One copy holds a mirror. Everyone around me's weeping,

addressing themselves to five gold spheres, bubbles in which
they can see the tears that may be theirs. (1-8)

The 'dozen copies' resonate with the fatal sirens singing in book twelve of *The Odyssey*: the photocopies themselves contain a mirror, denoting further doubling and reproduction. Even the gold spheres reflecting the audience are depicted in liquid terms - bubbles reflecting yet more liquid in the form of tears.

It is tempting, also, to situate Shapcott's 'The Oval Pool' alongside Jahan Ramazani's interpretation of Spenser's elegy 'Astrophel'; Ramazani notes that in this poem, 'on the side of consolation are its many figures of reproduction and imitation, figures that, multiplying and reinforcing one another, would override the severance of death' (Ramazani 9). The proliferation of copies in 'The Oval Pool' is underpinned by an audience 'addressing themselves' and looking for the tears 'that may be theirs', adding another self-reflexive layer to the poem. The doubling, reflection and duplication suggest that the artwork (much like the AIDS quilt) is dialogic: it is in a process of continual mutation through the experience of its audience. Liquid, in Shapcott's 'The Oval Pool', is uncontainable and thoroughly generative.

The poem also contains a litany of small creatures: 'In death they whirl and fly in my Xerox arms: a goose, herrings, / a crab, two mice, a skate, three rabbits, a starfish, rats and a squid...' (11-12). Crucially, the creatures are re-invigorated in replication; they may be dead, but they still 'whirl and fly', and the list gives a sense of bounty. This (dead) animal cornucopia is full of movement:

all of us blowing and blown under the sticky water,

circling in the blue dry solution, circling
in the gorgeous mess of our own gravity. (14-16)

Shapcott's 'gorgeous mess', paradoxically both liquid and dry, celebrates life and death simultaneously, as well paying tribute to Chadwick's work. 'The Oval Pool' contains elements of elegiac re-remembering, in that it recasts the disparate elements of Chadwick's artwork, putting them back together, transformed: the installation's transient existence, and the artist's impermanent body, becoming fixed in another art form. Jane Hirschfield, writing about the generative potential of poetry, notes poetry's unique power to create movement in the face of loss:

Against gravity and entropic loss, a poem proposes the levitations of fine excess and gratuitous beauty – sound trance's memorability; the aerial devices of implication; metaphor's democratic conjugation with all existence; the praise of whatever it is for what it is. (Hirshfield 52)

'The Oval Pool', through its manipulation of water, reflection and doubling, highlights the levitations of 'fine excess' as it moves towards a note of praise or celebration. The 'gorgeous mess of our own gravity' (16) praises the fallible body for what it is, our own mortality for what it is, and indeed the process of making art for what it is. It is noteworthy, too, that this fourteen-line poem uses past, present and future tenses, culminating in a sense of rotation or revolution that is at once destabilising and celebratory.

Another exploration of transformative immersion, along with a shifting, destabilised poetic voice, can be found in 'Deft', the fourth poem in *Of Mutability*. This poem, too, addresses the all-encompassing nature of sickness, but also its generative, reflective potential:

It's as easy to make an antibubble in your own kitchen
as it is to open up a crease in language

and reveal what you couldn't say yesterday.
Just a matter of squirting water onto water

without snapping the surface tension until liquid
surrounds a skin of air, surrounding liquid. My body's

a drop of water. Maybe the imperfections, the proliferating cells
help it refract the full spectrum... (1-8)

As we saw in Doty's poetics of illness, the 'full spectrum' of life is refracted and expanded by sickness. In Doty's terms, sickness acts as a kind of 'intensifier'. Virginia Woolf, writing about lying in a sick bed and appreciating the 'divinely beautiful but divinely heartless sky', claimed that 'one should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house' (Woolf 14). Here, we find Shapcott manipulating the same thematic domain. The added punch of 'proliferating' highlights the speed of the sickness taking hold, but also infuses the poem with a sense of generative energy. As this energy grows, the speaker is sinking, disappearing, and the boundaries between the soap bubble of the poem, the speaker's body and the world become increasingly fragile. At the same time, the poem moves into expansive space, with the speaker ultimately becoming more than she was at the start of the process:

The soap film is my skin:
permeable-for-some-things, membrane, separating-other-things,

this and that, the moving point between, the unsettled
limit, stretching and contracting under the breath

that comes and goes: I am this one, I am that one
I breathe in and become everything I see. (10-15)

There's a metanoia here, a kind of voluntary submersion or baptism, with a world (and a speaker) irreversibly changed in its wake.

Connotations of baptism can also be found in *Of Mutability's* penultimate poem, 'Procedure'; another ruminative exploration of liquid, which approaches the subject of clinical recovery while resisting closure and certainty. Although the title leads the reader in one direction, we are immediately rerouted in the poem's opening line; a sentence that extends the full thirteen-line length of the poem:

This tea, this cup of tea, made of leaves,
made of the leaves of herbs and absolute

almond blossom, this tea, is the interpreter
of almond, liquid touchstone which lets us
scent its true taste at last and with a bump,

in my case, takes me back to the yellow time
of trouble with blood tests, and cellular
madness, and my presence required

on the slab for surgery, and all that mess
I don't want to comb through here because
it seems, honestly, a trifle now that steam

and scent and strength and steep and infusion
say thank you thank you thank you for the then, and now
(1-13).

'Procedure' is a deceptively simple poem; a tender exploration of a simple ritual, made vivid by the poet's return from the frightening experience of cancer treatment. But at the close of the poem, the focus is on steam, not liquid: liquid is evaporating, and like the experience of surgery, it will leave only traces. This sense of loss or lessening also powers the poem on a somatic level, as the speaker has physically lost some of her body in the duration of her cancer treatment. It is 'steam, scent, strength, steep and infusion' that speak towards the end of the poem to say thank you. The sweetness threaded through the poem with images of bees and hives ('yellow time', 'cellular' and 'comb') echo the sweet purity of the tea's 'absolute / almond blossom'. But it is the word *infusion* that interests me most here, the metaphor for an immersive physical and mental experience that leaves the speaker transformed. The experience of cancer has 'infused' the speaker, leaving her in a process of ongoing gratitude that extends beyond the poem's reach: note the poem's lack of closing punctuation, and the fact that it pulls up one line short of being a sonnet. Tonally, 'Procedure' echoes Julia Darling's sonnet 'Chemotherapy': 'I'm not unhappy. I have learnt to drift / and sip. The smallest things are gifts' (13-14).

Shapcott continues the exploration of liquidity to extend her re-imagining of bodily experience in 'Piss Flower', the final poem in *Of Mutability*. It is another piece inspired by Helen Chadwick's work (Chadwick's 1991 installation *Piss Flowers* featured sculptures created by casting the interior spaces left in snow after female urination). 'Piss Flower' alludes to the limitations of language, and operates from a specifically female perspective – that of a woman who cannot write her name clearly in

the snow with piss, as a man can. There's a wry, tongue-in-cheek tone to the opening tercets:

I can't pretend to a golden parabola,
or the downing of many pints
for making magnificent water.

I can't begin to write my name, no
not even my pet name, in the snow:
except in pointless unreadable script. (1-6)

The poem, however, moves beyond the limits of gendered experience towards notes of headiness and joy, and closes the collection with the speaker asserting her ability to 'print' or represent her experience through writing *and* the workings of her body:

But I can print a stream of bubbles
into water with a velocity
you'd have to call aesthetic.

I can shoot down a jet stream
so intense my body rises
a full forty feet and floats

on a bubble stem of grace
for just a few seconds
up there in the urban air. (7-15)

The wry urgency of 'a velocity you'd have to call aesthetic' recalls the struggle in the poem's opening: the poet cannot truly reproduce herself; any attempt will be inadequate, or 'unreadable'. But, paradoxically, the poet *can* 'print' in a somatic sense. This off-kilter, destabilising argument of the poem closes on a note of euphoria, with the speaker 'floating for just a few seconds'. Shapcott alluded to this sense of urgency in 2011: 'When Dennis Potter was dying, he filmed that famous interview, in which he talked about looking out of the window, and observing the blossominess (sic) of the blossoms with an increased urgency and joy. And I think that does happen to cancer survivors - apparently it's really common to feel euphoria, if you get through the treatment...' (Shapcott, *BOL*).

What truly allows the speaker her freedom, however, is the leap the poem takes into surreal or absurd territory: the ‘stream of bubbles’, where she is lifted into the air ‘on a bubble stem of grace’. This manipulation of the surreal or absurd in order to interrogate embodied female experience, sickness and narrative dislocation is something Shapcott has deployed in much earlier work; in the next section I’ll consider her Mad Cow poems, published a full 18 years before the publication of *Of Mutability*, but vitally important in any exploration of her poetics of illness.

ii. Glorious Collapse

To deepen our understanding of *Of Mutability*, I now want to explore an earlier sequence of Shapcott's 'illness' poems published in 1992. *Phrase Book*, Shapcott's second collection, contains a variety of recognisable twentieth-century voices (including those of Marlon Brando, Superman and Tom & Jerry), alongside her Mad Cow poems: five poems written from the perspective of a cow developing the symptoms of Bovine Spongiforme Encephalitis (BSE). BSE was officially recognised in 1986, but it wasn't until 1990 that a surveillance unit was set up in the UK to monitor the links between BSE and the fatal degenerative brain disorder Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). The BSE crisis peaked in 1992, with CJD sufferers still succumbing to the disease as late as 1995; the European Commission's worldwide ban on British beef exports was not lifted until 1999. Shapcott's Mad Cow poems, written during this period of heightened fear and media frenzy, offer fragmented, dislocated narratives of physical and mental deterioration. Tonally, they are tongue-in-cheek, fusing every phase of the cow's rapid decline with black humour.

In this sequence, Shapcott articulates a speaker's descent into untreatable sickness, with the attendant limitations and paradoxical freedoms this offers. Shapcott's strategies for portraying such visceral imagined experience are circular, almost kaleidoscopic; the poems loop and follow one route before leaping to another. Taken as a series, the narrative (or lack thereof) of these poems re-enacts the confusion and fragmentation of the disease taking hold of the cow's brain. The poems are darkly comic, but simultaneously interrogate power imbalances, the struggles of artistic expression, and a sense of deep eco-political helplessness.

Of all the connotations of madness, 'foolishness' and 'frenzy' are perhaps the most apt to characterise these poems; written from the perspective of growing delusion, they move towards a register of savage pleasure. The first Mad Cow poem, 'The Mad Cow Talks Back', opens with 'I'm not mad. It just seems that way' - undercutting the speaker's authority and destabilising the reader from the very start. The poem quickly moves to a site of playful openness, where the disease is depicted as something generative, which allows multiple voices to speak:

There are wonderful holes in my brain
through which ideas from outside can travel
at top speed and through which voices,
sometimes whole people, speak to me
about the universe... (3-7)

As the cow becomes less and less physically able, less steady on her feet, she interprets and depicts this as a liberating, free-wheeling dance rather than as the symptom of a fatal illness. This joyful unsteadiness imbues the poem with a sense of exhilaration through performativity: the cow's erratic movement allows for 'glorious' and 'magnificent' experience, where she feels she is straddling the world; 'turning and spinning across whole hard / Pacifics and Atlantics' (12-13).

The gamble of this deluded performance parallels the very act of composition. To publish is to take risks, to relinquish authorial control. The notion of failure, denoted through the risk of physical collapse in 'The Mad Cow Talks Back', is nothing to be afraid of:

... It's risky when
you're good, so of course the legs go before,
behind, and to the side of the body from time
to time, and then there's the general embarrassing
collapse, but when that happens it's glorious
because it's always when you're travelling
most furiously in your mind... (13-19)

Crucially, collapse occurs when 'travelling / most furiously in your mind' – when the speaker is stretching and expanding beyond expected limits, stirring up the conundrum of artistic or creative dilemmas as the cow/poet describes her brain pulling in two directions simultaneously: 'constant little murmurs from its cells / saying this is the way, this is the way to go' (14-15). The cow's brain has become permeable, but at the same time the sickness is again acting as an intensifier, a conduit for a variety of voices. These may be hallucinations or delusions, but the spongy, holey brain has allowed this: '... You need this spongy / generosity to let the other in' (8-9).

Shapcott's dramatisation of a disintegrating self opens up a discursive or imaginative field that extends to visualisations of the afterlife in the second Mad Cow

poem, 'The Mad Cow in Love'. This poem, one 32-line stanza addressed to the Mad Cow's partner, is situated in familiar domestic territory turned surreal:

I want to be an angel and really think
I'm getting there with this mind of mine,
shrinking every day towards the cleanness,
the size of a baby animal's brain. (1-4)

The cow, in order to become angelic, needs her brain to shrink. The Mad Cow poems invite a consideration of the radical and disruptive force of female madness or illness alongside the anxieties of female authorship that have long preoccupied feminist literary scholarship: Gilbert and Gubar argue that 'from the female point of view, the madwoman, the monster, the witch, the evil Queen are not simply antagonistic images used as a foil to the "pure" heroine, but images of the woman author herself who "seeks the power of articulation"' (Frederico 7). The Mad Cow poems offer us a specifically female speaker seeking her own power of articulation – disrupting boundaries, taking up space, and deeply preoccupied with leaving her mark, as we will see on page 137 when we look more closely at 'The Mad Cow Writes the Good Poem'. But I am interested in the specific parameters of the lines 'shrinking every day towards the cleanness / the size of a baby animal's brain' which raise associations with diminution, purity, self-annihilation, and sacrifice. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, 'it is the surrender of her self – of her personal comfort, or her personal desires, or both – that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead' (Gilbert and Gubar 602). The Mad Cow's desire to become angelic necessarily involves a complete subjugation of her self. This specifically feminist reading of Shapcott's Mad Cow poems offers tantalising glimpses into female power, insubordination, and 'powers of articulation' – a route which would be tempting to explore further beyond the constraints of this particular essay.

However, just as some kind of coherent narrative seems to be coalescing, Shapcott throws the reader off course; it is the cow's lover who is scanning his newspaper 'looking for news of the self' (12): the experience of clinical deterioration extends to both sufferer and partner. Sickness has separated the cow from her partner,

with the result that they occupy completely different territories while living under one roof – the Mad Cow situates herself as:

foreign correspondent on the track of who you are
looking for leads, your last screw, the food
you threw away, your strategic approaches
for living through the next hour. (25-28)

The looming separation moves the poem into poignant territory, as the cow wants her lover to accompany her in the afterlife, though she knows this is a journey she must take alone: ‘Do you want to be an angel? I know / the answer already and it’s rough medicine’ (13-14). From the expansive, ‘letting other voices in’ and the wildly performative ‘I’m a magnificent / skater’ of the first Mad Cow poem, ‘The Mad Cow in Love’ then moves towards a register of assertive artistic power, with the cow as creator laying out her vision of what angelic life will look like in an imagined roll-call of heavenly jobs:

And angels do a variety of jobs:
the post of perpetual adoration might suit,
or divine messenger but I fancy for you
the government of the stars and all the elements. (20-23)

This poem weaves its way through various stages: from the subjugation of the self with the shrinking brain, through the embodied separation of speaker and lover, towards this ambitious imaginative luring of the lover towards heaven. And yet, the progress of the poems loops again, as the cow/speaker radically undercuts her own narrative in the last five lines: ‘I don’t mean it, / though, any of it...’ (28-29). In another twist, this dream or projection of living as an angel is halted, brought down to earth and expanded to contain all the damage the future might contain: ‘I want you earthly / including all the global terrors and harms / which might come...’ (29-31).

‘The Mad Cow in Love’ is dexterous in its circularity and contradictions. At a first glance it could be interpreted as a paean to imagination as a route out of the confines of quotidian home life. However, as the poem veers back towards earthy or geopolitical concerns, we are confronted with a ruptured domestic scene where the abiding image is one of impending separation. Though tonally and stylistically

dissimilar to Mark Doty's narratives of anticipatory grief, this poem moves in a similar elegiac direction; foregrounding the experience of a couple facing final parting, and desperate to protect one another from pain.

The next poem in the sequence, 'Mad Cow Dance', deploys further images of instability, and is again situated at the point of rupture between comedy and tragedy. The lack of an article in the title of this poem (the only poem in this sequence not to open with 'The') suits this disjointed, fragmented piece, which is set in couplets, tercets and single line stanzas, with line lengths shrinking towards the poem's close. In performative terms, the cow now is completely alone, and has moved centre stage:

I like to dance. Bang. I love to dance. Push.

It makes me savage and brilliant. Stomp. To
my own rhythm, rhythm. I lead or I don't

have a partner. No market for partners,
just this wide floor for the dance... (1-5)

The 'savage and brilliant' cow, now in the later stages of BSE when standing becomes impossible and the animal loses control of its own body - 'Four legs increase splits into splats' (30) - refutes expected narratives of disintegration with a focus on physical pleasure:

... But fireflies

know I'm here, raving with light,
they swirl down my spine. Swish. My tail
goes bam, thwack against the backs
of my legs. Pleasure, local pleasure... (13-17)

For the Mad Cow, this physical deterioration signals the end of control: 'Ceasefire / between my legs and my brain' (22-23). Sociologists such as Talcott Parsons argue that health care professionals function as agents of social control, which is vital; that 'asymmetry' is an integral part of the physician-patient relationship. The Mad Cow, undiagnosed, animal not human, operates outwith the parameters of medical care, outside the hierarchies of social control usually found in medical settings. As Parsons notes: 'with respect to the inherent functions of effective care and amelioration of

conditions of illness, there must be a built-in institutionalized superiority of the professional roles, grounded in responsibility, competence, and occupational concern' (Parsons 271). Shapcott's *Mad Cow*, not confined to bed or subjected to medical tests or treatment, kicks out at the world, and the reader is encouraged to bear witness to this. Operating outside a controlled or hierarchical medical setting, 'Mad Cow Dance' becomes expansive and sensual, as the poem shifts into a darker register of somatic space beyond words -

just watch me

become
pure product, pure

use,
pure perfume
jasmine and fucked. (31-36)

The 'just watch me' of 'Mad Cow Dance' foreshadows the uneven, feverish direct address to the reader in *Of Mutability's* 'Stargazer':

if I appear
to be scanning the sky
head thrown back, curious,
ecstatic, shy, strolling
unevenly across the floor
in front of you, my audience,
forgive ... (2-8)

It also anticipates the exuberantly sensual voice in *Of Mutability's* 'La Canterina' where the speaker asserts that 'Performing / on a tightrope / makes me feel wanton' (25-27) - but the cow at the end of 'Mad Cow Dance' is 'fucked' in a literal and figurative sense. Mark Doty, in a piece for *Granta*, wrote 'I could make a list (of two or three hundred terms) for fucking and come absolutely no closer to what I want to say: it is as if the transformative bodily experience lives on one side of the veil and language on the other' (*Granta* 19). Sex, like the experience of the deteriorating brain, exists in a sphere of pure sensation, of embodiment beyond the limits of linguistic representation. A further complexity in 'Mad Cow Dance' is that the female animal is

completely commodified, becoming product, with the 'perfume' and 'jasmine' as traditional signifiers of sweetness and seduction, and 'pure' hinting at a return to Gilbert and Gubar's virginal, selfless/dead angel. In 'Mad Cow Dance', Shapcott has misdirected the reader once again: having set the stage for disruptive female space, she ends the poem with the cow in a position of complete subjugation. This maddening circularity and re-routing leaves the reader with a jumble of impressions rather than one easy-to-follow chronology of sickness.

Isabel Galleymore notes that when reading Shapcott's Mad Cow poems, 'the importance of cows as traditional elements in the pastoral scene must be remembered. They wander Constable's landscapes, modern dairy product advertisements and the promotional materials of English tourism alike. The anthropomorphising of the cow ... marks a shift from the environment as background to the environment as foreground' (Galleymore 157). In moving the environment into the foreground, the speaker highlights the fact that not only the body, but nature itself is uncontrollable. In this sense, although we might posit these Mad Cow poems as a kind of 'ruptured pastoral', we must acknowledge that pastoral itself is a slippery term. Hurley and O'Neill, for example, make the point that the rural landscape is far from a straightforward idyll: 'in pastoral, the rural is explored as a place of temporary resolution of life's complexities, only for these complexities frequently to reassert themselves...' (4). Terry Gifford goes further, situating it as a site of dissonance with his observation that 'there has always been something suspect about pastoral writing - nostalgic, escapist, comfortingly timeless and stable - in a word "Arcadian"' (46).

Shapcott's darkly playful, satirical explorations of BSE use pastoral as a complex, irresolute space in order to attest to a deeper and more profound concern, a concern threaded through the lived experience of anyone seriously ill: the sensation of impotence and a heightened awareness of time running out. One reaction to this helplessness, of course, is to mine it for creativity. The struggle to leave one's mark (as we saw in 'Piss Flowers', in the previous section) underpins the next poem in the sequence, 'The Mad Cow Tries to Write the Good Poem', which shifts between creative potential and the frustration of that potential in its allusion to the limits of artistic representation.

Still dramatising a disintegration of the self, but moving the cow from passive ('fucked') back towards the role of active creator, 'The Mad Cow Writes the Good Poem' is set on a delicate fulcrum between power and subjugation:

... I used
my hooves as gentle weapons in the air. A bit of newspaper
fame came my way that day, but shit, it was a performance
ephemeral, and certainly not the good poem. Lasting.
How can I last when I live in a shed and even
the postman doesn't know how to find me? (4-9)

Here, the speaker is preoccupied with a desperate need to have a voice, to leave some trace behind. The excitement about a performance (which only exists in the present moment) has been overlaid with concerns about making a mark, no matter how unconventional the method. This poem's images of cow dung - 'I hear it written in streaky emulsion on the walls, / in my own messing on the floor, in the nation's smeary dailies' (19-20) - destabilise and interrogate notions of femininity, as the cow, who, we must remember, was previously concerned with being angelic, moves towards a place of what Luce Irigaray would term 'a feminine disruptive excess' (Irigaray 571).

Shapcott explores the idea of feminine 'disruption' through bodily functions in several of her poems; for example, 'With the Big Tray', the second poem in Shapcott's 1988 collection *Electroplating the Baby*. 'With the Big Tray' features a housemaid who 'surprises herself' by breaking wind when serving up tea:

Secretly, her large smell
made her feel as real and salty
as a merchant adventurer... (26-28)

Bodily functions, more usually seen as private or even shameful for women, become themselves an act of embodiment, an act of becoming 'real'. Similarly, in 'Birthday Surprise', Shapcott narrates the story of her seven-year-old self as she experiences the 'surprise' of a 'trickle down the leg':

...'Power!' I was thinking,
'A puddle on the rug.' Then Mother
got out a tissue and blotted the wet shape
so carefully mapped and steaming on the Wilton -

my Florida, my Amazon, my Indies. (5-9)

Both 'Birthday Surprise' and 'With the Big Tray', with their compressed sense of adventure or exploration, link into the Mad Cow's narratives on a corporeal level: the notion of shock, or lack of control, leading to a sense of power or authenticity, which allow the speaker to take up physical as well as creative space. There is a parallel with the Mad Cow 'turning and spinning across whole hard / Pacifics and Atlantics' here. Breaking wind or pissing become acts of creation and performance, leaving a temporary mark, reminiscent of Doty's poem 'Human Figures', where a homeless man makes a mark with his blood on a Manhattan street. Crucially, when contextualising these poems in the framework of illness, it is *letting go* that allows the 'power' of 'Birthday Surprise', 'Piss Flowers', 'With the Big Tray' or, indeed, 'Mad Cow Dance'. Relinquishing any attempt at control, or accepting one's impotence in the face of bodily deterioration, offers a surprising route towards liberation.

This sense of wild (imagined) power intensifies as the final mad cow poem, 'The Mad Cow Believes She is the Spirit of the Weather', depicts the speaker as a goddess with even the landscape around her fragmenting:

I was a junior cloud goddess, with storms following
me, winds and whirlwinds, shots of rain
and a split sky above my head. (8-10)

This final poem alludes to the danger of untethered, untreated illness: 'I'm dangerous to the earth. / I spat and a blanket of algae four miles long / bloomed on the Cornish coast' (19-21). The BSE crisis was exacerbated by a practice taken up by British farmers in the mid 1980s - grinding up useless parts of other cows to feed to their (usually herbivore) cattle. This unnatural process, driven by greed, draws our attention to the ecological destruction that underpins Shapcott's queasy pastoral. The final lines of this final Mad Cow poem, the understated 'I have been sad recently / and now the weather has changed for good' (24-25) gesture towards *Of Mutability's* much later poem 'Forecast', with the closing line 'It's a sad child / that destroys its own weather' (9-10). The cow's narrative has become one of sacrifice and slaughter; she is defeated, and the admission 'it's harder now / here in the future' (13-14) seems to be a poignant

foreshadowing not only of Shapcott's later writing about her own illness, but of the damage done to the environment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

There's such circularity to Shapcott's Mad Cow poems: looped, resisting sane territory, resisting neat endings or linearity, which is encapsulated by the 'amazing circular music which had entered a gap / near my cortex' (2-3). Reading them, I am reminded at once of Colm Tóibín's assertion that Doty's work searches for 'a scheme that can accommodate illness, however fitfully or sadly' (Tóibín, 3), and of a quote from Shapcott, when she said that Helen Chadwick inspired her 'not least because she offers a route outside the dialectical, deliberately questioning dualistic definitions - "to weave loops, twists and turns around binary categories," as she put it' (*LSHA*).

The Mad Cow's fantasy-pastoral landscape, full of rupture and brimming with ferocious, decaying life, is an oddly fitting setting for Shapcott's fragmented explorations of individuals taking centre stage even as their bodies are behaving unpredictably. The Mad Cow poems offer the possibility of encountering unbounded space and liberation during clinical deterioration. Although the notion of drawing creativity or pleasure from frailty or collapse could be read as naïvely optimistic, Shapcott's Mad Cow sequence offers instead a deeply humane journey through the paradoxes that pervade our embodied experience. In this way, her work simultaneously complicates, and renders more nuanced, our understandings of both illness and creativity.

iii. The Unfamiliar Self

I want now to turn to Shapcott's explorations of mortality and the nature of change through 'cinematography': how she presents her poems through not only microscopic close-up, but also through the sweep of a wide-angle lens, and how this shifting perspective is augmented by her use of direct address to the reader in certain poems. I want to situate these techniques in the context of Shapcott's poetry as a whole, exploring two earlier poems as well as four from *Of Mutability*.

The juxtaposition of microscopic close-up and broad-sweep panorama acts as a kind of democratic corrective in Shapcott's poetry: in Shapcott's imaginative world, gods and natural disasters are no greater or more significant than wood lice or spiders, and images often unfold at strange angles, from unusual perspectives. (This 'democracy' seems fitting for a poet who has defined her writing as political; Shapcott refused a CBE in 2003, sending her anti-war poem 'Phrase Book' to the cabinet office with a letter turning it down.) Indeed, *Of Mutability* as a whole is suggestive of illness as a leveller: the speaker frequently shrinks throughout the collection, situating herself inside trees and plants, or taking on non-human forms, which the reader is invited to share; in 'Night Flight From Muncaster' she asks the reader to imagine themselves as an owl: 'you've been learning / how to read the silences of air' (37-38).

Feeling diminished and trying to 'read silence' during spells of limbo and uncertainty are common features in cancer narratives. Anatole Broyard describes the sensation during his treatment: 'to the typical physician, my illness is a routine incident in his rounds, while for me it's the crisis of my life. I would feel better if I had a doctor who at least perceived this incongruity' (Broyard 43). This is a sentiment echoed by Gavin Francis's *Adventures in Human Being*: 'hospital is a place dedicated to the efficient processing of thousands of people; the hopes and anxieties of individuals tend to get drowned out in the crowd' (Francis 93). Diagnosis, hospital stays and surgery can leave a patient feeling, as *Of Mutability*'s titular poem has it, 'small / among the numbers. Razor small' (4-5).

Shapcott replicates this sensation, depicting a speaker in miniature, in 'I Go Inside the Tree' where the speaker burrows into a trunk:

... tasting
weather in the tree rings,
scoffing years of drought and storm,
moving as fast as a woodworm (5-8)

Shapcott writes without the formal resistance of rhyme, but her crammed sound-patterns and emphatic use of assonance lend her free verse a musical energy that gives loud voice to the seemingly insignificant: ‘burrowing into the core, / for mouthing pith and sap, / until the O my god at the heart’ (10-12). Lucy Collins, writing about Shapcott’s contemporary Kathleen Jamie, points out that Jamie ‘views the world in microcosm, so that by intimate attention to the single living thing, the entire ecosystem may implicitly be encountered’ (Karhio et al. 159). In parallel, Shapcott’s focused attention on the minuscule also allows her to posit the uniqueness of her experience, her very personalised pain, alongside the huge sweep of sickness as a concept, or the ‘entire ecosystem’ of illness; for Shapcott, as for the historian Joanna Bourke, pain is ‘absolutely unique and infinitely shareable’ (*Lancet* 2421).

This observation recollects Rita Charon’s comments about the process of clinical diagnosis, which I mentioned in the introduction: the crucial importance of the broader narrative alongside the minute detail. In turn, we might situate Shapcott’s ‘broad and narrow’ approach within the Romantic (or indeed, metaphysical) ideal of being closely attuned to small sensory detail, then branching or expanding into more profound philosophical or spiritual ruminations. But my present focus is on how we, as readers, experience this narrowing and broadening. Shapcott’s use of fluctuating perspectives may allow the reader a sense of omniscience – a rich, sensory experience – but at times the omniscience becomes dizzying, destabilizing, leaving us with a sense of profound dislocation.

To better understand Shapcott’s unsettling use of both perspective and direct address in the light of her work as a whole, I want to look at ‘I’m Contemplated by a Portrait of a Divine’, from 1992’s *Phrase Book*. The very title challenges our expectations; isn’t it curious to be ‘contemplated’ by a piece of art? This reversal of traditional perspective starts us off on unsteady territory, as the poem opens:

I cannot speak to you. My lips are fused

where an archangel kissed them. I have never
made much of myself although I know,
sometimes, that space is touching me
because I have seen the crack in the universe
through which the galaxies stream... (1-7)

Shapcott opens the poem by highlighting the speaker's inability to speak, with lips not just closed but 'fused', but then follows this image with that of a faultline acting as a portal to entire galaxies. The poem becomes an emotive, physical exploration of religion, sex and art, narrowing its focus back down to the tiny sonic effects of putting one's ear to the ground: 'Dear Christ, I can hear vice rushing through / the grass' (12-13). As readers, our viewpoint is omniscient, but more than omniscient - we shift and leap with the speaker's thoughts, in a way that echoes the disordered, unpredictable unspooling of Shapcott's earlier Mad Cow poems. There is a slipperiness in the poem; the last seven lines of the poem situate the speaker on one side of occluded glass, through which she strains to see another figure - suggesting, perhaps that the 'I' has become the person in the portrait, looking out:

... There is someone here.
If I could lick the glass
clean from this side, I might see her, though
I already know she would look the way
I want my soul to look. This pose
which I strain to keep, in which I lean
on the desk for dear life, is not a pose.
It's so important for keeping the drawer shut
in case my heart should slip out, fly up. (13-21)

The ambiguity extends to the 'divine' of the poem's title, which we might interpret variously as God, providence or even the idealised version of the writerly self: the poem foregrounds the duality of artistic creation, the elusive nature of spiritual consolation, and the idea of the artist and woman as passive muse. Crucially, the heart is portrayed as vital, alive and utterly uncontrollable, so the poem develops into an exploration of containment and release - again emphasising the illusory nature of control over our embodied selves.

The reader's perspective is similarly destabilised with Shapcott's use of direct address in her 1998 collection *My Life Asleep*, which contains 'Thetis', a poem about

a goddess shapeshifter. Again, the speaker is physically entwined with her environment: ‘Already I’m so much the oak / I lean everything towards the black oxygen / in the black air’ (17-19). This figurative enmeshing of body and nature echoes Doty’s work, and Hillman’s comments on the imbrication of the body-self with the environment, which I explored on page 95. It is also suggestive of being buried, and breathlessness, and the phrase ‘already I’m so much the oak’ points towards decomposition (and indeed re-composition). As the poem’s speaker starts to transform, she turns to address the reader directly with the intimate line: ‘here comes the full thrill of my art’. This bold, knowing duality, giving a nod to the process of writing as the poem’s narrative unfolds, offers us a chance to see the poem from two different angles simultaneously: from outside and inside the poem. Here, and in Shapcott’s tree sequence towards the end of *Of Mutability* (which I will address in more detail on page 147) we can see the parallels with Ovid: here is Daphne transformed into a tree in *The Metamorphoses*:

... a deep languor took hold on her limbs, her soft breast was enclosed in thin bark, her hair grew into leaves, her arms into branches, and her feet that were lately so swift were held fast by sluggish roots, while her face became the treetop. Nothing of her was left, except her shining loveliness. (Ovid, 43)

As Fiona Cox attests, ‘Jo Shapcott has engaged extensively with Ovid in her poetry ... but it was especially through her volume *Of Mutability* that she meditated upon the unexpected pleasures and perils of metamorphosis, since she invoked Ovid in her response to her diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer’ (Cox 2). Indeed, the task of mapping Shapcott’s work alongside that of Ovid could be another complete research project. But, for our purposes, I want to demonstrate that years before Shapcott’s exploration of cancer in *Of Mutability*, she was already exploring notions of rebirth, transformation, and altered perspective.

We find examples of transformation, mutability and disrupted perspective in Shapcott’s 1998 collection *Electroplating the Baby*. This book’s titular poem is a complex depiction of a visceral experience delivered in careful, pared-back language, as if the speaker were giving a medical lecture or reading from a clinical manual. The address to the reader in ‘Electroplating the Baby’ has a knowing tone: ‘Does this

waken your curiosity? / Do you wish to know / how Dr Variot proceeds?' (21-23). The verbs used in 'Electroplating the Baby' are workmanlike rather than lyrical, but add up to a feeling of complete immersion: 'encloses', 'insulated', 'penetrated', 'reduced'.

They all contribute to a sense of containment, and leave the reader complicit: having accepted the speaker's invitation to witness this horror, they feel the poem constrict around them. Miroslav Holub notes that 'both scientific and poetic communications are a function of condensation of meanings, of the net weight of meaning per word, of inner and immanent intensity. Opposed to other written communications, they are - at their best - concentrates, time-saving devices' (Holub 135). Shapcott's stripped back language and use of the passive voice serve to enhance this impression of 'condensed meaning', which feels unsettlingly unemotional:

By attentively watching
the thickness of the deposit

upon the face, hands and all
the delicate parts of the body,

a faithful mould will be obtained
that will exactly recall

the details of conformation
and the tints of the physiognomy. (82-88)

As Doty would have it, 'What else do you do / with what you adore / but build a replica?'. Attentive to the most delicate physical details, the concentrated horror of 'Electroplating the Baby' is almost painful to read, but the voice of the authoritarian doctor contrasts sharply with Shapcott's later poetics of illness, which more often situate their speaker as impotent, carried on the currents of diagnosis and treatment. I also detect an odd parallel between assessing the 'thickness of the deposit' and monitoring the progress of a cancerous tumour; and the 'faithful mould' of the 'delicate parts of the body' is reminiscent of the physical art created in 'Piss Flowers'.

The detached, clinical perspective of 'Electroplating the Baby' offers another avenue to explore: in its sardonic rendering of 'a faithful mould', it touches on the challenge of recreating experience through art, territory explored more deeply in Shapcott's 'The Oval Pool' (see section i of this chapter) and in much of *Of*

Mutability. The following couplets allude to this challenge in a language of uncertainty and fragmentation:

What is the future in store
for this process of mummification?

It would be impossible to say.
It is infinitely probable

that metallised cadavers
will never figure

except in small numbers
for a long, long time to come. (113-120)

Shapcott's destabilised interrogations of immortality and reproduction led the poet and critic Iain Twiddy to suggest that '*Of Mutability* repeatedly stresses how illness is a defamiliarising of experience, as the self becomes pressingly aligned to everything else in the universe' (Twiddy 101). Defamiliarisation is absolutely key to *Of Mutability*. Even death, when it appears in this collection, is unfamiliar, unexpected: in 'The Deaths', the poem's speaker is astounded by her own failure to recognise death - 'I didn't recognise her. She lit / a green flame over my head/and even then I didn't get it' (21-23). The speaker hits a rueful note, chastising herself for believing death would be male and arrive as a sort of companion:

...we'd get friendly and walk
our walk of two drunkards
with him chattering inside me
about lumps and arteries. (5-8)

Instead, death appears as a personified female, shocking and unexpected, with the initial encounter relayed through a series of sensory observations; note the repeated 'ands' and lack of punctuation gesturing towards a loss of authorial control:

the rain started
and the fine hairs rose on my neck
and the long hairs tugged my scalp
and my mouth stank of seaweed
and a tingle ran round my wrists,

I didn't recognise her. (16-21)

This poem might summon associations with the experience of chemotherapy – a metallic taste in the mouth is a common side effect – and the doubling of ‘fine hairs’ and ‘long hairs’ draw attention to the process of hair loss. Hair loss is often one of the most challenging side effects of chemotherapy, given its traditional associations with femininity and fertility; associations we can trace back at least to the 9th century, when Ovid portrayed Medusa’s hair as ‘the most wonderful of all her charms’ before Athena transformed it into a coil of serpents (*Metamorphoses* Book IV 803).

As well as the textual layering and close detail to sensations of touch and taste in ‘The Deaths’, speed plays an important role in the poem. The speaker, in the poem’s opening stanza, expected to get to know death *slowly*, leading up to a sudden demise (‘give me the look and / I’d implode like a ripe mango’ (12-13), whereas the cancer patient experiences the possibility of death as arising much more abruptly, followed by the slow, uncertain process of diagnosis and treatment. This tension leaves the speaker bewildered and lost: ‘I was gone and still I didn’t know’ (26). The abrupt tonal changes in this poem’s two stanzas serve to disrupt temporal continuity, forcing us to address the speaker’s imagined future in sharp contrast with the unfolding reality. Death, in this poem, operates as an *anagnorisis* (recognition, revelation or disclosure) which we examined in the context of elegy. Indeed, ‘The Deaths’ could be read as a parallel elegy, written from the perspective of the dead – ‘I was gone and I still didn’t know’. It is worth reiterating that Findlay Potts sees *anagnorisis* as ‘the very goal of elegy ... elegy is the poetry of sceptical and revelatory vision for its own sake’ (Potts 37).

While Twiddy asserts that *Of Mutability* demonstrates a self ‘pressingly aligned to everything else in the universe’ (101), I argue that the recognition, or *anagnorisis*, in *Of Mutability* is more expansive than that. The ‘self’ in Shapcott’s *Of Mutability* is problematic: the collection offers many selves, and they are not only ‘aligned’ to everything else in the universe, but actually *becoming* it, as we saw in the chapter on Shapcott’s fluid boundaries. Indeed, in the poem ‘Shrubbery’, the speaker takes microscopic close-up one step further, and actually embodies herself in miniature:

... spinning inside
the brown foliage, laughing
and blink-squinting at every
here-gone, here-gone, here-gone
glimpse of the sun. (11-15)

'Shrubbery' is one of a sequence of tree poems towards the end of *Of Mutability* where the influence of the *Metamorphoses* is most clearly felt. The imbrication of the self and the natural world deepens in 'Trasimeno Olive', where 'It's only human to think the olive / speaks, that there are mouths / singing, screaming, even, in the gashes' (3-5). Shapcott turns again to the reader in the urgently sensual 'Cypress':

Visit it in the dark. Cicadas
are inside your head as your hand
reaches towards bark: you feel
the latent heat first then the surface,
scabbed with lichen you can't see
but know from the fizz where touch
meets memory. Before all this,
the scent, which is anti-language
(only, as it drifts into your body
the words slip in, as well)... (1-10)

The dreamlike, liminal space of 'Cypress' evokes for me Doty's comments on the impossibility of writing about sex, and echoes the loss of language in the Mad Cow poems. As she draws the reader in with tiny, sensual details, Shapcott probes another paradox in these poems; the idea that scent (which we might understand as a metonym for nature, the natural world, extending to somatic experience) is 'anti-language' offers us a widening circle of enquiry - and yet 'the words slip in, as well'. This underlines the uncertain boundaries between self and world, and opens up further questions about the limits of artistic representation, especially when cataloguing female bodily experience.

A more formally experimental poem towards the end of *Of Mutability*, 'Myself Photographed' also toys with the boundaries of linguistic replication to explore defamiliarised experience. Shapcott takes the reader right inside the photograph, and

uses parentheses, arresting line breaks, and repetition in order to interrogate notions of dislocation, counterpointing each image with her unwritten version:

Perhaps it is an expression of surprise
that I am in the world at all, let alone
that this wrong turning resulted in an oak
(I want to say leaf, leaf); high grass (I want
to say hay tickle); my dodgy ankle (I want to
say friendly old pain); the warm tang
of saliva in my mouth (I want to say
charged tongue); my body cells
so new, fresh, and not disorderly at all
(I want to say Hope) and O the weather there
which was hot, so hot, so hot, so hot that day. (5-15)

Note how the epistrophic line-ends are manipulated: 'I want / I want to / I want to say'. Again and again, Shapcott enacts a paradox: she wields language with heft and directness, while reminding us that language is inadequate for the full portrayal of our embodied experience. The 'O the weather there' re-enacts the expression of surprise (think of a mouth open like an O), moving the reader towards the chanting, almost liturgical, final line. The repetition of 'I want' and the repeated 'so hot' build a feeling of yearning, but the poem also allows Shapcott to play with the boundaries of language, using deliberately 'flat' words, while simultaneously including her more poetic or lyrical alternative versions. This undercutting of certainties underpins Shapcott's work, making it particularly effective in evoking the liminal and inconsistent experience of sickness: the abstraction of desire versus the specificity of clinical parameters.

By accepting the patient's impotence and manipulating a defamiliarised, decentralised viewpoint, Shapcott permits the reader both a microscopic and wide-angle view of her subjects, often within the same piece of work: ultimately offering us an understanding of the transformative nature of illness, and a deeper exploration of the 'absolutely unique and infinitely shareable' (Burke 2421).

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate the correspondences and differences in the work of two contemporary poets as they explore the themes of sickness and mortality. If we can conceive of sickness as a crisis of agency, we can extend this to an understanding of it as a crisis of meaning or narrative: an interruption or diversion on routes through life. Post-diagnosis, the bifurcated life might best be exemplified through a disjunctive narrative as opposed to a conjunctive one. Doty and Shapcott both explore authoritative agency being hijacked through their irresolute discourse – Shapcott’s unsteady ground or surreal territory; Doty’s expansive, metamorphic navigations of loss – as they renegotiate a new sense of self. As we have seen, both poets’ unsettled colloquy is shored up by a loving attention to light, to liminality, and to the boundlessness of the unknowable.

Mark Doty’s explorations of ‘bearing witness’ to his partner’s suffering also act to chronicle the stories of the AIDS epidemic and, as Landau puts it, generate a ‘transformed space beyond brutality’ (Landau 194). Jo Shapcott’s ruminations on her own experience of sickness and mortality, whether evoking an Ovidian transformation, or speaking directly in the voice of the patient, also forge alternative narratives of the tentative steps towards recovery. Both poets veer into rhapsodic or celebratory territory in their articulations of illness, and they each engage with the concept of performance, placing value on ‘being seen’ (as in having an audience; translating pain into art) as well as ‘seeing’ (as in paying close attention, being appreciative of the seemingly mundane).

Investigating Doty and Shapcott’s shared thematic spaces allowed me to consider how the poetry of medicine can provide surprising forms of resistance: Shapcott’s Mad Cow poems, along with Doty’s ‘ferocity of the dying’ in *Atlantis*, and Doty’s delight in the ‘hysterical sublime’ (Jameson 359) were particularly fruitful in teasing out these complex relationships.

When interrogating consolation, it was necessary to be alive to the idea that Doty’s work is broadly elegiac, while acknowledging the contested definitions of elegy in contemporary poetry. I also examined the ways in which leaving a physical mark

behind serves Shapcott in her enlivening poetics of illness, where consolation so often appears as construction, contumacy or creativity.

Shapcott's self-acknowledged attempts to 'weave loops, twists and turns around binary categories' (*LSH*) formally enact poetry's capacity to unsettle and trouble boundaries. Doty's engagement with drag and performance offers similar insight, as he makes boundaries so fluid that concrete and abstract become one, perhaps best exemplified by 'Crêpe de Chine' - 'That's what I want from the city / to wear it. / That's what drag is: a city / to cover our nakedness...' (37-40).

Naturally, a thesis of this length is limited in scope. I think there is more work to be done on Shapcott's treatment of the female body with reference to physicality, madness and bodily functions, both in the Mad Cow poems and throughout her collection *Phrase Book*. Dowson and Entwistle highlight Cixous's claim that female desire (born of a 'mixture of difference and inequality') is best satisfied in the imaginative and political strategy of self-transformation: 'If there is a self proper to woman, paradoxically it is her capacity to deappropriate herself' (Dowson and Entwistle 233), which is a tempting route to explore further in light of Shapcott's comments about her desire to resist or reinvigorate binary categories. Reading Cixous's claim that 'This power to be errant is strength ... No matter how submissive and docile she may be in relation to the masculine order, she still remains the threatening possibility of savagery' (Cixous and Clement 91) raises tantalising questions about Shapcott's work from a feminist perspective. Other areas I was not able to develop more fully include the connection between Mark Doty, Keats and the sublime, especially in relation to Bennett's claims about Romanticism's essentially paradoxical constraints: for example, I was intrigued by Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol's assertion that 'in *Lamia*, Keats [is] ... narrating no mortal pursuit of conventional sublimity but rather a demigoddess's quest for *material* sublimity' (Tontiplaphol 48).

To return to the locus of this research, however, I want to repeat Nick Laird's quote from my introduction: 'poetry / is weather for the mind / not an umbrella' (Laird 63). Anatole Broyard's declaration that 'Inside every patient there's a poet trying to get out. For the sick man, distance lends enchantment to life' (Broyard 41) echoes Shapcott's claim that her illness left her 'reborn as someone slightly different ... living with a changed sensibility' (Shapcott, *Ambulance*), but neither Doty nor

Shapcott attempt to situate poetry as a protective shield, and it would be reductive to claim that either poet finds magic in the mundane due to their lived experience of illness. Doty and Shapcott's poetics of illness is more nuanced than that; more closely aligned, as I have argued, with Colm Tóibín's 'scheme which can accommodate this illness, however fitfully and sadly' (Tóibín 3).

Doty's poetics do not seek to make sense of sickness, the AIDS epidemic or his own personal experience of loss; Shapcott does not stake a claim on the narratives of chemotherapy and breast cancer. Rather, both poets surrender to uncertainties and mysteries in their attempts to 'accommodate illness'. Even as Doty writes about impending loss, half-light, liminal space, he does so with a deep attention that brings the beauty he finds into sharp relief. And as Shapcott explores her own embodied impotence, fear and uncertainty, the work is threaded with her urgent need to leave her mark. For both poets, the experience of illness and writing is immersive, transformative. In 'The Black Page' Shapcott implores the reader:

... Believe
in mourning and
a proper afterlife
which you will come
to understand once
you strip off, fall in
and swim in ink. (5-11)

My understanding of Doty and Shapcott's transformative work was deepened by considering it in the context of narrative medicine, which sits at the core of any critical medical humanities, privileging the patient's voice and attempting to bring the patient's first-hand, bodily experience back into the clinical encounter in an empathic manner. Though the principles of narrative medicine are more commonly used in a clinical setting, I have aimed to interweave their core tenets into my analysis: an attentiveness to elision, as well as what is overtly stated; an attempt to hold the big picture and the fine detail simultaneously; and in unpacking the complexities of these two poets' unique journeys through illness, I have questioned conceptual polarities.

Although this critical essay centres on poetic imagery and technique, I believe it has implications for the wider medical humanities. Analysing the poetry of sickness

can offer us insight into the means by which patient experience might be more deeply understood. In terms of clinical communication, Doty and Shapcott's poetics of illness, in its willingness to travel 'beyond the fixable' (*TSS*) foregrounds an important contradiction. It shows us illness as transformative (it *can* be a route towards liberation, new perspectives, a flourishing awareness of life's brevity) but it also demonstrates how that transformation is most often experienced as a frightening crisis: that which renders a life unrecognisable, and can diminish a patient until they feel 'razor small' ('Of Mutability' 5). Might it be useful for doctors-in-training to have a deeper awareness of the sensation of impotence and defamiliarisation found in these particular explorations of serious illness? Could practitioners giving test results benefit from reading the sense of diminution and agonising anticipation in Doty's 'Fog'?

... We're

the public health care worker's
nine o'clock appointment,

she is a phantom hand who forms
the letters of your name, and the word

that begins with *P*. (54-59)

The silencing and shrinking in 'Fog', with the lovers' future reduced to a line in the clinician's diary, leads me back to Craig Irvine's focus on 'a finer sense of the ordinary' when teaching medical students at Columbia University: 'How best to teach ethics to physicians-in-training? At least one answer to this question, I believe, lies in literature's power both to bring close and to distance, or more properly ... to bring close distance as such. My hope ... is that they might attend to a finer sense of the ordinary on the other side of silence' (Irvine 1). Medical diagnoses could be enriched if only patients had the tools to explain what they 'want to say' alongside what they do say; and medical students would benefit from being able to ask the questions that allow the patients' true experience to manifest. This in turn would perhaps render more productive a relationship that is necessarily built upon a power imbalance, with the patient ceding control to both her illness and her doctors.

This PhD is one of blurred boundaries: between sickness and health, hope and despair, criticism and poetry, analysis and praxis. I was, and am, interested in a form of research that is exploratory and organic, mirroring the openness of narrative medicine and its diagnostic approach: that is to say, questioning, probing, allowing scope for focus and depth while also being attuned to the larger, overarching questions. Working through my research, with perspectives from clinicians, patients, poets and literary critics clamouring for my attention, I kept coming back to this quote by Rilke:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. (Rilke 23)

Rilke tells us to ‘live everything’. Shapcott, in ‘Stargazer’, confesses her urge to ‘say everything, all / at once, to everyone...’ (20-21). Similarly, in ‘Retrievers in Translation’, Doty alludes to a ‘crowded world’ in the midst of his grief:

Loss concentrates the gaze
to a singular focus, but the crowded world
says, *Here, look here*, and yields a confusion
of silk particulars. (18-21)

Doty is in a process of negotiation with the sublime: after several collections’ worth of deconstructing the stories of illness, playing with notions of fluidity, he seems to have arrived at something that is not an answer, but a provisional conclusion: joy is a weighty, important aspect of life, and paying attention to the seemingly mundane may help us to seek it out. *Sweet Machine*’s final poem is ‘Visitation’, and its closing rhetorical question could be read as mildly amused, or knowing:

... heaviness
which is no burden to itself.
What did you think, that joy
is some slight thing? (61-64)

No matter how we choose to interpret these lines (I like their studied casualness, which is a hallmark of Doty's style), it seems Doty may have found the delicate balance between transience and transcendence. To keep questioning, and to keep seeking joy, is the only route through the maze of sickness.

Similarly, Shapcott's poems often prioritise physicality or immediate bodily response over intellectual reflection; in 'Border Cartography':

We're listening so hard
but the wind hereabouts
whips up its own
noisy version of the truth. (5-8)

These questioning, shifting poems, sharp with the tang of loss and threaded with the sweetness of simply being alive, resist straightforward conclusions. Doty explained that he thought of AIDS as 'an intensifier' (*HC2*), and, as previously mentioned, Shapcott spoke of her cancer remission as a kind of 'rebirth': 'You become aware that the body is going in one direction: towards disintegration. That's true for all of us, of course – but now it's at the front of my mind, and that means living with a changed sensibility' (Shapcott, *Ambulance*). In the way that narrative medicine seeks to query conceptual polarities, so Doty and Shapcott bridge the gap between the corporeal and the somatic, the personal and the social, the frail and the flourishing.

In the notes to *Atlantis*, Doty thanks not only Wally Roberts, but the people who 'helped to carry him during the last years of his life'. He follows this with a single line from Edna St Vincent Millay's *God's World*: 'O world, I cannot hold thee close enough.' Both Doty and Shapcott develop a poetics of illness situated at the interstices between pain and joy; and through paying attention to both, they navigate illness and loss by staking out artistic space that is transformative and ultimately redemptive. This is space that I, as a critic and a practitioner, have found a challenging yet profoundly generative place to spend the last three years.

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