



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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Poetry submission:

Section A: *The axe of the house*

Section B: 'Entangled in biographical circumstances'

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at the University of Edinburgh

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I hereby declare that this thesis and the poems contained herein were composed and originated entirely by myself, in the Department of English Literature at The University of Edinburgh.

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Abstract

The axe of the house is a collection of poetry written and collated over three and a half years. The vast majority of the poems are about women: these are women's voices usually recounting specifically female experiences. Many of these female poems were informed by the confessional mode, as appropriated and transmuted by the contemporary women writers I read and studied. The collection begins with confessions of my own in poems like "Anne Askew's ashes" and "Jean," and then moves on to include love poems like "Prayer" and "Gulls," which are also at least partially autobiographical.

Also confessional, but not autobiographical, are the poems at the centre of this collection. These are poems in which women from various different walks of life speak about their inner lives. Some of these women, like the speakers of "Hate mail" and "Silver Ghost," are my own creation, while others, like "Mrs Rochester," are borrowed from elsewhere. These poems examine intimate relationships from various angles: marriages, one night stands and vicious rivalries are all explored via a first person narrative. Body image is also a common theme. There are a few poems which are more overtly political, delivering feminist messages about the ways patriarchal society portrays and often ostracises women. "Harpies," for example, looks at women who are seen to have no sexual worth, while "The picture in your mind when you speak of whores" concerns women whose only perceived worth is sexual, dismissing the various marginalising stereotypes that exist around sex workers.

The collection moves farthest away from its examination of the female experience in the poems towards the end. However, these poems form a travelogue in which privilege of various kinds is examined and critiqued. Poems like "Witch" and "Belongings" are still concerned with the lives of women, while "Big heat" uses a female narrator to examine the more recognised privileges of wealth and mobility. These ideas recur in poems like "Barcelona diptych" and "Highway: Skagit County, WA," but the poems that round off the collection are also attempts to capture a sense of place and space. Throughout this work, there are poems that are particularly interested in liminal space: several of the poems in the collection, including "Poltergeistrix" and "The women" look at the hours and days immediately after death. The space between travel destinations is also liminal, and these final poems attempt to make sense of it – finally succeeding with "Hydra," which delivers a sense of acceptance and advocates living 'in the moment'.

The critical section, “Entangled in biographical circumstances,” looks afresh at the female confessional poem, most commonly associated with Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich. With reference to the works of these literary foremothers, I focus on the ways in which a new generation of women poets has been inspired to adopt this mode. As well as noting the often hostile response of male critics to confessional work by female writers, I examine the very different ways in which Sharon Olds, Sapphire and Liz Lochhead work in the confessional tradition to produce poetry that speaks candidly about the inner lives of women. I also discuss the ways in which the work of these three poets has influenced and shaped my own poetry.

Section A:

The axe of the house

Anne Askew's ashes

All day, the stove has sulked and spat, sucking hard
on knuckle-bones of coal. I shed my coat and kneel to sift the ash
between the grate's iron teeth – restack the fire-bricks,
sweep and scrape – to reinflate this blackened lung.

When I am done, my wrists are rigor-mortis grey
and ringed with soot like rope-burns, shackles,
marks of prayer. In the backyard's bitter air,
the ash-pan stutters, spills itself a little in the wind.

I make it to the bin and tilt the pan,
release a ghoul of smut and dust that dirls and hangs there
after I am gone. A blazing witch, as silent as the earth –
you are the ghost in every fire I birth.

My father's cars

after 'Wheels' by Jim Daniels

My father keeps his photographs
in a cake-tin labelled *Cars*:

on my grandparents' front drive at twenty
with his Hillman Hunter in racing green
smiling

in a violent orange Bond Bug blindfolded
his mate Roy navigating
six-two and bent nearly double
smiling

parked in a Lake District lane
with my mother
and the beige Vauxhall Viva with the dodgy suspension
smiling

in front of Cartmel Priory Shop
with the yellow Triumph Dolomite
my grandmother gave him
smiling

in the snow under trees with my uncle David
and my uncle David's grey
short wheelbase Land Rover
smiling

in front of his first house
with his brown Mini Clubman van
and my mother's brown Mini Cooper
and my mother
smiling

bringing me home three days old
in the front seat of the red Mark I Ford Escort
smiling

dandling my sister on the slick turquoise bonnet
of the Vauxhall Cavalier
smiling

with the navy blue Astra sport hatchback
with the Citroen BX he drove 500 miles
with no oil in it
by accident

with his red Fiat Panda
and my mother's blue Fiat Panda
that my sister and I refused
to ride home from school in

with the secondhand Punto that dented
if you so much as looked at it
with my first boyfriend's Micra
with my second boyfriend's Nova

with the black Frontera 4x4
and that bloody caravan
that turned out to be stolen

(with their names written on the back of each picture
in pencil like names of children
Lurch, Pru, Henry, Penelope,
Evadne, Myrtle, Genevieve, Sam)

smiling.

Visiting Nannie Gray

We go on Sundays to make her tea.
I've known her years, but every week
we're introduced. She thrums my name's soft hiss
in her teeth, tells you she's sure
you and I are for keeps.

We bite our lips as she slams round the house,
chitters for a long-dead cat, and
worried he's missing, puts out fish.
She never sits –

fluttering like a moth at the nets,
she asks you where we've tied the horse
and trap, while the red Ford Escort smarts in the drive
like a wound.

And would I like to see her frocks?
And every week I say I would.

She spreads them on the bed like relics,
recites the names of seamstresses, department stores.
There's always one whose floral print
she bunches in her fist – flimsy anchor to the past –
says without flinching, *bury me in this*.

And that's the moment every week,
the heart-stuck lurch as she realises what she is,
for just a breath. Then like a child, afraid and angry,
she reaches for me, whispers *I'm sorry*.
I'm sorry.

Driving in snow

We saw it swallow the hill first.
The sky split and clicked
like a cooling flashbulb,
fizzed with the first flakes,
snorted up whole lines of trees.

It was quick. Even as the starter-motor fired,
the valley was filling itself
like a bathtub, greedy. We skidded
at the hill-gate and slid
a good ten feet – my sister in the back seat
chanting *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I eased us out without wheelspin
or incident – took off my boots
and socks to coax the pedals,
greasy and cold. I had fifty six horsepower
and a bald tyre I knew
I should have had seen to.

The road was like wadding.
We were the only warm bodies for miles.

Natural resources

A doorway in Niddry Street on a wetslick night;
my red satin dressing gown; a grandfather
who used to race Aston Martins; this room;
half a pack of black clove cigarettes;
long legs; *Led Zeppelin II* on vinyl;

the secret Armstrong recipe
for gingerbread; eight pairs of shoes;
my bizarre fear of hairdressers; Larkin;
late-night distant planes beyond the house;
notebooks; a tiny corner of Canada;

sisterhood; typewriters on the bed
like cats; the word phantasm; tie-dye;
my secret fear of the dark; cups of tea;
five foot eleven in stocking feet; earrings;
loose change in bars; chapped lips.

I'm holding my hands out to offer you this.
I'm out of breath to my bootstraps with yelling.
Here I am.
For goodness sake take me.

Jean

after Adrienne Rich

The day I woke up a woman
we became enemies

Stupid as a fairy tale

the snicker
of the mirror telling the aunt
her niece

this fat thirteen year old
anaemic
still afraid of the dark

was a threat

So for years the sweet
low-hanging blooms of hate

the roots looped deep
grown strong

obscured the fight
we should have had
the thrashing of the plant
across the stones

Don't you know I know you
sister
eldest
one who should have been a boy
who had so much to do
look out for the small ones

work hard
work harder
get into the grammar school
be good
be quiet
find a man who'll stay
a house
but not just any
don't live on Hallgarth
have a boy
trust us
don't trust the bank
don't trust a childless woman
stay away from travelling people
vote Liberal Democrat
never argue never
get too clever

Don't we know each other by now
aren't we sisters
of the same tribe

Women of the north
built large
built to lean into the barrage
of the world and give
just enough

like the timbers of a ship

as it takes
and takes
and takes

My grandmother's logic

after 'Symposium' by Paul Muldoon

It'll be a cold day in Hell
when the cows come home,
so don't put all your eggs
into the fire.

A stitch in time saves
Dick's hatband;
fine words will butter
a nine-bob note, and
a sow's ear
keeps the wolf from the door.

One swallow
spoils the barrel.
A bad workman
is a friend indeed.
There's a black sheep in every
bag of washing.
Dogs in the same street
hang themselves.

You know, Rome was not built
in a handbasket –
you've been brought up in the bottle and seen nothing but
blood and stomach pills.
There's no smoke without
spilled milk –
the devil makes
another man's poison.

Money doesn't grow

for idle hands.

You can lead a horse to water, but

it never boils.

I'll give you a penny for your

can of worms.

A bird in the hand is worth

a good hiding.

A list of things

A list of things you live among:
the odd socks and the Pringles tubes,
old coffee cups undead with scum,
dust thick as moss.

Curtains hanging slightly off;
a shrug of fading crimson flowers
that fold and clot like lovely cunts.
The sloppy shock of unearthed tupperware.

Tissues slowly unballing their fists,
a snicker of bills, the desk I itch
to take a match to. Hangdog shoes,
the floorboards' trademark spooky creak.

In the big, wonky elbow of the bed
you blush and sulk, apologise.
Around us, ecosystems thrive:
the room is a hoarse and rustling song.

We lie like a pair of dirty spoons
and I think out this poem
in time with your breath:
I am part of the stuff

you've accrued and this
is a list of things I love about you.

Prayer

I almost can't
help it.
Sometimes
it just comes
fizzing
up through me –
the white noise
of lightning
rattling the radio tower –
the need to stand
in a silent room
a mile away
from logic
or earshot
and just
say
thank you.

Or sorry.
Or help me out
here. Or
I am a seed-blown
cinder path
behind a locked gate I am
so lonely.
Or no,
no more now
please,
enough.

Sometimes,
the big, slick bug
of a plane
in the sky
is just
an omen.
Sometimes
I'm just scared
to the teeth
that every single heart
I love
will someday die.

Including yours –
especially yours –
you,
who'd smile,
look me square
in the eye,
tell me this
is all one
big
fat
comforting
elaborate
lie.

Gulls

You woke me
in the thick of half past three,
its poured pitch hush interrupted
by something that shot you bolt upright –
cab at the kerb, a seagull's dirty laugh –
the dying night slipping
its mischievous tongue in your ear.

The first I heard
was the breath sawing hot and loud
through your chest like the purr
of a big, angry cat.
Coming round frightened and slow
as a coma patient, at first
I worried that something was wrong.

Then your mouth
found my flesh and stuck
and stung like a brand,
and I understood. So we both
had work first thing in the morning.
So your best friend lay wrapped
in thistledown sleep in the room next door.

In that darkness,
nothing was certain anymore.
Nothing but the hot, white arcs
of your hands, and your cries
which seemed so high and fine,
so urgent and strangely far away
like the gulls outside in the dawn.

The impossible journey

My grandmothers walked through fire
and were reduced to teasetts, wedding dresses, teeth.

My godfather went in hat and tie
and shoeshine, like this were a dance.

My great aunt billowed in, spilling thistledown.

My ancestors ran through, plaid and woad
in barefoot hundreds, man and boy.

My great uncle went in pieces:
pair of boots, a mess can, shrapnel, rot.

A clutch of boys fell through my mother's hands
like seeds that never grew.

My grandfather flatly declares he will not go.

One great grandmother came with palms upturned
and red and striped like weave.

The other liked the place, but didn't stay –
she still lives here as scent and sigh and shift.

The girl I knew from school band
knocked, and wiped her feet.

When I set off, they'll come down to the dock
with lamps, and wave me in.

The axe of the house

i. *Hacksaw and burn*

The woman who died in this house
went deaf towards the end. Your new neighbour
Mary, clipped in a pinny and pink gloves
like a dinner lady, tells you this
over the fence. The woman's name was June,
you learn. Her smell is on everything:
lavender, talc, menthol and something medical
behind it all. You strip her sixties paper,
carve the carpets up like pie with Stanley knives
then rip them out, tacks flying. She's still
here, her bobby pins wedged in the skirting.
You're learning to do it all gingerly,
feeling her eyes on your neck as you sledgehammer,
hacksaw and burn. You start saying *sorry*
aloud, splitting floorboards, hauling down
ancient steel blinds that unravel and clatter
like train-wires or hail. But you know
she can't hear you.
She can't hear a goddamn thing.

ii. *In the dream*

The room is finished.

The dust sheets, pails

of plaster like grey dough,

the toolbox with its bradawl,

spanner, rasp, the lethal

ladder, everything is gone.

You put one palm on a wall

that is cool and smooth.

The room is custard yellow

filled with sun and smells

like fresh banana bread.

Inside, there's only a folding stool

and June, folded down onto it.

Her hair's been done.

She has on white, seamed gloves,

a string of beads like tiny,

iridescent eyes. She says

nothing, though you wait a long time.

Outside, a swift screams low

across the window. Mary's Hoover

bothers the adjoining wall

like a big fly. You forget

where you are. Whose house is this?

Who was it invited you in?

iii. *Deafening*

The open sash throws a kite of late sun
on the boards. Outside,
the fruitless raspberry frisks the wall,
a mother calls a child's name once
across the yards. The next street's
big trees count the fivers of their leaves
in the hot wind. A blackbird in the garden
sings his namesake's famous Beatles song.

The fridge clicking on, or the clatter
of clapboard shifting in the skip
is enough to scare you half to death.
To think, you lived just weeks ago above the bar:
the late-night chip shop's neon lit your kitchen
fit to read by until 3am when half the town
came yelling out like gulls into the night-
bus layover chug of your street.

Here, the quiet lies thick and neat
as turf. A siren's painful violin comes drifting
over pampas grass and garage roofs
from miles away. Decades of sleeping through
last call and drunksong, cabs slammed shut
like books, and now you're woken
by the vocal solo of an owl you're certain
can't be real, but is; by foxclaws on the path.

You'll live. You think you'll even come
to love it, though you joke *it's deafening*.

iv. *Mary tells you about the break-in*

They got in with one kick – if you look,
you can still see the boot-mark,
see where the bolt broke – oldest
trick in the book. She liked the house
dark, the rollers down over the nets,
so no one suspected. They left
through the front door like something
official. I heard one of them whistling,
and came from the kitchen to look,
you know we all curtain-twitch
round here, you'll do it too. It was noon,
and the wireless was on and the washer
no doubt swishing away, *you* know.
I thought they were builders,
or gas men – they dressed just the same.
I gave a description of course but
they could have been anyone,
they didn't look like that type.
They took a bit, a bagful, all valuable:
jewellery, stuff they could carry.
Her pin money, a really bonny
silver dish I liked. It wrecked her,
getting back from the day centre
and finding that.
If only I'd known. But I didn't
hear a thing, I swear. Only the whistle,
and the bag, the way it jingled.

v. *Housewarming*

You didn't do any of it.

Forgot to bury silver at the threshold.

Forgot a new broom for a new home.

Forgot the salt for long life.

Forgot to bang the pots and shine a light
to frighten old ghosts.

You couldn't bring coals
from the given-up hearth,
though you picture yourself,
absurd at the roadside,
bearing their chack-chack
and spark back in a bucket:

your own crap jack o' lantern.

Your new key hot
from the devil's pocket.

vi. *The axe*

You've bought an axe.
It's buried erect and shining,
L of light, in the heart
of the shed. The wind
eekes through the timbers.
You think the shed knows
the reason for the axe.

The blackbird sits on the ridge
of the hip roof. The leaves
of the big trees curl
like brown hands
in your wasted borders.
The skip is taken on a truck.
Autumn rattles the empty canes.

You wonder how many years
you will lie in the dark
like the axe of this house,
its walls turning their backs.
The owl will drop out
of the night, the fox starve
and open like a bloom.

The white stamens of their bones
on the track. The blackbird long
gone. How many years until
you no longer hear his song?

Poltergeistrix

First, she watches her lover's grief
with tasty horror. When he lies
face down and foghorns out her name,
she places her weightlessness along him,
sinks her fist into his chest
and rummages, touching the shuddering lungs
in turn, the heart chugging down
its jello-shots of blood.

She loves that she is presence
without mass: her pass says
access all areas and she does,
sampling all the things he'd not
be seen dead doing. Within a week,
she learns he likes his porn vanilla,
blonde and young; that when he comes
alone he wears a different face.

But without her, he's thuddingly dull.
After a month she's done
going bump in the night, writing
love notes in his minging human dust.
The pizza cartons piling up,
mugs scumming green and grey
til he runs out and buys a slub
of plastic party cups, the final straw.

It's been weeks now, but he's still
so lousy with the snot and tears
and stench of death, it's gross.
I want to see other ghosts, she says,
it's over – but he doesn't even flinch.

She spends a final night, fingering
things she'll miss: gilt picture frames,
a silver brooch, the cat. Not him.

By dawn, she's gone. Now being dead
is fun: she melts through buildings floor by floor
the way a good knife butchers wedding cake.
But the more she poltergeists around, the less
she's human: soon she's gawping through
their picture windows like this city is a massive,
boring zoo. They're all the same.
Dysfunctional, but dull as rust.

She gives up: finds a crypt whose lock is good.
There'll be no piss-stink, no kids crawling in
to smoke and fuck, just leaf mould
and the local dead. She's heard you get
a dying wish, and saved hers up,
but now she speaks it to the hunkered stumps,
the graveyard and its scary sky. *Make sure
he never finds me. Better: never let him die.*

Onion

after Carol Ann Duffy's "Valentine"

This year, it's personal: I'm giving you
the dirtiest of Valentines. This:
a bulge of hard and sapling flesh
unsheathing from its grotesque
loop of hair. It crackles
as you tear away its homespun shirt
and start a sweet undressing –
dance of a thousand foreskins,
luminous and slick. Unzip it
with your grinning blade and see it
spill apart to offer you
the tarnished earring-hoops of strippers,
pregnant chavs in chip shop queues.
I'm carving up this clutch
of pawnshop jewels so you can glitter
filthily. I'm slipping you this sticky fist
to see you spent
and breathless with delicious tears.
I'll cross your palm with slivers
of my gift so you can wear
the guilty stink of its secretions
on your fingertips long afterwards,
perhaps for days. I've cut its heart out,
held it in my teeth. I'll leave you
with its tongue still in your mouth.

High school

Better than the fractions like weird pictograms,
better than Othello's major themes, the queens
and kings of Scotland down the years,
titration, verbs in conjugation tables
you can still recite – the sound let out
before the thought's complete – *Je suis*.
Tu est. Il est. Elle est. What you learned best
was the fact of your disgustingness.

How vile you were. Your every flaw:
the monstrous, speckled thighs that brimmed
from gym shorts, ringed with red elastic welts
and howled down in the changing rooms.
The shoes: too flat, too high
you slattern, too gum-soled and scuffed,
or not enough. The hairstyle that your Mum
still cut; your Mum; the blush of rage

or shame that spread routinely up
your neck. Your ugly neck. Your neck,
never adorned with friendship beads or later,
hickies. Your score of these, or of love-notes
passed to you in class, slow-dances, gropings,
fucks – all zero. That score kept to be broadcast
in the midst of something good, the way
a dying rock-star breaks the evening news.

It's women who learn first the throw that hurts,
the way to really wound your fellow girl,
the soft parts where it doesn't show
and cannot heal. How did these blue-eyed whippets
learn so much of power and spite in years
you'd spent just grooming dolls and waiting,
fanning gravel out behind your bike's
bald, beaded, tinkling wheels?

The worst thing: they believed it all,
the tiny hierarchies built and smashed
at rum-and-cola parties you were never party to.
They thought that life would always hold
the door for them, or for their looks, their smart
high-kicks – did it matter which? – and you'd always be
some chubby joke. You believed it too.
The softest part of you believes it now.

Mrs Rochester

I heard her scuttling in the thatch first,
crazy as a rat's nest: the servants talked.
I caught her scent once, heat and sweat
and cinnamon, like a good cake. It didn't take long
to work it out – he had a woman up there,
contraband mistress stuffed in the eaves.
She sang in the night – filthy sea shanties
that soured my dreams – hung huge and black
in the dark above my virgin room.

One night she doused his bed and set him alight
while he slept – they must have fought. I woke him
to thwart her, even hauled the blackened sheets
outside myself, her hatred's soot collecting in my skin.
Then it was war. She smeared a hex of dirty blood
above my door; harlot angel, I nailed her in
and prayed that week in church that she would starve.

It had to end. She bribed a maid, escaped
and while I danced below in his conniving arms,
she slashed my dresses into rags. I heard them laugh
as I packed up, picked his safe,
breathed that house's big dry tinder smell
one final time. This was the standard treatment
for a witch. Let it be known
it was me who struck the match.

The banker

He had the easy grin of a man
who's ruined lives, but sleeps like death.
He emptied out his pockets like an offering of guilt.

He travelled light. A keyless car,
no coins or trinkets – the slick pink tongue
of a single fifty hinged in his elegant fist.

His wallet was crisp, black,
flat as a coaster – a whispering ribcage
stiffened with platinum and gold.

We split the check clean but, insistent,
he tipped like a pimp. His kiss
was a hard, grey nicotine thrill.

I thought of the sums that had passed
through his hands in a lifetime spent counting,
the abacus beads of his fingertips hot in my mouth.

Before him, I balanced.
That night, I blew a fortune
and was spent.

Hate mail

I'd told her she was wrong about something.

She was. A big girl, full of close-cropped temper, and all because poetry itched in her blood. Like spite – like a sapling elbowing up through the woods – she'd found something she was good at, put her weight against it and shoved.

A smarter woman might have seen that rage coming, but I was stupid with intent. She split me in two: not a calm evening, not a quiet thought for weeks. This cruel, one-sided feud. She was definitely testing my strength, her endless letter full of questions – it ran over many pages. I was frightened, her malice was surprising. Darkness: this was the place I came to, turning over and over in the night. As I reached out, I hoped we could jigsaw together a peace. I got silence.

I hoped we could jigsaw together a peace. I got silence over and over in the night as I reached out, surprising darkness. This was the place I came to, turning over many pages. I was frightened – her malice was testing my strength, her endless letter full of questions. It ran for weeks, this cruel, one-sided feud. She was definitely not a calm evening, not a quiet thought, but I was. Stupid with intent, she split me in two. A smarter woman might have seen that rage coming, put her weight against it and shoved. She'd found something she was good at, like a sapling elbowing up through the woods. Poetry itched in her blood like spite – she was a big girl, full of close-cropped temper. And all because I'd told her she was wrong about something.

Harpies

They are voluminous with scowls.
Bitter fat girls no one ever asked
to the prom, they shiver nightly
in single beds, proving like bread
until they are flour-soft,
pocked with salt, kneaded to the likeness
of their mothers.

These are the hapless,
untipped waitresses of the western world,
the reliable babysitters.

These are the gorgeous unwanted:
their uncharted galaxies of stretchmarks,
their deep green longing too saline
to be drunk.

Where are the men they were promised
would turn up to love them?
The whole of the past is shrunk to a lie
they hold in their mouths like a sour brown coin.
Remembering new Barbies: their crackling hair,
sad eyes. Their waists like impossible slivers,
terrible threats.

Pica

I'd had a dream. You know the way dreams
shake you up sometimes? Got up in the dark
and under the fridge's strip-lit yawn
I fiddled the rind off the cheese, thinking of nothing.
Shredded it slowly –a squeak in my teeth –
and swallowed, felt an eerie kind of calm.

It went on from there. I worried I was pregnant,
craving brick-dust in the cold back yard, dabbing spats of talc
on my yellowing tongue. But it wasn't my womb
that turned and swelled like sickmaking, ordinary bread.
I spurned that stuff first: potatoes and meat
like gobs of sand in my gut.

I did do my best to stick to food: tried weird stuff,
chillies, spiced everything to death. I just threw it up
or couldn't sleep – wound up in the garden at 3am
smearing my pale face with fistfuls of soil.
I shrank to the width of a six-year-old girl,
falling through skirt after skirt like I'd always wanted.

You could get here too. I know you've been near this place,
teethmarks in your biro lid, your child-self licking pennies,
sucking stones. Don't you ever look at the earth after rain
and want to take in its sucking coffee mulch?
Don't you sometimes love this world so much
that – just for a second – you could swallow it up?

The women

One by one we get the dreadful midnight call.
Bolt upright in our beds at the phone's first ring,
we all know news that comes this late
cannot be good. On padded feet each of us
packs a single bag and leaves no note.
We drive from the scattered outposts of this land
in dressing gowns, feral with grief.

We each bear gifts – the contentious brooch
that once split twin from twin; the yellow cheesedish,
lost in time but known in legend – all are here.
Now he is gone, these things are cheap.
Piled on the sideboard they are strip-lit trinkets
we do not recognise. To think:
some of us have not spoken to each other in years.

Now we are mute with shame and loss.
We crowd this house like soldiers under shellfire,
afraid to speak of all the things we've done.
Now he is gone. Now he is gone.
Our lives are changed and frightening in the grip
of this new dawn. We know the future
is a world that's thick and dark with pain,
and if there is a road across, we do not know it.

Mothership

I'm sealed like a threat
in the envelope of a well-made
hotel bed, while the nets
hitch up each other's skirts
for passing trucks.

Outside, the pulled-up chug
of traffic lights; a late-night bus's
laboured sackcloth wheeze.

A final spangling bar
of some unpractised karaoke belter.

Blokes. The slam of cabs
and small change spattered
onto paving slabs like hail.

I can hear the banks of daffodils
asleep like clicking light-bulbs,
a lick of river fog along the slates.

Beyond: a freight train's gap-toothed lilt
of boxcars boxcars boxcars in the cut.

The last of winter striking out
with boots and stick to die
under the knowing stars.

A pink dawn spilt like paint
up at the barn. A gritty wind.

The year's first wasp fizzing awake.

And way off, if I pin my breath
into my throat, there's also
you. I'm so far out of range
it's sick and threadbare,
but I pick you up.
The ping of your pale beacon
says you're still alive
under the Spring night's clammy palm.

Beyond the land's dark shoulder,
and the city's thick refrigerator hum.

The Diet

My body is an opened can of female sin.
Inside my skull – its veil of scalp
the only skin that ever fit –
are the hundred-and-one diets of my mother.
Most are deemed unsafe by doctors now:
raw cabbage, grapefruit and eggs and nothing else,
the end of eating. Their names are a promise –
purge and *cleanse* – they suggest absolution,
but contain too many exclamation marks.

Hunger rings me like a gong. My tongue
is thick with words I cannot eat:
fat, carbs, salt – a staccato prayer of shame.
I see a rounded girl in the street
and want to ask, *are you there, too?*,
though I know she is. That terrible place:
eating your daughter's birthday cake
in the dark, with your hands –
huge raccoon, masked and starving,
picking the bits of burned meat from the bin.

My upper arms are flightless wings –
a slap and heft of ugly, useless flesh.
I'll try anything once. I heard that pageant queens
thwart the fork by tying up their fingers –
now my hands are stopped verbs, velociraptor claws.
But still they try to grasp at food, to own it:
the eggshell of a wineglass, gobs of jam,
the frenzied crack and tear of homemade bread.

Spoon out enough of my sour pulp, and you'll find
the cause: louder than reason but skinless,
as small as a fist. My stomach, under its lattice-work roof
of stretchmark scars, self-harm in slow-motion.
This is motherhood – endlessly feeding this creature
that churns and howls and will not quiet.
I want to prize it out like a peach-pit,
staple it down and silence its thrum –
but its sister, my big sad ampersand heart,
binds us. Keeps on, and on, and on.

The blues

Baby, there's something wrong with me / that I can't see – Aimee Mann

There are many of us: we're among you
all the time, blinking awake on the early
commuter bus, picking up the call you make
to pay a bill or query a mistake or yell,
or all of these. We're standing battered
in the street's unholy clang under a Golf Sale signboard
every day. We're teaching basic sex-ed
to your blushing sons. You cannot see
the difference, and we number millions:
ordering a sandwich right behind you in the deli queue,
peeling off the side road from a dead stop
into your rear-view. The change you ring
the tip jar with pays for the clock-off smoke
we're blowing out into the bar's rain-smattered yard.

So what, then, marks the shift in us, and not in you?
What kink unravels differently in our brains'
loose and milky spill? It must be something miniscule:
we laugh, too; fight, too; eat our guilty
Chinese food straight from the box and watch
the TV shows we know we shouldn't love.
We love, and just as stupidly: slinging pebbles
up at someone's unlit, shuttered sash
or sobbing in the strip club's only booth.
Sometimes, we're a theatre on fire, high and bright,
so jubilant we could draw crowds, and sometimes
we are tiny, cold and desolate as stars.

You know this. You've been these things, too.
You think you've got the plethora of human needs
and quirks and fears: the weird itch
to swan-dive off the swing-bridge though you know
you'd shatter like a plate; the odd, off-hand,
totemic act to bring you luck. Well, lucky you –
you lack whatever twist this is. This thing
that makes us take that final, lethal,
floral slug of gin; thing that calls in sick for weeks
and fingers strings of grease into our hair.
The d word: key that double-locks the door, flicks off
the light; a room you've never seen,
the curtains drawn, where no one ever calls for help,
so no one comes.

Found poem

from an index of first lines

I am describing to you on the phone.

I am twenty four.

I buried my father in the sky.

I came at night to the dark house.

I can't get him out of my mind.

I decided to do it free.

I did it. I killed my mother tongue.

I found my father face down.

I hadn't met his kind before.

I only did it for a laugh.

I think at some point I looked at my father.

I thought of other significant hearts.

I was not allowed to live my life.

In my beginning is my end.

The picture in your mind when you speak of whores

If it contains a backstreet, nasty alleyway
you wouldn't let your daughter near,
a scum of orange light across the roof
of one cheap, solitary car, then tear it up.
If the focus is on fishnet stockings
pulled with holes, big Os of gooseflesh,
ladders dragging high into the tatty garter belt,
then tear it up. And tear up too the shiny,
slimy, spike-heeled thigh-highs last seen on Cher
in 1986, and then those sci-fi Perspex platforms
stocked by the more vanilla fetish shops.
Tear down the smutty clubs set up by pimps
with purple feathered hats, the upstairs rooms
with torn red lampshades, raided nightly
by police. Tear up the dodgy sepia of gentlemen's clubs.
Tear up the Playboy Mansion, trim and gilt
of huge and spotless yachts cruising the Med,
exclusive hundred thousand dollar nights you read
an exposé about. But equally, tear up the shipping crates
on fishy docks, vans passing borders in the dark,
the track marks and the crack pipe, dumpsters,
bastards, abortions, catfights. Rip up the price
you heard, all those statistics howled in weekend
magazines, what your mate's mate did in Faliraki
on his stag, the tales of fallen high school track stars,
former beauty queens. For godssakes tear up Julia Roberts,
Richard Gere; and Cleopatra, Mata Hari, Elliott Spitzer,
Mary Magdalene – tear them up, too.
Now speak of whores. Stand in these tatters
of trash and tell these women one thing –
anything – they don't already know.

Silver Ghost

It died in the yard but haunted our kitchen
for years, called in from the Pennine frost
like a beaten dog: his precious ghost.

Five headlamps – for he'd spares enough
to fit a fleet – lined up like pickled eyes
that wept their rust into the washing up,
cake tins live with cogs and screws.

He'd stacked its shiny doors and flanks
behind the coal shed, elegant in tarp,
but the chassis sulked in the yard
like a giant mantrap, warping,
browned with age. I'd swear
it was spiteful, lacing our teacups
with the dirty sting of engine oil.

I watched my mother thin and drift
like smoke, and knew that she
was also broken down.

Her marriage was a ring of useless keys
whose lights and dials and gleaming roar
had raced off down the years and left her
breathless in the silent pits.

Her house: a wheelnut carburettor
battleground, gearsticks sharp
and wakeful in the dresser drawers.
Some nights I'd seize awake in fear,
not knowing why – and outside,
somewhere in the dark,
a starter-motor's strangled cry.

Minor threat

Before he leaves the office, piles
the backseat of his tired car with bags
of food that can be softened up –
eggs, potatoes, cheap white bread –
he threatens a woman.

Before he makes the heavy drive,
unloads, unlocks the door and calls out
so as not to scare his sleeping wife,
he waits until the other staff have left.

He puts one splayed-out palm down
hard against her desk, his smallish body
braced to make it square the way
he's read you ought to do
when facing down wild animals.

He's thinking of his wife, the bed.
The crisp sheet taut across her dreadful ribs.
The hoists and wheels and tubes, their smell.
Her thin white arms like knots of kitchen twine.

He's tasting anger's smoke-and-pepper tang.
The woman types too fast, her strange hair
tangles into nests she doesn't tease
away. She's tall and young. Something
is wrong with her: his job to find it out.

I've been watching you, he says
and shows his teeth, so later he can say
it was a smile mistaken. That seems enough
for now. He drives out through the low hills.

The house is cold. He jimmys every window,
singing adrenaline. With knife and fire
he creates soup, he is a man again. He says
his day was fine, the usual, and lifts
the spoon he's blown cool to her parted lips.

The western night

Shove your resplendent sunsets. In these parts, the comedown's fast:
splashdown on the Pacific's greedy, treachy tongue to curdle everything.
I've come to unpick the stitching of another day you doubtless wasted,
waistcoat pockets lined with tricky knives for cellblock shivs
and unpremeditated alleyways.

And every kid from fourteen down knows I've got horrors:
wardrobe zombies, anacondas loosed from pet stores, psychopaths.
Seems I'm the first mate of pushers and rapists like it's in my nature,
and yes, it's true – I'm in the barroom and the car park and the lonely road
with hands in pockets, quietly witnessing it all. And if you think I ever leave
you're wrong. All day I'm underneath the floor, a guilty stink
or in the attic thinking up unnerving sounds to play back later. I'll wake you
sweating or shouting or wishing you got that dog or learned to fire your uncle's gun.

But what's a dog or gun when I've got wolves and bears, the KGB,
late night TV, vampires, nightmares?

I'll always raise the bet until the world is broke and naturally

I'll show the house I have a royal flush of spades. Don't ask to see
what's up my sleeve – besides, you know. You name it,

I already made it with the vivid pink Meccano of your race's collective imagination.

Hello, I'm your personal wire-tapper, extreme body modifier, amateur pyrotech and by the way

I've gone to the effort of deadening the battery in your smoke detector.

Seek me out, let's have a self-destructive drink sometime.

Inside the perfect void behind a neon billboard you can find my footprints in the dirt.

Or look to the shuddering skyline where I hang my coat.

Gunsmith

You work like a sewing machine, clatter
and dazzle. When you're done,
you look down, find you've formed
a lethal *L*, an elbow of metal,
flat and black. *Glock*.

This is what they want these days
you hear – a piece that's essentially
a penis extension, deadly erect
in the cleft of a waistband,
no holster and no secrecy.

These days they call a Walther PPK
'a woman's gun.'

You try not to think of all the things
that have been done with them,
your blunt black-market goods.

For each frustrated shipping clerk
who blows a clip or ten
for fun at gun clubs
every mindless week or two, you know
there are a thousand men
who keep the cold hard kiss of your machines
against a stretch of pulsing thigh
because each one's a talisman
that makes them large and unafraid.

You know these men – no,
boys – have never learned
to stand correct with feet apart
at shoulder-width, to tame the kick
the shot serves up
and hold that bolt of power
fast between their hands, cupped knowingly.

You've seen the way a gun like this

is all too often opened
like a heinous flower of steel
from arm's length, side-on, like
it had no heft at all.
You've known a gun like this
discharged with whip-crack aftermath
enough to break the shooter's wrist.
But most of all you do not think
about the places bullets go
after they're loosed from alleyways
or living rooms or nightclub queues
to roam the night.
You try to think of shots
as incidental coughs of noise and sparks
out of the cool and blameless throats
you helped to birth.
You try to speak of self-defence
and sports and rights
and not of breastbones jawed apart
or lungs undone like purple wool
or screams. You take it in your hands –
its innocence and light, so clean –
this newest one. You fill its gut
with blanks and fire until
your breath is short and you are sick
and fizzy with adrenaline.
You know exactly why
they do the things they do,
these boys. You're in love with it yourself,
this thing you built.
This thing no one can destroy.

Landscape speaks of poets.

a response to "Landscape and I" by Norman MacCaig

The thing is, climb it.

The thing is, know the lark and hawk
are portents on the tongues of trees.

The thing is, plant yourself in me
in all the ways you can:

plunge in – the loch will tell
a tale of me while skinning you alive.

This is the thing. The thing is
what the crab and foxcub say
when you're not listening.

The thing is you are tiny,
flitting like a moth across
the eyelid of my ancient night.

My rock and blood and claw and spite –

that is the thing you're digging for,
sunk to the wrist in clart and sweat,
your fingers brittle-white as chalk.

The thing is, climb the mountain.

Come and stand at my front door
and see the thing I truly am.

Then we'll talk.

Allen Ginsberg mourns his mother Naomi

Death, which is the mother of the universe!—Now wear your nakedness forever, white flowers in your hair, your marriage sealed behind the sky, no revolution might destroy that maidenhood— O beautiful Garbo of my Karma— from “Kaddish,” part II.

She came home in the overalls
of the institution: stiff with stuck food,
gunk, knees almost rubbed through.
Others wore this misery suit
before she did – the fit was poor
the day they zipped her in
the final time. By then
she was mine alone, Naomi,
loose-shod mascot of loony bins
gouging her flesh behind the washroom’s
bubble-glass door, trying to haul out
the government wires. Secret telegrams
rattling the mailbox of her skull to tell her
her own mother was a spy.
They gave me the papers to lobotomise her
and I signed.

She came home in the overalls,
smell like a white room
full of dread. Sweatpatched and half-
bald, skin snarled into burn scars
above the ears. The procedure’s terrible mark
like a botched gunshot, yellow star
forever pinned to her. A pair
of laceless canvas shoes I couldn’t place,
and nothing else. No threadbare coat
or wedding ring or key. Nothing
I could bury her in.

Only letters full of useless code
and crazytalk in skinny, rattled hand.
Love poems to Hitler, CIA, old aunts
long dead and clawing through the Russian snow
to follow her, Naomi, down
the unwaxed madhouse halls
in bloody gowns. Yellow paper
snowflaked into antique lace
of tooth marks, specked with some
weird brine. The odd, rare,
lucid stanza in the static fog:
Get married Allen don't take drugs.
I am your mother. All my love.
The doctors told me it was time, Naomi,
and my pocket offered up its coward's pen.
I signed.

Ginsberg in Heaven

He walked in like he'd been here years
and asked for Blake. This wasn't weird –
it's usually what they do, in fact,
once they know for sure they're really dead.

There's always someone – sometimes God,
but just as often Elvis or Tupac Shakur.
He wanted Blake, a decent joint,
a blowjob and a guided tour,

in that order. It was as if he'd been before.
The journey hadn't dulled his wit, at least:
*Well, boys. If this is what's beyond the grave,
I'm digging it.*

Thing about death

“The worst thing about death must be the first night.” – Jiminez

The worst thing about death must be the first night:
spluttering awake, so blank in the absence of sweat
or the regular high-kick of a pulse,
the grainy playback of your life refusing to quit
on its endless, pointless loop.

The worst thing about death must be the quiet.

The worst thing about death must be
having to walk around with all
the undertaker’s greasepaint still on your face.
The worst thing about death must be
constantly singeing your fingers on matchsticks
trying to light the cigarette you cannot taste,
the nerve endings of all your extremities dead
like everything else, though you never remember.

The worst thing about death must be forgetfulness.

The worst thing about death must be
the time to sit alone with your regrets.

The worst thing about death must be
knowing now that *no regrets*
is just one of many sugar-coated lies the living tell.

The worst thing about death must be,
eventually, the smell.

The worst thing about death must be
the truly weird things you miss: psoriasis
and heartbreak, buses, seagulls, flip-flops,
anarchists at dinner parties, all the dogs you ever owned.
Your car. The junk collected in a bedside drawer
then thrown away – you wish you’d kept it now.

The worst thing about death must be
the rotting flowers giving way
to unkempt grass and less and less
footfall, mourning, memory or sense of loss.

The worst thing about death must be
the aggravating lack of clocks.

The worst thing about death must be
the constant dark, its unforgiving yawn.

The worst thing about death must be the first night
you know you did not dream of living.

Seefew steading

Precarious longhouse:

dislodged, shushing the night
with the dead leaves of sixty winters.

Back field lime-pit:

grave of shot dogs, spina bifida lambs,
victims of snap-leg and foot-rot; ghosts.

One-way half-mile phonebox:

clicking its tongue like a gramophone
unspooled, an old shrew.

Cow in the dark:

foghorn, moose-call, harpy, heavy
old banshee.

Then nothing.

And nothing.

And the river.

Peninsula

A slash across the wash:

weird rib,

serif strip of stone,

fingernail white.

Its cliffs are thick with nests.

Its caves promise mermaids.

Of course there are mermaids.

Their weedy purses wash

ashore, tangled in the nests

of kelp, the delicate ribs

of creephorn, crusted white.

Their lost mouths full of stones.

Tiny, sea-scraped stones

like hail, like knuckles: mermaids'

vicious pearls. Watch for a white

flash of neck, the wash

and swirl in their tails' wake, a ribbed

fin. Eggs missing from nests,

or sometimes the whole nest

gone. They're curious: the oval stones

explode into noise and feathery ribs

and slime. These are not the mermaids

of your bedtime stories. They're washed

in rage: teething with white-hot,

murderous spite. They scratch white
scars into fishing boats, fling their earnest
siren-songs across a night awash
with spume. Wrecks scatter the stones,
the eyes of all the mermaid
figureheads gouged out. Between their ribs,

impatient hearts seethe, ribcages
like those wrecked hulls, white-flecked
and warping. A mermaid
lives for centuries, a lonely nest
of bones, a crippled freak, stony
with boredom. They come to this peninsula's wash

because the wash is quiet, the land's long rib
deserted: no children to throw stones. Just the huge white gulls,
their easy young tucked into nests. These are the last mermaids of the world.

What Wordsworth never said about the Lake District

Penrith, and it's pissing down: it's flinging, chucking,
bucketing all the spume of Cumbria
down off the dark and hard-nosed hills.
Locals huff and smudge the panes
of shopfronts, trail the smell
of sodden wool through well-heeled Arnison's,
damply thumb Winceyette bedjackets
in their cellophane. A stone's throw out,
Ullswater is a grey and raging stormcloud
fallen hard to earth, unstoppering each matchwood jetty
and threatening the road. These jobs:
these toothless skinhead hills tattooed with scree,
ringing hackled lakes that foam and snarl
and whip themselves up loopy in the wind.
Everywhere you look they're knuckled down
and loitering in army knock-off khaki gangs:
sinister and spit-shined in the back
of every tourist photograph. Each one stands
uneasy like a body shot and left to bleed.
These goons. They coven round and cobble up
a widowmaker of a storm: a bitch they whip and heckle
as she jackboots through postcard towns.

To Wakefield

after Jenny Lindsay

Wakefield, you dirty bitch.

You patron saint of brickyards and rickets,
leaky filling in the mouth of the North.

There is no better word for you than *slag*.

Sat out on the dead and yellow lawn
of industry, braless and drunk,

you're hitching up your negligee
to flash the trains. Wakefield,
the ultimate lousy lay –

you mutton-dressed catastrophe,
shoving your hands down the jeans
of strangers in doorways on the Westgate run

and hiccupping kisses at Leeds.
Wakefield, you brash and brass-necked slattern
whose tongue is the Saturday turn

at the Working Men's Club
and whose stockings have run at the seams.
Shaky Wakey – your phone number inked

in the single stall of the gents
at the Cock and Dolphin
alongside the words *for a good time call...*

Wakefield. You fag-end of cities;
you district of many a dirty black mouth,
all stoppered now and blowsy with hate.

Wakefield, you flag-decked capital of chavs.

I told you I loved you.

You punched my lights out and fucked my Dad.

Fire comes

Fire comes to the garden like a sordid thought, brought by a hand starfishing out to ditch a Silk Cut filter still alight. It can't believe its luck: a smudge of creosote spilled up a wall, a windless night, the brown grass stiff as hackles, ankle deep and stirred by ticks that fizz and burst like cereal in Fire's mouth. It rises, slides its greasy back against the fencing slats, unfocusses the garden in a haar of smoke. Beyond the helpless trees somewhere a dog rattles awake; the air brake of a distant night bus seethes. Fire slides its tongue into the house's ear.

This is where the delicacies are: long flanks of cloth that Fire can Hoover up. Stuffed furnishings, their safety labels powerless as lucky charms; the carpets thick and edible as bread. In folded quiet, Fire gums the skirting boards, flirts briefly with its own reflection in the triple-mirrored gas-fire's front. In the hall it pauses, shorts the fuse box; stops the shrill, pinched pinging of the smoke alarm and pulls the walls down round its shoulders like a cape of dark. Now every downstairs room is Fire's. The windows blow. The faces of the white goods melt like cheese.

Upstairs, the woman holds the house's only heartbeat in her clotted chest. The varnished floorboards spit and pop while smoke gritty as candyfloss redraws the room. She's coldly calm: though Fire is taking bites out of the white, tiered staircase like it's cake, she can already hear the engines' gorgeous, strobing cry four streets away. All she can think of, crouching down for air the way she learned in school, is all those times she filled out mental lists of things she'd save from Fire. The photographs, the diaries, the cat she thought she'd buy but never found or named.

And then the street's a discotheque of blue and red, the neighbours on their front steps in their dressing gowns, the kids agape behind the nets.

And she wants none of it.

And Fire takes it all.

Barcelona diptych

i.

Some people live like this

streets filled with skinny trees
flicking their Spring pinks

slim chic flats with lofty
terracotta roofs

every building unshuttered awake
from a thin winter

cool stripes of ironwork
on the balcony's hot tiles

every sash thrown back
and the curtains' gauzy breath

filling the room with fluid light
sky tattered with spires

fountains
flamenco of traffic

the starched skirts of umbrellas
hitched for evening drinks

every step swept
every silver table a saucer of dusk

and up this street
the huge hewn church

unfinished
turning its many faces into the dark

ii.

Some people live like this –

in the racks of stacked-up,
tacky beach apartments, among the Irish bars
and stag-do-tours, the sad, scuffed,
late-night t-shirt shops, their *I heart
Barcelona* tat, fat kids with sunburn
and badges buying bad sombrero hats –

old men out late on the main drag
selling bird-whistles, knock-off
designer bags and warm four-packs
of beer, pashminas, fridge magnets,
Catalan flags, everything misspelled
and eager in their brown hands –

their mouths open and close,
they have no Spanish, speak no
English, hate you with your
clean face and good shoes –
you give them nothing even though
they glitter like fishes and speak
in the language of birds.

Witch

Her trick is to look sane,
look clean, sidle over crablike
so you don't clock her sightless,
milky eye. She must be ninety,
but still looks natty in clamdiggers,
keeps her hair chewed short
to shake the lice. Her smile
is like a once-good plate
smashed and stapled up
along the cracks: age
hasn't wrinkled her, it's hardened
on her surface like a glaze.

She's lived in these sun-trap,
dust-wraith streets
for over six decades,
trailing in the wake of handcarts
at La Boqueria, filching for spilt fish
along the docks until she's sore.
She's got radar for your sort,
and no amount of *no hablo*
Español will shake her once
she's tailed you to a leafy square
where yellow light lies
everywhere like dirt.

She finds a cent – its numerals
thumbed flush from all the times
she's pulled this trick –
and licks it, sticks it to her open palm.
The heartline is a rope of muck.
Her thumbs like pulled-up roots.

She sleeps most nights by hiding
in the *jardin* when they lock the gates
and lying by the orange trees
inside the fragrant, violet dark.

She says *dinero*, eclipsing the coin
then showing it again.

Dinero. You give in,
spill out a clutch of change
that's bigger than you'd like.
You see she's wearing plastic
gumball rings on every finger
as she counts aloud,
then tilts off, grinning
like a waxing moon.

Her good eye's on the stretch
of linen tablecloths and silverware.
Her other, mother-of-pearl eye
is fixed on you.

Belongings

*I have all of life's treasures
and they're fine and they're good;
they remind me,
houses are just made of wood – Tom Waits, 'The House Where Nobody Lives.'*

Houses like this wait for years,
assuming, the way dogs do,
that humans will return to them.

Behind the whitewash and shutters
the ancient ceiling fan, its socket,
its knowledge of sparks and singe,

dreams of carving up dry,
pie-crust air again.

In the cabinet hairline cracks meander
down a brandy glass, and carrier bags
ungluing into dust speak of the store they advertise,

now pulled down, loudly mourned
by older ladies of the port
who miss those years.

The year the bleach under the sink was bought,
its packaging museum-retro.

Years before the air con unit came,
when every pot-roofed building
was fever-hot.

The year this house
last held the bitter cake
of a woman's life inside its mouth:

her sweaty prints invisible,
delicious, coating everything;

her crumbs of occasional talk
on the step, then later
on the telephone she had put in.

Miraculous sleep
under that shotgun fan, dresses hung,
frightening, on the vine-swallowed terrace.

And all the house's things – the prints
and cups, the lamps, the books –
meant something only in her hands.

They'll wait here, stupid, guard-dog loyal.
This house forever hers;

this terrace, this long street
on its grey hill dipping
like a spoon to the bowl of the sea.

Highway: Skagit County, WA

grey welt on the cheek of the land

slap of black duct tape over an old wound

the clouds will not quit worrying the hills

the hills are so sick of one another

everything turns poverty and ominous and bored

there are no voices in the pines

the slopes are thick wet rot and silent

stacked up like a dishrack of forgetting

occasional farms peeled back and stopped

lone bad teeth in a mouth sewn up by the highway

still humming the highway's ugly song

Greyhound, Seattle to San Francisco

Weed, California: elevation 3,425ft above sea level

There's a scrape as he rakes a gear
up from the ancient box's gate
and the bus shoves out of Medford,
Oregon, into the usual great big grey
American dawn. He's just pulled through
the town's cool ribs – a rack
of clapboard flats, the backs
of warehouses – like all of Hell
was riding his rear wheels.
“California, folks,” he says as steam
or mist or the breath of early fires sighs up
between the foothills' paws.
“Let's all go get high in Weed.”
We ride the hem of a peak he cannot name –
it's 5am and the mountain throws
a shadow halfway back to Washington.
“Who is this clown and just how long's
he been driving a Greyhound anyhow?”
The radio throws a crackle in his voice
and the whole bus knows
this is a joke grown old long since.
How many sad Americas has he seen,
this stranger we have trusted
to push us safely through the sticky webs
of western night? How many terrible
desert casinos flinging infernal neon
at the weary hills? How many lacklustre
truckstop bathroom punch lines
has he noted down? Where are all
the taco serving counter girls

whose names he knows by heart,
spread out like patterns of rain
the windshield of his own good sense
can see, and tries to steer against?
Who is this clown, alone under the big-top
indigo nightmare Pacific sky?
He never answers the question.
We pull into Weed, California. We get high.

Big heat

*If I move now, the sun
naked between the trees
will melt me as I lie. – Adrienne Rich*

Because I am the one who speaks English,
they call me outside.

In the street, in an elbow of weak light
thrown by our porch, two tourists
mumble like fat, white grubs.

The boy comes up the steps to me,
hand round a bad map someone drew.
His face is hot, red, wet as a tongue.

The girl is crying. They are looking
for a house that, when they find it,
will be shuttered, lime-scale white
and dry. I want to say
that crying is a stupid luxury
the island women can't afford:
I trained my babies early
not to dehydrate themselves this way.

I know it will be morning now
before this girl, her massive backpack
full of useless things, can find
the market, buy a quart
and pull that water back
inside herself again. But I'm quiet,
pour a glassful for her from our fridge.
She sputters *thank you* in our language.

Things that thrive here: mules
and stones, crickets loud as fire alarms,
the harder vines. Old women
whose hands and feet are tough,
whose men worked boats or built homes
all day in the big heat,
and died young. The boring sun.
Slow flies the size of grapes.

My father finds the torch and guides them
down the street's steep shoulder,
holding the light down round their feet,
until they are out of sight.
All night, under the chattering fans,
I think about the girl's chapped throat,
the boy she lies beside,
their mouths. None of us sleeps.

Three haiku at the Museu d'Història de Catalunya, Barcelona

for David

The red tiles palmed warm
with Spring heat. Swifts bomb the roof.
Long light thick as milk.

The spires chime seven
one at a time, taking turns.
Evening curls its lip.

This coast has old bones.
The Mediterranean
won't tell what it knows.

Hydra

Everywhere you look is light
so exquisite it hurts. Light
off the taffeta sea, the brief white
rips of wake and surf; light
frosting the bleached houses' sides
wedding-cake perfect; light
in the wires, in the cut pot roofs, light
that's one hundred per cent proof. White-
washed island carefully dressed in light,
bridal; hung with thick sheets of light
like honeycombs, like dress shirts lightly
starched and hung to dry. Yachts in the bite
of the port, marshmallow white,
confettiing armfuls of chopped light
out into water clear and keen as ice.
And over the flat-topped hill as night
comes flirting on, the island saves its great light-
show for last. Ancient, many-headed light
that warms the kilns of myth: clay red, bright
pink, streaked ochre fingering the cloth of sky,
the undersides of all the thin white
clouds turned iris, mauve. And then the fine
pale strings of windows flared like Christmas lights
along the port; yachts flicker and go out, and high
across the strait the pinprick warning lights
flick one by one along the radar masts. Tonight,
insomniac in unfamiliar heat, I'll write
in a journal under the moth-bothered kitchen light,
this is the life. Mine is the lightest, easiest life.

Section B:

‘Entangled in biographical circumstances’: autobiography and confession in the poems of Sharon Olds, Sapphire and Liz Lochhead.

In the third of his T.S. Eliot Memorial lectures, delivered in 1986, Seamus Heaney memorably discusses the poetry and poetic career of Sylvia Plath. He writes: ‘I find in her poetic journey three stages which seem to exemplify three degrees of poetic achievement’ (*The Government of the Tongue*, 153). The first poetic stage, claims Heaney, comes when the poet finds herself able to produce a strong poem, and then effortlessly repeat the process whenever she wishes. Plath, claims Heaney, was entering this stage in her writing when she produced her first collection, *The Colossus*. The second poetic stage comes when the poet is able to direct the intention of their poems more carefully, and develops an ability to provoke a response in the reader. By the very latest poems in *The Colossus*, and those collected in *Crossing the Water*, Plath had begun to reach this second stage, according to Heaney. She has ‘got beyond scale-practicing... at this point, the poet’s art has found ways by which distinctively personal subjects and emotional necessities can be made a common possession of the reader’s’ (*Ibid*). He uses her poem “Elm” as an example of this, claiming it illustrates ‘Sylvia Plath’s breakthrough into her deeper self and her poetic fate’ (*Ibid*, 160).

In the third and final stage of her development, the poet, ‘stands open like an eye or ear, he [sic] becomes imprinted with all the melodies and hieroglyphs of the world; the workings of the active universe’ (*Ibid*, 163). Thus, the ultimate achievement of the poet ought to be her transformation into a conduit for the mysterious inner workings of the universe.

For Heaney, the key to attaining this revered state is the rejection of the concerns of the self, ‘get[ting] beyond ego in order to become the voice of more than autobiography... getting beyond the first person singular’ (148). Sylvia Plath approaches this stage in the

poems collected in *Ariel*, and the particular example Heaney picks out for praise is “Edge”, quite possibly the last poem she ever wrote:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over (*Selected Poems*, 85).

But although Heaney has deliberately selected Plath’s work to illustrate these three stages of poetic development – and although he initially describes her as, ‘a poet who grew to a point where she permitted herself identification with the oracle and gave herself over as a vehicle for possession’ (*Tongue*, 149) – at the end of his lecture, just as he seems about to explain the ways in which Plath managed to attain this desirable third stage, he swerves. “Edge”, the poem Heaney praised just a few sentences back for its ‘objectivity, a perfected economy of line’ (164), becomes, he says, ‘a suicide note, to put it extremely’ (165). For Heaney, in Plath’s best-known poems, ‘the supra-personal dimensions of knowledge – to which myth typically gives access – are slighted in favour of the intense personal need of the poet’ (*Ibid*). Heaney’s praise of Plath rings somewhat hollow in light of these statements. Although he uses polite terminology, Heaney is accusing Plath of self-absorption:

There is nothing *poetically* wrong with Plath’s work. What may finally limit it is its dominant theme of self-discovery and self-definition... I believe that the greatest work occurs when a certain self-forgetfulness is attained, or at least a fullness of self-possession denied to Sylvia Plath (*Ibid*).

These statements are extremely problematic, particularly for the feminist reader. However, they are not unfamiliar. The idea that poetry by women is overly personal and typically lacking in objectivity is one that male critics return to repeatedly. These supposed flaws in the work of female poets are so often referred to, in fact, that a potential long-term

effect is the exclusion of women writers from the literary canon, and from accepted poetic traditions. Heaney's unease in accepting Plath's achievement is merely one recent example from what Joanna Russ calls a long history of 'denial of agency, pollution of agency, and false categorizing' (Russ, 103) that have always prevented female writers from entering such traditions. Russ takes as one of her examples R.P. Blackmur's dismissal of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and Blackmur's objections are eerily similar to Heaney's. He describes Dickinson as 'private and eccentric', and 'neither a professional poet nor an amateur,' before denying her any kind of status by positing that she had '[not] the least inkling that poetry is a rational and objective art' (Russ, 99). A generation on, as Heaney's essay demonstrates, this process of marginalisation and neglect of women writers is still thriving. Lillian S. Robinson refers to this process as, 'neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognised female writers and excluding the others' (116).

Yet personal storytelling and autobiographical confession are cornerstones of feminist literature, feminist literary criticism and feminist theory. The phrase "the personal is political" is attributed to a variety of different authors, but it was popularised by radical feminist Carol Hanisch, who borrowed it to title a paper she authored in February 1969. At the time, Hanisch was running open workshops on "consciousness-raising," which Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards note, 'was a staple of Second Wave feminism,' involving 'informal meetings, usually in their homes, [where] women shared their secrets, stories of injustice, and mundane frustrations' (*Manifesta*, 14). Hanisch's purpose in authoring the paper was to argue that such sessions were not only extremely helpful to the women who attended them, but also that they constituted a larger political act that would prove to be beneficial to the wider women's movement:

These analytical sessions are a form of political action.... the reason I participate in these meetings is not to solve any personal problem. One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution. I went, and I continue to go to these meetings because I have gotten a political understanding which all my reading, all my "political discussions," all my "political action," all my four-odd years in the movement never gave me. I've been forced to take off the rose colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman (Hanisch).

"The personal is political" became a catchphrase for the women's movement as it gained momentum in the early 1970s. Feminist literary study began, according to Toril Moi, with the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1969 – 'the book established the feminist approach to literature as a critical force to be reckoned with' (24) – and feminist literary critics also took up the catchphrase. It soon came to be common practice for female critics to include in their work some aspect of their autobiography. In the 1972 anthology *Images of Women In Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, one of the first ever anthologies of feminist criticism, Florence Howe wrote:

I begin with autobiography because it is there, in our consciousness about our own lives, that the connection between feminism and literature begins. That we learn from lives is, of course, a fundamental assumption of literature and of its teacher-critics. (255)

Lesley Saunders, writing over a decade later, states, 'I don't hold the view... that self-expression, *tout court*, constitutes art,' but notes that 'first-hand accounts of... material and mental struggles, these idiosyncratic decisions and inspirations, are important' (3). The lesbian feminist poet Minnie Bruce Pratt wrote that finding her poetic voice meant realising 'I needed to do my own work: express my sorrow and responsibility in myself, in my own words, by my own actions' (Identity', 41), and her literary predecessor Adrienne Rich agrees:

When... [a] woman refuses to hide her sexuality, abnegate her maternity, silence her hungers and angers in her poetry, she creates – as [Muriel] Rukeyser did, as Audre Lorde has done, as [Minnie Bruce] Pratt and [Sharon] Olds are doing – a force field of extraordinary energy (*What Is Found There*, 158).

Toril Moi goes even further, arguing that the ideal of measured detachment praised by patriarchal critics is in fact impossible to achieve. 'We all speak from a specific position shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors. It is authoritarian and manipulative to present [one] limited perspective as "universal"' (43). She adds that an acknowledgement by the female writer of their own personal context, 'cannot be overstated. It remains one of the fundamental assumptions of any feminist critic to date' (44).

The practice of including personal and autobiographical details alongside feminist literary criticism has continued beyond the 1970s. In 1991, Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl published *Feminisms: an anthology of literary theory and criticism*, and in their introduction wrote:

Being explicit about the referents of one's pronouns, the origins of one's projects, and the position from which one speaks has become very common among feminists; beginning a book with a personal anecdote is practically obligatory. There are good reasons for this: feminism holds that 'the personal *is* political,' and as feminists we believe that the traditional academic boundaries between professional and personal experiences ought to be undermined (ix).

The anthology even contains an essay dedicated to examining the value of personal testimony in literary criticism. Although she is sceptical about its use, the essay's author, Linda S Kaufmann, nevertheless notes, 'I clearly believe that our intellectual work as feminists is directly related to our personal histories, that our subjective experiences influence our politics, that our psychic traumas affect our teaching and writing' (1156).

Meanwhile, female poets began to acknowledge the personal as political well before their counterparts in literary criticism, and Sylvia Plath is only one example. As early as 1960, Anne Sexton was writing about personal female experiences in her debut collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*:

I tapped my own head;
it was a glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing

to rage in your own bowl. [...]
And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie
and fasten a new skin around it (*Complete Poems*, 34).

At this time, male poets were also publishing work that would come to be called confessional. Sexton’s teacher Robert Lowell won the National Book Award in 1960 for his collection *Life Studies*: a work that was labelled “confessional” in one review by ML Rosenthal, a label that Lowell’s editor, Frank Bidart, contested. Allen Ginsberg had been writing and publishing brilliant, controversial poems that dealt with the intimate details of his personal life since the mid-1950s, and in 1964, John Berryman would publish his *77 Dream Songs*. But when Sexton, whose work was undoubtedly influenced by the teachings of Lowell, published the collection *All My Pretty Ones* in 1962, she moved into more essentially female – and largely uncharted – territory. ‘Among the subjects,’ notes Elaine Showalter, ‘was abortion, and the surgery Sexton had undergone for a benign ovarian cyst’ (434). Maxine Kumin, Sexton’s companion and fellow writer, points out that her friend’s newfound approach to poetry, ‘confront[ed] the still-rigid mores of that period... [and] aroused the ire of more than one male reviewer’ (*Breaking the Mold*, 104). Showalter also acknowledges the provocative nature of Sexton’s work, noting that *All My Pretty Ones*, ‘was much too strong for the squeamish James Dickey, who charged in the *New York Times Book Review* that “it would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience”’ (434). The poems from this collection and those that followed it would come to establish Sexton as one of the first female poets to acknowledge the personal as political and the sexual as textual, using the vivid images of her own female experience to send a message that is now regularly read as feminist:

[Sexton's] interrogation of femininity and gender in relation to her writing, her desire to transform the horror of personal experience into wider realms – the relations between men and women, male and female, the human and the divine – is an ambitious one that prefigures, and in a sense, allows much of the poetry arising from the women's movement (Rees-Jones, *Consorting*, 144).

Although Sexton's confessional work provided a jumping-off for those female writers who followed her – giving permission, 'to startle and inspire women readers, and to shock and appal male critics' (Showalter, 439) – she was less vocal about her feminist intentions than her contemporary, fellow confessional poet, Adrienne Rich:

We have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasized our helplessness. [...] We have had the truth of our bodies withheld from us or distorted; we have been kept in ignorance of our most intimate places. Our instincts have been punished: clitoridectomies for "lustful" nuns or "difficult" wives (Rich, *Women and Honor*, 198).

For both Sexton and Rich, use of the confessional mode was a deliberate act of rebellion against a literary world where, Maxine Kumin recalls, 'all the lean, hard, muscular poetry was being written by men. What was left was verse devoted to God, butterflies and brownies, composed by the little three-named Letitia ladies' (103). Fellow poet Cynthia Macdonald, one of the aforementioned 'poet[s] arising from the women's movement' (Rees-Jones, *Consorting*, 144), visualises the literary world of this time as, 'a road paved with poems by men. An occasional path branches off the main road, poems by women' (112). This separatist model was certainly what Rich wanted: rather than aiming to become part of the "main road" by writing the sort of poetry that male writers considered suitable for them, she encouraged female poets to break away from that establishment and create a poetry of their own. 'Women have understood that we needed an art of our own: to remind us of our history and what we might be; to show us our true faces – all of them, including the unacceptable; to speak of what has been muffled in code or silence' (Rich, *Blood, Bread and*

Poetry, 249). Sexton's approach is less separatist, although she took obvious delight in alienating male critics, creating, 'an intentional exhibition of wounds, a freak show, as she herself acknowledged' (Showalter, 433). Sylvia Plath, biographer Janet Malcolm claims, was as ambitious and ruthless as any male poet of the time: 'Plath's not-niceness is the outstanding characteristic of the *Ariel* poems, it is what sets her apart from the other so-called confessional poets of the fifties and sixties' (32). Plath's own journal entries back up the idea that she saw herself as an important voice worthy of inclusion in the mainstream literary canon. As early as 1958, she was writing statements like, 'I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America' (*Journals*, 360). While Rich may have embraced MacDonald's 'side road [for] poets by women' (112), Plath definitely sought a place in 'the tradition' (*Tongue*, 168) that Seamus Heaney and other male critics seem to feel they must guard.

In her 1966 collection *Live or Die*, which Deryn Rees-Jones describes as, 'a volume which includes some of her most raw and personal work' (134), Sexton "writes back" to Arthur Rimbaud, taking his lines, 'Ma faim, Anne, Anne / Fuis sur ton ane' (Rimbaud, 126) as the epigraph for her poem, "Flee on Your Donkey." In the poem – a lurid description of her time in a mental institution – she writes, 'you promised me another world / to tell me who / I was' (*Complete Poems*, 100). The lines are for Sexton's doctor, but could just as easily be directed at Rimbaud himself. Sexton is, 'both herself and not herself, addressing a male poet, who, in invoking her name, talks to her' (Rees-Jones, *Consorting*, 135). However, the conversation is one-way – Rimbaud can speak to Sexton, but 'of course can't listen' (*Ibid*). As well as depicting the loneliness of the mental institution, it also depicts the female poet, whose poetics can only be shaped, never accepted, by the generations of published writers – most of them male – who have come before her: 'that which can be told by the self, but not heard'

(Ibid).

The voices of female poets are far better represented in contemporary poetic culture than they were in the early 1960s, when Plath and Sexton began publishing their work. Indeed, things have improved noticeably for women poets since the era of Heaney's essay on Plath.

However, women who wish to write poetry must still do so from within a patriarchal poetic tradition, and the intersection of personal, political and poetic remains a knot of questions about content versus form, about autobiographical intensity, objectivity and accessibility. In this study, I examine the works of three very different contemporary female poets, all of whom produce the kind of poetry that Heaney might describe as 'entangled in biographical circumstances' (*Tongue*, 165). I illustrate that autobiographical or semi-autobiographical poems authored by women are neither solely useful for nor merely confined to a process of 'self-discovery and self-definition' (168), nor are they necessarily governed by 'the intense personal need of the poet' (*Ibid*). I show that when a female writer chooses to include elements of her own experience in her poems, those poems do not automatically become 'flawed' or 'limit[ed]' as a result of that choice. These three poets prove that the inclusion of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical elements can and does reveal new ways of thinking and writing. Sharon Olds, whose work has picked up the confessional baton from Anne Sexton, proves that even the most intimate, personal, and inherently female stories can prove their worth as literature, and attain great critical success. Meanwhile, Sapphire's poetry insists that readers re-examine the confessional genre: it asks questions about how personal stories are valued when they are also stories about the often problematic intersections of class, gender and race. And finally, Liz Lochhead's poetry offers up new versions of traditional myths and folktales by transposing them into first-person female narratives.

These poets, all born in the same decade¹, grew up and became women in the midst of second-wave feminism and women's liberation. Sharon Olds recalls her introduction to feminism, which came over a decade prior to the publication of her first book:

It was very clear to me that Hugh [Seidman, with whom Olds became friends at graduate school] and all the others were real poets. I only noticed years later that they were all men. [...] And then I began to write my own stuff—love poems, mostly. Then I married. I became pregnant. My first child was born in 1969. In 1968 the Women's Movement in New York City—especially among a lot of women I knew—was very alive. [...] I do remember understanding that I had never questioned that men had all the important jobs. And that was shocking (Laskey).

Liz Lochhead has also made it clear that, although she does not always use the label “feminist,” her writing has always been heavily influenced by feminism:

Being a feminist writer was stopping writing as if I might be a man, and being a Scottish writer is stopping writing as if I might be English. It's a matter of taking on board certain things and letting them feed right through to the bedrock. [...] My language is female-coloured as well as Scottish-coloured (*Sleeping with Monsters*, 11).

Sapphire has been an outspoken proponent of the feminist movement, and in particular, of intersectional feminism: feminism that recognises the importance of class and race as well as gender in the fight against oppression. Intersectionality was first championed by bell hooks in the 1989 book *Talking Back*: ‘Only when we confront the realities of sex, race and class, the ways they divide us, make us different, stand us in opposition, and work to reconcile and resolve these issues will we be able to participate in the making of feminist revolution, in the transformation of the world’ (25). Sapphire agrees, criticising North American society in particular: ‘you have this vast universe of African Americans, Latin American kids and women who are invisible and disenfranchised from the culture’ (Bidisha).

As Baumgardner and Richards argue in *Manifesta*, ‘after the early 1960s, the presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted. For our generation, feminism is like fluoride.

¹ Sharon Olds was born in 1942, Liz Lochhead in 1947, and Sapphire in 1950

We scarcely notice that we have it – it's simply in the water' (17). Whether they are consciously influenced by the feminist movement or not, the work of all three of these poets certainly carries feminist overtones, focuses almost solely on female experiences, and represents an important contribution to contemporary women's poetry.

Finally, these women are all poets whose creative work has shaped my own. In conclusion to this study, I will illustrate a few ways in which Olds, Sapphire and Lochhead have influenced my poetry, and helped me to realise the value of female self-expression and poetic autobiography.

Chapter One

‘I am putting my proud American boast / right here with the others’: the personal as political in the poetry of Sharon Olds

Although the confessional female poets of the 1960s – Plath, Rich, Sexton and their contemporaries – embodied the idea of the personal as political, their work, claims Deryn Rees-Jones, ‘does not always, perhaps, offer a clearly positive feminist model’ (144). However, confessional poetry – and in particular, the unflinching work of Anne Sexton – did ‘[pave] the way for a poet like Sharon Olds, who in turn has influenced a new generation of poets’ (*Ibid*). Olds, born in 1942, has to date published ten full-length collections of poetry, the most recent of which, *Stag’s Leap*, won both the T.S. Eliot Prize and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2012. Amy Hempel describes Olds’ work as ‘written without embarrassment or apology, with remarkable passion and savagery and nerve, poems about family and family pathology, early erotic fascination, and sexual life inside marriage’ (Hempel). The vast majority of Olds’ poetry is obviously, unapologetically autobiographical: again and again she details for the reader events of her own life in unflinching detail. Just as Sexton returns repeatedly to abuse of the female child by her father in poems like “Briar Rose,” – ‘my father / drunkenly bends over my bed / circling the abyss like a shark, / my father thick upon me’ (*Collected Poems*, 294) – so too does Olds, filling her work with references to the abuse she suffered as a small child. Olds returns most often to the day she was tied into a chair by her father and left for several hours, for example, in “That Year”:

[S]he told him to leave; so there wasn’t another
tying by the wrist to the chair,
or denial of food, not another
forcing of food, the head held back,
down the throat at the restaurant,
the shame of vomited buttermilk
down the sweater with its shame of new breasts (*Satan Says*, 6).

This event is mentioned again and again, appearing in many of Olds’ collections. “Beyond

Harm,” from her 1992 collection *The Father*, is another example:

He respected
my spunk – when they tied me to the chair that time,
they were tying up someone he respected, and when
he did not speak, for weeks, I was one of the
beings to whom he was not speaking,
someone with a place in his life (*Selected Poems*, 57).

The event is rarely explored in detail or given a poem of its own, but it is repeatedly mentioned in passing. These off-hand mentions are Olds’ way of bringing the reader immediately into the event with her: she does not explain what happened, as if she assumes the reader already knows, as if they had been there with her. The cumulative effect of these many mentions of the same event, across an entire career of publication, adds to the reader’s distinct feeling that this is one of their own memories, as well as one of Olds’. The event appears yet again in *The Unswept Room*, in the poem “A Chair By The Fire”:

They could not
think of how else to stop me from pouring
ink on their bed, they thought I was a little
possessed. [...]
I could have swung myself against a wall
and dislodged my pine saddle, but I sat
obedient (9).

This is a technique Olds employs widely – making repeated, but throwaway references to key moments in her own autobiography. This paradoxically reinforces and simultaneously diminishes the power and significance of these events as motifs within the poems. They are mentioned as if they are nothing particularly out of the ordinary, and yet they are constantly alluded to. Rees-Jones notes that this kind of repetition is a defining characteristic of poetry in the confessional genre: ‘the confessional works as a compulsive repetition and re-enactment of suffering, which hauls trauma into the moment of writing itself’ (*Consorting*, 143). In Sexton’s work, this repetition was very much a therapeutic act for the poet: ‘she attempts to speak the horror in which she finds herself... for Sexton the poem is not simply an expression of suffering, but aims to purge, to disinherit her experience’ (*Ibid*). The

language of Sexton's poems shows this is clearly the case: though describing past events, her poems often speak in the present tense:

I was abandoned.
That much I know.
I was forced backward.
I was forced forward.
I was passed hand to hand
like a bowl of fruit.
Each night I am nailed into place
and forget who I am (*Complete Poems*, 294)

Olds, however, seems far more at peace with the traumatic events of her childhood. In the poem, "I Go Back To May 1937," she ponders whether or not she would, if given the chance, do something to prevent her father's acts of cruelty:

you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die (*Selected Poems*, 35).

However, by the end of the poem, she decides that no, even if she had the chance to change the past, she would still let everything happen as it did. Olds realises that the abuse she suffered could only have been avoided had she never existed:

I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it (*Ibid*).

In this final stanza, Olds is implicitly acknowledging the important role her difficult childhood has played in creating her success as a poet. The poems she has written about this time in her life are arguably her most visceral and affecting works. Here, she is almost giving thanks for the fact that she is able to bring these experiences to her poetry and present them as autobiography. Unlike Sexton, Olds is not writing confessional poems as therapy.

I believe that a confession is a telling, publicly or privately, of a wrong that one has done, which one regrets. And the confession is a way of trying to get to the other side

and change one's nature. So I... would use the phrase *apparently personal poetry* for the kind of poetry that I think people are referring to as confessional (Blossom, 30).

Olds' description of her poems as only 'apparently personal,' is confusing in light of their subject matter, and she publicly revised her statements about this aspect of her work after the publication of *Stag's Leap*, which I discuss later in this chapter. But I believe that what she wants to make clear here is that it is not she who is living or re-living a trauma in these poems, but the reader. Olds forces the reader to vividly imagine even the smallest moments with her, through her use of direct, unflinching and often unpleasant language, for example, in "The Glass":

So my father has to gargle, cough
spit a mouthful of thick stuff
into the glass every ten minutes or so,
scraping the rim up his lower lip
[...] and it
sits there, like a glass of beer foam,
shiny and faintly yellow, he gargles and
coughs and reaches for it again,
and gets the heavy sputum out,
full of bubbles and moving around like yeast (*Selected Poems*, 47).

Many of Olds' poems relate to intimate physical acts, most often female ones: she explores candidly and at length female reproductive processes, heterosexual sex acts and other, more taboo aspects of female physicality. "Diaphragm Aria" is a poem devoted to her inspection of a used contraceptive cap:

When I have reached
into myself, and glistened out the dome,
I search its planetarium sky
for its weather, ivory nimbus, reach
of summer showers (*The Unswept Room*, 38).

Similarly, "The Releasing" describes the poet cleaning herself after sex:

First, a caduceus of hairs,
mine and maybe his, they felt dipped
in honey-glaze, and dried, I tugged at their
helix gently, and something crackled
and something tore delectably (*Ibid.*, 36).

In its determination to share these intimate truths – acknowledging the personal as political – and to describe them so unflinchingly, Olds’ work has been added to the feminist poetic canon alongside that of Sexton and Rich: ‘Olds clearly has strong links with confessional poetry in her revelations of the intimacies at the heart of a family’ (Rees-Jones, *Modern Women Poets*, 206).

Cynthia MacDonald – writing in the mid-nineties, as Sharon Olds was beginning to rise to fame in the poetry world – claimed, ‘If women poets wish to be loved and admired... there are several categories which encourage that love: girl (no matter what age), spinster, or safely meek woman’ (115). This theory certainly applies to the women who were accepted at the time that Sexton and her contemporaries began writing seriously in the 1950s. There were a few exceptions, for example, the poet Marianne Moore – however Moore, says Maxine Kumin, ‘did not provide Sexton and me with a workable model. [...] [She was] a self-effacing maiden... much lionized but little read’ (102). Elizabeth Bishop, arguably the only other very famous female poet at that time, ‘was a profoundly private person. Matters of gender, it seemed, were off-limits in her work’ (*Ibid*). For Olds’ generation of writing women, female poetry has become much more visible; but there remains a sense that certain poems by women are more acceptable than others. Still marginalised, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the work of the confessional poets, are, ‘heterosexual women who wish to have what men have: full participation in the centre of the [literary] firmament and who neither remain girls nor are safely-meek’ (Macdonald, 115).

It is in this role that Olds writes. Over and above its redemptive, therapeutic qualities, it seems that what particularly appeals to her about the confessional mode is its ability, ‘to shock and appal male critics’ (Showalter, 439). Although it took her until the publication of *Stag’s Leap* to publicly acknowledge her work as confessional, Olds shares her foremothers’ resentment at the marginalisation of women, making this clear in even her earliest poems:

She was home, then.
This was her place, the one of all the others
where she feared to walk, where someone had always
arrived first, and would hold it against her
at any cost (*Satan Says*, 69).

Olds wants to be able to write poetry about her own experiences *and* be accepted into ‘the tradition’ Seamus Heaney refers to. And, unlike Sexton’s veiled plea to Rimbaud in “Flee On Your Donkey,” Olds is not content to rely on ambiguity when addressing her male literary forefathers. Her ambition is outlined most clearly by the poem “The Language of the Brag”:

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,
Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,
I and the other women this exceptional
act with the exceptional heroic body,
this giving birth, this glistening verb,
and I am putting my proud American boast
right here with the others (45).

Here, Olds is comparing the act of completing a creative work with the act of giving birth – a metaphor that has long been used by writers of both genders. ‘For what other metaphor, though hopelessly clichéd, still best represents the creative process, from inspiration (conception) through delivery?’ (Muske, 143). In this sense Olds really is the intimidating woman who Cynthia McDonald suspects frightens men. What she is demanding is not only, ‘her rightful place in the heroic pantheon of American poets’ (Showalter, 470), but also her right to be recognisably female: to do, write about and celebrate acts that are available only to women, and to have her accounts of these acts accorded equal importance to their male-penned equivalents.

By pulling these quintessentially female narratives into the mainstream, Olds is reclaiming and subverting the patriarchal idea that a woman’s place is within the domestic sphere: that to be female is to be, ‘the repository of all goodness and truth in the home’ (Kumin, 104). Rather than seeing traditional female gender roles as prohibitive and defined by men, she chooses to agree with feminist critic Laura Kipnis, who claims that, ‘restricted

from the public sphere, women commandeered domestic life' (5). For Olds, domesticity is not a punishment, but a source of control: it is the only sphere in which women are definitely more powerful than men. Therefore, it is her domestic achievements – in particular, giving birth to and raising children – that Olds wants to have recognised as her 'American achievement / beyond the ordinary' (*Satan Says*, 45):

When I turn out the light and lie
down, I feel as if I'm at the apex
of a triangle, and then, with a Copernican
swerve, I feel that the apex is my daughter,
and then my son, I am that background figure, that
source figure the mother. We are not,
strictly speaking, mortal. We cast
beloveds into the future (*The Unswept Room*, 58).

And Olds further subverts patriarchal expectations by manipulating the role of "domestic" poet with which she has aligned herself. She claims, 'There's a brat in me who likes doing it my own way, knowing that I'm supposed to be doing it the other way. Let them do it the other way' (Laskey). The female domestic poet is traditionally expected to be, according to Alice Ostriker, 'maternal, nurturing and receptive rather than active' (Ostriker, 154). Olds, however, flatly refuses to fit this definition of the role. Her poetry may deal primarily with married love and the raising of children, but it is far from the kind of nurturing passivity Ostriker describes. Her depictions of sex within marriage are often so grotesque that the activity described is barely recognisable as an act of love. For example, in "Dear Heart," sex with her husband is described as:

floating out there, splayed, facing
away, fucked, fucked, my face
glistening and distorted pressed against the inner
caul of the world. I was almost beyond
pleasure, in a region of icy, absolute
sensing, my open mouth and love-slimed
cheeks stretching the membrane (Olds, *Selected*, 91).

Similarly, when Olds writes about caring for her terminally ill mother, she switches alarmingly back and forth from concerned daughter to murderous avenging angel; seeing her

opportunity to punish her frail mother for the abuse she suffered as a child. In “The Dead,” she actively wishes her mother dead:

For a moment I see
it would not be an entirely bad thing
if my mother died. How interesting
to be in the world when she was not – how
odd to breathe air she would not recently
have breathed. I even envision her dead,
for a second – on her back, naked (*One Secret Thing*, 57).

Though less disturbing, Olds’ descriptions of childbearing and motherhood also blur the line between affection and violence, for example in “The Clasp”:

When I had her wrist
in my grasp I compressed it, fiercely, for a couple
of seconds, to make an impression on her,
to hurt her, our beloved firstborn, I even almost
savoured the stinging sensation of the squeezing, the
expression, into her, of my anger (*The Unswept Room*, 37).

Olds’ work also calls into question Eavan Boland’s assertion that the female domestic poet will automatically find herself marginalised within her own literary community. ‘When a woman writer leaves the center of a society, becomes a wife, mother and housewife, she ceases automatically to be a member of that dominant class which she belonged to when she was visible chiefly as a writer’ (Boland, 565). Some critics have indeed attempted to discredit Olds for what they see as a determination to focus on the minutiae of her own female experience. For example, Anis Shivani argues: ‘ [Olds] likes to pile on gratuitously, well after she’s made the point about whatever bodily dysfunction is bothering her. [...] Childbirth, her father’s penis, her son’s cock, and her daughter’s vagina are repeated obsessions she can always count on in a pinch’ (Shivani). However, even her most disdainful critics must admit that Olds has – through her dogged insistence that her writing deserves the same recognition as that of her most praised poetic counterparts – attained a level of influence that has begun to draw comparisons to Sylvia Plath. Shivani concedes: ‘Female poets in workshops around the country idolize her, collaborate in the masochism, because

they say she freed them to talk about taboo subjects, she "empowered" them' (*Ibid*).

And Olds thumbs her nose at her critics by subverting her poetic role still further. Her stylistic approach is also irreverent. She speaks of a writing process that is based on journaling and includes unusual prompts and techniques, like the use of children's stickers. Journaling was also popular with Olds' confessional foremothers – Sexton initially began using journals therapeutically in response to her mental health issues, and at the very beginning of her writing career. 'Sexton, who had married young, missed college, and worked only as a model, was encouraged to study and write by her young psychiatrist' (Showalter, 415). For Olds too, journaling is essential to her writing process:

I would hate to imagine living without [my journal]. It's where I discover what I think and feel and make something of it. I love doing it. And it's physical. It's a ballpoint pen—it doesn't scratch and stick on the paper. I use different colored pens. I put in stickers. [...] This morning, I was having a hard time trying to interpret and record and write about the gulls' cries. I was really in distress from them. I couldn't interpret them... But I knew that I had a sticker with me of Curious George on a beach with a seagull. And so I put it in my notebook, and I felt much better. [...] It's something about the visual and the way it sits on the page with space around it. The clarity of that (Laskey).

Olds has also created a form of free verse that she claims is entirely her own, and which she describes as a very conscious rebellion against traditional prosody:

"I said to free will," she remembers "or the pagan god of making things, or whoever, let me write my own stuff. I'll give up everything I've learned, anything, if you'll let me write my poems. They don't have to be any good, but just mine. And that," she says, "is when my weird line came about" (Patterson).

This "weird line" is Olds' use of enjambment, which she employs as though at random, giving her poems a feeling of uncanny fragmentation, but also a sense of genuine urgency.

The announcer had given my
boyfriend's name as one of two
brought to the hospital after the sunrise
service, the egg-hunt, the crash – one of them
critical, one of them dead. [...]
I had said

which one of them died, and now the world was
an ant's world: the huge crumb of each
second thrown, somehow, up onto
my back, and the young, tired voice
said my fresh love's name (*One Secret Thing*, 37).

Although this “weird line” is perhaps not as unusual as Olds suggests, the sense of earnestness it lends to her poems is very deliberate. Their urgent tone reveals Olds’ desire to have these poems recognised, acknowledged, seen as important. She even claims that more traditional uses of enjambment serve to set poems at a remove from the experience they hope to describe. She sees her own technique as a way, ‘to try to imitate what it feels like to be alive, which is, for me, not end-stopped’ (Laskey).

The “weird line” is still present in Olds’ most recent collection, *Stag’s Leap*, but this book appears to mark a sea-change in the way she thinks about her confessional poetry. *Stag’s Leap* is markedly different in tone from all of her previous works. This collection is almost entirely without the ‘bodily dysfunction[s]’ (*Ibid*) that Anis Shivani refers to, and it also seems at first to be free from the overtones of vengeful anger and violence that have characterised her earlier collections. This is unexpected, as all the poems in *Stag’s Leap* were written in response to Olds’ husband of over thirty years leaving her for another woman. But in fact, in these poems Olds seems most obviously concerned about her own failures. In “Telling My Mother,” Olds takes personal responsibility for her husband’s transgression, writing: ‘I did not know him / I did not work not to lose him, and I lost him’ (*Stag’s Leap*, 9). In “Stag’s Leap,” Olds claims, ‘he seems my victim’ (*Ibid*, 15), and suggests that the deeply personal, autobiographical poems she wrote and published over the course of their marriage may have been the reason why her husband eventually left:

[W]hen I wrote about him, did he
feel he had to walk around
carrying my books on his head like a stack of
posture volumes, or the rack of horns

hung where a hunter washes the venison
down with the sauvignon? (*Ibid*)

The word ‘posture’ carries a double meaning here. Olds is referring on the one hand to the common deportment practice of teaching young people – usually women – to walk with a straight back by placing a book or books on their head. This reading of the word suggests that Olds feels her writing placed a difficult burden on her husband, and perhaps caused him to change his public behaviour. On the other hand, referring to her own books as ‘posture volumes’ (*Ibid*) suggests that Olds, with hindsight, sees these books as “posturing” – as too much of a public display of what ought to have been kept private. This regret as making her private life so public is reinforced by the poem “Left-Wife Bop,” in which she writes:

[H]e did not give
his secrets to his patients, but I gave my secrets
to you, dear strangers, and his, too –
unlike the warbling of coming, I sang
for two. Uneven, uneven, our scales
of contentment went slowly askew (*Ibid*, 83).

However, in spite of her regret at the damage her earlier confessional works have caused, *Stag’s Leap* is still itself a volume of obviously autobiographical, highly personal poetry. In “Not Quiet Enough,” Olds expresses guilt at having described the intimacies of her sex life so often in poems she then made public:

Or maybe
it was not my chirps, not the sounding
flesh of those sheets, floor, chairs back
porches, a hayloft, woods, but this telling
of them – did his spirit turn against the spirit which
tolled our private wild bell
from the public rooftop (*Ibid*, 48).

But even as she expresses regret, Olds is still giving out these private details. In the same poem, she writes, ‘I can almost hear / the sound of him then, as if startled, or nearly / caught up with, nearly in the grip of something, then those / honeysuckle moans’ (*Ibid*). Similarly,

in “Poem of Thanks” – the poem that sits directly opposite the guilty lament of “Left-Wife Bop” in the book – Olds again describes various sexual encounters with her husband:

Colleague of sand
and moonlight – and by beach noonlight, once,
and of straw, salt bale in a barn, and mulch
inside a garden, between the rows – once-
partner of up against the wall (*Ibid*, 82).

Olds’ apparent feelings of compunction do not ring entirely true, therefore. In a review of the collection for *The Guardian*, Kate Kellaway claimed that the poem “Running Into You,” in which Olds describes her husband as, ‘covered with her, like a child working with glue / who’s young to be working with glue’ (*Ibid*, 78) is ‘funny and belittling... the closest [Olds] comes to cruel’ (Kellaway). In an interview for *The Guardian* soon after, Olds claims that Kellaway’s comment caused her to change the poem, stating firmly that she did not want to appear cruel towards her ex-husband:

One critic pointed out this was the only nasty line in the collection. I take criticism very seriously. And I looked at it again and thought, “Oh my God, that is true.” It wasn’t exact enough. I’ve added the line, “or was I the one playing with glue?” I was the one having trouble getting unstuck from him (Durrant).

However, it is possible to read some cruelty into *Stag’s Leap*, simply because the poems in which Olds expresses remorse for her part in the break-up of her marriage feel so back-handed. These are poems in which she apologises for confessing everything about the marriage, whilst simultaneously confessing even more. Furthermore, until the publication of *Stag’s Leap*, Olds had always worked to maintain a level of distance between her personal life and the poems she had written about it, claiming that her work should not be read as entirely autobiographical. ‘I would use the phrase *apparently personal poetry* for the kind of poetry that I think people are referring to as confessional. *Apparently personal* because how do we really know? We don’t’ (Blossom, 30). However, following the publication of *Stag’s Leap*, Olds began to admit for the first time what her critics have always assumed anyway:

that her work is always autobiographical. 'It has always been obvious to anyone that my poems were autobiographical, but I used to think I would go to the grave without actually saying it' (Durrant). But Olds *is* "saying it" of *Stag's Leap*, a book which is, arguably, more revealing about her husband than any prior collection. So in fact, this collection is at least as angry and vengeful as any of her older works. Sharon Olds does so much more in her poetry than merely describe her personal experiences. Her use of the confessional mode in *Stag's Leap* – coupled with her confession, at last, that these poems are indeed confessional – is yet another example of her constant subverting of reader and critical expectations.

Chapter Two

‘She asks why we always / read books about black people’: Sapphire’s safe space for black, female, working class voices

Ramona Lofton was born in Fort Ord, California in 1950. She began writing in the 1970s, and adopted the name Sapphire, ‘for its connotations of vividness and to reclaim the demonised figure of the fiery black woman’ (Bidisha). Best known for her 1996 novel *Push*, which was adapted into the multi-award-winning film *Precious* in 2009, Sapphire is also the author of three collections of poetry. Her first collection, *Meditations on the Rainbow*, published in 1987, is so little-known that her second book, *American Dreams*, published in 1994, was included on some first collection prize shortlists. Her most recent collection is *Black Wings and Blind Angels: Poems*, published in 1999.

Like Sharon Olds, Sapphire also sets many of her poems in the domestic sphere. However, while Olds’ work reclaims the domestic sphere as a site of female power, Sapphire contests the idea that the domestic environment offers any kind of security for women. In some poems, Sapphire echoes Adrienne Rich’s thesis in *Of Woman Born*, most of which is devoted to refuting the idea that women actively desire a domestic, child-raising life:

Women are still raising children alone, living day in and day out within their individual family units, doing the laundry, herding the tricycles to the park, waiting for the husbands to come home. [...] I do not envy the turmoil of the elevator full of small children, babies howling in the Laundromat, the apartment in winter where pent-up seven- and eight-year-olds have one adult to look to for their frustrations, reassurances, the grounding of their lives (*Ibid*, 33).

However, it is not the drudgery of mothering and child-raising with which Sapphire takes issue. In her poems, the home is associated not only with domestic toil but with very real physical danger. It is a place where women and children are trapped, and at the mercy of men. For example, in “poem for jennifer, marla, tawana & me,” the figure of the father is not nurturing or protective but threatening and unpredictable:

i remember my father saying ‘yes suh,’ ‘no suh,’
stressing the importance of dressing correctly, finishing school, keeping the house clean and disposing of sanitary napkins properly.
i knew he would not protect me and he did not respect me. i was supposed to be grateful he did not kill me (*American Dreams*, 114).

The domestic sphere is not just the site of child abuse, but also domestic abuse, as illustrated in the poem “Chava, Catalogue Chairs, & Three Colored Scarves”:

Hanging on the back of three kitchen chairs
are three kerchiefs – red, yellow, magenta squares
that I fold neatly into rectangles when I arise.
I am trying to restore order
after forty-five seconds of chaos, screaming
in the night. It happens like a grocery bag splitting (*Black Wings*, 101).

Feminist writers have pushed back against the patriarchal “trap” of domesticity before – the most notable example being Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, the central argument of which is that ideally, a woman writer should have ‘either £500 a year or a room of [her] own’ (*Women and Writing*, 53). One of Sapphire’s prose poems, “A New Day for Willa Mae,” depicts a woman coming to terms with her estrangement from her daughter Jadine by turning Jadine’s bedroom into “a room of her own”:

Willa Mae was scrubbing the floor of what had been Jadine’s room for the second time, the fumes of the drying paint around her head. [...] She saw it clear day, clear as *day*. The soft pale wall was lit up with the Star of Mississippi, what her grandmother had quilted, but it was a brighter star, a more vivid yellow set against a deeper blue and a red so sharp it was like a dog biting. [...] It was then Willa Mae knew she wasn’t going back to Mrs Goldstein. Wasn’t nothin’ to even think about (*American Dreams*, 68-9).

However, overwhelmingly, these poems rebel against the idea of the domestic sphere as a safe space – it is still a place of isolation and fear, even if the woman is alone there, as she is in “Are You Ready To Rock?”:

while dogs ran free
you stayed home,
alone,

looking out the window
of a war zone [...]
dying
alone
on the
bathroom floor
you had scrubbed
earlier that day (*Ibid*, 9-10).

Sapphire's poetry points out the problematic issues of race and class raised by the work of feminist writers and critics who still believe that a re-drawing of domestic space as powerful might be a valuable process for women. Writers like Eavan Boland – who claims, 'the so-called domestic poem... touched the place I lived and was touched by it. I want to argue here for its scope and reach; for its powerful roots in the unseen world' (*A Journey*, 100) – build upon a Woolfian ideal for female writers that – although desirable – is completely unrealistic for many women outside the middle class. Reviews at the time of its publication noted that *A Room of One's Own* left out working class women, and Woolf responded, 'if we wish to increase the supply of rare and remarkable women like the Brontës we should give the Joneses and the Smiths rooms of their own and five hundred a year' (*Women and Writing*, 54). She gave no explanation of how this should be done, however. And those contemporary female writers who still seek to reclaim the domestic sphere as a space of power for women routinely erase the experiences of working class women in the same way. In Olds' poems – "April, New Hampshire," for example – domestic scenes are routinely depicted as peaceful and idyllic:

In the living room,
the old butterscotch collie let me
get my hand into the folds
of the mammal, and knead it. Inside their room,
Don said, *This is it – this is where
we lived and died.* To the centre of the dark
painted headboard – sleigh of beauty,
sleigh of night – there was an angel affixed
as if bound to it, with her wings open.

The bed spoke, as if to itself,
it sang. The whole room sang (*The Unswept Room*, 79).

Boland, meanwhile, paints a similarly serene domestic scene in which:

a woman is going into the garden. She is youngish; her apron is on, and there is flour on her hands. It is early afternoon. She is going there to lift a child who for the third time is about to put laburnum pods into its mouth. This is what she does ('The Woman Poet,' 560).

This scene is later described as representative of, 'the ordinary routine day that many women live – must live' ('The Woman Poet,' 561), an inaccurate statement that fails to acknowledge that many female lives look nothing like this. There is no room in this idyllic version of the domestic for a poem like Sapphire's "Breaking Karma #3," though it is also a depiction of an everyday domestic interior:

From where I sit I can see the yellow gray
stains in the crotch of my mother's underpants.
She leans back against the headboard of the bed
withered thighs cocked open drinking whiskey straight.

The smell from between her legs permeates the summer air. [...]

I turn away,
stare at the skeins of synthetic wool tangled orange and green around
knitting needles and empty bottles spilling from paste-board boxes
near her bed (*American Dreams*, 163).

As Adrienne Rich points out, for working class women, the act of writing rarely happens in a private space – rather:

poems are written and absorbed, silently and aloud, in prisons, prairie kitchens, urban basement workshops, branch libraries, battered women's shelters, homeless shelters, offices, a public hospital for disabled people, an HIV support group (*What Is Found There*, 207).

The experiences of working class women, therefore, will always be left out of narratives about women's lives that rely upon a particular physical space to provide their setting:

The very stability, familiarity, and security of these physical structures are undermined by the discovery that these buildings and streets witnessed and obscured particular race, class and gender struggles (Martin, 297).

The failure of middle class female writers to acknowledge and include the experiences of working class women is a common problem that stretches far beyond the writings of women like Eavan Boland. Elizabeth V Spelman notes that, since the birth of the women's movement,

the focus on women "as women" has addressed only one group of women – namely, white middle-class women... the solution has not been to talk about what women have in common as women; it has been to conflate the condition of one group of women with the condition of all (*Inessential Woman*, 3).

Sapphire's domestic settings are also used to deal with ideas about race. For women of colour, the very word "domestic" is heavy with meaning. Well into the twentieth century, "domestic" was used as a noun to describe a usually-female domestic servant. In the United States, domestic servants were almost always women of colour. Roxane Gay argues:

In the wake of slavery, black women entered the domestic workplace where they had to deal with many of the same dangers they faced during slavery, while raising other people's children as well as their own (Gay, 18).

And many of the female speakers in Sapphire's poems are domestic servants. In "A New Day for Willa Mae", Willa Mae's employer dismissively describes her as, 'just another large coloured girl with a child she had to feed, benign contempt for the people she served, clean, a good cook, a little late sometimes' (*American Dreams*, 55). In "Are You Ready To Rock?", the female speaker realises that her race is the reason, 'why you went back willingly / to the back door, / whore house, / & white bitch's kitchen' (*Ibid*, 8). Far from being "a room of one's own", Sapphire argues that for black women, the domestic sphere is often a place where they are literally owned by the white families they work for. For example, in "Arisa":

I'm tired already
of cleaning

this white bitch's house
her white body [...]
I try to think positive
in circles of shimmering
white light;
everything is white
down here on the upper west side
you are over it all (*Ibid*, 79)

Even when it is presented in a more abstract way, the domestic sphere is still problematic for women of colour. In their book *border women*, Debra A Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba devote a chapter to the double-meaning of “homely,” a word often applied to the narratives of women of colour. On the one hand, the word “homely” is a positive descriptor for, ‘intimate domestic spaces’ meaning ‘homelike’ (*border women*, 151). On the other hand, the term is potentially dismissive. ‘These stories are “homely” in a second sense as well, for they speak lovingly about ordinary, unlovely people and situations’ (*Ibid*). Sapphire’s writing is by no means “homely” in the first sense of the word, but could easily be put into the second category. Her poems display some of the same ‘unlovely’ characteristics mentioned by Castillo and Córdoba. For example, ‘homely female bodies... unflatteringly overweight, heavily made-up... stuffed into a form of white woman drag’ (*Ibid*, 153), appear in many of Sapphire’s works, including “Are You Ready To Rock?”:

women douse themselves with perfume, put on push-up bras & slide into tight red dresses flashing the hold card of youth and desirability... you know you a woman who got to bleed every month & finally turn to sour milk & fat & die alone or too young (*American Dreams*, 2)

Sapphire is keen to give voice to the women whose experiences might otherwise be dismissed on the grounds of being “homely.” As well as including female domestic servants, she writes a series of three poems, “Trilogy,” from the point of view of sex workers:

It was me, Sherry, Naomi, Lee, Princess, Misty, Angel, Zulima, Shawnessy, RubyJane – stripping, jammed into that little dressing room, a world to itself, a freak set untouched by outside values. I learned to be free, to like their bodies, play. The

men in the booths, the freaks, I watched them drop quarters, crook their fingers, beckon, unzip their pants (*Ibid*, 46).

Another prose poem, “There’s A Window,” is written from the point of view of a female prisoner:

Hawk-eyed, crew cut butch, she was old compared to me. How the fuck did she keep her underwear so clean in this dingy hole, I marvelled. They acted like showers and changes of clothes were privileges. [...] My heart swelled up big-time inside my chest. Here we was in death’s asshole, two bitches behind bars, hard as nails and twice as ugly – caring. She *cared* about me, she cared about herself (*Ibid*, 103).

“Human Torso Gives Birth,” is about the experience of a quadruple amputee trying to take care of her baby without help:

But they can’t take my baby from me. I won’t let them she says determinedly. I am more fun than a circus as I show the judge how I can change a diaper with my teeth and tongue (*Ibid*, 117).

The decision to make her black female characters so “homely” and “unlovely” is an examination of another stereotypical image of the black woman within the domestic sphere: not the domestic servant, but the Mammy. As Gay argues: ‘The Mammy archetype... suggested that all black women were full-figured, happy, dark-skinned, domestic, completely asexual, and selfless in their desire to care for others’ (Gay, 18). Her poems deliberately demolish the Mammy stereotype, depicting black women in guises that directly oppose it.

These are women who reject their familial obligations, for example, in “Breaking Karma #8”:

I haven’t seen her in ten, eleven years,
I’m twenty-four, twenty-five years old.
My grandmother and aunt have heard I moved
to San Francisco. They call all the Ls
in the book. [...]
What do they want with me now?
What do I need a grandmother and an aunt
for now? (*Black Wings*, 11)

Sapphire also allows her black female speakers to voice their anger and unhappiness in poems like “An Ordinary Evening”:

You were sitting in the den, by the tone of your voice you could have been asking are there any more hot dogs left or saying let's go get high. She said you turned around and looked at her and said, "Let's kill him, let's kill the old man" (*Ibid*, 26).

In the poem "American Dreams," Sapphire responds to being publicly labelled "Mammy":

BE MY BLACK MAMMY SAPPHIRE
BE MY BLACK MAMMY
He held on & wouldn't let go
Finally I thought to turn
my hand into a claw
& raked straight down his face
with my fingernails (*American Dreams*, 16).

For Sapphire, the domestic sphere is a thoroughly undesirable setting for the black woman writer, because it cannot be disentangled from these racist stereotypes. The Mammy is also an impossibly narrow archetype: even if she aspired to replicate it, the black woman writer would inevitably fall short. '[The Mammy] is selfless and independent. She is resourceful. She is stoic and suffers in silence. She gives and gives and gives until even the marrow has been sucked out of her bones' (Gay, 18). The poem "in my father's house" describes a black girl's desperation to please her father by excelling at her domestic chores, but to no avail:

I cooked, cleaned
no one asked how school was going,
what I needed or dreamed.
I had to have dinner ready at 5:30
biscuits cornbread ribs chicken meatloaf [...]
I went to sit down at the table
& stopped shocked
my father had only set a place
for himself (*American Dreams*, 28)

These poems suggest that black working class female writers have no access to Virginia Woolf's 'rooms of their own and five hundred a year' (*Women and Writing*, 54). Instead, Sapphire is seeking a different space for women – a communal, creative space – in the same way as Maud Sulter, who writes:

As a blackwoman actively engaged in cultural production, writing, performing, skill-sharing, making pictures... I am not safe in the home. I do not have free speech. I do not have freedom of choice. These democratic rights are a fallacy. [...] Our priority must be to give ourselves the space to create (149).

For Sapphire, this space is not inside a room of her own, but inside poetry itself. In “Ghosts,” she writes from an unfamiliar room at a writer’s colony, but calls the poem she creates there “home”:

Why have I come
here, and what do their ghosts
want with me. I know I’m not writing poetry

But trying to build a bridge back to poetry. [...]

Here at the writer’s colony I attempt poetry in a room.
I see my mother and father at the top of the sky. My parents
have come here, home, to help me, ghosts (*Black Wings*, 22-3)

This idea of a black woman’s safe space being within her own creativity is taken directly from the writings of Audre Lorde:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. [...] Our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house (*Sister Outsider*, 37).

Here, Lorde appears to be arguing for the kind of freedom of expression that is offered by the confessional mode. ‘We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it’ (*Ibid*, 38). Indeed, there are various elements in Sapphire’s poetry which can be read as confessional. Like the work of Anne Sexton and Sharon Olds, Sapphire’s poetry deals unflinchingly with the more taboo aspects of being female. The female body is described candidly, simply, without euphemisms, for example in “A New Day for Willa Mae”:

Then she pulled off her uniform and her slip; letting her breasts fall out of her brassiere, she stepped in front of her dressing table and looked at her large body with satisfaction. "It's mine," she sighed (Sapphire, *American Dreams*, 56).

Like Sexton, Rich and Olds, Sapphire also describes in graphic detail menstruation and female masturbation. "Are You Ready To Rock?" is one of her most candid poems:

someone touches your breast
in a way that seems ancient,
you remember sitting on
the toilet watching your
blood drip red on top of toilet paper & shit,
you remember
reading a poem,
you remember
masturbating (*Ibid*, 7).

Also like Sexton and Olds, Sapphire returns repeatedly to the motif of the female child physically and sexually abused by her father. Sometimes, as in "Mickey Mouse Was A Scorpio," the abuse is veiled in the innocent language of a child:

The farmer takes Jill down the well
& all the king's horses
& all the king's men
can't put that baby together again
crooked man
crooked man
pumpkin eater
childhood stealer (*Ibid*, 22).

Elsewhere, as in "False Memory Syndrome (or, In The Dream)", the abuse is described uncompromisingly:

In the dream my father
is a mean man
who is fucking with me up to the
time I am grown
He puts his big finger between
my legs and pushes pushes hard
mean
in the dream my body is good
to me and doesn't let his horrible
finger in (*Black Wings*, 24).

In “in my father’s house” and other poems, Sapphire tries to reconcile herself to this abuse, in the same way that Olds does in “I Go Back To May 1937”:

he told me his father put his foot on his neck
& beat him til his nose bled.
he left home when he was 14,
an Aries full of blind light
trying to wrap barbed wire around the wind.

my father bent a piece of rubber hose
into a black ellipse, then taped the ends together
to make a handle. he beat me with this (*American Dreams*, 23).

In “Mickey Mouse Was A Scorpio”, she even echoes Olds directly: ‘don’t tell me about god & good little girls / i want to live / i want to live’ (*Ibid*, 21).

However, Sapphire actively resists the categorisation of her work as confessional or autobiographical, even when her poems appear to be based on her own experience. This resistance may have been triggered by Senator Jesse Helms, who used one of Sapphire’s poems, “Wild Thing,” without consent, to protest the fact that she had received an award from The National Endowment of the Arts in 1994, and as part of a wider campaign against the NEA itself. She describes the experience as deeply frustrating:

My work was used against me and I was painted as a pervert playing into the sexual exploitation of women. I spent so many years of my life undoing the effects of my own sexual abuse as a child, trying to help my students with this, and be an advocate in my own community with stopping rape, denouncing incest and exposing the sexual exploitation and victimization of women. Then to have someone parade the material like that was very harmful (Keehnen).

Critics and reviewers have also questioned the authenticity of Sapphire’s poetry. She claims: ‘I was further marginalized and seen as subversive, transgressive, and antagonistic to society as opposed to a person who is very concerned about the culture and wanting it to change’ (Keehnen). Nellie McKay argues that literary critics have always worked to dismiss the writings of black women as unimportant, and have always appeared keen to rely on

stereotypes, 'to [allow] black women to be considered an indistinct whole' (Gay, 18). She writes:

history assures us that black women have not ever been artistically or critically silent, even though for most of the past their voices went largely ignored by those who did not wish to hear them. [...] [B]lack women have always confirmed and authenticated the complexity of the black American female experience, and in so doing have debunked the negative stereotypes that others created of them while denying them audience for their words (153).

McKay writes in the past tense, but Sapphire sees this as an on-going problem that is reflected in critics' assumptions that her work is autobiographical.

This has something to do with class and race and the way African Americans are perceived in the world of literature. We're not often seen as people with imagination and vision and focus and artistry. [...] Instead of thinking I was talented or intelligent or intuitive... well, that couldn't be, because I'm black. They just assumed it was all autobiography (Bidisha).

Sapphire is only too aware of the effects of stereotyping. She points out that, 'you have this vast universe of African Americans, Latin American kids and women who are invisible and disenfranchised from the culture' (Bidisha) as a result of it. She works deliberately to make it difficult for readers of her work to draw easy conclusions, and one of the ways she does this is by simultaneously embracing and rejecting the confessional mode. Sapphire's poems are confessional – they are full of women speaking candidly about their lives – but they are not always autobiographical:

[Sapphire's] background is modest and normal – army parents who broke up. Sapphire lived with her father, but was also in touch with her mother and studied dance, poetry, ancient history and medicine before teaching creative writing for years and publishing highly acclaimed collections of poetry (*Ibid*).

As Lynda S Kauffman points out, 'there is something fatally alluring about personal testimony. [...] Invocations to personal experience are appealing because they imply that one can surmount injustice and triumph over adversity' (1158-9). However, Kauffman also questions the conventional wisdom that denotes female confession as an inherently feminist

act. 'Removed from history, economics, *and even from the unconscious*, [the individual] is depicted as someone who always has choices, and whose choices are always "free"' (1164). Making personal confession a cornerstone – if not a requirement – of feminist writing is as damaging for those whose choices are *not* free as the assumption that what every female writer needs is "a room of her own." Sapphire does not see the recording of her own personal story as a particularly powerful act, and, in fact, she questions the legitimacy of such an act. 'Even when a person creates what they are calling "autobiographical poetry" they all have that element of fiction to me' (Cerra). It is clear, however, that she agrees with Audre Lorde's assertion that poems on intensely personal topics, 'become spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas' (37). In Sapphire's work, such ideas are spoken in the voices of women whose experiences have largely been left out of feminist writing. The speaker of much of her work is, she says, 'a composite of many young women I encountered when I worked as a literacy teacher in Harlem and the Bronx. [...] To me she has not existed in literature before' (Keehnen). Sapphire is writing confessions, but the confessions are not always her own. Deryn Rees-Jones attributes the invention of this technique to Anne Sexton, and refers to the resulting poems as 'dramatic monologues which also offer a confession in another voice' (*Consorting*, 135).

Sapphire makes careful use of poetic form in her building of a platform from which to tell the stories of black women who are, in her eyes, underrepresented in literature. Many of her obviously non-autobiographical poems are written as prose poems, using a long line. For example, in the first part of "Trilogy," the poem about sex workers:

The rent is due next week. I just paid the motherfucker! It's always something – rent, phone, gas, Graham technique classes, tokens. I laid down and spread my legs for them funky, chump-change tips. Into the pink (*American Dreams*, 39).

Meanwhile, poems that are more clearly based on Sapphire's own experience – her brother's death in "Autopsy Report 86-13504," for example – tend to use enjambment across a shorter line, making them more obviously recognisable as poems:

 he described you
little razor knife cutting
to blurred type
on stapled pages –
Michael (you had hell learning to spell that name,
stuttering up to M-I-C-H, not knowing whether the
"a" or "e" came next) *Lofton*.
I hold a 9 by 12 manilla envelope that contains your
birth certificate, death certificate & autopsy report.
[...] the grass bleeds & the wind spells correctly:
M-I-C-H-A-E-L (*Ibid*, 90).

The long line is not merely used to hint at a speaker who is not Sapphire herself, however.

The long line allows the women's voices to develop and become distinct from one another, as well as distinct from Sapphire's own. For example, the speaker in "Human Torso Gives Birth" – 'I dream of breaking bricks with my fists, turning flips and flying across the stage at Madison Square Garden. Black female sixth-degree black belt, all the people screaming and cheering me on' (*Ibid*, 117) – is obviously a very different woman from the speaker in "Violet '86":

 He is coarse, red and ugly. He is rich. He is white. He is the surgeon come to get you to sign papers to pump poison into your aorta. I am poor. I am black. I am a woman. I run to you. His gloved hands move towards the papers, but mine is on them first. I face the devil with no deodorant or degrees (*Ibid*, 86).

Furthermore, these are speakers of a class, race and gender perpetually ignored within conventional ideas of a Western poetic tradition. Therefore, Sapphire consciously adjusts her writing style to represent their voices. Many of these persona poems are largely free from capital letters – including their titles. "in my father's house" is one example:

 together alone one night we were watching t.v.
& my father shot to his feet as

The Star Spangled Banner
hailed the network's last gleaming.
he stood at attention saluting the red & white striped
tongue gyrating on the t.v. screen (*Ibid*, 23).

The rejection of capital letters in black women's writing is most commonly associated with the critic bell hooks, who used her lower-case pseudonym with a view to distancing herself from 'patriarchal norms that placed value on thought and labor based on the titles held by, and name recognition of, its [sic] source' (Jackson). In *Talking Back*, hooks urged black women writers to reject ideas about how their writing "should" look or sound, in favour of creating an authentic expression of their own experiences:

While feminist women... often say that they want to hear from women who have not spoken, they do not always want to hear what we have to say. Often when we speak, our ideas are not only expressed differently but they are different... those of us who are coming from different ethnic and racial backgrounds must work to overcome the racism, sexism and class exploitation that has socialised us to believe our words are not important (154).

The words 'The Star Spangled Banner' are among the only ones Sapphire capitalises in "in my father's house." The fact that the only capitals are given to this symbol of white American patriotism mirrors hooks' idea that capitalisation denotes power and value. This also applies to Sapphire's decision to keep the names in the title of "poem for jennifer, marla, tawana & me" in lower case. The poem tells the stories of four women who were all victims of some kind of gendered violence, and explores the ways in which each woman's identity and agency were removed or undermined by the media coverage of the crimes:

a woman must be a good girl, virgin, myth of a thing
in order to be raped. any other kind of woman
brought it on herself, did it to herself, it was her own fault, her
own fault... (*American Dreams*, 109)

While each woman's name is presented in lower case in the title, along with the speaking "I" – 'i've been raped. i am afraid of that happening again. [...] and what could i say? i *am* that type of girl' (*Ibid*, 111) – the names of the male perpetrators are all given capitals: 'i am

thinking about the scratches on Robert Chambers's face and hands' (*Ibid*, 108). Sarah J Jackson writes of bell hooks, '[her] naming politics then asks us to consider a reordering of the very systems in which names, successes, and other social conventions are established.' Sapphire does the same, using non-traditional poetic and linguistic techniques in order to question the tradition that has routinely left black, working class women's voices out.

Sapphire is using her autobiographical poems to question patriarchal assumptions. Her work questions the theory – created initially by Virginia Woolf and then extrapolated by other writer-critics like Eavan Boland – that the best place for the female writer is in “a room of her own.” Her poems illustrate that this suggestion is classist, as it does not acknowledge the realities of working class life. Sapphire uses poems like “Going Home” to depict the lives of working class women:

As a military family we were always moving.
My mother adamant about Easter eggs and Christmas tree lights. [...]
I think about Kirk with thirteen children, wonder about windows
and that for so long I had none (*Black Wings*, 41).

Sapphire also reveals uncomfortable truths about the domestic sphere – traditionally considered an acceptable topic for women's writing, and a space that Sharon Olds actively claims as a site of power. Sapphire's poems argue that the domestic sphere can never be safe for women, because it is a place where they are routinely at risk from abuse. In her work, this abuse is always patriarchal and is usually represented by the figure of an abusive father, for example in “poem for jennifer, marla, tawana & me”:

use my bones to build a house
where we may heal
and unlearn the patriarchy.
a house where my father
cannot come (*American Dreams*, 115).

Sapphire's work examines 'the tradition,' which is so often reliant upon sexist and racist stereotypes of black women. Through her poems, which are almost always in the first person, she strives to speak for women whose voices all too often go unheard. Like Sharon Olds, Sapphire is keen to appropriate and subvert the confessional mode in order to use it to her own ends. However, in the poems in which she writes the confessions of women whose experiences are not her own, Sapphire is truly 'get[ting] beyond ego,' in spite of the fact that she is not actually 'getting beyond the first person singular' (*Tongue*, 148). Sapphire seeks a place in 'the tradition' less for herself and more for the black, working class women who might never write their own confessions. 'To become the voice of more than autobiography' (*Ibid*) is exactly what she hopes to do.

Chapter Three

‘No one could say the stories were useless’: female agency in the reimagined myths of Liz Lochhead

Feminist and literary critics alike have suggested that one of the most important functions not just of confessional poetry, but of all contemporary literature by women is to look again at representations of women and female power in myth. Marina Warner makes a compelling case for the continuing relevance of myth in *Six Myths of Our Time*:

Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context – they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they’re not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed but – and this is fortunate – never set so hard they cannot be changed again. (*Ibid*, 19)

Historian of religion Karen Armstrong agrees that human beings seeking to determine their place in the world should turn to their culture’s ancient myths:

Mythology was designed to help us to cope with the problematic human predicament. It helped people to find their place in the world and their true orientation. We all want to know where we came from, but... our earliest beginnings are lost in the mists of prehistory (*A Short History*, 6).

This process of rediscovering mythical stories is particularly essential for women:

The telling and retelling of stories may well be the central project of contemporary women’s writing. The construction or reclamation of a women’s tradition shapes or brings to light hidden or neglected stories. And the retelling of traditional stories or myths has become one of the significant strategies of female and feminist creativity (McMillan, 17).

However, the task of tracing a female mythical lineage has been made extremely difficult, as Clarissa Pinkola Estés explains in her vast study of women’s myth and folklore, *Women Who Run With The Wolves*:

[Historians] suspect the famous brothers [Grimm] continued the tradition of old pagan

symbols overlaid with Christian ones, so that an old healer in a tale became an evil witch, a spirit became an angel, an initiation veil or caul became a handkerchief, or a child named Beautiful (the customary name for a child born during Solstice festival) was renamed *Schmerzenreich*, Sorrowful. Sexual elements were omitted. Helping creatures and animals were changed into demons and boogeyes.

This is how many women's teaching tales about sex, love, money, marriage, birthing, death and transformation were lost. It is how fairy tales and myths that explicate ancient women's mysteries have been covered over, too. Most old collections of fairy tales and myths existent today have been scoured clean of the scatological, the sexual, the perverse, the pre-Christian, the feminine (Pinkola Estés, 16).

The process has serious implications for contemporary female writers. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine specific myths and stories in the early chapters of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and acknowledge the ways in which the gender roles within these myths have contributed to the creation of a 'Western literary history [which] is overwhelmingly male – or, more accurately, patriarchal' (47):

From Eve, Minerva, Sophia and Galatea onward, after all, patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men, the children of male brains, ribs, and ingenuity. [...] At the same time, male texts, continually elaborating the metaphor of literary paternity, have continually proclaimed that, in Honoré de Balzac's ambiguous words, "women's virtue is man's greatest invention." [...] This complex of metaphors and etiologies simply reflects not just the fiercely patriarchal structure of Western society but also the underpinning of misogyny upon which that severe patriarchy has stood (12-13).

The reclamation of a mythic – and by extension, literary – tradition for women has arguably become the central focus of feminist writing and literary criticism. Lillian S. Robinson stresses the importance of this project in her essay 'Treason Our Text: feminist challenges to the literary canon':

The male-authored canon contributes to the body of information, stereotype, inference and surmise about the female sex that is generally in the culture. Once this state of affairs has been exposed... [feminist criticism] can emphasize alternative readings of the tradition, readings that reinterpret women's character, motivations, and actions and that identify and challenge sexist ideology (117).

In the absence of a female literary tradition, the re-telling and re-energising of old stories allows female writers to fill in the blanks in their literary bloodline, and on their own terms.

Armstrong notes, ‘there is never a single, orthodox version of a myth. As our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring out their timeless truth’ (*A Short History*, 11). Confessional poetry by women has always been closely linked to the telling and re-telling of myths. Arguably Anne Sexton’s most accessible collection, *Transformations* – published in 1971 – is a series of poems that focusses on revising the myth and folklore gathered by the brothers Grimm. Deryn Rees-Jones claims the book ‘brings together 17 retellings of Grimms’ fairytales, [and] the confessional element is partially projected onto the characters of the fairytales whose stories are retold and dramatised’ (*Consorting*, 135-6). Sylvia Plath’s poetry was also very much concerned with exploring myth, albeit in a less obvious way. Linda Wagner-Martin finds multiple mythical allusions in many of Plath’s poems – for example, “Ariel” is an examination of:

beliefs as generated from Tarot card 14, Art or Temperance, on which a black-white woman is doing alchemical work over a cauldron, with a lion and eagle at her feet. Associated with this iconography is the number 60, the Hebrew letter S, the sign Sagittarius, the God Jupiter, the Goddess Diana, the colour blue, the horse, the Arrow, the hips and thighs, the centaur, and the Path of union with one’s Higher Self or Holy Guardian Angel, symbolised by the sun (115-116).

And Sexton and Plath are not the only prominent female poets to have rewritten myth in their work. Deryn Rees-Jones describes:

a catalogue of work by women poets... drawing on [mythical] narratives, including HD’s *Trilogy* (1944) and *Helen in Egypt* (1961), Margaret Atwood’s “Circe/Mud” sequence, Judith Kazantzis’s *The Wicked Queen* (1980), Michelene Wandor’s *Gardens of Eden* (1984), Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* (1971), Liz Lochhead’s *The Grimm Sisters* (1981)... and a whole list of books by women novelists (*Consorting*, 148).

To underline the connection between the confessional and the mythic, Rees-Jones goes on to quote Susan Sellers, who writes: ‘the communal process of telling and retelling a myth until it contains the input of many in a pared down form has the paradoxical effect of reflecting our experiences more powerfully than if we were to retain a profusion of personal details’ (*Ibid*,

149). Adrienne Rich, herself a poet of the confessional mode, referred to this process as, ‘women poets [learning] to use what they’ve sieved up from the old river, combining it anew’ (*What Is Found There*, 159).

Liz Lochhead was born in 1947 and began publishing her poetry in the early 1970s. Throughout her career she has returned again and again to ideas about myth, folklore and storytelling. She describes her first book, *Memo for Spring*, published in 1972, as ‘all about grey streets and rain and here and now’ (Wilson, 9) but acknowledges that in all her subsequent collections – six of them, to date – she has been keen to focus more on tropes, archetypes and stories that have long existed: ‘I began to retell familiar stories from another angle. [...] I’ve been fascinated by familiar stories and myths and legends’ (*Ibid*, 9-10).

Lochhead’s approach to these myths and stories is complex. She writes and re-writes them from a deliberately female perspective – a process Dorothy Porter McMillan describes as ‘the central project of contemporary women’s writing’ (17). Lochhead describes her motivation thus: ‘I didn’t want the women to be the object in the stories, but the subject’ (Wilson, 10). However, although she identifies herself as a feminist, she is keen to distance this poetic work from her feminist politics:

My work would never be anti-feminist, but I don’t think of myself as a feminist writer because I don’t think you can write and sign up for anything. [...] I think feminism’s basically very, very simple. It’s about equal pay, equal opportunities, abortion on demand, free childcare. So what could you write about these things? (Wilson, 12)

Speaking on the subject at the 2011 Edinburgh International Book Festival, she noted: ‘it’s very depressing that we have to do [feminism] all over again. It’s always the same – it’s just like the hoovering’ (In Conversation). Lochhead speaks about feminism as though it is a chore: something that could potentially get in the way of the more important business of writing. These statements are surprising. In the early 1970s, when she first began publishing her work, Lochhead was one of the only contemporary female poets of note in Scotland, and

her presence in a literary scene where the rising stars were ‘Kelman, Gray, Leonard, Spence and Lochhead’ (Smith, 7) provided inspiration for other female Scottish writers to begin publishing. Jackie Kay, for example, names Lochhead’s work as a starting point for her own feminist awakening in her poem “Kail and Callaloo”: ‘Liz was my teenage hero / OCH MEN and her stop and start rhythm / I’d never heard of Audre Lorde back then’ (Kay, 196). This suggests that even if Lochhead did not identify as a feminist at this point, this did not stop others from finding feminist messages in her work. More importantly, Lochhead’s poems themselves contradict her insistence that they are ‘greater than these isms’ (Wilson, 13). Critics routinely identify them as feminist, noting that Lochhead regularly takes ‘gender relations as her targets... linking themes of sisterhood, class and blood’ (Christianson, 46-47). Lochhead was also one of the first female writers to take up the task of revising myths and familiar folklore from a female perspective. ‘[Lochhead] has been an influential mould-breaker in so many ways from 1972 until the present, anticipating with her *Memo for Spring* the feminist discourses of the later 1970s’ (McCulloch, 11). Lochhead’s *The Grimm Sisters* appeared in 1981, only two years after Angela Carter published *The Bloody Chamber*, and prior to the appearance of the anthology *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*, which Carter edited. But Lochhead seems keen to stress that her poetry is not affiliated with any particular cause. In her preface to the 2003 edition of *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems, 1967-1984*, she claimed that she writes poetry solely ‘for consolation, and for fun’ (xii). In *A Choosing: Selected Poems*, published in 2011, she refers to her body of work as ‘a random flinging-together without much rhyme or reason’ (xii). Referring to oneself as a feminist poet, she believes, ‘tells a lot of people not to bother listening’ (Wilson, 11).

However, Lochhead’s desire to revise myths and challenge archetypes looks very much like an example of the feminist project of ‘scholarship devoted to the discovery, republication and reappraisal’ (Robinson, 119) of women’s stories. Lochhead clearly

acknowledges that the stories and folk tales we tell our children – and each other – have gradually shaped and continue to shape the society in which we live. She fully realises their power and influence. ‘The fictions and narratives of a society contribute as fundamentally to its character as its laws and economy and political arrangements’ (Warner, xvii). In “Storyteller,” the first of a trio entitled “Storyteller Poems,” Lochhead taps into the ancient and quintessentially female tradition of oral storytelling:

No one could say the stories were useless
for as the tongue clacked
five or forty fingers stitched
corn was grated from the husk
the patchwork was pieced
or the darning done (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 79).

Of course, she is describing a circle of women who use storytelling to pass the time while completing their domestic tasks. (Similar to Sapphire’s vision of the domestic, these are depicted as both difficult and time-consuming – ‘every last crumb of daylight was salted away’ (*Ibid*) – and also dangerous, with children at ‘the terrible mercy / of the Worst Mother’ (*Ibid*, 81).) However, the ‘patchwork’ that is being pieced together is also the patchwork of community, and by extension, of society and culture. And it is not just the act of telling stories and creating myths that shapes the machinations of a society – making changes to a fundamental tale or myth can also change the society that myth has helped to mould:

As a tale names characters, and makes distinctions among motifs, setting, and behaviour, and as certain new stylistic and social applications are introduced or older ones are abandoned, the tale breathes differently – namely, it breathes new, meaningful life into the community of listeners. (Zipes, 8)

A female writer like Lochhead goes through the process of, ‘being alienated from an accepted myth, recognising her alienation, appropriating myth for her own purposes, and passing into the reality of mythology... in which women believe in their own experiences’ (Lauter, 13-14). As part of this process – though perhaps unconsciously – Lochhead chooses

myths, fairy tales and folk stories which offer her an opportunity to examine and re-examine gender roles and the balance of power between men and women in contemporary society. She is particularly interested in stories that feature a female protagonist alongside a male beast or monster, the most obvious example being the ancient fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast.” In the trio “Three Twists,” Lochhead creates her own re-telling of this famous story, which she titles “Beauty and the”:

From one sleepy thought
of how like a mane his hair...
next thing
he’s furred & feathered, pig bristled,
warted like a toad
puffed & jumping (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 90)

In this short poem, Lochhead unravels the various problematic readings that this tale has produced in its long and colourful life. Originally, the stories on which “Beauty and the Beast” is based would likely have been told by women, but “authored” by male folktale collectors, who routinely edited out any suggestion that female characters could be strong or resourceful:

‘Tales about innocent persecuted women collected by neglected female storytellers and writers... are not readily available in the classical fairy tale collections of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Andersen... [O]ur notion of female protagonists in fairy tales has been greatly informed by male collectors and writers who often domesticated the heroines and made them more passive than they actually were’ (Zipes, 95).

The version of the story we recognise today had, somewhat unusually, a female author – Madame Leprince de Beaumont. It is based on ‘several beast bridegroom tales such as “Marvizia”, “The King of Love,” “King Dead Horse” and “The Serpent”, and in each story a young woman is put to severe tests to rescue an enchanted prince or tame a beast’ (*Ibid*, 132). However, de Beaumont’s take differs from earlier tellings – it was her version that initially introduced the idea of Beauty being forced to reside with the Beast against her will, ‘as a sacrifice to save her father’ rather than ‘to prove she is valiant, smart and competent’ (*Ibid*).

This rather more unpleasant version of the story has become the one we retell today because it was seized upon by male folktale collectors who preferred, ‘stories that concern rape, incest, abuse and violation, intolerable and unjust acts’ (*Ibid*). Lochhead certainly reads rape into the story’s subtext:

he grew horns
he had you
screaming mammy daddy screaming blue
murder. [...]
the green cling of those
froggy fingers
will make you shudder yet. (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 90)

The line ‘he had you’ implies both Beauty’s confinement and the Beast’s control, as well as the loss of her virginity – without consent, as her ‘shudder’ at his touch suggests. However, Lochhead is by no means playing into the hands of this patriarchally imposed reading of the tale. For all that this scene implies a rape, Lochhead subverts the reader’s expectations and refuses to make things entirely clear. There is also a definite eroticism about the sexual encounter between the Beast and the poem’s speaker. The opening lines are, ‘Beast / he was hot’ (*Ibid*), suggesting an attraction on the part of Beauty, and tapping into ideas about the allure of the “bad boy” character, ‘the idea that all beauties deep down really want a beast... after the Beast, Prince Charming can only be a comedown’ (Warner, 80). There is also the suggestion that a sexually virile Beast is preferable to a do-gooding Prince Charming – a figure of ridicule in all three of the “Twists”. In “Rapunzstiltskin,” the Prince has ‘absolutely / all the wrong answers’, and the heroine is frustrated by ‘his tendency to talk in strung-together cliché’ (*Ibid*, 89). In spite of her confinement and domination by the Beast, Beauty notes that her situation is:

[b]etter than hanging around
a hundred years for Someone
to hack his way through the thorns

for the shoe that fits
for the chance to have you cough up
the poisoned apple
wedged in your gullet (*Ibid*, 91)

This is mythic tradition turned on its head – rather than simply accepting her fate, or hoping that eventually a hero will come along to save her, the female protagonist is actively weighing up her options, and rejecting the “happily ever after” ending. And the reader can see why. Unlike Prince Charming, whose incompetence eventually destroys Rapunzel – ‘*I love you?* he came up with / as she finally tore herself in two’ (*Ibid*, 90) – the Beast is unable to maintain his control over Beauty. As the poem goes on, Lochhead further refuses the simplistic reading of Beauty as imprisoned and violated virgin, one of the male folktale collector’s ‘domestics and breeders, born to serve the interests of men’ (Zipes, 80). The reader senses that Beauty is not going to succumb to the Beast’s charms and fall in love with her captor-rapist after all: ‘[E]mbrace the beast, endure. // Three days & nights, three patient years, / you’ll win I’m sure’ (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 91). Lochhead points out that actually, it is Beauty who sways the balance of power in the relationship: in every traditional version of the tale, she succeeds in civilising the Beast, moulding him into a partner she can desire and accept. ‘Belle attends to his personal growth. He learns to weep, not roar, and wins her... all he needed was the love of a good woman’ (Warner, 80).

However, Lochhead recognises that this version of the tale is problematic – and ultimately patriarchal – too. For a start, once the Beast is tamed, he loses his potent allure, ‘becomes just another episode in the long tragic chronicle about male libidos unjustly slapped down’ (*Ibid*). Thus, as depicted in the third “Twist,” there is the danger that a character like Beauty may become bored with her once exciting lover:

On the fourth night,
the lady thought as she drifted off to sleep
how monotonous it was going to be
to live on rabbit stew forever

& she turned a little away
from snoring, the smell of wild garlic.

When they passed him on the road
on the fifth day,
she began to make eyes at the merchant. (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 92)

Furthermore, even if Beauty succeeds in overcoming and eventually civilising the Beast, she is still complicit in her own objectification and control. By eventually accepting the Beast, Beauty's character is excusing his behaviour – manipulation, kidnap and rape – and her story reinforcing patriarchal ideals. 'Such plots neatly manage a stack of pleasures: they flatter women with evidence of their remarkable powers to excite and tame the primitive, [but] they excuse men their deep-down wild impulses... and continual control of women' (Warner, 80). Realising this, Lochhead further subverts the story. Beauty comes out on top not by turning her rapist into her ideal man, but by becoming a beast herself so that she can match his strength and brutality:

Oh but soon
(her hair grew lang her breath grew strang)
you'll
(little One-Eye for little Three-Eyes, the
Bearded Lady)
Yes, sweet Beauty, you'll
match him
horror for horror. (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 91)

By re-examining and updating fairy tale and myth in this way, Lochhead is contributing to a brand new tradition – overwhelmingly female – that seeks to revise, subvert and satirise mythic and fairy tale tropes in a feminist light. This tradition is most commonly associated with the works of Angela Carter, who compiled a selection of such stories in *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*. This selection includes Suniti Namjoshi's reworking of Little Red Riding Hood, in which the only male characters – the axe-wielding hero and the wolf – are in fact one and the same. 'Wolf not slain. Forester is wolf. How else was he there

exactly on time?’ (Three Feminist Fables, 85). In this re-telling, too, the female protagonist transforms herself into the beast – in this case, a wolf – in order to maintain her agency. ‘R gets it straight. Okay to be wolf. Mama is a wolf. She is a wolf’ (*Ibid*). Carter also rewrote the Beauty and the Beast story herself as “The Tiger’s Bride”, one of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*. In Carter’s version, too, Beauty transforms into a beast-like figure during her sexual encounter with the Beast, indicating her decision to fight against, rather than succumb to, her ordeal:

He growled at the back of his throat, lowered his head, sank on to his forepaws, snarled, showed me his red gullet, his yellow teeth. He never moved. He snuffed the air, as if to smell my fear; he could not. Slowly, slowly, he began to drag his heavy, gleaming weight across the floor towards me. [...] He dragged himself close and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. [...] And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (75)

Lochhead extends this revisionist, feminist stance to newer tales, too. She recognises that myths are little more than stories; stories are turned into myths when they ‘are perpetuated through cultural repetition, transmitted through a variety of pathways’ (Warner, xx). In light of this, she is able to pick out for appropriation another popular “beast” myth whose themes and ideas have certainly shaped contemporary attitudes— Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*:

I decided I would like to write about Mary Wollstonecraft. [...] It kept fascinating me, how this intellectual, rational woman, with all these incredibly powerful, almost too rational, views of female education, had been so haunted by bogeymen in her own life, and had tried to drown herself. And then it interested me that her daughter should have grown up to write *Frankenstein*... Why would Mary Shelley write about monsters? I was haunted by that phrase from Goya: the sleep of reason produces monsters. If you try to force things to be too rational the dark and untidy bits will well up and manifest themselves (Wilson, 13).

Lochhead imagines this manifestation in the poem “Dreaming Frankenstein” – again, one poem in a trio examining the Frankenstein myth – as a literal, physical monster, who breaks into Mary Shelley’s room as she sleeps. Published in a collection of the same name, three

years after *The Grimm Sisters*, this poem carries definite echoes of “Beauty and the”. Again, there is a suggestion of rape:

[h]er mother-tongue clung to her mouth’s roof
in terror, dumbing her, and he came with a name
that was none of her making. [...]
a ton-weight sensation,
the marks fading visibly where
his buttons had bit into her and
the rough serge of his suiting had chafed her sex (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 7).

Initially, the poem alludes to Shelley as a helpless virgin victim: ‘she had not courted. / The amazed flesh of her / neck and shoulders nettled / at his apparition’ (*Ibid*). However, there is a suggestion that, like Beauty, Shelley is not altogether repulsed by her encounter with the monster. Lochhead even hints at the idea that she might have evoked his presence: ‘(having eaten / that egg with its yolk hollowed out / then filled with salt) / as a spell to summon up her lover’ (*Ibid*). And as the poem goes on, Shelley, like Beauty, begins to reclaim her agency. Far from being horrified by her ordeal, she is practical, realising that she will need to get rid of the monster – and what’s more, acknowledging that, though it will be painful, she can.

Anyway

he was inside her,
and getting him out again
would be agony fit to quarter her,
unstitching everything. (*Ibid*, 8)

This short section can be read in a number of ways. Firstly, the image of Shelley ‘unstitching’, splitting into quarters, suggests a metamorphosis not unlike that of Angela Carter’s Beauty shedding ‘skin after successive skin’ (*The Bloody Chamber*, 75). It hints at Shelley becoming monstrous herself, growing like her monster, to ‘match him / horror for horror’ (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 91). Secondly, the agonising process of ‘getting him out’

compares writing the story of the monster to giving birth to a child. This is a common literary comparison that has been oddly appropriated by men. Atwood writes: ‘I got pregnant by the Muse and needed to give birth to a book – an interesting piece of cross-dressing indulged in by male writers’ (Atwood, *Negotiating*, xx). By reclaiming this metaphor for Shelley and for herself, Lochhead is underlining the fact that Frankenstein’s monster is a female creation, and that this is in keeping with the vast majority of myths, which were traditionally ‘stories that women told to one another, and that were never collected or written down’ (Zipes, 80). However, perhaps most interesting is the suggestion that Shelley is purging a monstrous, unwanted and, importantly, male influence that she has somehow internalised: ‘[H]e came with a name / that was none of her making... slipped like a silver dagger / between her ribs and healed her up secretly / again’ (Lochhead, *Dreaming Frankenstein*, 7). Here Shelley represents the female writer, working to free herself from unwanted male influence. As the poem suggests, the only way to do this is to write: ‘[I]n the reasonable sun of the morning, / she dressed in damped muslin / and sat down to quill and ink / and icy paper’ (*Ibid*, 8).

The third of the three “Dreaming Frankenstein” poems, “Smirnoff for Karloff,” reimagines Shelley not as the virginal victim of unwanted male influence, but as a dominant feminine authorial figure. The roles are reversed: rather than being entered by the monster and required to “write out” his story, Shelley is now the monster’s keeper, taking charge of his narrative and shaping it according to her will:

Going to make you.
 make you sit up,
 sit up and beg. [...]
 Going to make you,
 going to put you to the test,
 make you give your all six
 nights per week and on Sundays
 going to take the rest. (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 10)

The depiction of such an assertive authorship as female is jarring for the reader, unused as we are to seeing a female authorship associated with this kind of independence and confidence. Even feminists – including French feminist theorists like Makward, Irigaray and Cixous – offer ‘a theory of uniquely female language’ that is ‘open, nonlinear, exploded, fragmented, polysemic... congruent with the idea of the hopelessly irrational, disorganised, “weaker sex” desired by the masculine Other’ (Baym, 282). But Lochhead’s role-reversal upsets such expectations, and certainly upsets received ideas about Mary Shelley, whose work, it has been suggested, was shaped by ‘the companions she had who were pulling her two different ways’ (Wilson, 13). The “companions” referred to here are male: her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron.

Women... are associated both with madness and with silence, whereas men are identified with prerogatives of discourse and of reason. In fact, men appear not only as the possessors, but also as the dispensers of reason, which they can at will mete out to – or take away from – others. (Felman, 14)

The speaker of “Smirnoff for Karloff” is neither mad nor silent; she is startlingly straight talking and very much in control of the poem’s male subject. ‘Sure, you can smoke in bed. / It’s a free country. / Let me pour you a stiff drink’ (Lochhead, *Dreaming Frankenstein*, 10). Lochhead has essentially endowed her female author with a variety of classically patriarchal, misogynist traits. This reimagined Mary Shelley repeatedly sexualises and objectifies the monster, for example:

You know Matron
take more than hospital corners to keep
a good man down, oh
yeah. [...]
He got all my wits around him
his extrasensory senses and his
five straight limbs. (*Ibid*)

There is an unsettling hint of violence inherent in Shelley’s sexual advances towards the monster, too:

Going to make you.
Going to take you to bits.
Going to take you to the cleaners. [...]
What wouldn't you
give to love me. An arm, and a leg? (*Ibid*, 9-10)

The monster has absolutely no agency of his own in this imagined scenario – it is Shelley who decides what she will 'let' him do:

Going to make you look cute.
Going to let you role-pole all over me
in your funeral suit –
the one you wear to weddings. Yeah. (*Ibid*, 9)

By reframing Mary Shelley's authorial creation of the monster in this way, Lochhead is demolishing the patriarchal image of Shelley as a woman taken advantage of by overbearing male influences:

Lochhead's work reconfigures each story, both thematically and structurally, from a feminist standpoint [...] Mary Shelley is marked by the success she has in gaining ownership of her intellectual and emotional development. She moves to being the subject and narrator of her own story. (McDonald, 124)

In her re-workings of mythic tales, Lochhead is asking a question that crops up, subtly or explicitly, in many of her identifiably feminist poems. She is essentially turning to those who perpetuate ideas about superior male authorship or masculine literary dominance and asking *how would they like it?*:

And the likes of them were Acting God,
Being Real Men,
Scoring *us* on a scale of one to ten [...]
How would *thae guys* like to be a prize –
A cake everybody wanted a slice of –
Have every leering schoolgirl consider them a pearl
Everybody kennt the price of? [...]
In a blinding flash I saw the hale thing was trash (*Bagpipe Musak*, 5).

Lochhead's appropriation of the Beauty and the Beast story is an examination of the role of women within literature and myth, and thus, by extension, of women within society and

culture. However, her revision of the Frankenstein story also gives Lochhead a way to examine the marginalisation of female myth *makers*, the women who create literature – women like herself. Deryn Rees-Jones claims that, in poems where the female poet seeks to retell and revise myths for her own ends, ‘we see, despite the distancing effect of the fairytale’s narrative and the use of monologue, a close identification between the poet and poetic “I”’ (*Consorting*, 151). As well as retelling a story, Lochhead is also working in a similar way to Sapphires: both poets make use of the voices of largely ignored or misrepresented women in order to tell the truth about women’s lives. Lochhead also creates personae from which to speak in the first person, but unlike Sapphires, they do not describe the gritty, violent tale of female oppression. Instead, Lochhead writes powerful female protagonists who eventually realise their physical strength and sexual dominance. Although, like Plath, Lochhead is writing in the obviously female ‘confines of the first person singular’ (Heaney, 149), she appears to be doing exactly what Seamus Heaney describes when he praises the superior verse of W.B. Yeats in ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps’. Yeats’ work, Heaney claims:

evoke[s] the impersonal, impersonating, mask-like utterance which he takes all poetry to be. We are reminded how *persona* derives from *personae*, meaning “to sound out through”... for Yeats, the poet is somebody who is spoken through. [...] Poetry, drama and myth converge (*Ibid*).

Lochhead is keenly aware that both the female fictional characters we recognise in popular myths and stories – and the women who have been responsible for creating some of those myths and stories – have been unfairly misrepresented. In her poems, the monster is representative of this unwanted male influence that must be overcome, and Lochhead asserts that female writers must move forward by finding ways to ‘match’ their male counterparts ‘horror for horror’ (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 90).

‘i went home to write her story / because she couldn’t.’

Heaney’s essay on Plath is a perfect example of the sort of cultural gatekeeping that led Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to formulate their ‘construction of a feminist poetics’ (17) in *The Madwoman In The Attic*. They argue that female writers like Sylvia Plath have always been told by male writers and critics like Seamus Heaney who they ought to be and how they ought to write, to the extent that these instructions have become internalised. Female writers, attempting to create their own narratives have, historically, always been held back by the confines of ‘male expectations and designs’ (*Ibid*, 14):

The woman writer’s self-contemplation may be said to have begun with a searching glance into the mirror of the male-inscribed literary text. There she would see at first only those eternal lineaments fixed on her like a mask to conceal her dreadful and bloody link to nature. But looking long enough, looking hard enough, she would see... an enraged prisoner: herself (*Ibid*, 15).

The female poets whose work is examined here are not just writing confessional poetry – the confessional mode having been shaped and used by poets of all genders – they are also doing the important feminist work of pushing against patriarchal expectations and designs. The fact that all of them write using an autobiographical or partially-autobiographical first person “I” is important: it shows that these are women writers writing as *themselves*. ‘Self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative “I AM” cannot be uttered if the “I” knows not what it is’ (*Ibid*, 17). And each of these poets uses this ‘creative “I AM”’ (*Ibid*) to her own ends.

Sharon Olds writes fierce, intensely personal poems which wilfully ignore the suggestion that ‘all the lean, hard, muscular poetry [is] written by men’ (Kumin, 103). In her poems Olds occupies – in every sense of the word – the female domestic sphere, reclaiming it not as a site of relegation, but as a site of power for women. She writes using what she calls ‘my weird line,’ and admits, ‘there’s a brat in me who likes doing it my own way, knowing

that I'm supposed to be doing it the other way' (Laskey). In spite – or perhaps because – of her determination to do everything *her way*, Olds has attained huge critical success. She is a poet whose work Seamus Heaney would surely describe as 'entangled in biographical circumstances' (165), yet she has certainly made it into 'the tradition' (*Ibid*, 168). Olds is described by Deryn Rees-Jones as having 'influenced a new generation of poets' (*Consorting*, 144), and by Adrienne Rich as a poet who 'refuses to hide her sexuality, abnegate her maternity, silence her hungers and angers in her poetry' (*What Is Found There*, 158).

Sapphire – a comparatively unknown poet – is less interested in gaining access to a literary tradition that has routinely excluded women like her. She writes autobiographical first person poems about her experiences of poverty, violence and childhood abuse, as well as writing non-autobiographical first person female confessions using a distinctive long line. Sapphire's poetry seeks to make visible the stories of black women, queer women, and survivors of domestic and gendered abuse, and illustrate the reasons why they have always been denied entry to 'the tradition' (*Tongue*, 168). Her unflinching poems underline the fact that even female and feminist-identified poets and critics like Sharon Olds and Eavan Boland are guilty of perpetuating damaging stereotypes about what being a woman is really like. Even Olds' reclaimed, supposedly feminist domestic sphere ignores the women for whom "domestic" is a racially loaded term, or those for whom domesticity signals poverty, danger and abuse. Sapphire's rejection of patriarchal ideals is embedded in the form and style of her poems: even minute details like the capitalisation of names or the speaking "I" have been carefully composed to reflect ideas about gender, power and control. 'and what could i say? i am that type of girl' (*American Dreams*, 111).

Finally – although she refuses to label her work "feminist" for fear of alienating readers – again, Liz Lochhead is interested in what Dorothy Porter McMillan refers to as, 'the central project of contemporary women's writing ... the retelling of traditional stories or

myths' (17). Her collection *The Grimm Sisters* is one of the books named by Deryn Rees-Jones in her 'catalogue of work by women poets... turning to myth and fairytale' (*Consorting*, 148-149), alongside works like HD's *Trilogy* and Anne Sexton's *Transformations*. Lochhead is keen to redraw the famous women of myth as 'not the object in the stories, but the subject' (Wilson, 10), and her three-part examination of the Beauty and the Beast folktale is a fine example of this work. However, Lochhead is also interested in the work normally done by feminist literary theorists like Gilbert and Gubar or Marina Warner: retelling the stories and rehabilitating the images of female myth *makers*. At the end of "Dreaming Frankenstein," Lochhead has Mary Shelley turn 'to quill and ink / and icy paper' (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 8) in order to free herself from the monster of patriarchal influence.

I was drawn to these writers' very different approaches to the confessional genre and the "problem" of patriarchal influence over female authorship. However, I was also drawn to them because each one has in her own way shaped and influenced the creative work that accompanies this thesis. I have been reading Liz Lochhead, for example, for over fifteen years, and the myth and fairytale poems from *Dreaming Frankenstein* and *The Grimm Sisters* have particularly influenced my poetry. I believe there are clear echoes in my work of poems like Lochhead's "Rapunzel":

Soon, he was shimmying in & out
 every other day as though
 he owned the place, bringing her
 sex manuals and skeins of silk
 from which she was meant, eventually
 to weave the means of her own escape.
 "All very well & good," she prompted,
 "but when exactly?" (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 89)

I like this poem – and the others in "Three Twists" and the rest of *The Grimm Sisters* – for its flippancy and ease. These are hugely enjoyable, relatable poems, and they all have a smart-mouthed heroine who speaks her mind. I hoped to achieve all this in writing poems like "Moon" – 'she's shameless in her pin-up curves / and slattern grin' – and particularly

“Poltergeistrix,” a poem I believe owes a great deal to Lochhead’s influence:

It’s been weeks now, but he’s still
so lousy with the snot and tears
and stench of death, it’s gross.
I want to see other ghosts, she says,
it’s over – but he doesn’t even flinch.

I am also indebted to the poems in *Dreaming Frankenstein* that examine the “problem” of conventional femininity – poems like “Heartbreak Hotel,” and especially “Mirror’s Song”:

Smash me, she’ll smash back –
without you she can’t lift a finger.
Smash me she’ll whirl out like Kali,
trashing the alligator mantrap handbags
with her righteous karate.
The ashcan for the stubbed lipsticks
and the lipsticked butts,
the wet lettuce of fivers! (*Dreaming Frankenstein*, 74).

These poems greatly influenced my poems about body image and disordered eating. Some of these drew on the sadness and humiliation of lines from “Heartbreak Hotel” – ‘Every day / there’s a basket of blossomheads, / crumpled kleenex to throw away’ – poems like “The Diet”:

My upper arms are flightless wings --
a slap and heft of ugly, useless flesh.
I’ll try anything once. I heard that pageant queens
thwart the fork by tying up their fingers --
now my hands are stopped verbs, velociraptor claws.

“Harpies,” too:

These are the hapless,
untipped waitresses of the western world,
the reliable babysitters.
These are the gorgeous unwanted.

The vengeful tone of “Mirror’s Song,” meanwhile, inspired the fiercer, more positive tone of poems like “Pica”:

I shrank to the width of a six-year-old girl,
falling through skirt after skirt like I’d always wanted.

You could get here too. I know you’ve been near this place,

teethmarks in your biro lid, your child-self licking pennies,
sucking stones.

My poems about intimate female experiences also owe a great deal to Sharon Olds. Her poems, which I discovered in 2003 with the publication of *The Unswept Room*, encouraged me to write the poetic confessions I'd always felt nervous about. Poems in which Olds speaks candidly about her own anxieties allowed me to write the various poems about mental health that appear here. For example, in "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant":

The linoleum is
smooth – under my brow, a bulge
of the pattern, like a harrow bank in soil.
I do not think I will get up again.
I think I have found my posture for life (*The Unswept Room*, 67).

Poems like this one granted the permission I needed to write something like "The blues":

The d word: key that double-locks the door, flicks off
the light; a room you've never seen,
the curtains drawn, where no one ever calls for help,
so no one comes.

Olds' work also directly inspired the poem "Visiting Nanny Gray," another personal confession and also a poem about anxiety and mental illness:

She spreads them on the bed like relics,
recites the names of seamstresses, department stores.
There's always one whose floral print
she bunches in her fist -- flimsy anchor to the past --
says without flinching, *bury me in this*.

And that's the moment every week,
the heart-stuck lurch as she realises what she is,
for just a breath.

This poem, one of the most recent in the selection accompanying this thesis, was written after reading *Stag's Leap*, and particularly inspired by poems from that collection in which Olds addresses her ex-husband directly, for example, "Running Into You":

That moved me so much about you,
the way you were a dumbstruck one
and yet you seemed to know everything
I did not know (78).

The darker and more political my poems, the more they owe to the work of Sapphire. I came to Sapphire's poetry only after reading her fiction, but was instantly taken with her uncompromising voice and her unflinching approach to the content of her work. Her voice is very different to mine, and as a white poet I feel it would be appropriative to skirt too close to her poems. However, Sapphire showed me that it was possible to write effectively about issues like gender and class privilege in poetry. Although it owes little to Sapphire's work stylistically, a poem like "Big heat" is very much influenced by her:

I want to say
that crying is a stupid luxury
the island women can't afford:
I trained my babies early
not to dehydrate themselves this way.

I know it will be morning now
before this girl, her massive backpack
full of useless things, can find
the market, buy a quart
and pull that water back
inside herself again. But I'm quiet,
pour a glassful for her from our fridge.
She sputters *thank you* in our language.

This is a poem about the various different ways a person can possess privilege without even realising: the privilege of class, education, race, unimpeded physical ability. Other poems investigate these different issues in more detail. "The picture in your mind when you speak of whores," for example, is an examination of the discrimination faced by sex workers, women whose only perceived worth is sexual:

For godssakes tear up Julia Roberts, Richard Gere;
and Cleopatra, Mata Hari, Elliott Spitzer,
Mary Magdalene – tear them up, too.
Now speak of whores. Stand in these tatters
of trash and tell these women one thing –
anything – they don't already know.

Both these poems are written about people whose experiences are radically different from my own. The poems in which Sapphire writes from the points of view of prisoners, sex workers

and survivors of abuse were also instrumental in giving me the confidence to even attempt to write such narratives.

The borrowings and influences I have taken from these poets have shaped my creative work, and the way I think about my creative work, in myriad different ways. However, the greatest debt I owe to Sharon Olds, Sapphire and Liz Lochhead is one of gratitude for the difficult but vital work they have done in claiming and defending a space for women's voices in contemporary poetry. By pushing back against writers and critics who seek to defend a literary tradition that is still overwhelmingly patriarchal, they have paved the way for me, and young female poets like me, to write freely about our own experiences. It is my belief that their poems really do 'rise like a tide out of language to carry individual utterance away upon a current stronger and deeper than the individual could have anticipated' (Heaney, *Tongue*, 148).

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