THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

The Domestication of Wolves

&

"Intimate with Madness": Metaphors for the Mind and Mental Illness in Confessional Poetry

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Abstracts

'The Domestication of Wolves' is a collection of poems written, revised, and assembled during the four-year period of my PhD. My writing has been informed and guided by the work of the Confessional poets Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman, particularly by their construction and deployment of richly figurative language to characterise their inner psyches and intense emotional extremes. By drawing on the knowledge and vocabulary gained from my early career as a neuroscientist specialising in psychiatry within the pharmaceutical industry, I attempt to construct new metaphors and reshape other, more established, metaphors to explore the subjective and intangible qualities of human relationships and psychology. I also employ the Confessional lyric 'I' in my exploration of distance, displacement, rootedness, masculinity, blue-collar work, and class – themes to which I have found myself repeatedly drawn. Additionally, I have included a long poem, 'Three Journeys to Harris', which I wrote while writer-in-residence at the Isle of Harris Distillery. The poem is built by layering metaphors depicting the maturation process of whisky and setting them against images of Harris's unique landscape and culture. While individual poems wrestle with a wide variety of subjects – from a fictional disease that turns limbs to spiders to the contemplation of what it means to be a good son – I hope that the collection as a whole offers the reader a satisfying balance between inner and outer worlds, joy and solemnity, and absence and embodied physicality.

In the accompanying critical essay, "'Intimate with Madness": Metaphors for the Mind and Mental Illness in Confessional Poetry', I perform close readings, predominantly of the poetry of Anne Sexton but also of the work of her fellow Confessional poets Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman. In reading the work of these poets, I argue that their mental illness is often framed in terms of the conceptual metaphors of 'madness as destination' and 'madness as possession'. I explore how each poet negotiates these two conceptual metaphors in different ways, sometimes adhering to the established connotations and sometimes dissenting from them to create distinct literary effects that convey novel insight into evasive, individual pathologies.

Lay Summaries

'The Domestication of Wolves' is a 75-page collection of poems that addresses themes of neuroscience and psychiatry, distance and displacement, rootedness, and class. The work seeks to use richly figurative language and, often, the lyric 'I' to explore these preoccupations.

The accompanying essay, '"Intimate with Madness": Metaphors for the Mind and Mental Illness in Confessional Poetry', performs close readings, predominantly of the poetry of Anne Sexton but also of the work of her fellow Confessional poets, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman, which reveal that their mental illness is often framed in terms of the conceptual metaphors of 'madness as destination' and 'madness as possession'. This thesis examines these dual conceptual metaphors in the work of the selected poets, and evaluates the effects created.

Contents

The Domestication of Wolves

Poems

Poetry Contents

I

II

III

I

THE ART OF FREEDIVING

Breathe-up: fill your chest deep
from your stomach, saturate your throat.
Pack down the invisible, the unviable,
until your blood glows rich and velvet
with oxygen. Exhale slowly, slowly. Repeat.
As fundamental as the seas themselves
the need to dive lower and longer, darker
and smaller, the heart at its least ravenous.
Ignore your limbs forever until they belong
elsewhere; the ballast-belt will drag you under.
It's the harvest of sponge and red coral,
it's pearling, it's the art of falling without flinching.
Farther into the cool, the colour of the sun dims:
turquois then purple to faint flint grey.
Let the weight of water make fists of your lungs.
Stripped of all panic, attend to the silence.

NEW BIRDS

I'm teaching myself to type. My rate of progress
is glacial – but this is the age of mass extinction.

Apparently, the difficulty lies not in learning
a new technique but in the abandonment

of the easy hunt-and-peck habits
cemented in bodily memory.

With all this slowness, I notice the small details:
species of trees, the direction

of the prevailing wind, which new birds
have shown up in the yard.

More important than increasing speed
is the maintenance of a steady pace.

I keep to the rhythm of my bones,
breathing in sync with the sky.

Sixty words per minute: one of three ambitions –
to call them dreams promotes such distance.

Hunched over an Underwood, keys
worked to a shine, squinting through myopia,

I'm in love with the learned action
of my fingers, their developing expertise.

I type what I think is a peregrine,
so pleasing and noble on the page,

but swiftly it flies, and I question
if it was ever anything more than a crow.

SPRING ARRIVALS

Late Spring evening
the night-singers have returned

from their winter exile
fattened and jubilant.

They crowd the birch
already sagging with new growth.

I imagine the glow
of the new moon

reflects in their dark flashing eyes
but with no-one to confirm

who can say?
I feel their many tiny stares

penetrating the near darkness
like an enraptured audience

and yet it is they who steal the show
from tonight's headline act.

YOU WERE RAISED NEXT TO THE SEA

but I grew up deep inland –
one impossible discordance of ours –
so now, whenever the coast is close by
I'm fooled into feeling
as though I'm on holiday:

the swell and lap of a breaking tide,
salt blown across lips,
groan of a strained rope wrenched taut
between boat and mooring.

Unaccustomed as I am
to wearing jewellery, I've chosen
a wedding ring that's slightly too big.
It prevents me from wading out:
I fear that plunging into steel-
green waves might cause it to slip,
and that some ancient by-law
will render us void.

ON LIVING NEXT TO A SEMINARY COLLEGE

The undergrads from upstairs are back and drunk,
sloppily launching their after-party. Perfectly good people,
just excited by their youth and unaware of their beauty.

But this is my privilege for soon they will sing
hymnal four-part harmonies
like a gang of lost calves calling to their mothers.

The stars freeze. Witching hour – an apnoea
when the slow drift of death smoulders in the fireplace.
Rounds of melodious worship penetrate the darkness,

bloom, fall through the floorboards
only to dissolve into the night too swiftly.
I hope annihilation sounds like this.

BROOKLYN _ NY

Perhaps it feels as though
we're in a movie

from a top floor off Atlantic Ave
we're looking down on more
interesting versions of ourselves

waking to the wide-open
spaces of morning
cop cars speeding like hearts

the city singing to its birds

beyond the serrated-edge
of the skyline
pearl-white clouds

we came as pilgrims

this is what life could have been
were we not buried
under small failures of imagination

people here catch sunlight
in their hands as though it were rain

the effect of this place

eating good sushi makes me wish
we had always eaten good sushi

PEAFOWL

We turn right off the expressway
past Mt. Bonnell and into someone else's heaven:
a small patch of Texas filled with Indian peacocks.
I grew up where the promise of peacocks
unravelled on a school outing
somewhere in Staffordshire; a solitary tattered thing
plucking bare its dulled rainbow of plumage.
But this – this electric muster of birds,
dozens of them roaming the ornamental garden,
crowding the parking lot, calls fat with menace,
voices as malformed as their tails are beautiful.
Two perch upon the roof of the little tearoom.
Another blocks the entrance gate,
its feathers fully fanned like a deck of cards,
a hundred cobalt eyes boring into us.
It steals the sunlight for its own resplendence,
and in the shade left behind
a cluster of plain brown peahens console one another.
We've come here to lift *A*'s spirits;
she's been passed over for a small promotion.
Nothing that will register in a week or two
but today she is stung, and it has left me stung too,
which I think might be a circle closer to love's core.

VIRGINIA

My turn to fix dinner;
I scrub the potatoes clean
as the oven slowly swells,
daydream about when we
were unknown to each other
and I'd spend these early evening hours
smoking cigarettes and listening to 45s.
As I search for a slotted spoon,
I find the memory of an argument
over *Virginia is for Lovers* –
the slogan sold by a 60s ad-man
that moved you regardless.
I season the beans and put water on to boil.
Outside, rain spits. Through a gap in the clouds
the moon lights the pale body of the path
and, in the collecting puddles, the broken face
of a second moon. The off-license glows
in the distance like a cooling star.
I leave the meat to rest
and the cabbage to steam.
Such is the rivalry of our affections.
When I claim I love you
does it sound like dogs barking?
The imbalanced call and response
of *I love you* and *I love you too*
always requires someone to surrender first.

FALLOUT

There's a heavily weighted question woven
into the algorithm of the online dating
compatibility questionnaire that imploded
the distance between us. The one about
whether nuclear war would be interesting.
I guess we both answered 'strongly agree' –
bored out of our skulls, slumped on our sofas,
dreaming of watching the fallout unfold
with someone new and beautiful as we
reload fistfuls of popcorn into our aghast mouths.

THE YEAR OF MANIA

It was exquisite

I'd defeated time

A year of
pure voltage

drinking on the front porch till three a.m.

nine mile run at six
at my desk for nine

I listened exclusively to Tom Waits on repeat

Never in my life had I said yes so often

Couldn't wait to rise from my bed each morning until I stopped going to bed at all

Afternoons I soared up to the roof
to the bleach-clean sky

started chain-smoking cigarettes

I must have fallen in love a dozen times that summer
each more crushing than the last

I cupped my hands dipped them into the moonlight retrieved flashes of silver

The future stretched into forever
the past forgiven

Nothing needed to get done Everything needed to get done

I could feel my eyeballs glisten

ANNE SEXTON'S THYMUS

The brain's greatest deceit
was to convince us that melancholy
is an affliction of the heart –
how it punches its way out
against the portcullis of ribs,
how it hangs
like a flower with a broken stem.

And all the emotions of Ancient Greece
were said to have originated
in the dull smoke of the thymus,
sweetbread lodged behind the breastplate.
Translated as rage, life-force, depth –
vestigial emotion.

But it was her brain that gave way
to the dysthymic low
that floated through those bad-souled
Bostonian afternoons,
leading her out to the garage dressed
in her best fur, to her rose-red
Mercury Cougar, its engine ticking over.

SPIDER HANDS

Rare and degenerative, the condition arrived
without warning: a Tarantula for an index finger,
its swollen mocha abdomen fused to the knuckle
as though the lines embossed across my palm
were the net of its silk-spun web.
Then a Huntsman where I'd last seen
my right thumb. Doctors counted the eyes,
took biopsies by plucking legs;
an experimental ointment was prescribed.
I learned to manage with my hands
stuffed in my pockets, opening jars in an elbow's crook.
I almost forgot my plight until two small Sheet Weavers
busied themselves replacing my pinkies.
Then the Trapdoor, the Wolf, the Brown Recluse.

Why me? Why not the neighbour's son?
I'd chop off my arms were I able to grip
the necessary instrument.
My only solace comes at night
when the inquisitive pointed fingers
of children are tucked up in bed.
I drink whisky and ginger through a straw
and telephone a friend whose own suffering
makes me feel as though I've won a prize.
She has experts stumped: an inoperable alligator
is wrapped around her intestines and any day now
its merciless jaws will snap shut for good.

THE VIEW

When you declare a view incredible
what you're really saying is

we're high enough up to be reminded
of our limits.

Whenever you visit my apartment
you declare the view incredible.

The city thrown open and smoothed out
to a map of itself, its expanse collapses

into a nest of canals, into grey, jutting
hills, a grid in between.

It has become your ritual: transfixed
at this altar, anything over your shoulder

ceases to exist. From this height,
you say you can see

everywhere you've ever been
and everything you've ever done,

and pity blooms in me because
you never want to leave this moment.

EARLY AUTUMN AUBADE

The light is fast in these first hours;
greens so sincerely green
they're purple, reds so rich they're blood.

I pick semi-set sleep from my eyes.
I will not leave this house today
because I've fallen out of love with the hills

and everything here is so curated:
my unmade bed, my unread books, the expensive
orange saucepans into which I've filled my life.

On mornings like these I think sad thoughts;
a small gesture to show that I miss you,
that my day could yet improve.

Another summer has collapsed into autumn.
The most valiant leaves fight on but most
have scattered like flour across a countertop.

The days draw in. The moon is emboldened.
I feel like an obscure corner of the ocean
in which it's too cold to swim.

Do you remember the second-hand pan
you'd use to warm milk on mornings like this?
I hated its banged-up asymmetry.

Sometimes I speak into the wind and wait
all day for your reply. Sometimes I wish
winter would arrive more quickly.

TRADING ZONE

When you talk of a horse and I talk of a horse
are you thinking what I'm thinking?
What about *cheval*, *pferd*, *perd*, *zaldi*, *uma*?
What lessons can we take from the first Portuguese
who offered up flintlock muskets
and brass bracelets to the great Oba of Benin,
captor of the sea god, lord of the leopard king,
as swaps for pepper, tusks, honey-coloured coral beads?

We hammer out our discordance –
you on an old oil can, me on a freshly undressed
pig pelt stretched taut and transparent –
and pass the clashing rhythms of exchange,
the ceaseless charge towards a common creole
that might, just might, reveal
what we're sure we've always known:
hidden within our histories sits
a compromise as fragile as scrimshaw,
a reluctant victory for us both.

CROSSINGS

You ask, how was work?
I enquire how school went

and we proceed to talk past the other –
our speech slow, pronunciation deliberate,

as though we're back in Spain
and you're guiding the barman

through the construction
of a half pint of half 'n' half.

We each make our quiet study
of the other's sadness:

you the theorist,
imprisoned in a malaise;

me the experimentalist,
shitfaced out of my tiny liquid brain.

In what might be a massive
oversimplification of events,

we lovingly contaminate each other
with our history of failings.

We sympathise with tall buildings
having to carry the weight

of themselves within their own walls.
I love you and hate you

with the static attraction
of two rubbed balloons.

We stand here in what will be
our slow love to the death –

your monkey claw
versus my eagle's fist.

SHIPS AND COFFINS OF LEITH

These are the most human of all the objects,
these two iPhones charging on a kitchen counter,
opponents rehearsing the age-old Anglo-American
argument on how to pronounce aluminium.

A bird's-eye view of two battleships
not yet scuttled by guesses of F1 or J8.

Two lead-lined coffins.

Their metallic deadness has the tranquillity
of a perfectly still mill pond. A face could
ripple in the high polish shine.

METAPHOR

The taste of desiccated moonrock
and raspberries
falling gently back to Earth.

When things were good between us
we played a drinking game with cheap wine,
taking turns to suck air through its ruby body.

The aim: to invent tasting notes so specific
they became abstractions.

Blow-torched potato skins
macerated in goose fat as viscous
and sweet as syrup.

I imagine it's a universal truth
that drinking games are only played
during times of intense happiness.

A bathtub of iron filings and treacle
and baked squid and apples.

Another truth: people are happiest
when they are most unlike themselves,

which is to say, it's disappointing
for anything is to exist only as itself.

The impenetrable aroma
of a stale dockside on a January morning.

We haven't played in years, and now
I'm drinking alone in a motel room

so devoid of trust its windows
open a maximum of six-inches.

The taste of the five o'clock breeze
coming off a reclaimed Japanese beach.

STANISLAVSKI METHOD WITH COFFEE

Take the mug's base and slide your fingers
through the handle as though clasping the hilt of a rapier.
Nurse the warmth tentatively, blow cooling ripples
over the surface.

Too much is unknown: fine bone china, coarse
earthenware, or the chipped tin of a prisoner's cup?
The tension of your grip and shape of your palm
a puzzle:

too confident, you fail to embrace the jeopardy of spillage;
too round, you hold a small moon;
too slack, you treasure an illusive, half-remembered dream;
too uneven, you are cradling a dying animal;

too timid and there's nothing in your hand at all.

THE HEARTFELT THINGS WRITTEN BY IMPERFECT PEOPLE

Country songs are often more honest, don't you agree?
Lyrics direct from the lizard brain about falls
from rock bottom and good-for-nothing deadbeats.

Instead we're choosing a literary quote
to inscribe on the inside of our rings
(subject to the maximum engravable characters).

As we shortlist one weighty passage
and then the next, a pattern is revealed:
all of them are written by terrible men.

19th, 20th, 21st centuries, Russians, Americans,
Europeans, they're all the same: grey-faced drunks,
fornicators, arrangers of glossy and virtuous words.

No, country music knows our manifest lapses,
how we delight in the imperfections: the three-cord
punk track by a kid who never learnt guitar,

or burnt bacon, or mixed-breed Heinz 57 mutts,
or every sports team that, from the bleachers,
I fruitlessly cheered on to certain defeat.

TUNNELLING

I think they're playing our song if this is the song
we agreed is ours – I forget – yet I'll swear
to discredit all others who consider it theirs.

It's the meaning that occupies the distance
between us, it's the unexcavated dirt as two tunnellers
converge, as thin as a cigarette paper, wide as the sky.

Dragged by the other into a new orbit of lexicons –
mine tougher than yours, yours better at talking
its way out of trouble –

a common language as necessary as bread.
We are closer to capturing whatever absolute truth
is suspended in the air like delicate, hot breath.

FIREPOWER

Most mornings you email me a video-clip
in which an orphaned animal – piglet runt
or deaf foal – has been adopted
by an unlikely species of parent – hawk
or grizzly bear – as though it speaks
to our relationship. Is your sweetness
saccharine? A proxy for something?
Today I reply with a long-form article
about the trope of the action movie bad guy
who repeatedly fails to capture the goodie
despite superior strength and firepower.

TAPAS

My favourite memories are of us scouting
the shelves for discount food, scavenging
like raccoons for the biggest bargains,
making do with the overlooked bounty
because we knew *use-by* and *sell-by*
and *best before* arrive at different semantic deaths.

We'd bounce from one store to the next,
amassing intelligence: closing times,
restocking rituals, colours of the reduced stickers.
We'd forage a feast, a patchwork menu,
dipping chorizo into aoli,
gorging on squid croquets and manchego
because tomorrow they would spoil.

A HILL OUTSIDE SANTO DOMINGO

As the last of the afternoon light
falls off its boil and the moon waits, poised,
we climb a Rioja hill by Santo Domingo
for a better view of the cathedral.

Our panting leaves us speechless
but we sense the other's presence.
Small white flowers, fields of rapeseed,
greens so various each tree limns another.

The slight disappointment at finding
the summit crowded with Spanish school kids
passing around a bottle. From up here
the insistence that we're central to anything

weakens. The flat lushness of the valley
recalls my adolescence spent wastefully
in a basement snooker club:
the acres of lush green felt, explosions

of colour, spirits shelf as a backdrop,
inverted bottles rising from their optics.
Perhaps I'm remembering a time
that never existed, or that exists as ashes.

I love it here, but what is it I love?
The sun's warm mouth, drinking wine at lunch,
the brine of the olives, no one complaining.
Lavish – these perfect austerities.

ENLIGHTENMENT AT THE CO-OP

I've been wrestling with the best words
but maybe you'll find this helpful:
last Tuesday I bought a six-can multipack of Coke Zero
for £3.50, but versus the £2.50 offer for the Pepsi Max
six-can multipack it was 40% dearer and I'm unable
to justify the extra expense –
a bout of largesse,
a decadence, conscious that our time
is unreeling and we deserve all that we desire –
when the difference in taste is negligible.
All this is to say, goodbye.

I FOUND OUT ON FACEBOOK THAT MY FIRST GIRLFRIEND HAD DIED

Sadness or at least the sense
of where a sadness might sit
had it not been so long ago.

I'd expected to see her again
in the cereal aisle or collecting a prescription
when home visiting my mum.

Her name is – was – the same as my wife's.
One of those patterns of coincidence you notice
which means absolutely nothing.

I think of her sometimes: long summer
afternoons when her father was at work,
swigging gin from the drinks cabinet,

the novelty of nakedness.
I still have the letters she passed me in class,
in an old biscuit tin somewhere in the loft.

I wonder if she kept mine and whether someone
found them during the clear out, read them.
I indulge the loss that isn't mine to feel.

NYUTO ONSEN
[February 2020]

Said to have been discovered
by a dance of cranes healing themselves
in the hot spring's shallows –
into the embrace
of the ancient warmth we sank,
gently at first and then completely,
into water soft and opaque
as bone marrow soup,
rich and mirrorless, summoned
from somewhere deep and furious,
pooling in a simple forest clearing.
It was the season Akita's sweet cabbage
is harvested from beneath the snow –
February, the last days of winter,
shortly before the year broke apart
on the rocks. We'd later learn the death toll
was already on an uptick
but we were warm in our ignorance,
submerged in the rotenburo,
burrowing our feet into a bed
of forgiving round pebbles,
counting bubbles of sulphur.
A moment suspended in rising vapour,
the calm occasionally broken
by the groan and splash of ice
breaking loose from the ryokan roof
and melting by the time the ripples cleared.
Our buoyancy shifted with each cycle of breath,
as we repositioned our spines against
the worn boulders outlining the bath.
Never had we felt so still, slow, naked.
For a blissful afternoon we forgot
how quietly our lives were shaking out.

II

MOBY DICK

We sail, Ishmael & I, for the Sandwich Isles
at sunrise; two privateers with nothing left
to lose, a last night to tarnish, to wish & counter-
wish, to rap our knuckles upon the bar
for a break. But even with a duffel-bag packed tight
with juju & a bandoleer of lucky bones & dead certs,
there's no chance we'll salvage ourselves
from a life adrift at sea.

I reinspect the ticket but it never shows a win,
two-to-one odds-on favourite, Moby Dick,
falling at the first, chasing loss with loss
like a sermon aboard the Pequod.
The brutal rhythms of hooves through turf
& whitecaps slapping the hull
thunder in my head.

Please, just one more reach towards the blessed
& I'll vow to turn blind-eyed
from the rounds of pitch-and-toss & mail home
every meagre pay-packet weighed piecemeal
against the harvest of boiled blubber & ambergris.

SABBATH

O Lord, your repeated motifs break like waves
across these bleakest hours: my shower curtain,
for instance, is printed with palm trees
huddled around mounds of heaped sand

and yet their extravagant samenesses,
their whispers of paradise,
leave me tarnished; pound-shop provenance
evidence of just how far I haven't come.

Standing against the tropical backdrop,
water so crystal you can see the tub, it's clear:
I have been a poor believer, a self-serving believer,
no believer at all. I've burned through my faith.

The hot rainfall cleans but does not cleanse.
A sea breeze sweeps in,
disturbing the fronds, thick with greenness,
rustling the folds in the plastic curtain.

But under the great height of Sunday night's
ceiling, the wind utters nothing intelligible.
Stars contain no magic. Even breathing
requires a great performance.

A gin-stained afternoon still lingers in the veins
of the evening, finely balanced between
enough and excess, loved and unlovable.
I weigh myself against the weekend's damages.

My shadow turns to birds which scatter heavy
into the night.

THE DOMESTICATION OF WOLVES

Coaxed down from our dens
scattered across the spent hills,
we were given new jobs in telesales,
in vast call centres devoid of windows.

We've chosen wolves deliberately,
they told us during induction week,
so don't dare abandon your wolfish qualities.

They liked our casual good humour and thick skin.
They liked that we were hungry
for their distasteful work – the cold-calling,
the closing, commission-only pay.

They liked amusing themselves at our repeated
social faux pas. They insisted we punch-in
each day, detangled and disinfected, smart
in smoothly groomed uniformity.

They liked that we didn't scare easily
but could easily scare.
Our negotiations
were actually intimidations.

They liked that they'd harnessed
our savagery and unseated us
as apex predators.

But when we turned our eyes upon them,
asked for a fatter bonus, a better basic,
and allowed the silence to grow
into something malignant and excruciating,

they called us pushy and ungrateful,
said we'd misjudged our place,
said we were wrong
to make such ravenous demands.

But we couldn't go back –
overweight and no longer nocturnal,
our mothers wouldn't recognise our scent
and we'd forgotten how to hunt.

BONE

My job is to pick; I am a picker.
I harvest stock from the shelves
like ears of corn and pass it
to the ringer at the register
who compiles the orders
and onwards to the amender
who checks the consignment
against the warehouse manifest.
I staple a receipt to the pick-sheet
so it can be removed
by a dispatcher down the line.

A knot of days becomes a week;
weeks pile up like shed skins.

In the beautiful bite of coolness
at 5.30 am, before the sun hits its stride,
before the streets teem, a partial moon
hangs like a half-eaten egg in sky
the pink of a healing wound.
Change feels graspable.
I walk to my shift, my back
worked stiff from yesterday's;
the only remedy is more work.
I pick. I pass. Repeat. Careful
not to suggest improvements.
Bone: the toil has reached the bone.

LAST BUS

you wait at the station
where you've missed so many last buses

the wind whipping chip papers
across the bays

still the sawdust in your whiskers
still the perma-tan from summers fixing a roof

still joint-ache from damp winters afield
still the oil beneath your nails

still the same lunchbox protecting a sandwich
an oily thumbprint pushed into the butter

still the same loops and whorls
and arches and double loops

each time the well runs dry
it's still you who's asked to dig deeper

GOOD SONS

When we're all together like this
we're full of shit,

trotting out stories that've been told
till they're all bent out of shape.

But we pass the wine,
we dish the potatoes,

we nod at the flashbacks
as though it really happened that way.

It takes about a decade
for the human skeleton to dissolve

and replace itself, and every three months
our ten pints of blood

are removed and restocked,
drop by drop.

As the sun fades outside,
the conversation turns

to how he worked his hands raw
to give us a better life

and then he complains for the rest of the night
that we have it too easy.

Were it not for the lens of the eye
and a few other lingering foetal cells

we'd be entirely new people by now.

VOYAGER

In ’79, when Voyager 1 beamed back
Jupiter’s Great Red Spot –
the three-century storm raging
at the backs of our eyes –
we sat in silence in front of the TV,
eating baked potatoes hot from the microwave.

Each craft penetrating interstellar space
still carries a golden 12-inch
pressed with the best of humanity
to be played at 33 rpm.

Stravinsky’s Sacrificial Dance, a greeting in Gujarati, the ribcage

When we discovered that Saturn’s rings
are a rotating mass of space debris,
heaved together by the gravity of shepherd moons,
I was sitting cross-legged, watching Carl Sagan
explain that the universe is cooling
and will continue to cool until nothing moves.

Johnny B. Goode, brainwaves, the Taj Mahal, a supermarket, the sound of a kiss

When Voyager 2 split from Voyager 1
to map a different plane of the Milky Way,
even the perfect blueness of Neptune
couldn’t inspire my parents to reconcile.
I imagined the sinking tones
of the instruments sequentially shutting down
to conserve their dwindling power reserves.

a train, aeroplane blueprints, a cotton field, Golden Gate Bridge, a telescope

By the time the final photograph of the solar system
was relayed back, my mother had left home.
An image so remote that Earth was a single pixel.

GETTING ON TV

It didn't matter it was only a local news report
exposing air pollution hotspots –
when footage of our stretch of street
between the chemist and the bus station
made the evening news,
anything seemed possible.

And when we spotted ourselves in the background
kicking a frayed leather casey down the road,
we felt as proud as conquistadors.

Air so rich with diesel you could taste
the trains shunting behind the yard
and the factories that lined the tracks,
their chimneys exhaling thick, black stardust.
Dirt, our dirt, rising into the heavens.

THE EIGHTIES

Where are all the holograms
and hoverboards we were promised?
Not to mention the ubiquity of robots
serving us nouvelle cocktails, entire meals
contained in a single pill.

A small sadness spirals in me
when I consider how absurdly inaccurate
the 80s were at predicting our progress,
and how primitive and lacking our lives
will look in forty years' time.

Yes, I am spiralling, like Maverick's
F-14 flat-spin into the Pacific,
and even that blithe comparison sets me off:
Goose, and all that he never got to give.

EIGHT BIOGRAPHIES

[BIO. 1]
Originally born in Brooklyn, [TIM] has now been travelling in Europe for three days. [TIM]'s aura is purple and their Jungian colour energy is yellow. In a spooky coincidence [TIM]'s third favourite number is the number three. [TIM] is researching a novel about the redeeming qualities of narcissism.

[BIO. 2]
Born just outside Moscow to a father and a mother, [TIM] has toyed with writing under an ethnically-ambiguous pseudonym. [TIM] is very white. [TIM]'s biggest fears: going blind, dying in a fire, dying underwater, fading away.

[BIO. 3]
All [TIM]'s tattoos have fangs and all their dreams have infernos. [TIM] has worked as a knuckle-puller, longshoreman and cutter in a box mill. On social media, [TIM]'s writing has been described as important, vital, necessary, essential and stunning. [TIM]'s writing has been shortlisted, a finalist and a runner-up, which is to say, a continuing disappointment. [TIM] was born with all their moons in Aries, which, they've been told, explains everything.

[BIO. 4]
[TIM] grew up two streets away from you and attended the rival school. [TIM] enjoys deep conversations about meaningful things. [TIM] only donates to charities from which they might someday benefit. [TIM]'s bildungsroman is fuelled on ham and cheese Findus Crispy Pancakes. [TIM] strives for ultra-confessionalism.

[BIO. 5]
[TIM] died in a savage battle of Edward Forty Hands. For many years, [TIM] thought they were a pulsar star – emitting light, emitting time. [TIM] was best known as an inventor of motivational maxims, most notably, *If you believe, you can achieve*, and the ever true, *The only difference between ordinary and extraordinary is extra*.

[BIO. 6]
Whenever [TIM] daydreamed about death the critics wondered whether it constituted suicidal ideation. [TIM] regretted the irreversible damage done by his failures of kindness and his taste for opium. [TIM] died in a boating accident off the coast of Italy in 1822. More at [TIM].net because [TIM].com was taken.

[BIO. 7]
Originally from the liquid core of your dreams, [TIM] lives in Paris, NY. [TIM] founded the online journal, *Permanent Hiatus* (currently closed for submissions). Once their cat dies, [TIM] will enjoy the freedom to travel.

[BIO. 8]
Born on the bank of a river, [TIM] has proven themself capable of retrieving a rubber brick from the bottom of a swimming pool. When the ocean is perfectly calm and flat [TIM] feels a deep sense of guilt when breaking its skin.

DIAGNOSIS

Beyond the locked double doors
and bored receptionist slyly checking her texts,
I sit facing the psychologist:
two chess players in the park.

A one o'clock appointment,
her questions ripe with the perfume
of a cheese and onion sandwich
repeating on her breath.

She performs her set-procedures,
jotting down scores, timings, observations,
to place my competencies on a bell-shaped curve
of age-adjusted averages.

Roughly the same age as me
but more accustomed to analysing children.
She gently checks I know right from left,
that I can confidently catch a ball.

As I stumble over the pronunciation
of a list of neologisms
that look like words but aren't,
I am armourless.

I've made it this far without a diagnosis
to excuse the tender embarrassments –
misspelt sentences, botched correspondence,
so much distance.

A nexus of coping strategies, she calls me.
Keep doing what you've been doing,
she says. Slant wiring, she says.
But with my vulnerability confirmed

I can't help but obsess
over a certain wretched teacher
who called me an idiot,
writing me off.

I walk back past the receptionist
into the unaltered outside world
like I'm wading through water
right up to my mouth.

DREAM OF SUMMER

You dream of Italy,
no, of Greece,
of aquamarine

a sky mirrored in the cool
depths of an infinity pool.

Sunbeams drunk
tumbling
into the Athenian hills
uncertain
of end or edge.

By lunchtime
the miasma of your mood lifts
leaving behind
a sense of shame
like a scum-line ringing
a drained tub.

Imagine you break
the unbounded plane
waist deep
refracted feet
sending ripples radiating
across liquid skin.

The scent of flowering
black dragons carries
on the breeze.

Birdsong returns; kisses your ear.

A whisper.
Your last days
are crumbling.

You hug the stabilities
of the present:

you are in love
you were always in love
you will repent

you will be absolved again.

In the dream
you allow your feet to slip
all but your crown
dips
beneath the surface.

DUSK

so we choose to remember
some earlier version
when you were ablaze

and caught red-handed
stretched and striving
collecting all you thought

you were owed or further back
before the cognac glow
and the inexplicable temper

before the new claws of winter
began to show themselves
and before the pale creep of dusk

which has always loomed
but now feels bigger
and is getting bigger still

MILK BONES

The temper hid deep in his gut;
a mass of resentment tamped
to a solid black clot.
And when a light was left on
in an empty room or the fridge door
gaped ajar or when unfolded clothes
were discarded across the floor,
his war cry rang in our small ears
and our milk bones trembled,
betrayed by the quiver of bottom lips.

When silence refilled the house,
we were ghosts between rooms,
tiptoeing with the lightness of
a reflection on a cool blue lake,
careful not to break the calm.

Never an apology.
Instead the gesture
of fish and chips for tea
as though nothing had been lost,
as though the human heart
isn't a deep-sea sponge,
as though we wouldn't return as shadows
to ensure sunlight never shines again
on his back porch.

COASTING

The game was to stay in neutral, release the handbrake
and coast from my mum's mum's house at the top of Bar Hill
down to my dad's mum's in the village.

The slow creep from inertia down a mile of steep decline
past the other farm, the butchers, past the long driveway to nowhere
lined with poplars, building up enough momentum to endure

the half mile flat and hump of the railway bridge. For years we tried,
the Escort's engine idling like a restful animal. Failure came in countless forms:
scrubbing too much speed at the blind bend,

clipping the wing-mirror in front of the terraced houses,
sucking in our breath as we squeezed past an oncoming milk tanker
because braking was certain defeat.

One Christmas morning when the road was dead and silent, we made it.
From driveway to driveway without even turning the key.
Stepping out triumphant, our lives a little changed.

A feat never reattempted. We'd proven the impossible, possible.
So why try again? But we can still talk into the small hours
about the near misses, tactics, chances not taken.

AUTHENTIC

I venture on a bicycle ride for the sake of it,
not commuting but looping from home
back to home just to enjoy the last of the warmth
or to get away from the meaninglessness
of ROIs, P&L, risk analysis,
and trying to talk my boss' secretary into bed.
How quickly you can leave the orbit of the city,
inhale the taste of hay, freshly mown by a gang
of immigrant labourers under the baking sun.
I gulp down an azure-blue sports drink
to replace my essential lost electrolytes,
and, as I began to understand that a feeling
of vulnerability brings out my kindness,
the chain slips off its gear.
With the cog rethreaded, my hands black
and slick with grease, I touch the hem
of my sleeve – an unnecessary, deliberate act –
leaving my small thumbprint,
indelible stain; a harvest of sorts.

COMICBOOK MOVIE SHOOT, EDINBURGH

I read that in post-production two halves of a coconut
make a more authentic hoof-step than the real thing.
A guy hovers outside my sixth-floor window
waiting for the signal. Perched on the boom-arm of a cherry-picker,
he oversees the button that releases black fog.
All Hollywood's money can't command the moon – a spotlight
with ferocious voltage making sleep impossible.
At 3 am, descending down the cobbled street that teems
with high-vis activity, I levitate. I begin to dream.

ON HAPPINESS

You sit as still as a paperweight
so it won't get spooked;
one misplaced regret
will send it skittering back
into the croon of the wind.

Maybe coaxed from the edge
of the backwoods by warm
porridge and promises;
maybe delivered by prayer –
it vibrates as fragile as the bones
of a hummingbird's inner ear.

One unwelcome memory
or a single stray atom
could break the spell.
To touch the devastating
thinness of its skin would create
a tiny black hole.

So seldom does this book
fall open at these pages.

DELIVERANCE

The cheap tattoo etched on my shoulder lacked conviction – pitiful – too slight to be serious too large to ignore – a grasp at authenticity – hastily chosen – appallingly executed – fading from the start but never fading enough – the morning after I moved out of the house – transplanted into a different rough-edged city – chosen from a catalogue at the nearest parlour – *parlour* from the French to talk – always slightly unsavoury – beauty pizza massage – a ring-bound folder filled with laminated templates – zero research – zero Celtic blood – allegedly the Celtic symbol for 'deliverance' – an irrelevance – told that pirates brought the *tatu* back from the South Seas to commemorate voyages or identify bodies washed up on the shore – told old tattoos were removed by rubbing rum and ocean into the skin – so I stood in the bathtub scouring with a salted dishcloth for hours – blood spots sprang through like holes in a pepper pot – boring into the meat until crimson water pooled at my feet – it scabbed over for months – slow to heal until the skin beneath revealed itself – the tattoo as present as ever.

GALLEON

Two voices translated from the debris
of a washed-up galleon

smashed against the laments
of an errant armada.

Two voices: one gruff, a shanty,
bitten by its time at sea,

the other smoothed to glass or polished bronze
where a statue has been touched for luck.

Two voices logged long ago:
one encrusted with wreckage,

the other dug hollow
as if by a melon-baller or ice-cream scoop.

Two voices hacked from the hulls
mid-breath, and transplanted here,

studded with alien textures.
Two fistfuls of ocean still stubbornly

uttering all that they were
and wanted to be.

Voices slipping, fading into quicksand,
slowly eroding under their own surfaces.

Two tightly woven voices: one a wishing-well,
the rattle of change glinting in the deep,

the other salvation or the night,
its stars projected, embedded, a singular moment.

Voices exposed by their skin-picked anxieties,
consumed and reconfigured,

one as blue as Burmese blackwood, the other
more copper than tin, rutilant as tiger's eye.

NJ COMMUTE

Your bus files out of the Port Authority Terminal,
vanishes beneath the Hudson, breaches the city's brink.

A brown-bagged bottle of Seagram's for sedation.
Outside a gale beats its chest.

You're cut-rate. You take the bus; cheaper than the train
but slower. And more infrequent.

Newark looms in the window, its lumbering approach
a second winter. Planes rise into eternity.

Processing plants and refineries line the roadside.
The lights on their high walkways

burn like distant suns; chimneys spew.
Soon the sky will be crowded by snow.

Trucks unload cargoes of ore, and leave empty.
Your heart has become a black stone washed up on shore,

slowly being dragged back out to sea.
No, reject this: you're just tired and a little hungry.

The bus drives deeper. The landscape turns to
rural blackness. The Anthropocene lurches forwards.

FLOUNDER

One way I used to meet the rent
was to scoop flounder out of a great
fibreglass tank. Flat beasts
without the tasteful symmetry
of the dorso-ventrally pancaked stingray,
the flounder were caught sideways
in the machinery of evolution:
one eye creeping awfully
around the corner of its face.
I gripped the fanned quarter-moon
of its tail and, with the action
of a backhand smash,
struck its head across
the workbench so its body spasmed
into the curl of the letter C
as though trying to form a final word.

The calmest part: the scalpel,
its medical-grade sharpness
running down the length of the back,
and watching the watery meat separate
under its own tension as the smell
of the wild cold poured from the wound.
I snipped each translucent vertebra,
bent them back, and unpicked
the connective tissue with tweezers.

The adaptive capacity to survive
in freshwater or ocean, I was told,
held the key to human life.
But I was just there for the pension
and the free coffee, harvesting data
from glass electrodes, their points so sharp
they slipped invisibly into spines.
With alpha-waves lapping green
over the oscilloscope, in order
not to sacrifice everything,
I took the fillets off the bone
thinking of batter, of fragrant steam.

NEUROANATOMY PRACTICAL

Smaller than you imagined.
More like your idea of a dog's.
You cup it softly. Your thumb fidgets
over the fissure of a temporal lobe.
You lift it up to the side of your head
and picture your own firing in there –
surging, immortal.
If you were to lob it against the wall,
would it crumble or shatter
or liquefy or combust or bounce
back into your hands, intact?
When she (sixty-six, Caucasian, lymphoma)
donated it to science, was this the promised
afterlife? You consider biting into it
as you would a peach – and, were it not
for the bleach-like stench of toxic preservative,
you might.
In ten years' time you will think
what a privilege it was to hold that brain,
brim-filled with tomato soup recipes and original sin
and the smells of late summer and oboe lessons
and self-taught Italian and the night sky:
The Plough, The Great Bear, The Big Dipper.

DOG NIGHTS

Your mind crawls on all fours
probing the fence for weakness,

and though you're dog-tired
you're too tired to sleep.

A corroded chain-link
presents a narrow gap

between gate and post.
Let it escape, you think;

it'll come home hungry.

The neighbour's car
returning from a nightshift.

Its engine ticks cool
under a frozen moon,

awakens a high-luminescence
security-light.

A dog barks
a distant reply.

You roll over. You play dead.
You await extraction.

ON LEAVING

No sofa to absorb the sound
of my soles striking the parquet floor.
Not a spoon in the drawer.
The cat's paws buttered.
Dishcloth folded.
The final scene surveyed, ticking
off last acts. Meter readings taken.
Key unthreaded from the bunch.
On the counter a note
of encouragement for my next self.
My fingers coil around the doorknob.
Time running towards me
as though I owe it a debt.

ON RETURNING MORE COMPACT

you've been away

    too long, perhaps

have you lost weight?

you haven't
you're just denser

collapsing back into the centre
of yourself

    *

you've returned as a black sunrise against a black sky

    more serious

words arrive seldomly
still as pastures

    *

one-by-one
friendships have failed

    the slow atrophy

of underuse

    *

you were warned

distance with its acid creep

    *

a persistent memory flairs,

an echo

takes a U-turn and plummets

the little green suitcase
your mother allowed you

III

THREE JOURNEYS TO HARRIS

I

Calmac's winter timetable
has taken effect.

Weather permitting, the ferry arrives
in the mouth of the harbour

once a day, unloads, loads, ploughs
its way back into open water.

The steeply pitched roof of the stillhouse
flanked by its smaller replicas –

bottling plant and warehouse number one –
dominate the bay's countenance:

whitewashed and angular,
more kirk than factory,

as though a sermon sits
permanently on the lips of the dock.

*

The Isle
of Harris.

The Romans called it *Adru*:
thick, bulky.

The Norse called it *Hærri*:
higher.

*

I drive the Bays, along the Golden Road,
with the hesitation of a novice.

The groundworks cost a small fortune to lay
in the '40s, linking each one-house anchorage.

Cheviots and Blackface sheep,
the indigenous and the imports,

mingle in the road, mixed breeds
dyed and woven into tweed.

The air thick with brine.
The autumn sun has slung itself low

but the island remains as green and slow
as the blood of a sapling.

So full of distance. The land splints
the ocean, the ocean spurs into the land.

*

One imagines it began in a place like this:
a bumper harvest, heaps of magnificent crop,

too much grain to know what to do with,
so it was steeped and malted, ground down,

all the sugars captured, brewed and boiled.
Even after every thirst was quenched,

after every revelry had whimpered out
and each god's benevolence had been drunk to

(and drunk to again),
the still kept giving until the empty jars

and earthenware pots in the village
overflowed.

All that remained was a spent barrel of claret
in the corner of a hayloft, forgotten, refilled.

*

The warehouse at Ardhasiag already half-full
of two-and-a-half-year's work.

Upended barrels lashed together
and stacked five high. The air saturated

with the breath of proof
seeping out of the wood's pores.

*

A fistful of wind
laden with salt and sea-spite

banks off the Clisham,
kisses the old bell of St Clements,

and gusts over soil pocked
with the fallout of a detonated moon.

It rattles its way
over the narrow neck of the isthmus,

where the distillery sits
on land reclaimed from the bay,

only to be caught in the tight grain
of oak staves

like a butterfly – slate, scarlet, cerulean –
pinned to a specimen board.

*

A place created from a child's drawing:
hills poured upon hills,

so every gap between two mounds
reveals another mound –

imbricated, ever multiplying,
ever decreasing into the distance –

until the whole horizon resembles
scales on a salmon's belly.

*

Shimmering, the first morning rays
rain through the skylights and hit

the golden stills. They dance,
with something of Siena in them:

wide-hipped and plump; curved
like the slow arc of the Earth's surface.

Hot vapour reforms in their throats,
the shell and tube of their lyne arms.

*

A conflict of perception:
cool, darkly silent warehouse,

but within each cask
an ocean seethes, hot and ruthless;

the wood, a seawall
to barricade in the carnage.

Temperature, pressure, and volume brawl
within a shifting equilibrium:

the surface tension of the fluid
adheres to timber walls;

capillary action searches
for a means of escape.

*

The morning air is still,
the horizon sharp and immediate

as though the mainland has been lassoed
and hauled a few miles closer.

The light arrives true and unskewed.
I've begun to feel at home.

*

Locals curse the off-islanders
for driving too slowly.

Off-islanders curse the locals
for driving too closely, and lose

every game of chicken,
surrendering the single-track road

two or three
passing places prematurely.

*

The warehouse is a temple or mausoleum –
whichever demands greater reverence.

Casks stacked dunnage, three high,
rest upon each other's bent backs

like children in a field
forming precarious human pyramids;

amidst all the dank peace,
a note of play.

*

Barrels flush with gold,
their heads etched with the arc

of owners' names,
and three paint-stokes – grey,

red, blue – of the Harris H,
and, branded with white-hot iron,

Buffalo Trace, the smouldering name
of a former life in Kentucky.

A herd of steer that once wandered
the Bluegrass meadows

driven here, corralled in this alien place
where the sky drinks 2% per annum.

*

The upturned hull
of a newly commissioned ship

blanketed by Mount Clisham's
799-metre shadow,

half buried in the bay,
stark against the shore;

the seaweed green warehouse
outside the village

is young and unblemished.
Pristine. Inside,

the racked casks sleep
like unexploded bombs.

*

Turmoil lurks beneath the steel rafters
of the store, molecules scattering

with the ferocity of a billiard break:
colliding and re-colliding, ricocheting

at unpredictable slants.
The raw potential of state unspools,

brings forth low groans from the wood,
wide and sonorous as whale song.

Warmth radiates from inside the ribs
of each cask: entropic, exothermic, brazen.

*

Lost in the tight spaces
of the labyrinthine shelving,

at the end of an aisle,
a shock of blue upholstery –

a broken office chair,
abandoned –

reclines as though stealing
a break from its duties.

Separated from a wheel,
it will lie there unattended

until someone with a spare afternoon
can administer the repair.

*

Tortured until the cellulose splits
and cell walls burst, giving up

their vanilla, esters, polysaccharides.
A negotiation between liquor and wood.

Lactone slowly turns to coconut,
eugenol to spiced clove.

Ethanol clusters around water molecules,
hydrogen-bonded, hydrophobic tails

capturing the fusel oils and furfurals –
solvents, perfectly designed to leach

the remnant flavours from the grain
of the knotted, blackened staves.

*

Additive maturation. Extraction
of congeners – the borrowed flavours

from the last liquid in the cask
dissolve.

*

Subtractive maturation. Alterations
in the whisky matrix –

the Maillard reaction –
converting lignin

into amino acids and sugar reductions
like bread browned to toast.

*

Allowed to cool
for the next ten years,

flecks of burnt oak like flakes
of day-old mascara

will flex, float, and drift
in a suspension of total darkness

like earth dumped in a millpond
will settle gently.

II

My ferry left late tonight;
an irregular load at Lochmaddie this morning

and all day the lost half-hour
couldn't be recovered.

Up on deck the distillery grows.
The waxing gibbous moon beats down

on the shells of abandoned houses,
their roofs long gone.

*

The encroachment of time.
The gift of time.

The slow pollution of time.
The saturation of time.

Time infiltrating like a dream.
A dream of fire.

*

Of all the options – puncheons
and port pipes, quarter casks

and bloodtubs – the alchemy here
is held within hogsheads and sherry butts

nestled upon one another
like a litter of siblings.

*

American oak
for American whiskey.

A single stave, slim plank among
the many felled, stripped, piled on a flatbed

bound for a cooperage,
milled, herringboned from the heartwood,

sawed, planed, and shaped.
Toasted and charred, licked with fire

like a barbeque melts the connective
tissue of meat into something soft.

Aromatics teased out – the aldehydes, the oxidised
held deep within the timber like a confession.

*

For two hours I wait inside the black plank hut,
squint into the horizon for the pair of golden eagles

that nest along the glen. Had I waited three,
they might have revealed themselves.

*

Crofters are coming and going,
shovelling draff onto their trailers

to feed their herds, the spent husks
piled outside the stillhouse, still steaming

from the hot wash that flushed the sweetness
but left some goodness.

*

Carved into the stone entrance
of Lews Castle, Leverhulme's motto,

Mutare Vel Timere Sperno
(I scorn to change or fear).

But so many here hold down
half-a-dozen jobs

in preparation for the unexpected
they've come to expect.

*

A white oak felled in a Galician forest,
its heart cored, air-dried,

left to season in the Spanish sun,
destined for a bodega in Jerez

where it'll be steamed to soften its fibres
and fashioned into a vast butt

to be filled with Pedro Ximénez.
After that journey is over, the oloroso

bottled and dispatched, the empty vessel
will be sent by boat to the Hebrides.

*

Casks sitting in isolation –
palletised, stacked, abandoned.

Not hibernating but raging;
caged bears wrestling their way out.

Brimful of thousands of tiny tinctures
of extracted island,

localised microclimates impose
their characters.

*

Magic hour. Mountains glow pink
and collapse into a rose-coloured sea.

I'm stood on the barren surface of Jupiter,
unoccupied till the Clearances forced folk

to scratch themselves into this side of the isle.
Harris holds the crown tonight.

*

The story of Neolithic standing stones
repeatedly repurposed:

great rock giants, allegedly once men
petrified for not converting to the new God.

*

Like glacier melt, soft and blank,
the distillery's water source

tumbles down the hill behind the hotel
from a burn, *Abhainn Cnoc a 'Charrain*,

the name of which only *Hearachs* can pronounce;
a shibboleth of authenticity.

*

Highland cows, mothers and calves,
block the road to Hushinish,

so I wait, helpless in my rental,
as they edge themselves past,

unaware of their bulk, heads bowed, horns
inches from the paintwork.

*

Hushinish, house headland in Norse,
white sand beach

and jetty gently slanting to the sea.
This morning I watched from the cliffs

a shepherd and a fisherman clad in oilskins
haul six Cheviots onto a small blue boat.

Bleating clouds of fleece
tied together for a voyage across the bay

to begin their new lives
on the untrodden pastures of Scarp.

The underpowered two-stoke outboard
struggled against the slack water.

*

This island, thick with language,
the roiling daily dialogues

in Scots and *Gàidhlig*
like a kettle coming up to the boil.

*

I'm tucked in a corner of the canteen, dipping hunks
of soft white bread into lamb soup,

watching the populations pass through: birds
on their routes south for the winter.

Spring, I imagine, will arrive next,
the machair in full bloom,

corncrakes crexing, the return
of oystercatchers, lapwings, buntings.

*

The dark arts of maturation:
the spirit smoothing itself out,

cracking its bones, detangling its nets,
knocking off the sharp edges.

The feinty smell of new-make youth –
clear, colourless, astringent –

transformed into stewed fruit and
dark chocolate, heather honey and sunlight.

*

Plump little Buddhas
recline in a darkened room

within their remote island monastery –
its earthen floor, its absence of windows.

They silently chant their mantras,
until, gradually, their introspection

grows smaller, richer,
more like syrup.

*

A collection of small-scale oceans,
sealed bucketfuls of North Atlantic,

the moon's gravity tugs
and releases the reservoirs

within them. And when the force of the tide
causes a weakness in the wood to weep

and drip upon the ground,
it is left alone to clot, to heal, to *sugar up*.

*

The decommissioned lighthouse on Scalpay,
proud like a barber's pole.

Books still on the shelves.
The railings rusted fragile.

Vaporised salt
gusts in off the North Atlantic

to crust
on the murky window panes.

*

Buckets of brine
and liquid starlight,

the ullage growing,
losing so much

as the sky's yearly theft
goes unchecked.

*

You can barely hear yourself breathe
amid the raging molecular din

of this marketplace, this circus.
Moiety traded for moiety,

one carbon chain cracked loose
to be shackled to another, oils exchanged

for fats, paid for with microscopic flecks
of copper stolen from the still's walls.

*

Some will become vast, fabulous rooms
as grand as Versailles,

while the dregs of others will be swigged back
straight from the bottle like rocket fuel

by someone grieving on a back porch
looking up at a brilliant carpet of stars.

*

The spirit receives a counterintuitive love:
distilled and then permitted to gradually degrade

into something ravaged and worthy;
like a child, it doesn't miss a thing,

picks up the songs sung, jokes retold,
holds all the voices we'll lose

before the first bottling, remembers
each warm winter, Indian summer,

the stretches of dreich days
too common to count.

*

On Sundays the machinery shuts down,
so the highland cows, rain water

dripping off their manes,
provide the island's only commotion

when they shake the spray
from their backs.

The sun-bleached bones of those
who wandered from the herd

punctuate the hillside, exposed
outliers, like parables.

The origin of the word 'carcass'
descends from a lost language,

an etymology
for 'premonition'.

*

I watch one of those meteor showers
that experts claim only occur every century or so.

The night sky perfect. A frost already
begins to settle, glistening white and brittle.

My gaze fixes to a northern heading,
across Ursa Major's spine,

and every few minutes a bright dot
shoots through the darkness

towards the Earth, towards me,
like a cooling spark

falling
from a blacksmith's lathe.

III

On Skye, I sit at Uig harbour,
while the weather claims another day of ferries.

The wind thumps the bonnet
as though the car

were inching through an angry crowd.
Blustering, blowing stiff and angular,

the shifting gale bends chimney smoke
into oblivion. Umami, diesel –

my mouth fills with the green flavours
of the ocean.

*

A temperature spike.
A delay in the cut.

Deliberate avoidances of replication;
inconsistencies baked into the process.

Welcome human errors – handmade
mistakes that taste of deviation.

*

Ways to describe a flavour:
as chemical congeners,

trace impurities of character,
or as variously coloured tweed bobbins,

each a proxy
for a different recollection

of childhood, the limbic system
struck like a tuning fork.

*

I first arrived in the ferocious eye
of Storm Callum and now this is my final visit,

the other side of solstice,
after the long night moon.

Since I was here last, casks one, two and three
have come-of-age, three years and one day,

maturing into whisky on a Saturday afternoon
when the sun went down on an ashen sky.

Three ghosts solidifying
into their mortal forms.

*

The weather has turned bitter
and the peat fires that heat the homes

have filled the town with the smell
of burnt winter.

A wooden washback – new vat from the mainland –
bulges on the pavement.

Its bulk, carved from Oregon pine,
set against a naked sky

like a giant unable to duck beneath
the lintel of the distillery doorframe.

*

What is the collective noun for casks?
A scrum, a parliament, a celebration?

Capacity growing at a rate equal
to the island's expectations.

*

Slate grey skies fringed
by the wide sands of Luskentyre beach.

Cheeks tender and ruddy, pricked
by sub-zero cold. Eyes wet from wind.

The seabirds surf the inrushing squall
that shuttles over from St Kilda.

There's a sorrow lodged in the hills
that won't thaw until springtime.

*

The contours of the casks
mirror those of the hills:

falling at the same rate of decline,
angled down from the high slopes,

funnelling towards the bay,
narrowing into silence.

*

Taillights file away from the evening ferry,
a string of illuminated gemstones

poured from the boat's gawp
and dissolved into darkness.

It will rest here tonight
and become my morning ferry;

the crew will sleep in their bunks, packed tight.
Two weeks on, two weeks off.

*

Today the waves are rolling slowly,
resisting the break and crumble into wash.

No roaring battle cries, just the quiet surging
of the ocean's full weight like ripples of molten glass.

For a moment there's a halt to the rhythm
as though the water questions its breath.

Just as the falter threatens to become
a stall, the swell rears up again.

"Intimate with Madness": Metaphors for the Mind and Mental Illness in Confessional Poetry

Introduction

Had we our senses
But perhaps 'tis well they're not at Home
So intimate with Madness
He's liable with them

Had we the eyes without our Head –
How well that we are Blind –
We could not look upon the Earth –
So utterly unmoved –
(Dickinson)

By nature, emotions are intangible, subjective, and difficult to assess. They are slippery, differing from one person to another: what I understand to be a feeling of happiness is likely to be different to what you feel as happiness. Indeed, various factors have been shown to influence the way an individual experiences emotion. Interpersonal variations are influenced by a person's unique catalogue of experiences and brain chemistry (Vaughan-Johnston et al.), cultural differences (Lim), temporal/historical differences, and so on.

The absence of dependable shared emotional reference points poses a problem when a poet is attempting to connect with a reader and present a picture of a speaker's emotional state. This gap in precise understanding can be bridged by using metaphor to 'link disparate conceptual domains and to find the similarity between two apparently unrelated concepts [to] describe a vast range of emotions and experiences' (Menashe et al. 1). As I seek to improve my own writing craft, I wish to better understand how metaphor can be employed to convey emotion and a speaker's inner world. I am going to approach this question through an exploration of the poetry of Anne Sexton and her fellow Confessional poets. Much of Sexton's poetry explores her mental illness and she conjures a range of metaphors to capture the illusive bliss of mania and the deep sadness of depression. As I investigate the range of metaphors in the work of Sexton and the

Confessionals, I identify two categories of metaphor that seem to be prominent: madness as destination, and madness as possession. By investigating how these poets negotiate these two categories of metaphor, new ways of exploring emotion and psychological interiority have opened up to me in my work.

Having trained in the field of neuroscience and worked in the psychiatric arena as part of a career in the pharmaceutical industry before returning to academia as a creative writing scholar, I have witnessed first-hand how mentally ill patients can have difficulty in communicating their psychological dysfunction and disordered moods when in dialogue with their psychiatrists. They tend to rely on metaphor and figurative language to convey their experiences – for example, a patient might refer to 'hitting rock bottom' as a way of figuring the onset of a depressive episode. The dual threads of my academic interest and scholarly background converged, intensifying my interest in the intersection between psychology and creative writing; specifically, how metaphor can be used in poetry to characterise the concept of 'madness'.

I believe the focus of this research is timely: according to the National Health Service's most recent review of the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in the UK, the incidence of mental illness and the occurrence of related symptoms has steadily trended upwards for two decades. Additionally, the recently published government report, 'Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing' (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing), stresses the importance of literature and poetry in the treatment of mental illness and the maintenance of good mental health. This overlaps with the emergence of medical humanities as an interdisciplinary academic cluster, and the subcategory of mental health humanities, which is reasserting the human perspective into a medical arena that has been dominated by science for most of its history, and particularly in the last century or so.

The lyric 'I' is a familiar feature of contemporary poetry; many poets use it as a stylistic tool to explore and understand human psychology and the inner landscape of emotional response. Building upon this, some contemporary poets use their writing to present the reader with glimpses into their mental illness and acute psychiatric episodes. For example, *Odes to Lithium* by Shira Erlichman is characterised by Emilia Phillips in *The New York Times* as being successful at 'destigmatizing bipolar disorder through candor, intimacy and creativity' (Phillips); *Sunshine* by Melissa Lee-Houghton is a collection shaped around successive admissions to psychiatry institutions (Lee-Houghton, 'Articulating Your Experience Is Remarkably Life-Affirming'); and *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* (Akbar), a book about the poet's use of alcohol as self-medication, is reminiscent of John Berryman's plight. The number of collections focusing on the subjective experience of mental illness speaks to an appetite in our current culture for art that is in dialogue

with psychiatric dysfunction. The explicit exploration of a poet's mental illness can be traced to the Confessional movement and poets such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, W.D. Snodgrass, to name but a few. This thesis will be examining the first four writers, with a particular emphasis on Sexton and Berryman, to gain a deeper understanding of how their mental illness shaped their poetry, particularly their use of metaphor.

I'd like to briefly address some of the limitations of this essay at the outset. Firstly, as a piece of critical analysis of literature designed to provide insight into the craft of poetry, this essay cannot guarantee comprehensive medical accuracy. I am not qualified to draw psychoanalytical conclusions from my analysis of the poems, and any insights I do venture should be treated as the understanding of a literature scholar.

Secondly, while the terminology used by the 1950's medical community was in some ways as progressive as terminology we use today, the Confessionals often employ archaic language when referring to their mental illness that is inappropriate in a contemporary context. I suspect that there are a variety of reasons that Sexton *et al* use terms like 'madness', 'insane', 'looney', 'crazy', etc.: to reinforce their link to the trope of the mad, creative genius; to play with and challenge the stereotypes of mental illness; and to afford themselves the greatest creative palette by borrowing from this outmoded vocabulary. Throughout this essay, I negotiate the Confessional's work using some of this problematic terminology. I do so not to be controversial but to keep my analysis in the same lexical field as the source material.

Thirdly, Sexton, Plath, Lowell, and Berryman are clustered together under the 'Confessional' marque, a term for which they had no fondness. While there are factors that undoubtedly bound them together – historical era, focus of their writing, pathologies, geographical proximity, and their mutual friendships – it is perhaps too convenient to reference their work and illness together. I attempt to offer separation when focusing on them as poets, but in treating them as a group, I discuss their mental illness and incarceration as points of commonality. Despite biographical commonalities, it is important to bear in mind that the felt experience of illness would have been unique.

Fourthly, I have approached the poems of Sexton and Plath, and Lowell and Berryman with the same critical eye, focusing on facets of the writing, without attempting to address the complexities of gender head on. There is a great deal of scope for further scholarly work into how societal prejudices relating to women with mental illness shaped the writing of the female Confessionals distinctively, and there is an extensive corpus on how women are often dismissed and disparaged by the medical community. I have not attempted an in-depth feminist investigation in this essay for fear of limited space leading to a superficial enquiry. Certainly, in future research

I would like to apply feminist scholarship, for example the ideas of Gilbert and Guber's 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, to the poetry of Sexton and Plath specifically.

Confessional Poetry

The term 'Confessional poetry' was first coined by M.L. Rosenthal in *The Nation* (156) in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* that prompted the critic to assert that the collection was a form of 'poetry as confession' (ibid) because of the way in which the poet wrote about his 'private humiliations and personal mental illness' (Rosenbaum 296). The label of Confessional poetry came to be used for an innovative style of poetry that emerged in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, characterised by the candid presentation of individual experience and personal trauma. This innovative mode of poetics is deemed to have arrived in 1959 with the publication of Lowell's *Life Studies* and W.D. Snodgrass' *Heart's Needle* and ended in 1975 when Anne Sexton's *The Awful Rowing Toward God* was published posthumously, after Sylvia Plath and John Berryman had also taken their own lives, and after Lowell's output had moved in a different stylistic direction (Nelson 32).

There remains debate over whether Confessional poetry has a definable style or can be considered a 'school' of poetry, and it is a term that the associated poets 'universally disliked' (Nelson 32). But, while contentions continue to exist when it comes to capturing the inherent properties of the poems grouped under the term, and even the list of poets who can be classified as 'Confessional,' before I engage in the analysis of exemplar poems categorised as within the style, it is important to present my understanding of Confessional poetry's central qualities and characteristics.

A key question to consider is the extent to which Confessional poetry is autobiographical. It's true that the work is often aligned with actual people and identifiable events (Poetry Foundation). The Confessional poet is characteristically unafraid to address topics traditionally seen as private, shameful matters like infidelity or abortion, and also, particularly pertinent to this essay, 'rage, mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse' (Nelson 34). At the same time, it is overly simplistic and reductive to assume all Confessional poetry is literally autobiographical when there is evidence of an 'artful, fictive nature of confessional representation and performance, incl. the use of dramatic personae and dramatic monologue' (Rosenbaum 296).

While Confessional poetry cannot be regarded as purely autobiographical, there is agreement that it evinces a particularly close relationship between the author and the speaker, and an explicit presentation of the poet's inner psyche, including 'intense psychological experiences'

and 'battles with mental illness' (Poetry Foundation). It is this narrowed gap between speaker and poet that Hobsbaum views as the essential characteristic of Confessional poetry:

> The prime characteristic is the reduction of distance between the persona displayed in a poem and the author who writes it. (299)

Furthermore, rather than simply being defined by the inclusion of personal revelations, Confessional works can be identified by the 'urgency and "rawness" of the revelations' (Nelson 34). The nature of the 'direct, colloquial speech rhythms' (Poetry Foundation) offers up a certain authenticity, which serves to reinforce the close connection and reduced distance between writer and speaker. In linguistic terms, it's the 'cultivated spontaneity, immediacy, and a conversational style' (Rosenbaum 296) that 'contributes to the expectation of the liberation of truth' (ibid). As Nelson highlights, it is perhaps the relationship between the urgent poetic voice and the revelatory content which is the ultimate defining characteristic of the style:

> Taken together, a directness of address, which produced the impression of candor and intimacy with the reader, and the shameful, dishonorable (Rosenthal's term), or merely private nature of the content were a potent mix. It is thus important to keep both the form and content innovations of confessional poetry in mind. (34)

In searching for shared features that unite Confessional works, beyond the aforementioned voice, focus on revelatory subjects and the reduced space between the poet and speaker, we encounter a diversity of other literary features within the style. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* specifically highlights the wide range of Confessional poems, stating them as 'formally diverse, employing narrative, lyric, and dramatic modes and both free and metrical forms' (Rosenbaum 296), which is something that will become apparent as the essay progresses.

Irrespective of their distaste for the term Confessional poetry, it was this new style of writing that provided poets like Lowell, Sexton, Plath, and Berryman an outlet to describe the subjective experience of mental illnesses, which would ultimately claim the lives of the latter three. While many diagnoses were made at the time and further retrospective opinions have been offered, simply stated, Sexton, Plath, Lowell, and Berryman each had a form of 'madness' that can be categorised by Emil Kraepelin's codification of mental illness as falling under the umbrella of manic-depressive psychosis, as opposed to dementia praecox, or as it is now classified, schizophrenia (Ebert and Bär 191). In her writing about the Confessionals, especially Lowell, Kay Redfield Jamison describes the experience of manic-depressive psychosis:

> The clinical reality of manic-depressive illness is far more lethal and infinitely more complex than the current psychiatric nomenclature, bipolar disorder, would suggest. Cycles of fluctuating moods and energy levels serve as a background to constantly changing thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. The illness encompasses the extremes of human experience: thinking can range from florid psychosis, or "madness," to patterns of unusually clear, fast and creative associations, to retardation so profound that no meaningful mental activity can occur. (*Touched With Fire* 47)

The advent of this new style of poetry coincided with an era that ushered in major advances in the biological understanding of psychiatric disease and new pharmaceutical and psychological treatments for it. By the mid-fifties, there was increasing use of the newly licenced anti-psychotic, Thorazine, to treat myriad of psychiatric disorders, including mania. Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors became available from 1957, and the Tricyclic antidepressants from 1958, and they were hailed as new pharmacological tools to rebalance the disrupted biochemical levels of neurotransmitters, the deficiency of which are suspected to be the cause of mood disorders. The severity of the Confessional poets' emotional dysfunction, the artistic freedom they found in taking up the challenge of finding expression for that illness, and the rich, new vocabulary provided by the developing field of psychiatry allowed them to cultivate a new style of poetry, drawing heavily on metacognitive references. Whereas earlier eras had had to resort to explanations like demonic possession and hysteria for mental illness, the mid-twentieth century saw the brain positioned as the seat of the dysfunction, signalling the beginning of our modern understanding of mental illnesses as having an organic cause. Thus, these poets were among the first to have the opportunity to write about an ailing brain with the advantage of some kind of scientific understanding of how that ailment might be developing. As we will see, they were adept at combining this insight with earlier conceptions of 'madness' to both embellish and critique them.

Moreover, it has been suggested that the type of manic-depressive mental illness suffered by the Confessionals is fundamentally responsible for creative genius: the introspection of their enlarged inner-worlds during depressive periods coupled with the intense creative energy that flowed during manic bouts combined to allow these poets to write prolifically about the extremes of the human emotional condition:

> The fiery aspects of thought and feeling that initially compel the artistic voyage – fierce energy, high mood, and quick intelligence; a sense of the visionary and the grand; a restless and feverish temperament – commonly carry with them

> the capacity for vastly darker moods, grimmer energies, and, occasionally, bouts of "madness". (Jamison, *Touched With Fire* 2)

We should not overlook the historical context which permitted the artistic freedom to write candidly about mental illness. The advent of the Confessional movement dawned just twenty-years after the Nazis had exterminated hundreds of thousands of the 'mentally ill' – the first classification of victims of Hitler's programme of genocide. Reclaiming the right to call oneself 'mad' could be read as a celebration of the increased personal freedoms enjoyed in the late 1950s (Torrey and Yolken 26).

Sexton, Plath, Lowell and Berryman had many intersections as writers: all winners of the Pulitzer and the other major literary prizes, all residents of America's East Coast (and, all but Berryman, natives of classically repressed, Puritan New England), all mentally ill and recipients of treatment at McLean Hospital. However, each had a different personal relationship with psychiatry and a distinct mode of characterising their mental illness within their own writing. My exploration within this essay will focus on how each writer uses metaphor to describe their personal relationship with psychiatry; specifically, I am interested in how they represent their states of mind. Much poetry attempts to present a certain reality to a reader, to conjure something like a lived experience, or an experiential reality that may not be literally real, but that is emotionally or psychically authentic. But mental illness by definition involves a reality for the sufferer that runs counter to the socially agreed-upon experience of reality. How can a poet craft an experience of their own mental illness that readers can effectively inhabit? How can language express a state of mind that is not otherwise bound by conventional rules of logic or rationality? This examination of the disjunction between the conventional and the actual also has a particular resonance with historical time periods, given that the Confessional poets I will be examining largely did their most impactful writing in the 1950s (in America, the era of smug, post-war conventionality) and the 1960s (the rise of the counterculture and, at least in some circles, a focus on dismantling some of these facades in favour of honesty and authenticity).

Metaphor

The poetry of the Confessionals is rich with symbolic invention as a way of capturing and characterising their diverse personal experiences of the mind in extremis. Before examining examples of the use of metaphor within Confessional poetry, it will be useful to examine how metaphors can function more generally, and, particularly, how metaphors can work as configurations of mental states or emotions.

Metaphors enable us to identify patterns and parallels between seemingly unrelated events, thereby consolidating our experiences. By grouping similar phenomena together we form concepts, which creates a common foundation for metaphor. Within the field of cognitive poetics, the linguists Lakoff and Johnson pioneered a theory of conceptual metaphor that can be applied to representations of mental illness in Confessional poetry. In Lakoff and Johnson's framework, metaphor is the comparison of two domains: the target domain, which is the abstract emotion being clarified, and the source domain, the more concrete idea that is doing the clarifying. Kövecses later refined this idea in 2000's *Metaphor and Emotion: Language Culture, and Body in Human Feeling* by exploring emotional states and the metaphors that we use for them. For example, Kövecses collated and categorised an established set of conceptual metaphors for sadness around which English fixed-form phrases (common sayings and idioms) are constructed. Looking at Kövecses's first example ('SAD IS DOWN'), and using Lakoff and Johnson's terminology, 'sad' is the target domain and 'down' is the source domain. But the relationship is not exclusive; sadness has many source domains from which it can build metaphor. They range from the abstract ('lack of vitality') to the highly embodied ('captive animal', 'social superior'):

> SAD IS DOWN: He *brought* me *down* with his remarks.
> SAD IS DARK: He is in a *dark* mood.
> SADNESS IS A LACK OF HEAT: Losing his father *put his fire out*; he's been depressed for two years.
> SADNESS IS A LACK OF VITALITY: This was *disheartening* news.
> SADNESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER: I am *filled with* sorrow.
> SADNESS IS A PHYSICAL FORCE: That was a *terrible blow*.
> SADNESS IS A NATURAL FORCE: *Waves* of depression *came over him*.
> SADNESS IS AN ILLNESS: She was *heart-sick*. Time *heals* all sorrows.
> SADNESS IS INSANITY: He was *insane with* grief.
> SADNESS IS A BURDEN: He *staggered under* the pain.
> SADNESS IS A LIVING ORGANISM: He *drowned* his sorrow in drink.
> SADNESS IS A CAPTIVE ANIMAL: His feelings of misery *got out of hand*.
> SADNESS IS AN OPPONENT: He was *seized by* a fit of depression.
> SADNESS IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR: She was *ruled* by sorrow. (25-26)

In terms of Kövecses' codification, depression operates linguistically as a subordinate to the more basic emotional level of sadness (3). However, for the purposes of my own analysis, it is important to bear in mind that while sadness can be a symptom of depression, it is one of several and not enough to clinically diagnose a person as suffering from Major Depressive Disorder (American Psychiatric Association 160-168).

Lakoff and Johnson argue that the construction and use of metaphor is more than just a trick of language but rather a way of structuring and coherently organising our experiences. More importantly, they argue that metaphor not only has the role of rationalising past events, but also the ability to shape future events: 'Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such action will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies' (132).

To apply that idea to mental illness, conceptual metaphors relating to madness are in conversation with the wider social view of the mentally ill, and even have the capacity to create and influence social stigma. Later in this essay, we will see the Confessional poets explicitly challenging the status of existing conceptual metaphors of mental illness as a negative. Sexton, in particular, was successful at crafting metaphors that presented mental illness in new ways. As we will see, her work was also explicitly in conversation with the medical establishment and their understandings of treatment and cure.

This essay will focus on a series of metaphors that selected Confessional writers employed to figure their own psychiatric conditions within their poems – specifically metaphors that depict madness spatially, as a problem of either estrangement (becoming separated from some version of the 'sane' self) or possession (a deranged foreign presence inhabiting a consciousness alongside the speaker's 'sane' self. The (then) newly ascendant field of psychiatry also provided each of these poets with what we would recognise as 'modern' ways to talk about their suffering (and with them 'modern' imagery of pill bottles, malevolent orderlies, and cinderblock institutional walls). But these poets also consciously reached back to an earlier age of treatment for imagery of the lunatic shut up in the madhouse. In my exploration of how Sexton, Plath, Lowell, and Berryman each utilised the conceptual metaphors of 'madness as destination' and 'madness as possession' with invention and artistry, I will seek to investigate how each poet also used them in different ways, sometimes adhering to the established connotations of a particular metaphor and sometimes dissenting from them to produce unexpected, and often startling, effects.

Madness as Destination

> 'And it is easy to slip into a parallel universe. There are so many of them: worlds of the insane, the criminal, the crippled, the dying, perhaps of the dead as well. These worlds exist alongside this world and resemble it, but are not in it'. (Kaysen 5)

This opening quotation is taken from Susanna Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted*, a book about her time as an inpatient in McLean psychiatric hospital. It illustrates how madness can be experienced as a different physical place, a different universe from that of sanity, and how a person can 'slip' between these places. Similarly, Foucault writes about madness in terms of place, journey, and destination when considering the history of the illness during the age of reason:

> Madness will no longer proceed from a point within the world to a point beyond, on its strange voyage; it will never again be that fugitive and absolute limit. Behold it moored now, made fast among things and men. Retained and maintained. No longer a ship but a hospital. (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* 35)

Sexton, Plath, Lowell, and Berryman all received inpatient treatment at psychiatric hospitals and wrote significant works of poetry and prose detailing the physical environment of these institutions. Their poems offer descriptions and impressions of the other patients, the medical practitioners, the daily routine, and the physicality of the buildings. By focusing on the detailed specifics of their unfamiliar, clinical settings, these poets locate their madness within the asylum. Whether the heightened energy and intensity of mania, a tranquiliser-induced malaise, or the lonely claustrophobia of a depressive episode, mental illness is captured in Confessional poetry through the physical description of the hospital and the community of characters housed there. This chapter will investigate how the journey to the asylum, residence in the asylum, and the return journey home are utilised in specific poems to characterise mental illness as an evolving disease. The poets' illnesses each take on different contours, including Sexton's metonymic use of Bedlam to signify her 'madness', Berryman's treatment in 'Hell', and Lowell and Plath's fearful, reluctant return from the hospital to sanity and the quotidian responsibilities of real life.

David Wojahn observes that '[Confessional] poems tend not to be so much about the nature of the writers' diseases as about the poems' settings', adding that 'depression is nothing if not obsessive […], the desire to re-establish some sense of focus and order is a depressive's almost desperate goal' (115). I would argue that the writers' diseases and the poems' settings are

inextricably intertwined. They cannot be separated because the description of the surroundings enables the representation of the disease, giving the abstract concept a tangible shape. Wojahn's conjecture that writers have a heightened sensitivity to details and observations can be substantiated within Confessional texts (specifically, the devoted reportage of the features of institutional life in 'Waking in the Blue', 'Flee on your Donkey', and 'The Hell Poem' by Lowell, Sexton, and Berryman, respectively). It is no surprise that a writer – already likely a keen observer by inclination and occupation – suffering from an episode of emotional dysfunction, detained and overcome with boredom, has an enhanced fascination with the details of their environment.

Sexton, Plath, Lowell, and Berryman were practitioners who held professional admiration for one another's writing. Not only had their styles coalesced under the broad umbrella of 'Confessionalism', they suffered from some of the same psychiatric symptoms and often attempted to self-medicate with alcohol. This led them all to receive inpatient psychiatric treatment at McLean Hospital, Massachusetts during the 1950s and 60s, described in the *The Atlantic* as 'America's most literary mental institution' (Beam); the article goes on to suggest that the experience of hospitalisation provided a thematic and imagistic basis for their poetry:

> Sojourns at McLean provided not only needed respites but also creative material. Madness came out of the closet in their writings, and even acquired a certain cachet […] Plath had checked into McLean five years before Lowell, but it was Lowell who helped her to understand what madness had taught her. Sexton, too, experienced suicidal depression, and learned to write about it. (Beam 97)

Of all the Confessional poets, Anne Sexton wrote perhaps the most often and most directly about her experience within mental institutions. One of Confessional poetry's earliest and most important collections, Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back,* contains multiple poems from the perspective of an institutionalised speaker. With the titular invocation of 'Bedlam', Sexton is alerting the reader of her intention to represent her mental illness and psychiatric treatment in all its chaos. 'Bedlam' undercuts the grim seriousness of mental illness with an element of the colloquial, the word having evolved to signify the shambolically chaotic. But it also has darker, more insidious connotations: the original asylum, the madhouse, where lunatics and the insane are locked away, less for their own psychiatric wellbeing than for the protection of the public. Rather than adhering to the medieval construct of the asylum, where the unwanted, inconvenient truths of mental illness are silenced, Sexton shines a light on her experiences.

Sexton 'used metaphor expansively to define everything in her world […] as a way to understand and describe depression so that she could give herself an alternative to the oppression

and isolation that depression entails' (Kendall 89-90). 'Bedlam' is a metonym for both madness and the psychiatric hospital, which aligns with the concept that in madness, the mind leaves the body. 'To Bedlam' is consistent with phrases both colloquial ('away with the fairies') and literary ('that way madness lies', from *King Lear*) – Sexton's mental illness has resulted in her mind journeying to a different location, absent from its usual place in the world. Sonically, 'Part Way Back' is the most dynamic element of the title. Its three stressed beats, a molossus, and the impact of the assonance from the repeated 'a' sound creates a sense of heightened drama. It forcefully announces that the speaker is currently lucid and self-aware enough to be in control of her art, but still touched by the taboo of madness.

Even the typography of the collection's title typed on the original manuscript Sexton sent out to publishers provides clues into the complicated nature of her relationship with her illness:

TO BEDLAM

and part way back

(Sexton, *Anne Sexton Archive (To Bedlam and Part Way Back)*)

'TO BEDLAM' is capitalised and prominently positioned in the top left corner, relative to the lowercase 'and part way back', which has been jettisoned both latitudinally and longitudinally. The break in the title is so substantial that the phrases almost appear to have a tenuous relationship to one another. While the 'part way back' contains undeniable sonic force typographically, with its strong monosyllables, it appears to be a different story in context – the manic, maximum volume of the journey to madness, as represented by the capitalisation, has given way to the subdued and resigned whimper of 'and part way back', a line that begins on a conjunction to rob it of vitality. This original version of the title refuses to inform the reader as to what occurred during the inpatient treatment, as represented by the in chasm of whitespace of the multi-tabbed, multi-lined enjambment of the journey to the hospital and the journey back home. I would argue that this representation of the title in Sexton's unpublished manuscript, present before the book designer and professional typesetters had made their adjustments for the sake of aesthetics, is the purest insight into the nature of Sexton's feelings towards her illness.

The 'madwoman in the attic' is both an echo of the Gothic by way of *Jane Eyre* and an all-too-real fate for many sufferers of mental illness in a time before effective therapies. Sexton acknowledges and responds to these echoes by writing poems in which she is the real-life protagonist, locked in her madness but free to explore its corridors. Decades before the

contemporary recognition and celebration of neurodiversity, Sexton demonstrates a certain level of pride in her madness and an insistent reclamation of its virtues: the deeper experience of the human condition and a greater connection to creativity, a theory famously advocated by Berryman (and which we will encounter later in this chapter). The partial return to sanity portrayed by Sexton 'supports a notion that is very prevalent in confessional poetry: once one has "cracked," once he has been "to bedlam," he can never fully recover regardless of the number or the sincerity of his attempts; he can only get "part way" back home, but never can he reach that home from which he departed' (Blankenburg 103). One might argue that all lives are in a state of flux and evolution, so the notion of a stable, unchanging 'home' is a fallacy. Our personal definitions of the 'real world' are diverse, inconsistent and constantly shifting, whether returning from a psychiatric episode or not. Yet it is certain that Sexton felt her mental illness changed her view of the world irrevocably.

The subject of the book's first poem 'You, Doctor Martin', is Dr Martin Orne, Sexton's psychiatrist. The relationship between the psychiatrist and patient is secret and sacred, shrouded in legal and ethical guidance regarding confidentiality on the part of the doctor, but Sexton chose to sacrifice this limiting anonymity. The poem offers a clear-eyed account of Sexton's life in the institution from the perspective of a patient who has acquiesced to the daily rituals of inpatient life, and it presents the situation from a more subdued point of view than might be expected from the titular 'Bedlam'.

The form and typographical layout of the original version of 'You, Dr Martin' is unique within the collection, differentiating itself from the other poems by employing a balance and symmetry on the page that reflect the objectivity of the speaker: repeating septets, relatively regular line length (especially compared to her later poems) and deep indentation that results in an impression of central alignment. These features contribute to an impression of poise and neutrality:

You, Doctor Martin, walk
from breakfast to madness. Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
where the moving dead still talk
of pushing their bones against the thrust
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
or the laughing bee on a stalk (1-7)

The poem's opening lines present 'madness' as a location, a metonymic proxy for the hospital which speaks to the recommended routines and repetitions of mental hygiene (regular exercise, sufficient sleep, three balanced meals). This sense of regimented calm reinforces the portrayal of the hospital as a place of order and control, at least in the actions of the healthcare professionals,

but the poem soon unfolds to reveal that structured routine and predictable behaviour are constant features within all aspects of the asylum; qualities that are at odds with the archetypal and colloquial conception of Bedlam.

The composed objectivity of the poem presents the speaker as being clear-minded, consistent with a response to treatment and a journey back to good health. She distances herself from the sickness observed in the other patients: while the others are the sluggish 'moving dead', she speeds. Of course, an alternative reading is that this speeding, combined with the obscure energy of the 'laughing bee' image and the grandiosity of 'I am queen', could indicate that rather than returning to wellness, the speaker is expressing a manic episode, as characterised by an inflated sense of self-importance. These alternative readings demonstrate the difficulty in delineating the boundaries of good health: when does rediscovered energy and confidence represent acute mania rather than a return to wellness?

While the stay at the hospital is explicitly temporary (it is a 'hotel' rather than the 'home', language also deployed in a couple of the Lowell poems that I will discuss later in the chapter), the speaker still gives the impression of being settled as a semi-permanent resident. The speaker is the 'queen', linking to Sexton's belief that her own legacy was to fit into the chain of 'mad' writers before her, from Shelley to Woolf. The speaker is at the top of the madness hierarchy, which creates a sense of devout perpetuity to her stay at the hotel. Unusually, Sexton embraced her experience with mental illness and her stays at hospital:

> Anne Sexton's depression was something she referred to with warmth. She indulged herself in a dialogue about its immediacy and connectedness to her personality. […] Through the use of compressed language, making it elliptical and making it metaphorical, she made the affect of depression comprehensible and essential. (Kendall 87)

Sexton recognised that her mental illness linked her to other celebrated poets who suffered from mental illness, and to the trope that great art can come from mental instability. In her biography of Sexton, Middlebrook states that Sexton's madness 'connected her not only to such "mad" poets as Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath, but also to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and, before the age of psychiatry, to Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Coleridge' (65). This sense of legacy, and the mental illness rife within the established poetry community to which Sexton wanted so desperately to belong, motivated her to make public, vociferous claims of madness:

> Anne Sexton for years had a curious ambition: she wanted to be admitted to McLean. "If only I could get a scholarship to McLean," Sexton confided to her longtime friend and amanuensis Lois Ames, as if she were talking about a fellowship to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. (Beam 100)

While the general tone of 'You, Doctor Martin' suggests that speaker is comfortably ensconced in the hospital, there is a sense of forced order, confinement, removal of threat, and overarching surveillance that generate a malevolent atmosphere in the poem. Images of mentally ill patients entering through locked doors to dine together unsettle the reader, and a tension exists between forced order and the instability of that order; for example, 'We stand in broken / lines' (8-9) points towards an awkward compromise between stability and chaos, emphasised by the line break. 'We chew in rows' (13) emphasises the mechanical, utilitarian, joyless act of group dining juxtaposed with the anarchic, nerve-shattering din of 'our plates / scratch and whine like chalk' (13-14). The dinner scene adds a further layer of threat with the line, 'There are no knives / for cutting your throat' (15-16). Mentioning the removal of the threat serves only to raise awareness of it and its gruesome consequences, implanting a harrowing image. The physical properties of the hospital – the order, the incarceration, the removal of hazards – are properties of the speaker's medicated brain, blunted by tranquilisers to mitigate any potential harm the patient might inflict on herself.

The penultimate stanza of the poem shifts its focus from the details of the hospital to the Dr Martin's position and function:

> What large children we are
> here. All over I grow most tall
> in the best ward. Your business is people,
> you call at the madhouse, an oracular
> eye in our nest. Out in the hall
> the intercom pages you. (29-34)

He is a domineering patriarchal figure ('What large children we are'), a boss ('Your business is people'), and the twentieth-century nightmare of the Orwellian Big Brother ('an oracular / eye in our nest' and 'the intercom pages you'). This later image references the institutional architecture of Bentham's panopticon that became the blueprint for 19th century prison reform, the functional intention of which, Foucault wrote, was 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' ("'Panopticism" from "Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison"' 6). Yet there's a clear attachment felt by the speaker towards Dr Martin, referring to herself as his child and expressing a pride at being under his care ('All over I grow most tall / in the best ward'). Although the poem's subject is Dr Martin

Orne, Sexton's psychiatrist, referring to him as 'Dr Martin' shows a familiarity that blurs the boundary of the doctor-patient dynamic, while the title preserves some distance. As readers we identify the dramatic irony by recognising that, on one level, the speaker misrepresents the relationship as more personal than professional, while on another level, there is an unsettling, imbalanced power dynamic each time the speaker draws parallels between father/daughter, boss/subordinate, and the all-seeing-eye. Foucault explains, 'the Panopticon was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals' (ibid 8), which dovetails with some of the fears borne of now-outmoded psychiatric treatments (lobotomies; shock therapy as it was then used): that doctors are more interested in research than in helping patients, that psychiatry is a form of experimentation rather than treatment, and that patients need to be controlled rather than cured.

Towards the end of the poem the tone shifts slightly, gesturing towards a more maudlin mood of loss and waiting for wellness, and we encounter the speaker as a different type of queen as she describes her retreat from the world to the institution, where a person's values and ideas of self are skewed:

I am queen of all my sins
forgotten. Am I still lost?
Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
counting this row and that row of moccasins
waiting on the silent shelf. (38-42)

An unnecessary acknowledgement of guilt and irrational sense of sin are commonly experienced by depressive patients (American Psychiatric Association 161). By declaring herself the queen of all her sins, the speaker makes a proclamation about the magnitude of the errors she has made and she seems to take ownership of those sins, but this is complicated by the line break, the delayed 'forgotten'. Could it be that her illness has caused her to forget the sins she has committed, or has successful treatment allowed her to forgive and forget those sins? Could it also be that she is forgotten? It is unclear because the speaker seems unsure about how 'lost' in her madness she is. She is slowly mending but not completely, echoing the 'part way back' of the collection's title.

The antepenultimate line of the poem continues to resist easy answers or definitive insight. The speaker's self-assessment that she was once 'beautiful' but is now '[her]self' could be a symptom of ongoing depression-induced self-loathing, or a sign that the speaker's previous mania has been brought under control, subduing the inflated self-image. However, 'myself' is not a comparative antonym of 'beautiful', and the speaker seems resigned to being removed from the

outside world with all its preoccupations and expectations. Sexton, who had a brief modelling career before turning to poetry, is perhaps well-situated to appreciate the fact that beauty is something that cannot truly be inhabited, only granted by the appraisal of an observer. For the speaker, shut up alone in the craft room, 'myself' is, for better or worse, the only option left. And the invocation of moccasin-making, creative handiwork that calms the mind, is surely a nod towards Sexton's own attitude towards her writing. In her own words, Sexton's vehicle for reuniting her own mind and self was the act of writing: 'Poetry led me by the hand out of madness' (Sexton, *Anne Sexton* 335).

If 'You, Doctor Martin' uses formal control, an objective speaker, a modulated tone, and images of 'safe' imprisonment to represent an institution filled with sedated minds, another of Sexton's poems, 'Flee on your Donkey', uses her craft to depict a mind in the acute stages of a mental episode. This poem is included in Sexton's third book, *Live or Die*, a collection described as a 'crowning achievement of the confessional mode' (Boyers 61). The collection's title candidly offers the choice felt acutely by a person suffering a severe episode of mental illness.

'Flee on your Donkey' opens with the speaker taking herself to the hospital at the height of a psychotic break. The sense of fear and chaos is represented in the poem by its frenetic and disorderly form. The line length varies erratically from just a word or two, to multisyllabic ten-word lines, which gives a jagged, uncoordinated appearance to the right-hand edge of the poem. The stanzas, too, vary considerably (from five lines to over twenty), adding to the feeling of instability. The beginning of the poem sets the scene as an emergency visit to the asylum:

> Because there was no other place
> to flee to,
> I came back to the scene of the disordered senses,
> came back last night at midnight,
> arriving in the thick June night
> without luggage or defenses,
> giving up my car keys and my cash,
> keeping only a pack of Salem cigarettes
> the way a child holds on to a toy. (1-9)

The speaker is 'back' at the hospital, so this is a repeat episode; although the tone of the poem is edgy and panicked, the experience is familiar. The fact that there are no alternatives to 'flee to' and the speaker has arrived 'without luggage' signals the urgency and severity of the breakdown. As the speaker is recalling the scene the next day ('came back last night'), the anxiety is fresh.

Admission requires the speaker to give up all possessions and all the mechanics of everyday life: money, transport, clothing. And with the submission of defences, the speaker is psychologically naked and exposed. 'Without luggage or defences' collides the physical and the mental, highlighting just how complete and absolute the speaker's vulnerability is, which underpins her aggressive dedication to fleeing from the institution. By clinging to cigarettes as a child might a toy, Sexton almost infantilises the speaker, capturing her need to hold on to the comfort of something familiar – in this case, a tobacco addiction that provides a method of self-medication, a socially acceptable way of treating anxiety, a Freudian self-soother. But a few lines later, Sexton pushes against her own imagery of the child, deflating the whole idea with the line 'this is a mental hospital, / not a child's game' (12-13), redoubling the seriousness and anxiety of the situation. The specificity of the brand of cigarettes, Salem, summons associations with Salem, Massachusetts, famous for its witch trials and a byword for the unjustified persecution of women. By making this reference in the poem, Sexton injects the idea that madness is a type of malevolent possession, and by admitting herself to the hospital she is submitting, at least for the moment, to patriarchal tyranny. The pace and energy in the opening stanza – achieved by the litany of the present continuous verbs 'arriving', 'giving up', and 'keeping' without the repeated use of a pronoun – depicts the restlessness of the speaker's mind.

The gallop of the opening reverberates through the poem's theme of escape. Whereas the speaker in 'You, Doctor Martin' seems resigned to settle into her exile, the speaker in 'Flee on your Donkey' is preoccupied with leaving. Unlike some other Confessional Poets, Sexton here expresses no ambivalence about returning home:

> Anne, Anne,
> flee on your donkey,
> flee this sad hotel (226-228)

In the closing exhortation, the speaker addresses herself in the third person, reinforcing the sense that the mind and self are divided and disassociated during episodes of agitation. The hospital as sad 'hotel' recurs throughout Sexton's poetry and can also be traced to the work of the other Confessionals, notably, Lowell's figuration of the 'resort'. 'Sad' can refer to the emotional state of the patients, to the drab, sombre atmosphere of the hospital, and it can also be a judgement on quality (it being an undesirable place to stay). In the image of the 'sad hotel', the physical characteristics of the hospital mirror the mental illness of the patients who reside there. Sexton is not advocating escaping madness decorously; rather, 'any old way' (234) will suffice: an old donkey

with a 'clumsy gait' (232) is fine, evoking the Marian flight into Egypt to avoid the Massacre of the Innocents.

While Sexton was perhaps the most avid chronicler of what would now be called her journey through the mental healthcare system, Lowell was the first Confessional poet to overtly mine his experiences of mental illness and institutionalisation for poetic material. His work is particularly interested in the journey to and from madness, the time spent in asylums, and the discharge, once treated, back into the domestic setting. A heightened self-awareness and introspective honesty are displayed throughout the poems he wrote during his confessional phase, offering a unique insight into the plight of the self-described 'madman'.

In *Life Studies*, widely regarded as the first full collection of Confessional poetry, Lowell has three poems that deal with locations associated with mental illness: 'Home After Three Months Away', 'Returning', and 'Waking in the Blue'. Each is written in a consistent style and voice, with the first two located in the home immediately after the speaker's return from the asylum, and the latter based in the hospital. In these poems, Lowell uses the concepts of destination and journey to represent his oscillating mental state, reflected in the portrayal of the dissociation of the mind and the body.

'Home After Three Months Away' has a literal title that engenders an expectation that it will be a candid account of the speaker's return to sanity. The poem reports on the process of psychiatric remission, focussing on how indelibly changed a person is after mental illness and the impossible slowness of progress when the speaker leaves the hospital and attempts to assimilate back into family life. The opening lines ('Gone now the baby's nurse / a lioness that ruled the roost') borrow a rhythm more commonly found in nursery rhymes: a spondee followed by two iambic feet. This resonates with the semantic content of babies and caretaking, and the barely-there slant rhyme of 'nurse' / 'roost'. The speaker continues that thought by depicting a more detailed memory of the nurse:

> She used to tie
> gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze –
> three months they hung like soggy toast
> on our eight foot magnolia tree,
> and helped the English sparrows
> weather a Boston winter. (4-9)

'Three months they hung like soggy toast' is a visceral image of dejection. It is perhaps no surprise that bland and unappetising food are what come to mind for the speaker after so much time in the

hospital. As disoriented as an English sparrow in a harsh New World winter, he has survived on this lean and colourless version of life – but only just.

The sense of dislocation is heightened at the beginning of the next stanza as a third-person voice breaks into the poem, as though the speaker is overhearing a conversation in which the neighbours are gossiping about his illness. Alternatively, it may signal the speaker's dissociation from his own identity; split into disparate personalities, he is able to both observe and comment upon the version of himself that moves through the house: 'Three months, three months! / Is Richard now himself again?' (10-11). The repetition and exclamation of the 'three months' connotes the surprise the speaker feels that such a large amount of time should have passed: the depressed malaise, the sedative action of the treatment, and the inherent boredom of the hospital have caused time to pass at a different rate for him than for those keeping 'ordinary' time. The isolation of the speaker's illness is manifest in his losing track of time, and the implied objectivity of the third person imparts the inertness of a specimen.

The poem's point of view shifts again, settling on the first person as the scene becomes more intimate, and the speaker interacts with his daughter:

> Dimpled with exaltation,
> my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
> Our noses rub,
> each of us pats a stringy lock of hair-
> they tell me nothing's gone.
> Though I am forty-one,
> not forty now, the time I put away
> was child's play. After thirteen weeks
> my child still dabs her cheeks
> to start me shaving. (12-21)

Here the rhyme scheme that runs irregularly through the poem comes to the fore in order to capture an atmosphere of innocence between father and young daughter: 'tub/rub' and 'gone/one' are a monosyllabic rhyme and near-rhyme that, as with the opening line of the poem, conjure the lyricism of nursery rhyme, and build on the innocence of the euphemistic 'away' of the title to convey the necessarily tentative process of re-familiarisation between father and child. The speaker is desperately striving to return to normality, for his daughter if for no one else. 'They tell me nothing's gone' seem like the empty, reassuring words of the hospital clinicians who falsely claim that everything in the speaker's life can return to the way it was, but the tone of the speaker suggests that he knows recovery is a distant and uncertain concept. Or, alternatively, the speaker is reminding himself of the words of the psychiatrists in an effort to convince himself that he can

recapture psychological wellbeing. This performative optimism is echoed further down the stanza when the daughter 'still dabs her cheeks / to start me shaving' with the recognition that some of the intimate rituals that bind the two together have not been eroded by the absence. The daughter's literal child's play contrasts with the speaker's phrasing: 'Though I am forty-one, / not forty now, the time I put away / was child's play'. The daughter's actions are as genuine and guileless as the speaker's words are minimising and superficial, attempting to gloss over his real pain.

The theme of strained family life runs through the writing and biographical narratives of the Confessional poets: Berryman and Lowell's multiple marriages punctuated by adulterous affairs conducted while in the grip of mania, Sexton's strained and competitive relationship with her own mother and then her daughters, the psychological abuse Plath suffered, and the history of suicide that haunts their families (Sexton's aunt, Berryman's father, Plath's son). In the poetry, a family can assume various relationships with the poets' madness: it is sometimes a catalyst that precipitates madness; it can also be the representation of sanity (the home setting being the binary opposite of the institutional setting); finally, homelife can be a chaotic setting devoid of the daily routine and calm imposed upon hospital inpatients.

In his 1962 book, *The Myth of Mental Illness*, considered a seminal text in the field of anti-psychiatry and published during the most prolific years of the confessional movement, Szasz writes:

> [M]ental illness may also be considered an indirect communication or language that is used ambiguously, usually in order to give the recipient of the message a choice between several alternative replies. Hints, allusions, and metaphorical expressions of all kinds are everyday examples of indirect communications. The need for this mode of communication arises typically in the family. The social conditions of this unit make it necessary that family members curb their wishes and hence also the explicit symbolic representations of them. This leads to the inhibition ("repression") of direct forms of communication and provides the stimulus for the development of relatively more devious, or indirect, forms of need-communicative behaviour. (300)

Szasz's suspicion of modern psychiatry as a medical discipline, and mental illness as a diagnosis, lay in the intuition that certain behaviours were being incorrectly pathologized when more salient explanations could be provided. One such idea was that mental illness was a form of language that evolved from challenging and confrontational family environments, the kind of family environments that the Confessional poets encountered. In this view, there was a link between their troubled homes, their mental illness, and their capacity for poetic language.

This theme of family estrangement due to mental illness, and the fear of being forgotten by those left behind, is a recurrent motif in Confessional poetry. The dedication in Sexton's debut collection is to her husband: 'To Kayo who waited'. Likewise, Lowell was preoccupied with the idea that his daughter might become too accustomed to his absence in the psychiatric hospital. What is unique to, or at least characteristic of, the Confessionals' take on the familial bond is a recurring guilt caused by a patient's frequent absences – absences caused by the patient being lost to their madness, physically estranged in the hospital, or the foreshadowing of absence linked to suicidal ideation.

This continual cycle of presence-absence is to some degree characteristic of most mental illnesses. Even today, treatment, whether with drugs or behavioural/cognitive therapy methods, often takes time; not all remedies will work for all patients, efficacy may fluctuate over time, and progress towards wellness is not without periodic regression. The transient nature of the madness suffered by the Confessionals is exemplified in their use of holiday/resort imagery. However, where Plath, Sexton and Berryman all refer to the psychiatric hospital as hotel, resort or vacation spot, Lowell inverts that idea in 'Returning' by painting his 'homecoming' as a return to 'the sheltered little resort':

> Homecoming to the sheltered little resort,
> where the members of my gang
> are bald-headed, in business,
> and the dogs still know me by my smell…
> It's rather a dead town
> after my twenty years' mirage. (1-6)

A great deal of tension is generated in that opening line by the odd juxtaposition of returning home to a resort. 'Homecoming' speaks of belonging and permanency, but 'resort' is a location of temporary residence (as well as, idiomatically, a place of desperation – for example, 'last resort'). The speaker's return from the mental institution is likely to be temporary, which links to Lowell's own experience of repeated readmissions to McLean Hospital. In fact, the derivation of 'resort' is 're'+'sortir': it is not merely a place of respite, but also a place designed to be returned to again and again. Lowell's resort is 'sheltered' and 'little': it offers protection, but it is small and out-of-the-way, which perhaps echoes the way the speaker feels diminished, having had his emotions blunted by anti-psychotic medication. The speaker projects his emotional state onto the physical world.

A fear of being forgotten surfaces in 'Returning', where Lowell taps into Homeric mythology to liken his speaker's psychological absenteeism to Odysseus' epic journey to the decade-long Trojan War, followed by the ten-year *nostos* during which he had to overcome myriad

adversities in order to return to his loved ones: 'and the dogs still know me by my smell… / It's rather a dead town / After my twenty years' mirage'. Upon returning to Ithaca, the old dog, Argos, was the only being to acknowledge Odysseus' arrival because he recognised his master's smell; however, Odysseus was forced to ignore Argos' affections so as not to give himself away, allowing the revenant warrior to secretly defeat the enemies who had taken over his household. By drawing on this reference, Lowell underlines the harrowing nature of the patient's estrangement, highlights the length of the speaker's absence, and suggests that he's unable to rejoice in the affections of those who love him. This anxiety about the chequered nature of returning home naturally resonates with 'Home After Three Months Away' too, where Lowell plays with the representation of confused senses to underline the speaker's psychological dislocation: 'When / we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy, / she changes to a boy' (21-23). Refusing to fix its view in one place for too long, the speaker's eye flits about the scene, searching for images that can mirror the scattered qualities of the speaker's mental state:

> Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil.
> Three stories down below,
> a choreman tends our coffin's length of soil,
> and seven horizontal tulips blow.
> Just twelve months ago,
> these flowers were pedigreed
> imported Dutchmen; now no one need
> distinguish them from weed.
> Brushed by the late spring snow,
> they cannot meet
> another year's snowballing enervation. (28-38)

With the phrase 'three stories down below', Lowell continues to shift the position and perspective of the viewpoint, which consolidates the dizzying lack of equilibrium present in a mind recovering from mental illness. The choreman is working, highlighting the speaker's loss of energy and effort. These two figures have ambiguous associations with life and death, activity and inertia. The choreman's active engagement with the 'coffin's length of soil' and its moribund tulips positions him firmly within the natural cycles of life, death, and rebirth. The speaker, literally looking down on the labourer, is the one who has been cut off from these normal rhythms of the world by his illness. The man at work on the 'coffin' of soil also summons the image of a gravedigger thereby associating the speaker with the depressed, patrician Hamlet, considering the abstractions of suicide and death, while those who must dig the graves have no such luxury. Spring has arrived and the thaw should begin in the natural world. But the speaker's feeling is not like waking from

hibernation: there is not a thaw in pathology because the listlessness is not retreating, but rather 'snowballing'. The once beautiful, prized flowers are becoming indistinguishable from the weeds; like the speaker, they are falling in rank, having managed to narrowly survive the winter.

The recovery from mental illness pushes the sufferer into a liminal space somewhere between life and death. The lines 'now no one need / distinguish them from weed' are not asserting that the tulips *cannot* be distinguished from the weeds but rather that there is no point in doing so – they are merely broken, uglier versions, having lost their previous vital qualities. Clearly, Lowell is projecting the attitude of the speaker onto the flowers. Having started out 'pedigreed', the speaker now finds himself ravaged by the demands of the journey to and from mental illness. Yet the speaker's mind is high-functioning, which adds to the despair when he claims that he is empty of energy or spirit. This is not an emotional reaction to his situation, but a considered report pertaining to his hopeless condition. The speaker's inertia feels like a form of death.

The theme of a sufferer of mental illness not being a whole or complete person upon returning from hospital treatment is also very clear in the final lines: 'I keep no rank or station. / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small' (39-40). The state of being 'frizzled' and 'stale', with its smack of the once-comestible, reaches back into the poem to where we found the birds' lard-balls hanging from a branch, reiterating the emotionless, enfeebled journey to recovery. 'Frizzled' is synonymous with something curled, further linking the speaker's physical and emotional state to a decayed piece of food. Lowell has returned shrivelled and smaller, older and wrinkled – he is diminished and possibly emasculated, no longer fit to command the role of patriarch for he is unable to manage his own wellbeing let alone that of the household. 'Frizzled' contains additional semantic texture in its connotations of burnt and charred: it has the association with, and almost onomatopoeic quality of, the ill-effects of an electric shock, which sends the reader to the electroconvulsive therapy that robbed Lowell of his short-term memory and normal emotional response. 'Cured' is a nice piece of semantic misdirection: at the beginning of the line, in context, the reader hears it as referring to illness because the speaker has received his treatment and has been discharged. As the line continues, though, 'cured' can be aligned with the other culinary terms (for example, 'stale') to suggest that the psychiatric treatment has desiccated personality and zest from the speaker, leaving behind a diminished, Pyrrhic version. The speaker has been literally preserved by his time in the hospital – but to what end?

There is a recurrent idea that mental illness and the deleterious effects of its treatment leaves the sufferer diminished, as though his right to be in the world has ebbed away because so much effort and energy have been diverted to the disease. Despite being a respected writer and professor, the perceived weakness of mental illness, especially during a period when psychiatric

illness was yet to be fully recognised, caused Lowell to feel a dip in social status. He is the subject of gossip and his faculties are not to be trusted. Losing 'rank or station' has particular relevance to Lowell, who was from an aristocratic family that could trace its lineage back to the early days of New England, a point of pride for Americans. Madness stripping him of social respectability would have been keenly felt.

In perhaps Lowell's most recognised poem about his time as an inpatient, 'Waking in the Blue', the line 'This is the house of the "mentally ill"' again positions the psychiatric hospital as a place of permanence and belonging, and the family home as a temporary and unfamiliar place, both for the speaker and the waking night attendant who is the focus of the poem's opening. There's a sense of the familiar in the title, as though the speaker is regaining consciousness after a dissociative bout of mania, and as he comes to he is immersed in the colour of sadness. As we have seen in Sexton's 'You, Dr Martin', and as we will see in Berryman's 'The Hell Poem', here authority and social dominance are clearly projected onto the staff. In this example, the 'night attendant', who 'catwalks down our corridor', apparently relishes his autonomy, as well as the inpatients' attention. As Lowell, perhaps with a sneer or maybe a sad sigh, notes, the night attendant is a 'B.U. sophomore'. He is a student, and considering Lowell taught at B.U., someone who could have been one of *his* students:

> The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore,
> rouses from the mare's-nest of his drowsy head
> propped on The Meaning of Meaning.
> He catwalks down our corridor.
> Azure day
> makes my agonized blue window bleaker.
> Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.
> Absence! My heart grows tense
> as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill. (1-10)

Lowell here plays with our social construction of the colour blue: 'Azure day / makes my agonized blue window bleaker'. Blue is the colour of sadness and depression but it is also the colour of a bright cloudless sky. However, for a patient whose freedom has been confiscated, the reminder of the open skies beyond the locked doors of the hospital is yet another torment. The remainder of the stanza builds on this sense of oppression as we immediately encounter crows, the signifiers of death. The exclamation mark after 'Absence!' increases the volume of the speaker's feelings, and the single word is emphatic. The stanza draws to a close by personifying the heart (the classic organ of love and emotion) and the harpoon (as though the speaker's madness has rendered him

a defenceless whale, lumbering through life), conjuring connotations of the hunted and even a welcome *coup de grâce*.

The parentheses and quotations that surround "mentally ill" reveal that the term is one used by others rather than by the speaker himself, and there is a lack of agreement as to its meaning. It could be linked to Lowell's own rejection of politically correct terms in favour of words like "madness" to categorise his own condition. Alternatively, perhaps the speaker rejects a label like "illness", preferring to accept madness as a normal aspect of his personality.

Formally, the poem sits in an awkward no man's land between the disorder of uneven stanzas written in free verse, and fragments in the rhyming couplets often favoured by Lowell (Meyers and Lowell 53-55). This feeds into the sense that the speaker is making seemingly lucid observations, but there is confusion in his thought process, and a drowsiness that lingers. Lowell uses a dissociation of mind and body to illustrate sensory disorientation and the underlying detachment that depression and its treatments can cause. This same technique can be seen in the work of other Confessional poets. Perhaps none are more disorientating, or more completely inhabit the state of disorientation, than the poems of John Berryman.

Berryman spent much of his life in and out of mental institutions, including McLean's Hospital, and he explicitly tackles the treatment of mental illness in several of his poems. 'The Hell Poem', formed of nine free-verse quatrains that describe a first-person inpatient experience in a psychiatric hospital, is perhaps the work most focused on his experience of institutionalisation. It is included in his collection *Love & Fame*, which has been called 'the most nakedly confessional of all his books'. The poem closely mirrors the experiences recounted in Lowell's 'Waking up in Blue' and Sexton's 'You, Dr Martin' in which the poet is the patient. As Lowell and Sexton did in their poems, Berryman focuses on the physical details of the hospital and its specific characters in order to project his mental state.

The entwined themes of madness, hell and death are perennial touchstones that Berryman referenced throughout his writing career, from his early poems, through to *The Dream Songs,* and continuing into his later, most autobiographical, work. He also utilised his classical education to reference Greek mythology, Dante, Milton and Shakespeare. In the poem 'Parting as Descent' from the 1948 collection *The Dispossessed*, published decades before 1970's *Love & Fame*, he writes:

> The vessels in my brain
> Burst, the train roared, the other travellers
> In flames leapt, burning on the tilted air
> *Che si cruccia*, I heard the devils curse
> And shriek with joy in that place beyond prayer. (8-12)

This poem contains parallels with Dante's spiral into hell, and the Italian quote '*Che si cruccia*', taken from Canto XIX, translates as 'you mortify' (Alighieri 206), leaving no doubt as to the poem's inspiration. In the poem's first two stanzas, the speaker is accompanied by another character, who 'turn[s] away and vanish[es]' as the speaker's train departs. As Virgil could not accompany Dante to Paradise, the speaker's companion cannot accompany him on his journey to 'the place beyond prayer'. Intimating the expulsion from Paradise (in the Edenic sense), the train journey is also a kind of exile, with the speaker cast out from the reassuringly quotidian world of clocks and coffee in the first two stanzas to the new life of suffering of the third. This loss of innocence for the speaker, and the abandonment by his companion, amplify the horror of the descriptions. From this point in Berryman's career, the brain, departure, madness, evil and the devil are all intertwined.

In 'The Hell Poem', Berryman deploys characters to illustrate different aspects of being an inpatient in the hospital: the autonomic routine of the nurses, the ingrained fear of returning to the real world, and the seclusion of the most afflicted patients to the inner wards deep within the hospital. The title of the poem leaves no room for misinterpretation. It is going to describe the worst place imaginable – the darkest, most deplorable realm. The reader is primed to receive a poem about place that is devoid of hope, freedom, peace and happiness. By specifying the genre 'Poem' in the title, rather than simply calling the piece 'Hell', Berryman makes it clear that he is drawing again upon allusions laid down in Dante's epic poem, *Inferno*. From the outset, Berryman intends to confront and unsettle the reader with his provocative account of mental illness.

The poem begins with two linked images apprehended by different senses, and they are immersive:

> Hospital racket, nurses' iron smiles.
> Jill & Eddie Jane are the souls.
> I like nearly all the rest of them too
> except when they feed me paraldehyde. (1-4)

The opening images give a jumpy, twitchy insight into the experience of the speaker as he attempts to orient himself within the hospital environment: 'iron smiles' are not a product of emotion but rather are fixed, mechanical, permanently set. The nurses are robotic and tough in their duties: functional, lacking compassion, rigid in their approach to the patients. But the speaker's attitude towards the asylum slides uneasily between affection and irritation: 'Jill & Eddie Jane are the souls. / I like nearly all the rest of them too / except…'. The speaker's ostensible affection for the nurses

is signalled by the use of their first names. But with the turn of 'except' he undercuts that intimacy again.

Having been introduced to the nurses in the first stanza, the second stanza immediately presents a fellow patient, 'Tyson'. The reality of becoming institutionalised and the fear of returning to the 'frightful outer world' is dramatised through Tyson's inability to cope:

> Tyson has been here three heavy months;
> heroin. We have the same doctor: She's improving,
> let out on pass tonight for her first time.
> A madonna's oval face with wide dark eyes.
>
> Everybody is jolly, patients, nurses,
> orderlies, some psychiatrists. Anguishes;
> gnawings. Protractions of return
> to the now desired but frightful outer world.
>
> Young Tyson hasn't eaten since she came back.
> She went to a wedding, her mother harangued her
> it was all much too much for her
> she sipped wine with a girl-friend, she fled here. (5-16)

Here the speaker's voice gains precision to explain the cause ('her mother harangued her') and effect ('she fled here') of Tyson's intimidation by the real world. The mention of the mother introduces a Freudian quality to the poem: all Tyson's problems can be traced back to her mother, including this latest ordeal. 'Three heavy months' generates a sense of lumbering slowness, of claustrophobia. The perception of time is again distorted: the universe within the asylum does not operate according to the same physical laws that govern the outside world. Time slows down, bringing with it enhanced reflection, observation, relaxation, and boredom. 'Everybody is jolly' is patently untrue. Either we acknowledge that the speaker is using an ironic tone and the statement is not to be taken at face value, or the assertion causes the reader to question the objectivity of the speaker and consider whether their illness is clouding his ability to report on the scene. The speaker no sooner makes the claim that 'everybody' is jolly than he undermines it, as only 'some psychiatrists' share the jovial attitude. This uncertainty is dispelled by the two-word sentence, 'Anguishes; / gnawings', undercutting the cheerfulness deftly. These words have added significance as they are taken from Dante's *Inferno*; specifically, they reference the minotaur gnawing on his own flesh in the seventh circle and the anguished screams of the Uncommitted heard by Dante as he passes through the vestibule of hell (56-60). The injection of unreliability

into the narrative of the speaker is an effective technique for reminding the reader that mental illness distorts understanding of the world and alters the ordinary functioning of the senses.

A striking feature of the psychiatric hospital as depicted by Berryman is how heavily populated it is. Patient experiences are communal and any isolation that is felt is purely internal because the scenes bustle with human activity. After the specificity of Tyson's personal story in stanza four ('it was all too much for her…she fled here'), stanza five of 'The Hell Poem' pans out again to take a wider view of the inhabitants en masse, to remind the reader of the faceless routine of the hospital:

> Many file down for shock & can't say after
> whether they ate breakfast or not. Dazed till four.
> One word is: the memory will come back.
> Ah, weeks or months. Maybe. (17-20)

This slow queuing, filing and collecting of patients is familiar from Sexton's work. We're reminded that although the Confessional poets are sharing their own, very personal, experiences of mental illness, and appreciation of the 'mind' is an individual concern, society processes multiple inpatients in a manner normally forced upon schoolchildren or inflicted on prisoners. The stanza also highlights the clear limitations of the treatment available in 1960s and the general imprecision of psychiatric understanding; as we have already witnessed, the beneficial effects of Tyson's treatment are so delicate that they are undone by a small altercation with her mother. In the eyes of the speaker, the act of mass electroconvulsive therapy seems to have the exclusive objective of forcing people to forget they are in hell, with the promise that the memory will return after some ill-defined period ('…The memory will come back. / Ah, weeks or months. Maybe'). The removal of memories does not remove trauma or dysfunctional thinking patterns; rather, in a cruel act of iatrogenesis, it erodes personality and humanity, thereby setting the patient even further adrift.

Stanza six begins: 'Behind the locked door, called 'back there,'/the worse victims' (21-22). The choice of the word 'victims' is germane: the poem, compassionately and perhaps surprisingly for its time period, suggests that patients are helpless to do anything about the onset of the disease. Those with the greatest severity of madness are the most physically dissociated, locked away in the deepest recesses of the facility, just as their minds are locked away in the deepest, most remote corners of their madness. The reversibility of this journey, as discussed previously, most notably in 'To Bedlam and Part Way Back', is demonstrated in Berryman's poem in lines 3-4 in stanza 7: 'Sometimes one is promoted here. We are ecstatic. / Sometimes one has to go back'. Berryman complicates the identification of madness with asylum by stratifying different severities of madness

and associating them with different areas within the institution. As previously discussed, Sexton celebrates madness to the extent that the greater the madness, the greater the elevation up the hierarchy (later echoed in Susanna Kaysen's memoir, *Girl, Interrupted*, in which characters compete to claim the greatest severity of illness). Yet Berryman's speaker inverts the hierarchy to one that is in line with the assumption that wellness is the desirable apex of the pyramid – hence one is 'promoted' out of the locked wards. The fact that the other patients are 'ecstatic' when someone makes it out of the locked wards further suggests that this is an achievement to be celebrated and that getting better is the desirable trajectory. In addition to this vertical axis of hierarchy of severity, there also exists another spatial metaphor of front and back in the poem that is linked to severity. The madder patients are 'behind' the less insane patients, for example, 'behind the locked door'. The most severe patients are not only removed from society, but they're also removed from the majority of other (less ill) patients housed in the institution. And when someone is promoted to the main ward, there's always the chance that they might 'go back'. Berryman's speaker views psychological wellness as being higher on a vertical axis and further forward on a horizontal axis.

In 'The Hell Poem', the speaker loses 'matches' and a 'telephone'. While this of course did literally happened upon admission to the facility, it's noteworthy that Berryman, Sexton, and Lowell each frame the removal of possessions as a type of theft that strips them of dignity, responsibility, and perhaps even humanity. The confiscation of matches represents the removal of one of our most basic tools capable of generating heat and light – metaphorically but also literally, the hospital is taking a patient's ability to satisfy his or her most fundamental human needs. Similarly revoking access to a telephone, tantamount to the act of an isolationist dictatorship, removes the possibility of communication with anyone not enclosed in the bubble of the institution.

In the penultimate stanza, Berryman reminds us of the arbitrary nature of mental illness, highlighting that it can afflict women, men, and any age group (he himself has been in the hospital with 'the elderly', 'men' and 'girls, fourteen to forty'). With satisfying cyclical completeness, the poem, which begins with the observation of 'hospital racket' concludes with 'sobbings, a scream, a slam' – onomatopoeic auditory images that underline the auditory chaos of the scene – before asking 'will the day glow again' for himself and the other patients. To close, he plunges the scene of the hospital into a hellish dark night, a night 'of witches'. The unnerving final line of 'The Hell Poem' is a declarative prophecy, 'I am staying days' (36).

Berryman held the belief that the empathy garnered through suffering was essential to the success of an artist. In an interview with *The Paris Review* shortly before his suicide, he spoke of

being 'lucky' to have been put through 'the worst possible ordeal'. His was an uncompromising belief that an artist must suffer for their art:

> INTERVIEWER: Where do you go from here?
>
> BERRYMAN: […] My idea is this: The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business. Beethoven's deafness, Goya's deafness, Milton's blindness, that kind of thing. And I think that what happens in my poetic work in the future will probably largely depend not on my sitting calmly on my ass as I think, "Hmm, hmm, a long poem again? Hmm," but on being knocked in the face, and thrown flat, and given cancer, and all kinds of other things short of senile dementia. At that point, I'm out, but short of that, I don't know. I hope to be nearly crucified.
>
> INTERVIEWER: You're not knocking on wood.
>
> BERRYMAN: I'm scared, but I'm willing. I'm sure this is a preposterous attitude, but I'm not ashamed of it. (Berryman, 'The Art of Poetry XVI: John Berryman' 206-207)

The views expressed by Berryman seem to chime with Socrates' claim, articulated in Plato's *Phaedo*, that 'the greatest of goods comes to us through madness, provided it is bestowed by divine gift'. Socrates adduces four types of madness that he regards as god-given: prophetic, ritualistic, poetic, and erotic. Given his fundamental principle that anything divine cannot be evil, Socrates infers that any divinely bestowed madness must therefore be 'the greatest of goods' (Harris 396-397).

Similarly, in the essay 'God-Consciousness and the "Poetry of Madness"', Elsa von Eckartsberg puts forward the idea that madness can be characterized as 'God-Consciousness' and being 'raised into human awareness' (361), further supporting the notion that madness can provide enlightenment: 'God-consciousness, if rightly understood and appropriated by man, is seen here as the most beneficial and constructive state of consciousness' (ibid 362). Madness can be something heaven-sent. Perhaps most pertinently, however, Eckartsberg acknowledges, but is unable to justify, the consequences of embracing the divine consciousness of madness: 'Why has the acquisition of god-consciousness, throughout the ages, held such a fascination for man that he would endure the hardest and most cruel ordeals, even risk his life and sanity to attain it?' (ibid 365).

For all Berryman's bravado in asserting that he welcomes suffering as an essential part of being an artist, the content and tone of his dream songs paint madness as a truly hopeless place.

Evidenced by 'Dream Song 1', the very beginning of the dream song sequence immediately points towards departure, absence and the act of hiding:

> Huffy Henry hid the day,
> unappeasable Henry sulked.
> I see his point, – a trying to put things over.
> It was the thought that they thought
> they could do it made Henry wicked & away.
> But he should have come out and talked.
>
> All the world like a woolen lover
> once did seem on Henry's side.
> Then came a departure.
> Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
> I don't see how Henry, pried
> open for all the world to see, survived. (1-12)

Before his 'departure' for the land of mental illness, Henry was innocent and saw the world as an ally; however, madness robs him of his sympathy with the world. The poem continues:

> What he has now to say is a long
> wonder the world can bear & be.
> Once in a sycamore I was glad
> all at the top, and I sang.
> Hard on the land wears the strong sea
> and empty grows every bed. (13-18)

Henry, once 'in a sycamore' loses his high and clear-sighted position. The sycamore has metaphorical resonance with the Biblical story of Zacchaeus climbing it in order to catch a glimpse of Christ. It is thus used in some Christian traditions to symbolise spiritual clarity – the kind of clarity that Henry now feels estranged from. The fall from the top of the 'sycamore' puts an end to Henry's singing. A loss of sympathy opens his eyes to 'hardness' and 'emptiness'; it is a poem about loss of innocence that prefigures all the following songs. Like Berryman, Henry is ill at ease with the world, swinging between bouts of depression and mania, self-medicating with alcohol, and in and out of mental institutions. The jacket copy of *The Dream Songs* proudly boasts that the poems: 'are witty and wild, an account of madness shot through with searing insight…' (Berryman, *The Dream Songs*). A 'witty' account of 'madness' suggests that the poems are not to be considered too earnestly; conversely, the promise of 'searing insight' suggests a real authenticity. As advertised, the poems do deliver the overlaid complexity of comedy and tragedy: the high/low diction, the

word play, the often-ridiculous thoughts Henry has, juxtaposed by a tangible sense of doom and wretchedness.

Of all the Confessional poets, Berryman's relationship to madness is perhaps the most complicated: he was painfully aware of its agonies but also acutely cognizant of the poetic rewards. By writing within the autobiographical limits of the lyrical 'I' and establishing the invented proxy 'Henry', Berryman explored the breadth and depth of his mental illness as a destination, drawing on his knowledge of classical, biblical and Shakespearean texts to present madness as somewhere both heavenly and hellish. The following chapter will explore how the Confessionals further complicated their portrayals of madness with the presence of an additional, often malign, personality.

Madness as Possession

> The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. (Rimbaud 377)

Historically, various forms of mental illness and so-called madness have been explained by and associated with forms of possession, including demons, devils, witches, djinns, ghosts, etc., which have their origins in religion, folk tales and mythology. Whereas the conceptual metaphor that links madness to a journey is a subtractive representation of madness (the afflicted taking leave of their senses), the idea of possession is an additive representation (the afflicted is joined by another, alien consciousness). This dichotomy is mirrored in the actual manifestation of mental illness. While the subtractive sense of the madness could be linked to the dissociative symptoms of several mental illnesses (in which the patient does not respond appropriately to external stimuli), the relation between madness and possession is linked to symptoms of a shared identity – altered memories and new, incursive personalities.

Even from our modern, medicalised Western perspective, tales of demonic possession resonate culturally, with examples like *The Exorcist* drawing their power from the horror of supernatural intrusion on modern day normalcy, even though they do not inform our day-to-day understanding of mental illness. However, the most recent edition of the main psychiatric reference text, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-5), explicitly connects the spiritual and the psychological, indicating that personality states of dissociative identity disorder may be interpreted as possession in some cultures, and further stating that instances of spirit possession and diagnoses of dissociative identity disorder can both originate from severely traumatic experiences (van Duijl et al. 1418).

In possession, the madness does not belong to the sufferer but can be explained by another actor, often one with malevolent intentions who insists on manipulating the host into performing actions that are undesired and troubling. Possession as a metaphor is associated with the active, 'positive' (in the clinical parlance) symptoms of mental illness: specifically, the destructive actions, sense of invincibility, disregard for consequences, and largesse exhibited during episodes of mania, as well as the radically altered behaviour that can precipitate a psychotic event. Through the possession, the sufferer can appear to become a different person, which the Confessional poets recognised and struggled with: 'Robert Lowell and John Berryman, along with their contemporaries Theodore Roethke, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, and Anne Sexton, were –

among other things – "stalked" by their manic-depressive illness' (Jamison, *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire* 12). The sense of mental illness as an external being is underlined by Jamison's very deliberate use of the word "stalked", which personifies the illness as a secondary, sinister presence.

Among the Confessionals, several of the poets explicitly reach for the cultural personas associated with possession. Sexton draws on witchcraft and fairy tales to characterise the qualities of her madness, while Plath writes about her repeated suicide attempts by (among other things) taking on the persona of Lazarus coming back to life; and Berryman continues his fascination with hell and the devils that might inhabit the mind during episodes of madness. The customary treatment for suffering via spirit possession involves various forms of exorcism that have the effect of casting the illness out and banishing it from the sufferer's mind, which is a trope that also recurs throughout Confessional poetry.

The possessive nature of madness, and the behavioural control it demands, can easily lead us to the conclusion that its relationship to the sufferer is a parasitic one; however, as seen in the previous chapter, the Confessionals did not view their mental afflictions as blights entirely without compensatory blessings. As we consider the idea of possession, perhaps it would be an overstatement and – considering how many of these writers ultimately ended up taking their own lives – a somewhat blithe elision of the real suffering their illnesses caused to refer to the relationship between the poet and their mental illness as symbiosis, with the illness feeding the writing. At the same time, our cultural memory contains the figure of the possessed as holy fools: blessed, chosen, marked out for reverence in some way due to their status as a vessel for this (potentially) higher power. From saints to shamans to seers, a wide range of cultures mark out the possessed as gifted messengers. As Scull points out:

> '[Our] remote ancestors […] often sought solace and explanation in the realm of the supernatural: the wrath of God (or the gods); possession by the Devil, or by evil spirits; bewitchment; the astrological influence of misaligned stars; sometimes even divine blessing or holy madness, for – perverse as it might seem – some forms of madness were interpreted in a favourable light. (7)

The previous chapter touched on how Sexton wrote from a subject position in which her lineage as a 'madwoman' granted the Janus-faced curse of genius. When she deploys metaphors of possession, we again see her very explicitly aligning herself with those who might have been slandered and feared in another age. Of all the Confessional poets, Sexton is perhaps the most consistent in characterising her madness as a form of possession, in which a character or entity wrests control of her mind, emotions and body, taking over her actions and robbing her personality

of its agency. Sexton portrays these disruptive possessions in various ways, but the most prominent personae are witches, and the most recurrent motifs drawn from witchcraft.

Szasz, a major figure in the anti-psychiatry movement as we have seen, argues that modern mental illness is a historical remnant of a concept drawn from medieval witchcraft that lingers in the cultural fabric, whereby witchcraft was a label applied to a person who was unwilling to follow the (Biblical) social rules that were supposed to govern an individual's behaviour (Szasz 303). By distancing herself from family life and dedicating all her energy to a poetry career, Sexton displayed a type of behaviour that went against the grain of what constituted normalcy for 1950s America. Szasz notes that Sexton demonstrated 'behaviour which has been variously labelled "witchcraft", "hysteria", and "mental illness"' (ibid 13).

Poetic expressions of the possessive qualities of Sexton's illness first emerge in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, specifically in the poem 'Her Kind':

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light:
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
> I have been her kind. (1-7)

The opening lines marry the sense of madness as journey and madness as possession. The journey commences only once the speaker, the witch, has been possessed. The poem's title makes clear that Sexton is describing the way in which the possession leaves the sufferer marked: the speaker describes herself and her actions as though she is apart, observing. By drawing on the image of the witch, Sexton links herself to a lineage of women living on the margins of society, reviled and feared for the powers that set them apart. Because of the traditional perception of witches as social deviants, the image of the witch provides Sexton a useful metaphor with which to explore feminism through the lens of the unjustly persecuted woman (this early reference to witchcraft, folklore and fairy tales foreshadows the work she went on to do in *Transformations*, a collection that entirely focuses on the retelling of Grimm's fairy tales). 'Her Kind' is formed of three septets, each with a mainly regular rhyme scheme (ABABCBC in the first two stanzas, for example), a pattern that is largely replicated in the third stanza. A more balanced or symmetrical version of this form might be an octet of ABABCBCB but here the 'missing' B rhyme of the absent last line, as well as the shortened length and monosyllables of the last line and the strong spondee of 'her kind' give an incantatory effect, as well as a measured and deliberate feel. The form of the septet has particular

significance because of the many various cultural and religious associations held by the number seven (the seven deadly sins and heavenly virtues; the sabbath).

In each of the poem's three stanzas, the speaker adopts a slightly different personality, a facet of multiple and mutable traditional female identities: crone, mother and victim (a sexualised victim, no less, with 'nude arms' and 'flames [biting] thigh'). The witch persona violates rules with her flagrant lack of inhibition and her dazzling agency. There is a freedom – one often not granted to women through the ages – associated with madness and the abandonment of social expectations. Again, Sexton's work displays cognisance of the positive effects of mental illness in addition to the negative. Against the boredom of the ordinary, the Sisyphean routine of daily life, what can be more exciting than flying above it all during the night's witching hour?

In the first two stanzas, Sexton's speaker is a lonely, nocturnal figure, keeping herself separate from the world's working hours and confining herself to a subterranean cave in the woods. Yet, like Icarus, she soars god-like above the small lives within the static and distant houses below (…I have done my hitch /over the plain houses, light by light). The opening stanza literally, physically positions the speaker in opposition to (or misalignment with) the rest of the conventional world, soaring above it in her reverie.

The first stanza's heightened vocabulary hits several gothic notes when describing the speaker/witch: 'possessed witch', 'haunting the black air', 'dreaming evil'. The speaker was 'braver at night', implying her experience of the outside world is easier during the antisocial hours when the majority of people are sleeping; these sinister witch-like activities, like vampiric or lycanthropic behaviour, are nocturnal experiences. In contrast to the witch's soaring freedom, the houses below are described as 'plain', with the phrase 'light by light' suggesting a linear uniformity. The symptoms of possession as described here are not just mental: the poem also describes the 'twelve-fingered' physical manifestation of black magic which, as in the mythology of Anne Boleyn's extra digit, could be taken as proof that a woman was a witch. 'A woman like that is not a woman, quite' collides the mental and physical 'otherness' of the witch persona with the external judgement of society to cast the speaker/witch out of mainstream categories and into something marginal – empowering, perhaps, but lonely and, as the final stanza demonstrates, dangerous.

In contrast with the night-time sojourn of the first stanza, the second stanza sees the speaker in her own home, where she is presented as a whimsical subversion of a traditional homemaker, decorating her cave and taking care of 'the worms and the elves'. While she may be cast out of conventional feminine roles, she enacts them on her own terms, maintaining the urge to nurture and put straight the 'disaligned'. Here, in this cosily self-determined place, the outside world only intrudes in the implicit judgement of the line: 'A woman like that is misunderstood'.

In the third stanza, the speaker/witch faces the hostile world most openly, with Sexton sketching witches' executions: the 'cart', the 'flames', the 'wheel [that] winds'. The speaker addresses the cart driver directly as 'you', implicating the external world and, by extension, the reader, in her persecution. This stanza is a mirror image of the first: whereas that passage was a nocturnal idyll, this is a waking nightmare, with the speaker brought into daylight and public for her punishment to be meted out by a society that sees her existence as tantamount to contagion. As in the first stanza, the speaker and the witch occupy the same form as separate personalities; but while the physical form is burnt and shattered, a voice is still 'survivor'. Is 'a woman like that' 'not ashamed to die' because she knows her supernatural possessor will outlive her fragile woman's body, just as Sexton's poem will outlast her own lifespan?

Each of the poem's three stanzas end with the same construction: 'A woman like that …/ 'I have been her kind'. This phrasing emphasises the speaker's membership in a lineage of outsider women, underlining, again, Sexton's sense of her madness placing her within an exalted group of gifted artists. But the careful third person distancing in the penultimate line of a 'woman like that', with the kinship only acknowledged in the final 'I have been her kind', also suggests the triangulation of society-speaker-possessor. The speaker is conflicted: simultaneously taking up her inheritance and mourning her exile.

The past tense of the construction ('I have been her kind') also suggests that madness is a reversible state, or at least not an essential one (how can it be, if it is a visitation by a possessive spirit?). The speaker's possession is not necessarily permanent, and the possessive entity may relinquish its grip and give back control to the speaker. While this idea of madness as possession is an ancient one, from the vantage point of twentieth-century psychiatry, we – and Sexton – are more likely to understand mental illness as a fracturing of the self. The intrusive presence is not literally an external malevolence but rather a facet of the personality. Perhaps this, too, explains the speaker's slipperiness about pronouns and alignments – she may regard the 'woman like that' as being a side of herself too essential to ignore, if too uncomfortable to fully embrace.

'Her Kind' is often interpreted as a feminist text, addressing a patriarchal society and women's reality of living in a world dominated by toxic masculinity (McClatchy). And certainly, the attribution of 'witch' was a way for societies to punish women who were troublesome in one way or another (Thurston). In addition to its feminist overtones, though, Sexton's poem draws a parallel between the way women were persecuted as witches in the seventeenth century and the stigma attached to the mentally ill in the twentieth century. The emphasis on the speaker/witch's outcast status, and the unfeeling (at best) and threatening (at worst) views of 'mainstream' society, show mental illness as another way of being 'apart'; the poem presents a solitary and fraught path,

though not one without compensations. Just as the witch soars to freedom, a manic episode may be an exhilarating experience. However, as Sexton demonstrates, the consequences can be severe.

The poem that immediately follows 'Her Kind' in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 'The Exorcists', is read by many critics as referring to abortion (Hedley 99). But pregnancy is, of course, a kind of literal physical possession. Sexton's metaphors can support both readings: of the separate personality as an incipient child or as a possessive entity residing in the mind of the speaker (Colburn 276). The poem opens:

> And I solemnly swear
> on the chill of secrecy
> that I know you not (1-3)

While the speaker in the poem could be talking to an unborn child, the tone of the address is such that she could also be talking to the being that resides in her mind in the form of madness:

> For all these present,
> before that wandering ghost,
> that yellow moth of my summer bed, (7-9)

The reference to the 'summer bed' echoes Sexton's earlier depiction of the hospital as a 'summer hotel' in the poem 'You, Dr Martin'. It seems, perhaps counter-intuitively, that the summer is the season associated with mental distress in Sexton's poetry, resulting in an unsettling juxtaposition between the gothic, wintry darkness of witchcraft and the summer's light, warmth and vitality. But this presumably mirrors Sexton's own experience of attempting to manage her mental health: we're reminded that mental illness refuses to be predictable and can let its presence be known at any time. And of course, for many sufferers, organic, physical catalysts influence mental illness. Sexton suffered from postnatal depression after the birth of each of her children, so pregnancy in her poetry is often referenced as a trigger for the deterioration of her mental health. This complicates the metaphor of madness as possession because, in Sexton's case, that possession is quite literal: the residing, parasitic entity causing emotional instability becomes synonymous with the child growing inside the speaker. Towards the end of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, the poem 'What's That' braids the themes of parenthood and madness:

> Before it came inside
> I had watched it from my kitchen window,
> watched it swell like a new balloon,

watched it slump and then divide,
like something I know I know –
a broken pear or two halves of the moon,
or round white plates floating nowhere
or fat hands waving in the summer air
until they fold together like a fist or a knee. (1-9)

This extract highlights the amorphous quality of the speaker's emotional state, as the oncoming madness is described using a succession of images that manage to resonate with and complicate one another. The madness is watched from the kitchen window, suggesting the speaker is powerless to influence it as she sits outside of the experience, an observer. Its growth is unstoppable and perturbing, it 'swells', 'slumps' and 'divides', in a way reminiscent of the cellular mechanisms of embryonic development. The myriad ways in which it is described prevents the speaker pinning down an exact, reliable image, and yet it is something she recognises on a visceral level ('something I know I know'). It exhibits the ghostly, witchlike properties of floating, before the focus shifts to the movement of 'a fist or a knee', almost as though we are witnessing the way the blurs of shadow condense into human form on an ultrasound. The moon and the pear have established associations with fertility, adding to the rich symbolism of the poem. The poem continues with the arrival of 'it':

After that it came to my door. Now it lives here.
And of course: it is a soft sound, soft as a seal's ear
that was caught between a shape and a shape and then returned to me. (10-12)

'Now it lives here' anthropomorphises the madness further and we are left wondering where the 'here' is: the speaker's home or the speaker's body or mind. The madness shifts to an auditory image, reframing the amorphous, visual content through a different sense; it is now a soft sound, but one that has been caught between two shapes. (Interestingly, seals by definition lack visible ears, so the image of a 'seal's ear' conjures something occult, if not paradoxical). The use of 'of course' and 'returned to me' suggests that 'it' is something that speaker has been expecting on the basis of having been acquainted with it previously, which is consistent with the cyclical relapse and remission of Sexton's experience with madness.

The conversion of 'it' from visible object to sound is developed in successive stanzas, and the poem becomes suggestive of the auditory hallucinations that Sexton experienced from time to time ('parents' call', 'dog snoring') and, in the mind of the speaker, these hallucinations are very real, as 'real as splinters stick in your ear'. The poem ends with a reminder of the seductive and

ghostly quality of madness: it calls to the speaker like a siren, or the 'outside cars whisk[ing] by on the / suburban street' (27-28), with the intent to wrest control and agency. This form of madness is intricate but unnameable, invisible but full of supernatural agency: 'What else is this, this intricate shape of air? /calling me, calling you.' (30-31)

'Old Dwarf Heart', first published in 1961 in *The Hudson Review* and later included in Sexton's second collection, *All My Pretty Ones*, furthers exemplifies her interest in using mythological characters as metaphorical and psychoanalytic substitutes for the mental illness she was experiencing. Compared to the protean nature of the constantly transforming entity seen in 'What's That', and the multifaceted witch employed in 'Her Kind', the old dwarf heart is a thoroughly rendered and relatively consistent character. The central image the poem presents is challenging in that the character is the heart of a dwarf with the anatomy of a person (the dwarf heart has eyes, for example). An earlier, unpublished version of the poem contains the lines, 'Each day she has her say // I have not made her up' (Sexton, *Anne Sexton Archive (All My Pretty Ones)*). The insistence underlines the oddness of the metaphor, but it is also particularly haunting in terms of the unrelenting interjection of this alien voice, and in the need for the speaker to vouch for the reality of this possession that is able to ventriloquise seamlessly and unnoticed. In the earliest drafts of 'Old Dwarf Heart' is an epigraph from Saul Bellow's 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King*, perhaps suggesting that inspiration for the poem was born out of a reading of the novel:

> True. All too true. I have never been at home in life. All my decay has taken place upon a child.

Certainly, there are striking resemblances in the plight of the novel's protagonist and that of the semi-autobiographical speaker in Sexton's poetry. Henderson, a wealthy upper-middle class gentleman, driven by an existential sense of dissatisfaction and a nagging inner voice, travels to Africa where a local tribe crowns him the Rain King. The narrative contains themes that Sexton cycles through in her poetry: the connection between mental restlessness and spiritual discontent; and imagery of witchcraft, possession, decay and escape.

Each stanza of 'Old Dwarf Heart' has an envelope rhyme scheme (ABCCBA), which is a figuration of the conversation between the speaker and the old dwarf heart herself. The enclosure also underlines the closed system between the speaker and the heart: the organ is both a part of and not a part of the speaker, and they are trapped together within the walls of the *stanza* (from the Italian for 'room'):

> When I lie down to love,

old dwarf heart shakes her head.
Like an imbecile she was born old,
Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds
of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.
She knows the decay we're made of. (1-6)

In taking the dwarf heart – an entity that has possessed the speaker's body – as an analogy for mental illness, it is possible to identify clearly certain symptoms, most notably: inability to love, irritability, pessimism, disturbed dreams. Furthermore, by using the old dwarf heart as the cause of her madness and its associated symptoms, Sexton's speaker is distancing herself from them and presenting them as something out of her control, a salient reminder that mental illness is not a choice. The disease has wrestled the reins out of the hands of the sufferer and is now steering the cart. The lines 'Like an imbecile she was born old' and 'When I lie down to love, old dwarf heart shakes her head' suggest that the character of old dwarf heart is imposing the negative, stereotypical attributes of old age on the speaker: a lack of vitality, irascibility, depletion of energy and optimism. Worse: in this case, old dwarf heart was born that way; she never enjoyed youth. The line 'When I lie down to love, / old dwarf heart shakes her head' renders the mild disapproval of a maternal figure; but actually, when the reader steps back to consider the stakes, old dwarf heart is denying the speaker the right to love. In this way, the childlike register of the opening lines belies a more sinister narrative, reminiscent of the techniques seen in the allegorical structure of the Germanic fairy tales with which Sexton was fascinated. The inability to love might also recall Sexton's previously-mentioned postnatal depression, as her medical records suggest she found it difficult to maintain a bond with her daughters during those periods of illness (Skorczewski 2).

The stanza closes with 'She knows the decay we're made of', intimating a heightened consciousness of mortality consistent with a depressive episode. Having established the metaphor in the opening stanza, Sexton uses the personified character of old dwarf heart, and her habitual behaviours, to explore symptoms with just such an episode: 'When hurt she is abrupt / Now she is solid, like fat' (7-8). The heart is not behaving as it should, quite the opposite: rather than presiding over a healthy physiology, supplying nutrition around the body, this heart is diseased; rather than the expected regular movement of beats like iambic feet, this heart is solid and still, with a pathological furring up with fat. In an earlier draft, the stanza includes the lines, 'I'd spit her out, / but my heart is the muscle she holds' (Sexton, *Anne Sexton Archive (All My Pretty Ones)*). These lines speaks to how viscerally intertwined Sexton is with the parasitic madness that has taken refuge in her mind.

In the second stanza we encounter the lines, '*She* dreams that… / strange, strange and corrupt' (11-12). The italicisation of 'she' in the archival draft emphasises to the reader that it is old dwarf heart who is in control of the speaker's dreams and, by proxy, her mind. But the specifics of the dreams are not reported and an ellipsis cuts the thought short, giving the impression that the speaker does not have enough command of her mind to recall them or that the contents are too ghastly to convey. The subsequent line seems to suggest the latter: the repetition of 'strange' gives the impression that the nature of the dreams surprises the speaker, which serves to distance her even further from the workings of her own mind.

The personification of the possessive qualities of madness is reminiscent of the abductions and possessions that frequently crop up in the plots of fairy tales. Propp's work on the 'dramatis personae' of the characters that typically rotate in and out of traditional stories shows old dwarf heart and the speaker to have a traditional victim/villain relationship (Propp). The poem does not have a narrative beginning, middle and end, at least not in the tidy sense of a fairy tale, so we don't witness the complete unfolding of Propp's schema. Rather, the poem provides a snapshot of the relationship between the speaker and old dwarf heart, focusing on the habitual connection between the two. Despite the negative consequences of old dwarf heart's presence ('When I lie down to love / old dwarf heart shakes her head') the speaker still offers care and support to her: 'how patiently I untangle her wrists / like knots' (21-22). By realising old dwarf heart as a wholly unique character, the speaker both holds her separate and admits that she is a part of herself. Old dwarf heart has infiltrated the speaker, 'gathered' in all her memories and now has complete access to emotions and actions:

> Good God, the things she knows!
> And worse, the sores she holds
> in her hands, gathered in like a nest
> from an abandoned field. At her best
> she is all red muscle, humming in and out, cajoled
> by time. Where I go, she goes. (13-18)

Placed almost parenthetically between her surprise that old dwarf heart knows the things the speaker knows and that she goes where the speaker goes, there's a description of the heart at her 'best', a marked equivocality that evokes co-dependence.

The final stanza of the poem describes the mammoth task the speaker has: to free herself from the grip and influence of old dwarf heart. Her words echo the children's prayer 'Now I lay me down to sleep…If I should die before I wake/ I pray the Lord my soul to take', and evoke both tenderness and awareness of mortality:

> Oh now I lay me down to love,
> how awkwardly her arms undo,
> how patiently I untangle her wrists
> like knots. Old ornament, old naked fist,
> even if I put on seventy coats I could not cover you…
> mother, father, I'm made of. (19-24)

Old dwarf heart's grip is knot-tight, signifying that treatment of mental illness is 'awkward' and requires patience. The distance between the speaker and the heart oscillates throughout the poem, and this is a particularly 'close' passage. The speaker then returns to describing old dwarf heart as an abnormal, incorrectly functioning thing. 'Old ornament' suggests that her presence is decorative, dusty, possibly inherited like an unwanted family heirloom that cannot be disposed of. Similarly, 'old naked fist' might resemble the heart – anatomically, of course, our heart is the approximately the size of our clenched fist – but this is only a rough visual similarity. Moreover, rather than being a symbol for love and life, it is symbol of violence and tension. While old dwarf heart is small (smaller than a human heart) her influence and effect is enormous: such is the extent of her control that 'seventy coats' would not cover her. The poem ends with another nod to the idea of inheritance in a curious line formed of a sentence that seems back-to-front, as though a spontaneous thought: the realisation that she is formed of (genetically) and by (in childhood) her parents, and that they are the ones responsible for passing along old dwarf heart.

Berryman also draws on the idea of an inherited, possessive form of madness in his first full-length collection, *The Dispossessed*, which contains the poem 'The Possessed'. In this poem we can see, even at this early stage in his writing career, the first stirrings of the thematic fixations that Berryman would return to throughout his career: mental health, alcohol dependency, and his father's suicide. These themes are often conflated, with madness and death drawn in close proximity. Among the Confessional poets, it is perhaps Berryman who most often incorporates the theme of legacy into his poetry. His father shot himself one morning amidst a period of unemployment and divorce proceedings, and Berryman gestures towards his father as, in part, the source of his own struggles with mental illness. There is an enduring connection between the madness of Berryman's speakers and their familial relationships, whether emotional or biological. In his biography of Berryman, Mariani writes:

> Yet, in spite of extensive therapy and the delicate operations he performed on his psyche in what he described as a world of complete darkness, in spite of extensive dream analysis and his poems – his Dream Songs – in spite of liquor, drugs, and the intimacy of fifty women, he never managed to get beyond the mystery of that early expulsion from the garden. (3-4)

In additional to his father's death, Berryman's mental illness can be traced to both sides of his family: Berryman's paternal aunt also committed suicide, some time before her brother had taken his life (ibid 13) and his mother suffered from depression, which deepened once the family moved to New York City (ibid 30).

The spirits in 'The Possessed' are not named or identified with any family members, but their 'watch[ing]' feels personal. As discussed in the previous chapter, Berryman consistently compares madness to a journey into hell and, accordingly, the possessing entities that instil madness in the poem are ghosts and monsters from the afterlife:

> This afternoon, discomfortable dead
> Drift into doorways, lounge, across the bridge,
> Whittling memory at the water's edge,
> And watch. This is what you inherited. (1-4)

The act of 'lounging' demonstrates that the newly arrived dead have no intention of going anywhere; having crossed the 'bridge' connecting the afterlife and life, sanity and madness, they have now settled in. The final two lines of the stanza relate the impact of the madness, the way the dead inhabit the speaker and affect memory, reducing and disarranging it. And finally, the fourth line explicitly claims madness as family heirloom, which was Berryman's personal experience: his father's madness passed to the son.

Berryman shares with Sexton the manipulation of gothic imagery to represent the ingress of madness. Echoing Sexton's attention to the witching hour, there's a sense that the most sinister aspects of madness only take effect during the night:

> Random they are, but hairy, for they chafe
> All in their eye, enlarging like a slide;
> Spectral as men once met or crucified,
> And kind. Until the sun sets you are safe. (5-8)

We see the features of his visitors emerge bit by bit (or shot by shot, cinematically) – the hair, the bulbous eyes – as though encountering a werewolf with its associations of 'lunacy'. Here 'spectral' carries two meanings: the literal 'spectre' and the ghost-like quality of the possessive madness; and the 'spectrum' of mental illness. The lupine associations persist with the evocation of prey in the next stanza:

A prey to your most awkward reflection,
Loose-limbed before the fire you sit appalled.
And think that by your error you have called
These to you. Look! The light will soon be gone. (9-12)

The poem is already in the second person, distancing the speaker from the experiences he is describing. The reference to 'your… reflection' creates a further layer. The idea that the reflection is 'awkward' suggests an ambivalent relationship to self, but the question of which self is deliberately elided. The stanza develops with the speaker blaming the addressee for the arrival of the dead and being 'appalled' by his 'error'. The speaker and the addressee, read as two facets of the same personality, experience guilt and a sense of being deserving of the horrors, both common symptoms of depressive mood disorders (American Psychiatric Association). Similar to Sexton's 'Old Dwarf Heart', this poem also has a palindromic style of rhyme scheme for each stanza (in this case, quatrains in the form of ABBA), again imparting a claustrophobic sense of enclosure as the host of entities crowds the room.

The poem culminates in a final stanza revealing that the only option left to the addressee is suicide. It begins, 'Think of all your sins with all intensity', returning to the idea the madness is somehow deserved because of past transgressions. The poem ends: 'There is a paper-knife to penetrate / Heart & guilt together. Do it quickly' (39-40). The speaker goads the addressee toward physical death, thereby ending the spiritual torment. And, if speaker is read as a facet of addressee, it is an urging of self toward suicide. The exhortation 'Do it quickly' demonstrates the speaker's desperation; it could also be read as a plea to the encroaching ghosts of madness to help hasten the end.

During different periods in his writing life Berryman devoted himself to publishing collections consisting exclusively of a single form, most often sonnets or the form he invented, the dream song. 'Sonnet 114' also deploys the theme of the speaker consciously describing another entity as analogous to mental illness, sharing motifs with 'The Possessed', and demonstrating Berryman's fixation with the gothic motifs of night and death, and the conflation of madness with grief. 'Sonnet 114' is Petrarchan in structure and, like 'The Possessed' features an enclosed rhyme scheme:

You come blonde visiting through the black air
knocking on my hinged lawn-level window
and you will come for years, above, below,
& through to interrupt my study where
I'm sweating it out like asterisks: so there,

you are the text, my work's broken down (1-6)

The sonnet is an address directed to an unspecified 'you', a personification of the speaker's encroaching mental illness. The occasion of the poem is the arrival of madness, but the speaker seems to have the knowledge of its future reappearances or visitations. It begins, 'you come', which gives an impression of the habitual waxing and waning nature of Berryman's madness; it visits, leaves and returns another day. 'You will come for years' reinforces the persistent, draining reappearance of the personification of mental illness, and places the speaker both in the present and the future: fated to be continually tormented. As with ghosts of the dead drifting into the house in 'The Possessed', this entity arrives with the darkness, as all evil things do in Berryman's poems. Again, the speaker is positioned inside the house and madness enters, on this occasion via the windows. This is analogous to madness searching for the weak entry points ('above, below & through') that will provide access to a person's mind. The poem underscores the blonde entity's arrival and how, like depression, it prevents the speaker from working or even concentrating.

Published five years after Berryman's suicide, *Henry's Fate and Other Poems* contains several dream songs including an untitled poem dated 'June 68'. The reader could be forgiven for assuming that the poem begins as the evening descends because, while we are not informed whether the 'Ten-twenty' refers to am or pm, the pattern would conform to Berryman's other poems. However, counter to our expectations, line three informs us that the poem is set during the morning. This is one of Berryman's final published poems but it shares a number of touchstones with 'The Possessed', one of Berryman's earliest published poems: there are multiple invading forms that signal the onset of the madness (in this case demons rather than ghosts), and again the speaker is 'preyed on' like a lame animal:

With arms outflung the clock announced: Ten-twenty.
Dozens of demons sprang & preyed on Henry.
All on a heavy morning.
The baby was ill, the sky was dark, the I
was Id, somebody put the sky on like a lid,
somebody who is not returning. (1-6)

Berryman combines domestic woes with mythical images: 'The baby was ill' is a mundane stressor that one could imagine being the catalyst for a depressive episode (and one that resonates with postnatal depression). Berryman then moves the reader into the language of Freudian psychoanalysis; by stating, 'I / Was Id', the speaker is admitting that the demons were causing his behaviour to be entirely governed by Id, at the sacrifice of critical, moral, and pragmatic behaviour.

This is underscored by the unusual line break on the pronoun. There is a suggestion that the sane version of Henry has been irrevocably lost:

> Somebody who is not returning.
>
> Oh we'll wait. After all, after all.
> The Doubter & the rest. They rested all,
> On the night of the crucifying.
> Perhaps their dreams were something truly remarkable.
> Perhaps their dreams had what to do with his dying –
> but that was very lonely. (6-12)

Berryman, true to his style of incorporating a range of voices and references, borrows from the biblical narrative of Doubting Thomas, a vestige of a strict Roman Catholic upbringing (Cole 54). The apostle Thomas refused to believe the Resurrection until he could touch the wounds inflicted during Christ's crucifixion. By referencing this incredulity, the speaker – who may or may not be psychically coterminous with Henry – is perhaps acknowledging his own uncertainty as to whether sanity might return.

This reference to crucifixion (also mentioned in 'The Possessed') is reminiscent of Berryman's *Paris Review* interview in which he talked up the creative benefits of madness that possessed him, claiming, 'I hope to be nearly crucified' (Berryman, 'The Art of Poetry XVI: John Berryman'), of which Farley and Roberts note:

> 'He hopes to be nearly crucified? Of course, there's bravado here, wry overstatement, but underneath all that, yes. We believe he hopes for it. Courts it. Longs for it. Not because he has a death wish, but because of the work. It is all for the sake of the work.' (59)

This indulgent, grandiose overstatement of mental illness is also projected onto Henry, by listing the overwhelming array of complicated medications administered to provide a semblance of normality. Henry's madness is so huge that it can only be subdued with a massive arsenal of pharmaceuticals, and Berryman reels off the names of these psychiatric drugs the same way he references characters from mythological epics, allowing the complexity of their phonetics and richness of their etymology to inflect the poem:

> Haldol & Serax, phenobarbital,
> Vivactil, by day; by deep night Tuinal
> & Thorazine,

> Kept Henry going, like a natural man.
> I'm waiting for them to work, as sometimes they can,
> Honey, in the bloodstream. (13-18)

Of course, a heavy prescription of psychoactive pharmaceuticals is the opposite of 'natural'. And yet the drugs, chemically engineered for a predictable, controllable physical reaction, allow Henry to appear active in the manner of a 'natural man' – the carefully dosed artificial additives induce a sense of normalcy, just as aspartame mimics the sweetness of honey. This deliberate contrast between the awkwardly dense and oratorically challenging drug names with the lyrically and metaphorically smooth 'honey' adds to the linguistic texture of the piece. The concept of the linguistically accommodating dream song arrived out of Berryman's cyclothymia and alcoholism, and subsequent psychotherapy, which gripped him from his mid-thirties onwards:

> Berryman emerged newly fascinated with psychiatry and his own buried psychological issues, especially the suicide of his father just before his 12th birthday, the story of which had been camouflaged by his mother. He also began to read the central texts of Freud, Fechner, Reich and others, which made a tremendous impression on him. Freud and psychoanalysis were to become major themes for Berryman. (Kleinzahler)

By inventing a new form, Berryman's poems evolved beyond the sonnet and were given the licence to be longer and freer. Unlike the sonnet, the dream song did not have the weighty historical expectations of a particular meter and rhyme scheme to which Berryman felt a responsibly to conform.

But if Berryman sought to move away from the tightly controlled form that is a hallmark of his earlier writing, why did he not make a total break and explore his dreams, Freudian analysis and mental illness using free verse? By inventing a new form, Berryman is attempting to negotiate the balance between freedom and control. Like his mental health, the content of his poems unravels and becomes more difficult to wrest meaning from, but at least the reliance on a regular form, like having a set wake-up alarm and set bedtime, provides a dependable element, a framework against which the chaos can be organised. The combination of regular form with irregular content generates great energy and tension in the poems, a tension that builds and echoes when we read the dream songs in a larger sequence:

> The Dream Song triple sestet is a regular sustained stanza structure that allows for play against and within the form as the long sequence develops. It affords a unity with an unusual degree of variation. Berryman often uses it as a

> syntactically open form, in which the discursive flow of the sentence is not end-stopped at the stanza break but runs on. This open form, in which the stanza boundaries are subordinate to the flow and to the spatial rearrangement as lines are inserted or extended, reminds us that the overall form is that of a poetic sequence, in which an individual Dream Song links into a larger form. (Denman 92)

Berryman wrote within the boundaries of the dream song to explore the possessive nature of his madness, often linking its origin to the demonic underworld, which is present throughout some of the earliest of the dream songs:

Dream Song 9:	Fancy the brain from hell held out so long. Let go. (17-18)
Dream Song 17:	Muttered Henry:– Lord of matter, thus: upon some more unquiet spirit knock, my madnesses have cease (1-3)
Dream Song 30:	Hell talkt my brain awake (7)

The most sustained use of possessive imagery comes in 'Dream Song 29', about which Travisano asserts, 'Here is a truly displaced elegy. Loss appears not as a deprivation but as an arrival in the form of an oppressive psychic visitation' (246). The poem's first stanza reads:

> There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
> só heavy, if he had a hundred years
> & more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
> Henry could not make good.
> Starts again always in Henry's ears
> the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime. (1-6)

The poem does not open by clarifying the identity of the 'thing'; instead, the meaning is withheld and the reader slowly deduces that Berryman is referring to a depressed state of mind based on the symptoms of 'weeping' and sleeplessness, but also the metaphorical sense of the 'thing': weighty, slow and permanent. The entity sits, immovable, preventing the full function of all the heart represents – love and emotion – like a wrestler pinning down a defeated opponent. To emphasis the heft and intractability of this madness, Berryman employs an o-acute stress to lengthen the 'só'. This unusual grammatical tool produces a sound that is almost comic, and that creates a momentary shift in tone at odds with dark and violent material that follows.

Perhaps more so than in the other Berryman poems we have discussed thus far, there is a real sense of the helplessness of Henry, who seems to have all his agency stolen: no matter how long he endures the symptoms of his madness, 'a hundred years / & more', he cannot 'make good'. The first stanza closes by referencing some of the hallucinatory features of the madness, detailing how its presence can be heard and smelled. The second stanza develops the sense of possession by incorporating a second entity in Henry's 'mind / like a grave Sienese face' (7-8) that is unforgettable: 'a thousand years would fail to blur the still profiled reproach of'. In the third stanza, Berryman delves further into Henry's madness as the speaker questions what terrible acts the controlling entity might have had him commit. Has insanity caused Henry to commit a murder he does not remember? He thinks he might have perpetrated a heinous crime but cannot resolve the sound and unsound memories, cannot identify the boundary between reality and hallucination: which is self, and which possessor?

> But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
> end anyone and hack her body up
> and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
> He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
> Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
> Nobody is ever missing. (13-18)

As Vendler (49) argues, Henry's anguish resides not in the fact that he might be a murderer. Rather, he is disturbed by the question of whether the actions caused and controlled by madness are the responsibility of the possessed, as well as by the paradox that the lack of evidence of physical harm is itself evidence of his psychosis. This speaks to a wider philosophical consideration related to the legal culpability and moral agency of the mentally ill. Throughout Confessional poetry the symptomatic effects of mental illness are shown to produce shifting subjectivities and undeterminable intentionality of behaviour, which, Elliott argues, means there can be 'no rules of insanity' (2).

In Plath's poem 'Elm', the possessive qualities of madness are explored using a personified tree to convey its complexity, including the effects of feeling one's subjectivity lacks stability and fixity. Written in free verse and arranged in tercets of irregular length lines, the poem recounts the speaker's conversation with the elm, in which the tree delivers a monologue about her experience with mental illness to a person whose mental illness is newer and less well understood. The perspective is not straightforward, and the conversing parties become fluidly aligned at several points in the poem when the elm can be read as another aspect of the speaker's psyche.

The poem's extended metaphor deploys some familiar malevolent symbols. Most notable is the emergence of an anthropomorphised embodiment of madness from the darkness, bearing fear and guilt, which lodges itself inside the once-healthy mind of the speaker. The elm knows a fear that she first felt in her roots, underground, in the darkness – in a place closer to the underworld and all that dwell there:

> I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great taproot:
> It is what you fear.
> I do not fear it: I have been there. (1-3)

The poem continues with its one-sided conversation directed at a fellow sufferer of madness, and does so using a series of rhetorical questions. The madness that resides inwardly is linked with auditory images, a motif that persists throughout the poem:

> Is it the sea you hear in me,
> Its dissatisfactions?
> Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness? (4-6)

But the most persistent attribute of the madness observed by the elm is an absence within – 'the voice of nothing' – which arrives from deep in the ground, in the shadows. The 'nothing' of madness may also gesture at the electro-convulsive therapy Plath received and its ability to erase the patient's memory. Once the madness (which is past tense here) has been burnt out of the patient's brain, what fills the space that it leaves? Plath's elm is inhabited by a madness that brings on loneliness and a craving for love that cannot be satisfied. Anything will be said or done to achieve it, but to no avail:

> Love is a shadow.
> How you lie and cry after it
> Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.
>
> All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
> Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
> Echoing, echoing. (7-12)

The auditory image transforms again, this time into a horse that is initially emblematic of elusive love but transforms into a creature capable of representing the manic qualities of madness through racing impulses that cannot be reined in. At this point, the poem becomes more overt in its reference to mental illness by referring to the symptomatic 'impetuous[ness]' of mania and the way

the speaker's head becomes a stone, hard and dysfunctional. The reference to 'head' and 'stone' laid up on 'turf' also evokes a gravestone: the madness is destined to rage until it delivers a premature death. There is a change in the point of view as the poem moves over the stanza break in the lines above: 'love' is initially represented by the sound of hooves, but in the next stanza the horse imagery transfers to 'I', as the elm becomes the galloping horse and madness fully envelops the mind. At the end of the stanza, 'echoing, echoing' shows the sound shifting again, now just a reverberation enveloped by a wider silence. As with the equine imagery being present in a charged and changed form between stanzas, in the next stanza the 'echo' becomes 'the sound of poisons' and the 'big hush' of the rain:

> Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
> This is rain now, this big hush.
> And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic. (13-15)

The elm has taken in the rain and transformed it into the sinister, 'tin-white' fruit, implying that the potentially neutral, natural force of the sun does nothing to nourish or warm the tree. Rather, it 'scorches' and 'burns', destroying rather than illuminating:

> I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
> Scorched to the root
> My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires. (16-18)

In the following stanza, the 'violent' wind is not quite a possessive force, but it is certainly an animating one. While the previous few stanzas have referenced silence, under the influence of the wind, the elm is moved against her own nature to 'shriek':

> Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
> A wind of such violence
> Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.
>
> The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
> Cruelly, being barren.
> Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her. (19-24)

The light of the sun and the moon are equally torturous. The 'scorching' sunset, which paired with a different adjective might be beautiful, is yet another psychic assault. The moon, like the elm tree,

is female here, and it is implied that being 'barren' makes her 'cruel'; in the absence of offspring to love she has become embittered:

> How your bad dreams possess and endow me.
>
> I am inhabited by a cry.
> Nightly it flaps out
> Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.
>
> I am terrified by this dark thing
> That sleeps in me;
> All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity. (27-33)

Plath turns the image between stanzas: 'possess and endow' of the previous line becomes 'inhabit[ation]' by the owl in the next. What makes the owl such a horrifying figure? As with Sexton's poem 'What's That', pregnancy, parasitism, and possession are linked. The fact of the owl's lodging is itself an assault on the independence of the elm. The parasite's 'soft, feathery turnings' while 'sleeping' are not overtly violent, though they are deeply disturbing. As in the previous stanza's 'love is a shadow', love, and the search for it, share the language of darkness and night, as well as intimations of futility. The owl has to go out again, night after night, echoing the witch in Sexton's 'Her Kind', a creature who can only show her true face in the dark. The figure of the owl also has mythological resonances with the ancient Roman figure of the child-eating owl-monster Strix, and its etymological descendants in Italian (*strega,* witch) and Romanian (*strigoi*, vampire). Plath may also have been aware of the story of Blodeuwedd from the Middle Welsh tales compiled as the *Mabinogian*, a symbol of duplicitous femininity punished for her unfaithfulness by transformation into an owl, hated by other birds and exiled from daylight. During the day, as the owl of the poem sleeps within the tree, they are independent beings sharing a space. But it is an uneasy pairing. At this point the poem increases in velocity, combining rhetorical questions with declarative statements. We encounter tropes identified in the other confessional poems: 'pale', distant love, the ill-functioning heart, and the misfiring mind that, moving past the point of rational function, has reduced capacity for affect:

> Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
> Is it for such I agitate my heart?
>
> I am incapable of more knowledge. (35-37)

At the end of the poem, Plath turns the speaker's full attention to the most severe consequences associated with madness-as-possession: self-destruction, or rather destruction of the self by the possessor:

> What is this, this face
> So murderous in its strangle of branches?—
>
> Its snaky acids hiss.
> It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
> That kill, that kill, that kill. (38-42)

The speaker acknowledges the invading illness, and names the fatal modes ('petrifies the will', 'snaky acids', isolation) that result in the death of the host.

If Sexton gives us witches and Berryman werewolves, then Plath continues the parade of monsters with the zombie of 'Lady Lazarus' (and maybe a bit of mummy for good measure: '[they] unwrap me hand and foot— / The big strip tease' (28-29)). In this poem, the speaker is possessed not only by the internal forces that both compel her to seek death and jolt her, somehow, periodically back to life, but by an external audience that claims ownership of her miraculous resurrected body. In this case, the possession, or at least the desire to possess, is literal and physical. Despite the poem's devastating subject manner, the tone is distant and ironic. This is echoed in the way that the speaker positions herself among the other figures of the poem. And it is a bustling place:

> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot—
> The big strip tease.
> Gentlemen, ladies
>
> ...It's the theatrical
>
> Comeback in broad day
> To the same place, the same face, the same brute
> Amused shout:
>
> 'A miracle!'
> That knocks me out.
> There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart——
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes. (26-44)

This vast audience is like a flock of paparazzi, crowding in to see the speaker's miraculous resurrection. But they are not just greedy to see the spectacle: 'for a charge' they can snatch at the speaker's clothes and body, grabbing saint's relics in order to literally possess a piece of the speaker. In contrast to this faceless crowd, a more delineated inner circle of caretakers also come into focus: the 'enemy' that plucks the napkin off (and later on, perhaps a relation, Herr Enemy / Herr Doktor), and the 'they' that 'call and call', 'pick the worms off', and 'unwrap me hand and foot'. The speaker's body is continuously being touched, adjusted, and ministered to by others. This is barely a metaphor of possession: in mental illness, as in physical, the patients, in a sense, cease to belong to themselves and their bodies, instead becoming objects to be fixed. Concerned caregivers, doctors and hospitals all subsume a sufferer's agency.

In this poem, the speaker's interiority is all but absent. This is not to say the speaker herself is absent; on the contrary, she self-mythologises continuously ('Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well' (43-45)), rattling off her history and depicting it with grandiosity. But the reader gets very little direct insight into her emotional state. We are given some clarity as to intentionality by learning of two previous attempts:

The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all. (35-38)

We do not, however, learn what drives the speaker to continue to try to end her life (if, indeed, it is something the speaker would be able to tell us; there is nothing in the poem to indicate that she knows herself, although many readers will draw connections with Plath's biography). As she speaks to us, she does not sound actively tormented or in acute emotional distress. Her continuous drive to destroy herself must, then, come from some other place. The madness-as-possession, here, is

implicit. Compellingly, so is its counterweight: self-preservation-as-possession. The speaker here is helpless in the face of these alternating impulses, despite the bravado. The poem is both terrifying and terrified, the speaker caught up in a cycle of possession by her own reanimated spirit, unable to break the samsara of resurrection and finally either die or live.

While Sexton and Berryman explicitly use images of madness-as-possession, the examples we have looked at in Plath's work are subtler. Generally, Lowell's references to possession are less overt still than the other poets examined in this chapter. Most of the poems in his first two confessional collections, *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, are written in the first-person, but occasionally Lowell will address mental illness using the third-person perspective, as though the speaker is outside their body looking in at a separate character. One such example is the 'The Drinker'. The poem's opening line, 'The man is killing time – there's nothing else', introduces the mortal stakes right away. In addition to time, the man is also killing himself, drinking in order to accelerate the arrival of his death. 'There's nothing else' works to highlight the despondency of the man; he is forced to self-medicate to get through the day. This poem is as autobiographical as his other confessional poems, but Lowell has chosen to distance himself from the speaker. The 'man' and the 'body' are treated as separate beings in this poem; the body is a container for the man:

> No help from his body, the whale's
> warm-hearted blubber, foundering down
> leagues of ocean, gasping whiteness.
> The barbed hooks fester. The lines snap tight. (9-12)

There's a sense that body and mind are at odds with each other. Like Sexton, Berryman, and Plath, Lowell employs an unexpected image to chart the mental downfall: the harpooned whale sinking to the seabed. The word 'heart' appears next to 'blubber', imparting the heart's disease in a way that's reminiscent of the fatty heart in Sexton's 'Old Dwarf Heart'. The sinking movement downwards entails lack of air ('gasping'), physical pain ('barbed hooks fester'), and the lack of freedom from being hooked on the booze ('the lines snap tight').

Lowell does not use gothic tropes to approach mental illness in the manner of Sexton, Berryman, and Plath, but he explores similar representations of the symptoms, notably loneliness, a loss of love, a loss of colour, and despair. The fourth stanza of 'The Drinker' depicts a bleak malaise:

> When he looks for neighbours, their names blur in the window
> his distracted eye sees only glass sky.
> His despair has the galvanised colour

of the mop and water in the galvanised bucket. (13-16)

Lowell is able to look at his afflicted self from a distance with an alienated gimlet eye and identify his mental illness as something else. He renders his speaker's suffering and confusion by depicting a lack of sensory acuity, poor visual resolution, and a loss of recall. In these four lines, the neighbours' names blur, as do their bodies. This lack of clarity is further underscored by the elision of glass of the window and the more distant sky – the speaker is unable to differentiate between these inner and outer worlds, unable to resolve the perspective. The image of a glass sky perhaps also conjures the thought of the titular 'drinker' seeing a blurred world through the crystal base of a drained whiskey tumbler. The speaker's dearth of intelligible sensation reaches an apex (or perhaps nadir) with the colour of 'despair', which is as murky and tarnished as mop-water in a bucket. The antipoetic act of creating a simile to compare 'galvanised' with 'galvanised' further flattens the scene by stifling variety. Lowell often favours domestic settings for his exploration of madness; even at home he doesn't feel at ease. These presentations of the symptoms of mental illness in the household environment reinforce the extent of Lowell's disturbance, Skillman argues:

> It is evident even from Lowell's most mundane descriptions of his psychotic experiences that the notably physical aspects of his madness and the unevenly successful somatic treatments used to stabilize his emotions and behaviour during this period had begun to dislocate his conceptions of self and spirit. (Skillman 56)

Lowell's final collection, *Day to Day*, published shortly before his sudden and fatal heart attack at age sixty, carries within its pages a prophetic sense of his impending death, and reflects on the suicides of his friends, Plath, Sexton, and Berryman. The preoccupation with death can even be seen in the titles of the poems in the collection; 'Departure', 'Our Afterlife I', 'Our Afterlife II', 'Burial', 'Endings', and 'Epilogue' are clustered together. In 'Suicide', the speaker talks to a form of suicidal ideation as though it were a separate, invading entity:

> You only come in the tormenting
> hallucinations of the night,
> when my sleeping, prophetic mind
> experiences things
> that have not happened yet. (1-5)

The final version of the poem emerged gradually. It is interesting that by the time Lowell wrote 'Suicide' he had been writing highly personal, autobiographical poems that explored his mental

illness for almost two decades, yet there still seems to be a difficulty and reluctance to tackle such emotionally raw material. Earlier drafts were titled, 'Spring Morning', 'Photographs', and 'Home-photographs' before Lowell settled on the stark, arresting directness of 'Suicide' (Lowell, *Day By Day*). Likewise, it took dozens of drafts before Lowell began to address the subject of mental illness in such a direct manner. When the line, 'You only come in the tormenting / hallucinations of the night' was composed, it was hidden in the middle of the poem before subsequently being promoted to the opening, where it sets the tone:

> Although this speaker is describing the appearance of a frightening apparition, the voice is discursive, almost matter-of-fact: the observing self is coolly watching while the experiencing self sleeps. But the next four stanzas, set off by italics, embody a different and more intense voice, and we understand at once that the experiencing self is speaking. (Wallingford 43)

In the earliest versions of the poem, Lowell distances the speaker from the question of suicide by asking the rhetorical question, 'Does one deserve credit for never having tried suicide?' (Lowell, *Robert Lowell Archive*), a less powerful formulation than the final version:

> Do I deserve credit
> for not having tried suicide
> or am I afraid
> the exotic act
> will make me blunder, (46-50)

By discarding the more remote third person of 'does one' and going for the direct first person, Lowell implicates the speaker in a much more arresting way, forcing the reader to consider the question as more than just a hypothetical; rather, we are asked to imagine the fate of the speaker, Lowell, and his fellow deceased confessional poets.

In Troy Jollimore's review of Kay Redfield Jamison's biography of Robert Lowell, he quotes Lowell writing to Berryman: 'We have gone through the same troubles, visiting the bottom of the world … The night is now passed, and I feel certain that your fire and loyalty and all-outedness carry you buoyantly on. The dark moment comes, it goes'. The Confessional poets were very much in conversation with each other about the realities of their mental illness and its impact on their work and on their lives. Even in these few sentences, Lowell employs the metaphors of madness as a journey 'to the bottom of the world' and madness as form of possession by 'the dark moment'. For the Confessional poets, mental illness was a constant companion; an affliction or

blight, a rich subject for poetry, and also the mark of exceptionalism that bound them one to the other.

Conclusion

> The language of the poem is also the language of one thing compared to another thing. In figurative language, a familiar thing is linked to an unknown thing, as a key, to unlock the mystery, or some part of a mystery, of the thing that is unknown. (Oliver 99)

The Confessional poets' metaphors for mental illness are often novel in their specifics, but draw on familiar verbal figures. This essay has focussed on two figurations of madness: madness as a journey or destination, and madness as possession by an alien force. In the metaphors of madness as journey, Sexton, Lowell, and Berryman had the biographical fact of long hospital stays to reference. In these cases, the speaker's journey is both literal and figurative, they are out of their mind and enclosed in an institution. There is a chequered oscillation between home and hospital whereby notions of respite, presence, and absence are reconfigured, and time and its markers, including the seasons, are distorted. Throughout the 'possession' poems of the Confessionals, the figures cast as the inhabiting spirit(s) take a dizzying array of forms. From the owl in the elm tree to the shrivelled old dwarf heart, the metaphors take up and interrogate the idea of other-as-self and self-as-other. Madness as possession is a particularly rich metaphor for the Confessionals because it is a way of portraying the sense of alienation (from self) experienced during episodes of depression, mania, psychosis or alcoholism. Although the possession threatens to break the mind into two or three different psyches, it does not always succeed; often the speaker inhabits the liminal self/not-self space. For each of the Confessional poets explored here, the possessing entity responsible for the madness arrives from a place of foreboding, one freighted with classic gothic touchstones: darkness, coldness, and the eldritch.

The essay has also considered how the madness that brings so much destructive energy could, in some cases, be depicted as a source of creativity, akin to being possessed by a dark muse. Of course, the balance between creative benefit and emotional blight is delicate and perpetually shifting for each of the poets. For example, Berryman saw his episodes as necessary, but Lowell was less willing to give his manic-depression any authorial credit. Lowell was for the most part without illusions about his illness, perceiving it to be an impediment to his creativity (Skillman 48). And, as we have seen, Sexton often found it useful to position herself vis-a-vis a lineage of inspired artists. This kind of valorisation of mental illness, while it may have been a coping mechanism for an individual writer, understates some of the devastating costs for those afflicted by mental illness, their families, and society as a whole. In seeking to understand how the Confessional poets

transformed their personal pain into innovative art, I have tried to tread a careful line with regard to language that would either romanticise their illnesses or cast them as victims.

As the poet Donald Hall puts it, 'The new metaphor is a miracle, like the creation of life' (23). Certainly, metaphorical life pervades the work of the Confessional poets. By investigating how they represent their inner worlds and the heightened emotions associated with their mental illness, I have discovered a rich variety of ways in which metaphor can be created, manipulated, and subverted. Personally speaking, I have benefited from analysing the sheer range of the Confessionals' figurative language and its full breadth of sub-classifications: metonym, synecdoche, simile, and extended metaphor. The sustained metaphors that Sexton and Plath generate in poems like 'Old Dwarf Heart' and 'Elm' respectively show how effectively the inner life of a speaker can be explored through the layering of related imagery. The way that Lowell dapples his quotidian experiences with undramatic metaphors – the hungry sparrows, the child's bathtime – conveys dramatic inner sadness through the use of quiet, subtle language. And Berryman borrows metaphors and references from a range of Shakespearean, Dantean, biblical and mythological sources, illustrating how fruitful it can be to recast metaphor and make it fresh.

Having enjoyed an earlier career as a neuroscientist specialising in psychiatry within the pharmaceutical industry, my writing often explores the themes of human psychology, and the human body and its pathologies. While reading the Confessionals, I have attempted to harness some of the insights taken from my study of the poems when approaching these preoccupations creatively. For example, in 'Neuroanatomy Practical', I begin by presenting an image of a brain in some sensory detail before moving towards the metaphor of a vessel that contains the contents of an entire (now extinguished) life. In 'Spiderhands', in which I portray the chronic worsening of a psychiatric event by using the extended metaphor of spiders taking over the speaker's arms, I draw on Sexton's method of presenting mental illness as physical quality or pain. I include two poems in the accompanying manuscript that seek to converse with assumptions commonly applied to mental illness. In 'Anne Sexton's Thymus', I use the archaic and debunked Ancient Greek idea that emotions reside in an abdominal organ they referred to as the thymus, which still provides an etymology for current clinical language (for example, cyclothymic and dysthymic). In so doing, I challenge the trope of melancholy as a poetic or romantic affliction of the heart. Conversely, in 'The Year of Mania', the speaker describes an episode of mania as something exquisite, detailing the positive consequences, albeit undercut by a certain amount of dramatic irony throughout: the reader knows that the events presented as 'exquisite' are actually worrying manifestations of a psychiatric episode. While these are examples of how the close study of the Confessional poets has impacted my own work directly, the indirect impacts of sustained immersion in their bold and

metaphor-rich approaches to their respective mental states are countless and still unfolding. I am sure their influence will continue to be felt in my writing for a long time to come.

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