

What You Brought with You

A collection of poems accompanied by a
contextualising exegesis

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of English (Creative Writing)
at the University of Leicester

by

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Abstract

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What You Brought with You is a collection of free verse poems accompanied by a contextualising exegesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of English (Creative Writing) at the University of Leicester. The poems in the collection seek to examine familiar subjects through a humorous, sideways glance at the situation. They aim to approach the material with a light touch. Each poem attempts to reveal quirky and interesting elements in ordinariness. Employing quotidian subject matter, content and speech results in accessible, relevant poetry that attempts to examine social mores, behaviour and ideas. Following on from the collection the exegesis is divided into four chapters. The guiding democratic principles of accessibility and specificity permeate the entire text. The first chapter examines the technical role of poetic closure in the successful delivery of a poem. By likening the poem to a joke, the chapter argues that the all-important poetic payoff is achieved through careful setup. The second chapter focuses on content within the poems and looks at on the role of ekphrasis both as an inspiration for particular poems within the collection and in the development of the wider poetic. Building on the tradition of utilising life experience as art material, this chapter examines the fundamental importance of one's personal involvement in reality in the process of shaping poetic intentions. The third chapter explores the particular use of tangible objects within the poems, and examines the disposable and ordinary nature of these articles and finds a triangular link between ideas, people and objects. The fourth chapter looks at quotidian speech and notes how the poems are structured along familiar speech patterns and how these patterns influence the content, sound and visual appearance of the poems. The exegesis concludes that these technical and content-based decisions are fundamental ingredients in the creation of a culturally relevant dialogical poetry.

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Preface

In 1962 Sylvia Plath gave an interview in which she stated ‘I can’t put toothbrushes in a poem, I really can’t!’¹ Reading it some fifty years later I found myself drawn to argue this point and within a few days I was tentatively showing my supervisor a poem entitled ‘A Poem Only About Toothbrushes’, fully expecting a derisive laugh. When the G.S. Fraser Prize judges thought it worth an Honourable Mention I felt emboldened and started to produce a more concrete, quotidian-themed style of poetry than I had previously attempted. Gone were the abstractions and poetic turns of phrase and in came the very real, very quotidian aspects of my life. What became worthy of poetic space was bizarrely satisfying. Mayonnaise jars and knitted cardigans showed up, ordinary speech became the structural basis and the focus of the poems became those tiny aspects of life that had seemed so insignificant that I had glanced over them for years. I realised that ‘the toothbrush poem’, the closest thing I have ever written to William Carlos Williams’s ‘image-object poem’ ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ had launched a definite trend in my work.² What follows is a collection of poems containing ubiquitous, disposable, mass-produced objects that help us take a look at the relationships we have with ourselves, our work and with other people.

¹ Peter Orr, *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press and Ian Scott-Kilvert* (University of California: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966a), p. 276.

² Phrase from Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech. Cubism, Stieglitz and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 218.

What You Brought with You: A Collection of Poems.

A Poem Only About Toothbrushes

'I can't put toothbrushes in a poem, I really can't!'

Sylvia Plath, Interview 30th October 1962

In this poem there will be only toothbrushes.

There is just one in the glass,
moulded in hard blue plastic with two thousand
tough nylon bristles;

there is another in the bin
under the sink.
It's pink.

Apples

When we discussed his work,
he said,
'It's not science,
baby,
it's politics.
There are eight
apples and ten
people.'
Ha!

Stein loved apples!
There was an empty space
on the wall
where Cezanne's painting
had been.
Looking at it
she felt she should write:
'Apples
Apples
Apples went.'
Because Leo took them.
Took.
Took.
Took them.
Of course Picasso felt her pain,
whipped her up a new one.
After all they weren't apples,
they were paint.

It's not apples,
baby,
it's paint.

On The Way To Work

It was a hot dry week
when the man first appeared
under the grey shadow
of Elizabeth Way Bridge.

Monday 9.07 he
was wrapped in a blanket,
his head pillowed by
a shiny new black leather handbag.

Tuesday 11.53 he was sitting up
with yellow-tipped cotton buds
strewn in front of him.

Wednesday 3.35 I noticed
his face was plastered
in thick brown foundation,
and he was carefully fastening
a large shell necklace around his neck.

Thursday 5.12 I wondered why
with a homeless shelter round the corner he was still there,
but he was
and the pavement
was stained with long dark patches of urine.

Friday 6.15 he was shouting
at the rowers through the
chipped white railings

urgent, repetitive,
inarticulate sounds.

Blackberrying

It's late August.
I go blackberrying,
first with Mum,
then with Jess
and now with you.
It's different this time,
I'm not giggling
but rather seriously
gathering fruit.
You too take it seriously
although you're not above
'the one for me,
one for the bag' policy.
When we finish
we could sit
on the five-barred gate
and feed each other berries
until the juice runs down our chins
but we don't;
instead with minor abrasions,
smarting from the many stinging nettles
and sporting a single black stain on my toe
where the juiciest berry had fallen,
we cycle home
and put the berries
in sensible-sized portions
into the freezer.

When I Grow Up

When I grow up I want to be somebody

like Doris Lessing and write and write

and say things like:

'I did take mescaline once. I'm glad I did it but I'll never do it again'.

Or Annie Oakley and shoot so sharp

the playing card is split edge on

and I'll just say:

'Only practice will make you perfect'.

Or Amelia Earhart and fly

solo across the Atlantic Ocean

stand up in my plane and wave for the cameras

and say: 'The most effective way to do it, is to do it'.

Or Valentina Tereshkova and go right off the planet

and laugh and say:

'Women! Why can't they fly in space?'

Or Jane Goodall and go barefoot

amongst the chimpanzees

and say: 'I was supposed to be a secretary in Bournemouth'.

Or Marie Curie and win not one but two Nobel Prizes

and study the complexness of neoplasms

and say: 'I have no dress except the one I wear'.

Or Margarita Nelken and wrangle for women's rights,

get elected and then say something complicated like:

‘Women shouldn’t have the vote because it is a vote for the priests’.

Or Margaret Sanger and get arrested

for daring to disseminate contraception

and calmly state:

‘It is a woman’s right to decide’.

When I grow up I want to be somebody and say something.

Not Waving

It's most unlikely he was waving,
Drowning, like life, often
doesn't look as it should.

Instead, a glassy stare
while treading water,
an inability to answer,
a silent desperate
scramble up an imaginary ladder
are all far more plausible.

Feminist Knitting Agenda

The doll she made for
my little girl
was trousered and caped:
a woollen superhero.

There were 'more to come,'
she said.
She planned to start on toy-sized
Curies, Earharts and
Wollstonecrafts.

'Are famous women
allowed happy endings?'
I wondered.

Out came the needles.
'No time to lose,' she told me,
and click clack, just like that,
she started working on a new pattern.

Lyn's Poem

(For Lyn Hejinian)

In the so-called utility room
where housewives
are supposed
to put the washing machine,
iron and neatly fold
the clothes,
Lyn put a printing press
and cleanly pressed
her letterpress books.

I'm Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar

I'm glad I washed the mayonnaise jar
so well because on Sunday evening
my neighbour, rootling in the bin,
dug it out and examined it closely.
He delved in again
to get the lid, which he screwed on in triumph.

The next day
I peeked in his window and saw him with his
back to me facing an easel and reaching
for a horsehair brush that rested in the
mayonnaise jar, now full of pale swirling liquid.

I was about to sneak away when behind
the easel I spotted the shelves,
rows and rows of glass jars,
my entire comestibles cupboard,
full of raspberry hues, apricot tints,
mustard yellows and pesto greens
all awaiting a horsehair brush.

One, Two, Three

She must have an engagement ring,
a diamond solitaire,
round cut,
colourless,
internally flawless
and as large a carat weight as possible.
From Tiffany or Harry Winston
if funds permit.

They pool their resources
to obtain one for her finger.

An Illustrated Obituary

Flicking through the monthly bulletin
I came across a tribute
to Jean
our office secretary
who'd retired last year.
Jean, who did something in the office,
and had always done something in the office
and that I knew nothing about
but that she was always at work.
I read the obituary to find out more.
It did not enlighten me.

Worse was the photo
the blurred figure of Jean
simply cropped out
from the background of a larger snapshot.

Conversations

At 7pm
every night
your Dad
calls on Skype
the grandparents
you've never met.

You gurgle at them
with all your five months
of noises
looking through
the liquid crystal display
at their familiar
2D faces.

Two

You see numbers,

they make up the pavements
and the buildings,
the trees and even this long river,
the stars
and the spaces between the stars.

You like them all.

They tell you many things
like how and why
and when and where.

But the number you like best,
the one you see everywhere,
is two.

You are convinced
by the matter and the anti matter,
the charges and the poles,
the X and the Y,
the left and the right.
It's all binary.
for you.

And two sure is a nice number.
I look with my two eyes
into yours
and your two hands

hold mine.

And here

leaning on this railing,

looking at the water that flows swiftly beneath us,

a silence falls

as if in our

tandem jump

we've just pulled

the parachute cord

and slowed right down.

Keeping Birds

The cage that hung by the bedroom window
was only wicker,

and the miniature white doves
cardboard and imitation feathers.

Nevertheless I couldn't quite bear it.
I broke the fragile lock
and let the door stand open.

Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings

In the museum in Bologna
where I first saw Morandi
you told me to look,
look at those ordinary shapes,
see the figures in the bottles.

You said the muses would come,
all nine of them.
And you said *natura morta*
was nature dead
and nature alive.
The Schrodinger's cat of art.

And the longer I looked the clearer I saw
the light playing subtly with the shadow
and the bottles, vases and glasses,
all unremarkable receptacles,
positioned just close enough
that I thought I heard
whispering.

I am... reading

‘We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white
spaces at the edges of print.’

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

January -
on a billboard
12 people dead

But they march anyway
#jesuischarlie

Print run of eight million
Luz, defiant, draws again

April -
happen upon a small article
‘it no longer interests me’

Pen down
Cartoonist leaves

The Man Next Door

The man next door is 83 and hunched
into a permanent stoop,
his bowed legs make him lurch
side to side like a cartoon sailor
and when he sways to the shops
he always takes with him a hempen
bag in one hand
and a stick in the other.

He is an artist
and has built
at the bottom of his garden
a studio
where he paints.

The garden was always filled
with tall sunflowers
in the summer
and his wife, with whom he
lived for 60 years,
would call to him
through the long stems
from the oil-cloth covered table
set for two
at 6pm every night.

In the summer when the paint
dried quickly
he was always

to be found
in his studio
or in the front garden
working on his impressionistic
flowers and fields,
or crowds of Renoir figures
using Gauguin colours
and the stillness of Bonnard,
or returning to the swirling energy of Van Gogh.

But then one day in April
she climbed
into an ambulance
calm and serene
and he followed
cheerful with his hempen bag
presumably packed with
nightie and toothbrush.

Then the flowers stopped appearing
at the sitting room window
the lights came on at night
but all was still in the day
and she never came home again.

The garden has not been weeded since
and the paintings have migrated
from the studio
to the living room,
the kitchen,
the hallway,

and finally the bedroom.

The furniture in the sitting room,
which was at first pushed back against the wall,
has been broken one piece at a time
and used for firewood, all except
a single chair
that still sits in front of the fireplace
and the easel
which has taken centre stage.

The Knitting Project

Nora had always lived alone,
so it was a surprise to find
in the house clearance
twenty-five beautifully knitted cardigans
each embroidered with a single name.

All were neatly folded
and wrapped in tissue paper,
carefully stored in a wardrobe
in the spare room.

Histon Road Cemetery Guided Tour

I have been watching the man
who is sitting on the bench
for the full forty minutes of this guided tour.
The Sun spread out on his knees,
he pauses, looking up every minute or so.

And I see that he's waiting for the girl
who is walking towards him now,
a hand resting on her abdomen.

A lead dangles from her hand.
She nods apologetically
before muttering the word 'hospital' at us.

Her Alsatian brushes past us.
'Don't worry,' she says,
'He won't hurt you.
He won't cause any trouble.'

Her dog runs, overexcited,
across the cemetery,
before sitting on Bertrand Russell's
mother's grave.

The guide, a Friend of the Histon Road Cemetery,
smiles indulgently:
'We like to think
it's a graveyard for everyone –
the dead and the living.'

It may be closed for graves but it's open for visits.'

The tour moves on
and I notice the wire bin
is full of dead flowers,
empty white lightning bottles
and unrolled condoms.

PR Chivalry

The overly certain voices on the radio
turn to football
as I turn off the A14
at Junction 3
and speed up the smooth
surface of the new bypass.

One voice dribbles a question over to the other:
'And how did Chris take losing the captaincy?'

A car overtakes me
and I'm too distracted to turn off the radio.

The comment shoots back:
'Like the top bloke he is.'

I slow for the roundabout
and then a twist in the road.

The comment heads straight into the goal:
'He was the first to shake Wayne by the hand.
Just like the top bloke he is.'

Monday Morning Arrival

When you first arrive
you are homesick
but you don't yet know that word in English.

'I lost the bus,' you tell me,
and I make reassuring faces,
before sitting you next to someone I know will talk.

'You name?' the other asks
and you mutter something.
'You first day here? No worry, first day crazy,' my chatterer says.

You talk as I waft papers and games around the class.
I catch snippets of your conversation.
'English food, no delicious,'
and 'I must to change host family, host mum no smoke me in house.
No smoke in house!'

By break you are happy to go to the dining room for coffee.
By lunch I hear,
'You come play bowling tonight?'
and then,
'Play bowling very fun, you come, yes?'

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Every year I get a couple
of blank cards,
'Congratulations' or 'Happy Birthday'
written on a post-it note inside.

'It's a card you can enjoy twice,'
my mum always says as she hands it to me.

Fribble

As we fribble away the afternoon in wicker chairs,
I tell you my fear
and I whisper the word
'Poetaster.'
It's a dirty word!

You, happily spooning vichyssoise,
expound on the future.
Your future.

The ebb and flow of the café is slow –
so slow it lulls me into a post-tiffin stupor.

You lean over and read this,
and sum it up succinctly.
'Poetry,' you say,
'is all about synonyms.
Why don't you put some in?'

Mantra

This is not love.

But my eyes have fallen inconveniently
into
my body.

A body that is now magnetic,
that is
drawn on principles.

And I've tapped
into something primitive
inadvertently
and am losing control.

It feels like love.

I start to rationalise,
to get to the
genus of the problem.

But there is something
growing,
feeding on the tension.

I tell myself that this is
about as unreal as it gets
but I'm filling up on expectation.

For the first time in years
I feel a tingle -
the plausibility of possibility.

I tell myself
I am not to blame.
This is basic principles.
This is out of my control.

But this is not love.

It's Not You, It's Me

There was snow on the ground as we headed towards April
and for some reason I wanted to be alone.

In the spring I always go north to see
the daffodils
in the pre-dinner light.

This year I suggest York.
As the train whisks us along
we sit silently
the cloying sweetness of
our hand-embrace squeezes the air out of the carriage,

When coffee spills all over the table,
We say in simpering sync
'So, so sorry,
my fault,'
each dabbing half up.

Musings

In the time it took me to go in to get the thing
it had started to rain,
misty light rain,
but nevertheless rain,
and I felt drab and damp.

I walked down the street without the umbrella I didn't own,
the pavement was shining
but the long faces of people were grey.

That reminded me to buck up
so
I ran for the bus I had no intention of catching,
and caught myself laughing so hard
that I was doubled up
and missed it twice.

One Man On High

I will stand on a mountain
and gaze into the distance.
And you?

You will photograph me
hidden behind your one-way eye of a camera.
And we?

We will place the photograph on a wall
as a glossy reminder
of how I look
when I contemplate the void.

For Tony

who mows the Pembroke lawns diagonally
then in straight lines to keep the pile

who tends cuttings in the greenhouses
and leaves moss under the hedges for the wrens

who dons shorts on May 1st
and a flat cap in September

who cuts flowers for the chapel
and for the feasts at Formal Halls

who has planted more bulbs for spring
than any of his predecessors

Staying In

Sofa to fridge
short journey
but frequent.

I plan to rescue myself
and sell the sofa.

The City

The city is blue,
its people stretched out,
like shadows.
Bruises painted under their eyes
stand out on their pale faces.

When the city is pink
you can buy it with just your eyes,
from the shop windows
as you lean in the long light
of the low rose moon.

If the city were yellow
you would hear it in the words
as they ricocheted off the ochre walls
before floating balloon-slow
out of reach.

What You Brought with You

The memories of our time at uni are deceptively packaged,
all freshly wrapped up with bows,
heavy with familiar redolence.

You dropped them into the conversation
like paper-wrapped sugar cubes into coffee.
It's a rush to rediscover the taste
but this drink
is bitter sweet.

It's a relief to put you on the train,
wave you off,
but you leave me with the past framed up,
posed,
claiming to be
pretty as a picture.

Black Hole

Like a room crammed full of broken pottery
with blackout blinds to hide it.

An area of unfathomable density
where anything can fall in

but nothing comes out.
Dense brokenness.

So dense that if there were lights inside
they would go unseen.

Craxton's Paintings

If I wanted to show you how Craxton painted
I'd divide a page up into neat sections.

I'd use bold words like angular, big and bright.
I'd tell you it was more real than reality.

I would show beautiful young men eating chips,
dancing or holding goats, all flattened into 2D.

But above all I'd have to show you the difference
between light and dark, shadow and relief,

the soft pastels and pinks and the hard dark browns,
greens and blues. The one will fill you with aerated joy

such as you'd get from drinking rum or
winning at cards and the other will ground you

as he grounded the barefooted sailors or the
child with naked feet chasing white chickens.

Father and Son

It's in Kettle's Yard
that I come across
Winifred Nicholson.
On the white walls
windows open on to
tissue-wrapped flowers
standing in
frangible saucers.

Blooming
in one corner
is a portrait
of sheer tenderness:
a man's clean-shaven face
pinning back a child's
tiny ear with a kiss.

Quickly, I search
for something
to write on
and find at the bottom
of my bag
a packet of tissues.
Holding one flat
between thumb and finger,
I brush with gentle
strokes of a black biro.

Batteries

Edith's house stands empty now,
the air speckled
with falling dust.

There are tins in cupboards
just as she left them
and nestled amidst the clothes
folded in mothballs
are old chocolate boxes
filled with dog-eared maps
from holidays,
Valentines and
half-filled journals.

Testament to her mother's time,
in the outhouse,
cobwebbed,
a meat safe, chamber pot and mangle.

On Sundays
when her son comes to the house
he brings with him batteries
and checks all the clocks,
makes sure their hands
are still moving.

Mixed Tape

Before the move I had a peek in
the box
the one with all the valuable
things
such as
rosettes with rusty pins

and of course that mixed tape
he made,
which, unlike the tape player,
I just couldn't throw out.

The Graduation

We can't help but notice
the new silver mini
wrapped up,
a huge pink
bow atop. The smiling
proud parents beside the
black-gowned mortar-boarded
daughter have cameras out.
Smile! Shutter clicks and kisses all round.

Then in a few swift
moves they have the bow off
and the father drags it
through the dust of the car park
coaxes it
into the large wheeled bin.

Baby Talk

We still talk
(since the baby I mean)
but we talk through her.

I say 'Daddy should have taken out the bins, shouldn't he?'
and you say 'Mummy forgot to do it, didn't she?'
Intonation goes up cheerfully,
phonemes stretch so she can hear them.

When we're angry
we turn to her.
I say 'Booytiful baaaby'
and rub noses with her
and you say,
'What a little angel,'
and press your cheek to hers
and we don't look at each other.

But sometimes we find ourselves full of playful banter
after we've dressed her, changed her and bathed her again.
'What a palaver that was.'
'What. A. Pavlova!'
But we always look at the baby
when we're laughing
and she laughs with us.

Now and then she falls asleep holding our fingers,
one in each hand,
a tiny conduit,

and we find we've got new things to say
because we do talk
but we talk through her.

Declare

He had seen her the day before and she had asked him:

‘And did you declare?’

He told me in the hallway as he was leaving for work.

‘Declare?’

‘You know on one knee, on the beach,’ he said.

‘On one knee?’

Propose?’

‘Ah yes. Pruh pooohz on one knee.’

He rolled the word around in his mouth slowly,

the o wide and resonant,

slow from a mouth still muscle bound

by the Castilian vowel.

‘And what did you say?’

‘Well, no.

I said I didn’t.’

‘Did you tell her about the rain?’

‘Ah the rain,’ he was thoughtful.

‘You should have declared!’ I said

He went down on both knees.

‘I love you.’

The o still low, the tongue swinging it down from the middle of the mouth.

‘Be my novia,’ he said.

The o sounded just right for that.

The Zero Gravity Pen Story

Phil is back from NASA headquarters in Houston
and has some tales to tell
of the 1960s space race
and the space pen.

The Americans needed a pen
that could write in
zero gravity
and millions were spent
producing one.

The Russians just used pencils.

We love the story and clap and laugh
and only later find out
that it isn't true.

The Washing Line

I pegged the poems up
one by one
on the rotary line,
spinning it round slowly
and rearranging them with care.
They were just getting into
a nice order when
the wind picked up
and a sudden gust
whirled some off.

Chasing them over the fence
I gathered them crumpled
to my t-shirt
but lost some others
as they somersaulted
down the road
over the fields
away towards
the line of marching
electricity pylons
where they wrapped
themselves
high out of reach
around the buzzing black wires.

Problem Solving

You were drawing with your feet in the flowerbed
yesterday morning and I found the shower screen
finger-painted with numerical jokes.

By lunchtime the newspaper was marked up
with symbols and at the concert I saw
you conduct a tiny mathematical dance with your forefinger.

This morning you were writing feverishly
and didn't realise you were no longer scribbling
on the paper but on your trousers which
you'd covered with equations.

I hope you solve the problem
before the dinner party this evening
because I fear for the tablecloth,
the napkins and the crisp white shirts of the guests.

Following Doctrine

‘Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.’

William Morris, ‘The Beauty of Life’ (1880)

I decide it is time to divest myself
of all this material.

I go from room to room
making piles of everything
I don’t need.

I say it’s the move
but really I am just sick of all these things.

But even after I have got rid of all
I can, there are the unwelcome folders
of bills, the cupboards of saucepans,
the books
I need for work that
have to stay

and while I have items that are useful
nothing seems beautiful.

Matching

The tiny, striped socks
complete the ensemble
of blue and white.

‘Twelve weeks and three days.’
The mother, in matching stripes, glows.

Next to her, a sullen six-year old in hot pink,
not a stripe in sight.

The Walk

Now that I have the baby
there is the daily walk.
A one-hour round trip suits me fine,
so I always head for the same destination -
De Freville Avenue.

Here I imagine myself living
in one of the solid nineteenth-century houses
which are set back from the road
neatly tucked behind
red and black diamond-patterned paths
and little green box hedges.
The doors are painted with tastefully subtle
National Trust colours
and the sitting rooms
full of large comfortable chesterfields
and table lamps.

Today I get there and see something new:
a white paper sign pinned to a door.
Words written with crayon:
'Welcome home Mummy and Daddy
Love Daisy;'
and drawn underneath,
somewhat clumsily,
three stick figures,
two in one corner
and a third, much smaller, in the other.

I look down at my baby,
remember myself,
six years old,
crying for my parents
and decide
tomorrow
I will find a new destination to head for.

160 Characters Remaining

I saw her this morning when
I dropped the kids off.
'Nana,' they cried,
heading though the open door
into her arms.
'Sorry! I'm in a rush,' I called
as I jumped back in the car.

In the five minutes I got for lunch
I read a text:
'Kids all fine -
eating carrot sticks -
they like the crunch!
How is your day going?'

At 5 I swung by
to pick them up.
Dad was at the door,
his face melting
extraordinarily.

'Your your m mum...'
he stumbled.

In the bedroom
they'd laid her on top of
a plastic bin liner -
'for the evacuations...'

I kissed her cheek,
unbelievably cold,
colder than ever before.

And then I remembered –
my half-written unsent text.

First Communion

The energy we're creating,
just with our eyes,
switches from pleasantly warm to intense
and I start to shake.

You're an expert at this
and guide us into our own melting pot.
I follow, uncertain and nervous,
giggling at the unfamiliar set up.

We look,
just look.
but I feel that
I am falling into your brown eyes.

We sit kilometres apart,
gazing through our pixelated windows,
wanting so much
to touch.

Phil

Phil's girlfriend is in Bahrain,
so we drink coffee in the Arts,
stroll past the Fitz
and stop outside St Peter's to look at the books.

After the Mill Pond we hug
and he climbs into his mother's Fiat.

'See you at the party,' we call to each other
and then he stops,
rolls down the window
and asks,
'Will there be hot girls there?
Cool chicks.'
His tongue is out now.
'Hot chicks.'
It waggles a little dance.
'After all,' he says, 'I'm geographically single.'

How I Write A Poem

Shape the words,
arrange them,
like so.

Listen out most particularly for the sound.
Tidy everything into lines.
Check the meaning has come out all right.

Read it in a linear fashion.
You might think it was written that way.

It wasn't.

In Bottisham

In Bottisham
the noise from the A14
roars over the flat fen fields.

Bill and Jean
in their blue and white clad house
have put a model boat
in the window
and a 'gone fishing' sign
by the door.

And so
the waves from the sea
crash over the flat fen fields
in Bottisham.

What You Brought with You: A Contextualising Exegesis.

Introduction

It is a curious fact that poetry, a mode of communication that holds at its core the ideals of omission and concision, should be as much an observer of minute details as is possible in prose or factual modes of communication. But so it is, and to marry the two seemingly disparate strands is an art form, as many modern poets have testified. This exegesis examines how this precision of inclusion can demonstrate a democratic approach to poetry as it results in contextually-relevant and accessible work. Specificity works alongside familiar sounds, ideas and visual structures in these poems in order to invite a readership. Precision challenges triviality in these poems, bringing to mind John Betjeman's final words in his poem 'Uffington': '[e]ven the trivial seems profound'.¹ This collection demonstrates that selectivity is not in fact triviality; rather it can be potent material. This exegesis explores this accurateness in more detail, both in terms of structure and content. In addition, by exploring the motivation and premise behind the poems, I demonstrate the development of my poetic. By contextualising the poems within a wider poetic tradition, I position them as a response to twentieth-century poets that have played a significant and direct role in my formation as a poet. These poets include the American free verse practitioners William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara and those who experimented with quotidian speech and subject matter such as the British poets Stevie Smith and Philip Larkin. Significant space has been given to Williams and O'Hara as their particular practice of combining content and structure, of operating on a free verse platform, and interacting with artistic communities, was extremely helpful in developing my poetic.

Specificity and concreteness are at the heart of this thesis. I approach these two pillars through the idea of context. Struck by the phrase 'context is all' that appeared in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) I decided to

¹ John Betjeman, *The Collected Poems of John Betjeman* (London: John Murray, 2006 (1958)) 264.

manipulate the idea of context by juxtaposing slightly unexpected ideas, images and objects against each other.² Jars are taken out of bins, pictures of the dead are hazy and the residents of one house in the landlocked county of Cambridgeshire turn it into a seaside cottage. Nevertheless, it is enough to suggest, or rather show, that closely examining the context in which details exist reveals a wealth of quirky ordinariness that is excellent material for poetry. Attention to detail and exactitude assist in the move away from those abstractions that Ezra Pound vilified.³ Relying on concrete items is my way into exploring the key themes of my poems. Familiar questions around topics such as mortality, love, parenting, and self-expression are raised in the collection but they are approached through concrete objects within specific contexts that allow for a fresh look at the themes.

Expanding the idea of the concrete object I explore the quotidian nature of these objects and in addition quotidian relationships, mundane practices, ordinary occurrences and typical assumptions. Through these ideas I examine wider generalities concerning politics, social mores and current issues. No subject is too small to be tackled but depiction of real life in artistic form has to strike a chord with the audience. Philip Larkin summarised this conundrum: '[n]owadays nobody believes in "poetic" subjects, any more than they believe in poetic diction. The longer one goes on, though, the more one feels that some subjects are more poetic than others, if only that poems about them get written whereas poems about other subjects don't'.⁴ Subjects such as that explored in 'Blackberrying' are familiar poetic topics treated in poems such as 'Blackberrying' by Sylvia Plath and 'Blackberry-Picking' by Seamus Heaney. Other poems such as 'Feminist Knitting Agenda' explore ideas often seen in academic papers.⁵ This collection pushes at the boundaries of poetic subject matter, probing to find new ways to discuss

² Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1993) 144.

³ Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', *Poetry*, (1913), 130.

⁴ Philip Larkin, *From the Archives: Philip Larkin on the Whitsun Weddings, 1964*, http://www.poetrybooks.co.uk/poetry_portal/from_the_archives_philip_larkin_on_the_whitsun_weddings_1964 edn, 2016 vols (Poetry Book Society,), p. 1 [accessed 2 January 2016].

⁵ Such as discussed in: Kyra Clarke, 'Willful Knitting? Contemporary Australian Craftivism and Feminist Histories', *Continuum*, 30 (2016), 298-306., Elizabeth Groeneveld, "'Join the Knitting Revolution": Third-Wave Feminist Magazines and the Politics of Domesticity', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 40 (2010), 259-277., Alla Myzelev, 'Whip Your Hobby into Shape: Knitting, Feminism and Construction of Gender', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 7 (2009), 148-163.

relationships between strangers, neighbours, family members and lovers in addition to exploring contemporary relevant issues such as disposability and enduring questions of mortality.

My technique is to build up to an observation through the examination of something seemingly unimportant, mundane or familiar. In doing so I make a point about the topic. For instance, 'The Walk' starts with the idea of a daily stroll with a baby; however, the final few words demonstrate that a reconsideration of personal priorities has occurred. In 'Saving Resources' and 'The Man Next Door' the blank cards and empty mayonnaise jar represent a questioning of consumption in a profligate society. Entering into pertinent and relevant cultural discussions such as these can prove difficult. Finding a seemingly innocuous and ordinary route into the cultural discussion hopefully beguiles the reader to some extent. Likewise, my approach to the familiar poetic territory of relationships is to examine them with the assistance of disposable quotidian objects. The disposability of items is equated with disposability of people. This idea is part of a wider cultural dialogue that arises out of a consumer-led culture. Often the items I refer to are ubiquitous and mass-produced such as the toothbrushes in 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes', and the freezer in 'Blackberrying'. They often represent the nature of the relationship between characters in the poem; the toothbrush is disposed of, suggesting that perhaps the partner has also been discarded. Meanwhile the freezer represents a cool and sensible approach to a relationship. Furthermore there is a mundane ordinariness about many items such as the tissues in 'Father and Son', the cotton buds in 'On The Way To Work' and the empty jar in 'I'm Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar'. These are disposable items in widespread use that rarely, if ever, have special meaning attributed to them. What is important about these objects is that they represent a reality that may be banal or stark but is still worthy of poetic attention. By utilising this approach I provide cohesion to the collection; the themes and the objects may vary but the conceit is revisited within the poems.

In addition to the ideas above, the following chapters will examine the nature of my poetic. A fundamental aspect of this is that the poems are not positioned on an intertextual platform and their comprehension is not dependent on an extensive literary education. By using quotidian subject matter and vocabulary, poetry becomes accessible. It is poetry of the twenty-first century and must be understood within the context in which it has been written. Due to the sudden rise of the World Wide Web and the Internet over the last two decades there has been a shift in the access to, and sharing of, information. This cultural phenomenon of unparalleled participation in the creation, storage and access of human knowledge has brought with it significant drawbacks such as an excess of processable information and deliberate oversimplification. However, it has also brought with it a democratic and dialogical approach to material. It is within this context that my poetry is positioned. The poems are essentially attempts to intervene in, or sometimes even to imitate, cultural conversations. They approach complex and nuanced human experiences; by deliberately omitting solutions I suggest that these are issues ripe for discussion.

This contextualising exegesis examines four aspects of poetic intent evident in my collection of poetry. The initial and final chapters wrestle with issues of technique and examine approaches to poetic closure and the role of quotidian speech respectively. The remaining two chapters examine content and focus on the role of ekphrasis and quotidian objects found within the collection. Of the myriad areas that might have been approached these four were selected as most significant to my central tenet of accessibility. Creating a cohesive, concise poetic statement is an essential part of my work and so it seemed fitting to commence the exegesis with the chapter that explores the fundamental techniques for achieving this. In the first chapter the argument centres on the idea that poems, like jokes, are built of a carefully constructed structure that consists of tensions that are relieved and released in the final lines of the poem. The second chapter explores one source of inspiration both for my work and my poetic. It is a case study of how the art world has influenced my work. The chapter delves into this source of inspiration and

looks at the role that public exhibition of art has played in the creation of poems within the collection. The third chapter also examines content, exploring the quotidian nature of tangible objects that appear in my poems and arguing that a triangular and communicative link between concepts, characters and objects exists. The fourth chapter suggests that speech patterns play a significant role in the poems as the informality of spoken language works on both a content-based and a structural level. This final chapter builds on the quotidian ideas explored in the third chapter but approaches the subject from a technical rather than content-based viewpoint. I thus demonstrate the importance of ordinariness in this collection and explore how it can both drive and structure a poem.

Chapter 1

Getting the punch line right: the role of closure in the creation of poetic meaning

So much depends on the final few words of the poem William Carlos Williams might have been tempted to write. For poets intent on creating concise observations, the craft of constructing the build up and payoff is all consuming at the point of writing, editing and rewriting. I find that choosing the correct words with which to end the poem can be the most challenging part of the composition. Identifying the purpose of a poetic ending raises questions about a poet's personal poetic and more broadly about the nature of closure. In considering closure as a technical or thematic feat that transforms the poem from a linear to a circular entity this chapter will explore the techniques and purposes of closure.

There are three key issues to consider: the importance of the circular text, the articulation of the primary idea, and the sense of a completed poem. In 'How I Write A Poem' I posit the seeming disparity between the consumption and creation of poems: '[r]ead it in a linear fashion. / You might think it was written that way'. This poem draws attention to the fact that texts are not as linear as they may visually appear. They are not always constructed in a linear fashion and the reader may not be expected to read them a single time from top to bottom. For many of the poems in this collection I hope the reader treats them as circular texts and after the first reading, returns to the beginning of the poem to reread and reappraise it. Those all-important final lines are the crucial link between the beginning and end of the poem. They encourage the reader to re-read and re-examine the poem and in doing so develop their understanding of it.

Beyond this encouragement to re-read, the last lines are often the repository of the primary idea behind the poem. It is here that I identify and articulate the ideas either as statements or as examples. It is usually in the composing stages that I develop this sense of purpose and find myself aligned with Philip Larkin on this point. In an interview for the *Paris Review* in 1982 he commented on his process:

I used to find that I was never sure I was going to finish a poem until I had thought of the last line. Of course, the last line was sometimes the first one you thought of! But usually the last line would come when I'd done about two-thirds of the poem, and then it was just a matter of closing the gap.¹

The sense of knowing what one is working towards is an encouraging turning point in the process; however, it is not until the finished product is ready for public reading that I have a real sense of completion. A significant number of the poems I have written over the course of the PhD were not successful in terms of grasping a concept and delivering a successful payoff and were therefore not included in the collection. The poems in *What You Brought with You* demonstrate various different styles of closure including repetition and dialogue. For example, in 'Mantra', I mimic the repetitive nature of an oral form of prayer by allowing the first and final lines, 'this is not love', to mirror and question each other. In doing this the poem attempts to convince the poet's persona as much as the reader.

One closure structure I am interested in employing is the use of direct speech. Direct speech, signposted with speech marks, is a technique I use in several poems: 'Feminist Knitting Agenda', 'Monday Morning Arrival', 'Fribble' and 'Phil'. It can be used to either

¹ Philip Larkin and Robert Phillips, 'Interviews. Philip Larkin, the Art of Poetry no. 30', *The Paris Review*, 84 (1982) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3153/the-art-of-poetry-no-30-philip-larkin>> [accessed 15 August 2016].

distance or align the poetic persona in relation to a sentiment. In 'Phil' I leave the final words, 'geographically single', in the mouth of the protagonist of the poem. In doing so I am able to distance my poetic persona from the sentiment. In this case by giving the character of Phil direct speech I separate his voice from that of the voice of the poetic persona. The voice is clearly marked out in speech marks and so also noticeably physically separated within the poem. By constructing it in this way it seems more likely that the reader would see that not only the voice is different but that the sentiments might be too. In 'I Remember, I Remember' Larkin ends with the line: '[n]othing, like something, happens anywhere' and by leaving the final line in dialogue he aligns his persona closely with the words. In addition to this by rendering the examples of his 'unspent' childhood in Coventry where he 'wasn't spoken to', 'never ran' and 'never trembling sat' into a single, concise statement he highlights the fundamental idea behind the poem.²

In articulating a primary concept the poet is able to strive for a sense of poetic integrity and completeness in the production of a final text. Barbara Herrnstein Smith discusses the close relationship poetic closure has to poetic integrity and completeness in her 1968 monograph on the subject. She finds that achieving a sense of closure contributes to the poem's sense of coherent wholeness.³ The concept of 'closing the gap' that Larkin referred to gives us an insight into how this sense of 'wholeness' presented itself to him. Some of his most popular poems end with memorable last lines that are both concise statements and poetic turns of phrase. 'An Arundel Tomb' for instance has the often quoted line, '[w]hat will survive of us is love', 'This Be The Verse' has '[a]nd don't have any kids yourself' and 'Aubade' has '[p]ostmen like doctors go from house to house'.⁴

² Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite, 2nd edn (London; Toronto: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 210.

³ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 289.

⁴ Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. by Archie Burnett (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 768.

In stark contrast to this idea Lyn Hejinian comments in her 1984 essay 'The Rejection of Closure' that: '[t]he writer experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it'. She proceeds to champion the idea of an 'open' text in relation to a 'closed' one.⁵ Her canonical work *My Life* (1980 and 1987), a long poem updated twice, represents this idea of the open text.⁶ Hejinian's concept of the open text with its multiple options of interpretation is a compelling one. She comments that: '[t]he "open text" often emphasises or foregrounds process' and that 'it resists reduction and commodification' into 'a product'.

Aligning myself, much as Larkin did, with the concept of a self-contained and closed poem in developing this collection, I have considered various techniques that can be used to build up to poetic closure. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's work identifies two fundamental aspects to closure, namely 'thematic closure' and 'formal closure'. To thematically close a poem, the poet primarily relies on narrative. While a formal structure might build up to a poetic ending it does not in itself necessarily achieve a sense of completion or wholeness that Smith attributes to successful poetic closure. To some extent formal structures, such as sonnets or limericks, lend themselves to effective endings; for those writing without these structures the ending has to be brought about with a symphony of various thematic elements and the natural rhythms and cadence within the piece. There is a fashion for not just types of poetic closure but also an absence of poetic closure, something that is seen in Hejinian's work where the length of the pieces challenges the type of poetic closure that Larkin could achieve.⁷ By eschewing regular line length, meter and rhyme in this collection I demonstrate a

⁵ Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 (1984)), pp. 40-58.

⁶ The text published in 1980 when she was 38 years old consisted of 38 stanzas consisting of 38 lines. It was updated and reissued in 1987 when she was 45 years old; the revised poem consisted of 45 stanzas each of 45 lines.

⁷ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, p. 289.

variety of techniques to thematically close a poem including: physical length, subject matter, and comedic effect. Examining techniques that other poets engage with, in addition to analysing my own practice, I have become aware of my use of the aforementioned repetition, dialogue and memorable final words. In addition to this I have deliberately employed narrative arcs, juxtaposition, lexical patterning and visual and auditory links. These techniques work alone or in tandem with each other. Ultimately my goal is to use the last line to alleviate or resolve the tensions created in the poem.

In 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' I use several techniques to close the poem including: length, epigraph and juxtaposition. This short poem is headed by a quote from a Peter Orr interview with Sylvia Plath which contextualises the poem and raises the debate about poetic material.⁸ This epigraph initiates a dialogue with Plath. The line in the final stanza, 'in the bin', ensures the debate is not fully resolved; toothbrushes have been deemed poetic material but despite this it is a poem about a toothbrush being discarded. Regardless of topic and to some extent resolution, linking the final lines to the title or epigraph does create a sense of completeness. This is something that Roger McGough, the well-known humourist, does with his poem 'Motorway', where he ends with the lines 'in the road / to destruction' thereby mirroring and punning on the title 'Motorway'.⁹ In 'Future Work', Fleur Adcock circles back to the epigraph: '[p]lease send future work' in her final lines: '[a]nd poems? Yes, there will certainly be poems: / they sing in my head, they tingle along my nerves. / It is all magnificently about to start'. The poem builds up with her descriptions of 'a splendid summer' of work to the final payoff of these lines. They resonate with humour. The final word 'start' ironically ends the poem leaving an optimistic yet slightly dubious sense of the future work which may be as certain as the apples

⁸ Sylvia Plath, 'A Comparison', in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, and Other Prose Writings* (London. Boston: Faber and Faber, Reprint 1978 (1977)), pp. 62-64.

⁹ Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten, *The Mersey Sound*, 4th edn (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 85.

‘expanding weightily in the soft air’ or as unlikely as winning ‘the chess championships in Manila’.¹⁰ Likewise in ‘Following Doctrine’ I leave the reader with a reexamination of the epigraph, ‘[h]ave nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful’, with the last line ‘nothing seems beautiful’.¹¹

The juxtaposition of ideas within a narrative gives the poet space to create meaning and humour. In ‘When I was sixteen I met Seamus Heaney’, Leontia Flynn compares the idea of literary fame with that of the incognizant literary consumer. In the poem Seamus Heaney signs a copy of a book by Flann O’Brien that the ‘friend / who knew her way around’ was carrying with her, albeit unread. Although Flynn’s persona is furious that she had in fact read *The Poor Mouth* (1941) unlike her friend, she has to admit that not only does she not know who Seamus Heaney is but confesses that ‘I believe he signed my bus ticket, which I later lost’.¹² At this point the teenage persona moves from a state of ignorance to carelessness. The words that Heaney writes, his name in this case, are simply lost. The narrative in this poem moves smoothly from the scene-setting first stanza to the anger directed at the friend and finally to a somewhat tender self-reprimand at the end. Flynn explores the ideas within the poem that make a point. However, the stanzas themselves flow easily in a narrative style. In my poem ‘I’m Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar’ creativity is compared with observation and reusability with disposability. The topic is approached in a light-hearted fashion: the ‘rows and rows’ of salvaged glass jars apparently from ‘my entire comestibles cupboard’ are saved by the ‘neighbour, rootling in my bin’. The three stanzas in this poem draw the reader through the narrative from observation to realisation.

¹⁰ Fleur Adcock, *Poems, 1960-2000* (London: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 84.

¹¹ From *The Beauty of Life* a lecture delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, February 19, 1880 published in William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art* (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2008 (1882)).

¹² Leontia Flynn, *These Days* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 19.

The majority of the poems in this collection are miniature narratives at best but more often close observations of minutiae. In 'The Man Next Door' however there is a clear narrative arc. It follows the life of a widowed painter as he gradually clears his house of furniture, burning and moving it. The poem ends with the image of one of the last pieces of the furniture he has left, the easel, 'which has taken centre stage'. Creating characters, setting up a narrative arc or delivering a key piece of information at the end are techniques that assist in the completion of a poem. In 'Resistance', the first poem in Anna Lewis's 2012 debut collection *Other Harbours*, the title and the first three stanzas build up a picture of a war-weary city but it is only in the penultimate line a word connected with war confirms what the poem is about: 'the soldiers bickering in pairs'. By humanising the soldiers with the word 'bickering', Lewis links them to 'the old men' who 'hunch down the pavements' and the 'women / with headscarves tugged low, / with quick shoes, and quicker hunger' who inhabit the town.¹³

Repetition and lexical patterning can be aspects of successful poetic delivery. Reusing language, in a proportionally appropriate way, creates familiarity and acceptance of it.¹⁴ In 'The Man Next Door' there are four instances of the word 'garden' to highlight the space between the artist's studio and his house. I have a particular fondness for conjunctions and use them liberally; in 'When I Grow Up' there are twenty-one instances of the word 'and'. This informal conjunction, that often irreverently starts a sentence or appears unnecessarily within the sentence, creates a sense of conversational ease and to some extent playfulness. In addition, lexical patterning, or grouping of connected words, plays a role in creating the illusion of familiarity and validity. In 'Blackberrying' I use the words: 'blackberrying', 'gathering', 'fruit', 'berries', 'juice' and 'juiciest' to reinforce the theme. There are words like 'abrasions', 'stinging

¹³ Anna Lewis, *Other Harbours* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2012), p. 1.

¹⁴ Consider the effectiveness of the twelve instances of the word 'silver' in Walter de la Mare's American Sonnet 'Silver'. Walter de la Mare and with illustrations by W. Heath Robinson, *Peacock Pie: A Book of Rhymes* (London: Constable, 1920).

nettles' and 'fallen' that might also be associated with the autumnal practice. Similarly in 'A Dam', Hugo Williams explores the physical endeavour of a child building a dam in a stream. There is a visceral element to the poem as Williams' persona is seen 'kneeling beside a stream [...] arms plunged up to the elbows in mud'. In this case, Williams uses 'plunged' which shares visual similarities with 'plug' in addition to 'stream' and 'mud', two words easily associated with dam making. Just as a dam separates water, the poet's persona is separated from his home; he is both physically and mentally 'so far away from home'. This participates in creating a successful image of building a dam while the final line reveals that there are two realities: the action of constructing the dam and that of writing about it later. It is at this point the language pertaining to sound become more apparent. His 'mother calls' his name, 'a familiar, two-note sound' that 'carries across the fields' and in the second stanza he tries to 'explain', and finally we hear his mother's voice in the final two lines. The poet's persona is not only aware of the sound of his mother's voice but uses it in the construction of his poem. Writing a poem starts to become as physical an endeavour as building a dam. The final lines, "[m]aking dams?" she will ask. / "Or making poems about making dams?" repeat the word 'dam' drawing the reader back to the title.¹⁵ This humorous meta-reference brings a neat close to the poem.

Ending on a pun or a joke is a familiar closure technique. In the succinct poem 'Staying In' I highlight the importance of humour in ending a poem by building up to the ending with a first stanza that stretches a single sentence over three lines, drawing attention to each part of it: '[s]ofa to fridge / short journey / but frequent'. The final two lines of the stanza are a joke: 'I plan to rescue myself / and sell the sofa'. Laughter is a familiar and ubiquitous technique to end a conversation. It is also the desired effect at the end of a joke. 'Feminist Knitting Agenda' shares similarities with a joke as it builds up to a punch line. The sense of completion is achieved through the thematic

¹⁵ Hugo Williams, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p.197.

structure of the piece. The language of 'knitting' appears in the poem with the word 'knitting' in the title and 'needles' and 'pattern' in the final stanza. The idea of a knitted doll representing a superhero develops into the idea that dolls should represent real-life 'superheroes' and finally this idea moves towards a questioning of whether excellence and fame are any guarantee of happiness. I set up a series of juxtapositions within the poem and these invite consideration on the female role within society, both the role in an idealised form and in actual form. The juxtapositions are couched as observations and at first appear innocuous. The doll is 'trouserred'; the great women are pictured in reproducible doll forms; fame and unhappiness are linked; and finally the woman who wants to bring about a change in the perception and portrayal of both women and dolls is doing so by knitting and is quite literally an 'armchair revolutionary'. The poem builds up to the final line: 'and click clack, just like that / she started working on a new pattern'. The elements of humour in this line serve to alleviate the tension engendered by this subject and bring a sense of finality to the poem. It provides a sense of a conversation closer but resists a definite conclusion.

Lyn Hejinian argued that poems should be open and to some extent her ideas resonate with me and have assisted in the development of my poetic. A successful ending offers a dual role. It is both a satisfying conclusion and a beginning. It can engender debate, suggest possibilities or raise questions without failing to deliver an answer or a solution in a clear and concise manner. Stevie Smith's work often demonstrates how poetry can serve as a conversation starter. In her conversationally philosophical poem, 'Mother, among the Dustbins', the penultimate line, 'Can you question the folly of man in the creation of God?' changes the nature of the child's religious assertions and our interpretation of them.¹⁶ In opening up debate she effectively expands the length of the poem as it continues to resonate in the reader's mind after reading. While my poems resist firm conclusions, delivering some sense of satisfaction and

¹⁶ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by William May (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p. 125.

answer is part of my poetic remit. In 'Histon Road Cemetery - Guided Tour' the poem meanders around the graveyard much as a tour would do but instead of taking in the established sights it focuses on the people using the space. It ends with a 'wire bin', which contains 'empty white lightning bottles / and unrolled condoms'. The story is incomplete, open to some extent, but the idea that the use of the graveyard has changed despite the efforts of certain parties is clear. My aim is to create poems that feel complete and yet leave room for interpretation.

Writing the ending of a poem is a challenge. Setting up the poem is an integral part in the creation of a poetic ending, as it ensures that the last few lines deliver something all-important. The final lines either get to the crux of the matter or at the least they elucidate it. They ensure the poem has a sense of completion. Producing a poem that delivers a sense of completeness depends on several factors. The poem must work thematically, in terms of creating a successful observation, it needs the certainty of veracity, and finally the final lines need to provide new information, a twist or a humorous look at the poetic content. To return to the humorous 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' the description of the 'blue plastic' toothbrush 'in the glass' builds up to and juxtaposes itself next to the toothbrush 'in the bin', the final payoff coming in the last line with the word 'pink'. It is this final twist, pun, humorous aside or reveal that many readers and indeed writers of poetry appreciate. For the poems that raise a smile, wry or otherwise, parallels must be drawn between poems and jokes, the final line being akin to that of a punch line. Once the punch line is articulated successfully the rest of the poem falls into place. It is as Larkin says 'just a matter of closing the gap' once you have thought of the last line.¹⁷

¹⁷ Philip Larkin and Robert Phillips, 'Interviews. Philip Larkin, the Art of Poetry no. 30', *The Paris Review*, 84 (1982) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3153/the-art-of-poetry-no-30-philip-larkin>> [accessed 15 August 2016].

Chapter 2

Writing art: ekphrastic approaches in poetry

Ekphrasis is the rendering of a piece of art, or a reaction to that art, into poetic form. James Heffernan neatly defines it as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’.¹ However, it is not purely a textual description of a piece of art such as would be found in art criticism. Ekphrastic poetry goes beyond that; by examining the physical entity of the artwork, it becomes a creative response to it. It may explore the ideas behind the artwork or appropriate its structure. Murray Krieger defines ekphrasis as ‘attempts to imitate in words an object of the plastic arts’ and finds that it may well demonstrate ‘the pictorial limits of the function of words in poetry’.² However when we apply this definition we see that it too falls short. Perhaps the most famous ekphrastic poem of the twentieth century, W.H. Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, defies both of these definitions by being neither an imitative nor a verbal representation of the art. Instead Auden examines the artist’s motivations behind the artwork and the philosophical and emotional significance of the topic it engages with. It is with these varying definitions of ekphrasis that this chapter approaches the topic.

This chapter will explore: the role of the museum culture; the reproduction of style in verbal form; the connection between the visual and the verbal; the idea of a visual text; and creative responses and motivations. It will explicate my own poetic interpretations of artwork, and demonstrate how poets such as Stevie Smith, William Carlos Williams and Frank O’Hara shared common creative aspirations with artists. Alongside this it will examine my own ekphrastic poems, ‘Craxton’s

¹ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.

² Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 1-6.

Paintings', 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings', 'Father and Son' and those poems with ekphrastic elements such as 'Apples', 'The Man Next Door' and 'One Man On High' and even my entire poetic.

The twentieth century witnessed a surge in ekphrastic poetry. It is likely that the sudden increase was due to an unprecedentedly widespread access to museums and art galleries, which ensured public familiarity with art. The democratic nature of art galleries, in particular those in the United Kingdom that not only allow free access to the main exhibitions but also provide extended opening hours, facilitate significant public access to artwork. My ekphrastic poems are a direct result of this access and to that extent my poems too are democratic. I have not been witness to any privileged or restricted information or space. In addition to physical access to art, dramatic changes in communications have played a significant role in its dissemination, as has the ease of travel and perhaps more importantly widespread availability to both physical and virtual reproductions of art.³ James Heffernan comments that postmodern ekphrastic poetry differs from its predecessors in two respects: firstly they are works of art in their own right, works of art that are self-aware and self-reflective, and secondly they are a response to both a museum culture and art history.⁴ Thinking in these terms helps to contextualise my work. Public art galleries not only allow access to the works on display but also participate in the dissemination of reproductions through virtual means such as websites and physical means such as reproductions, books, posters and postcards. In addition, the Internet has expedited access to art history and criticism. While libraries retain their unsurpassed role in terms of research, for the casual exploration of artwork many people turn to the World Wide Web. Aware that my readers can search for visual reproductions of artworks with ease I feel released from an obligation to explore all aspect of the works of art that appear in my poems.

³ John Berger and British Broadcasting Corporation, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, 1972), p. 165.

⁴ James A. W. Heffernan, p. 249.

Public exhibition spaces actively try to promote familiarity with works of art by involving visitors in interdisciplinary activities. Many galleries run courses to encourage writers to make use of the wealth of material they hold and so involvement in art galleries has become a familiar aspect of contemporary writing. Writers often run workshops and courses in these spaces; for instance, three contemporary poets, Catherine Smith, Abigail Morley and Emer Gillespie, initiated a recent project entitled 'Ekphrasis'. They invited public responses to art exhibitions.⁵ Smith stated that she was interested in how 'arts practitioners' from other disciplines can 'see something fresh and inspiring' in work from another artistic 'sphere'.⁶ As mentioned above, encountering art in organised exhibition space accounts for my own ekphrastic poetry. 'Father and Son' was written after the second viewing of Winifred Nicholson's oil painting 'Father and Son' when I visited the exhibition, 'Art and Life: 1920-1931' in Kettle's Yard, Cambridge in 2014.⁷ In the same year frequent visits to 'A World of Private Mystery: John Craxton, RA (1922-2009)' an exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge inspired 'Craxton's Paintings'. An entire day spent examining a collection of thirty-four paintings by Giorgio Morandi currently housed at the Modern Art Museum in Bologna resulted in 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings'. I find that my engagement with a piece of art is significantly enhanced when the art is contextualised either by work from the same artist or within an artistic timeline. Viewing a collection of an artist's work allows me to begin to visualise links between pieces and identify key themes. Furthermore, engagement with art criticism allows for a different appreciation of the art. The comprehensive exhibition of Morandi's work included access to contemporary art criticism, which

⁵ Abigail Morley, Catherine Smith and Emer Gillespie, *Ekphrasis*, <http://www.ekphrasis.org.uk> edn, 2015 vols (2015) [accessed 29 November 2015]. Events at the Royal Academy of Art and The British Museum.

⁶ Catherine Smith originally quoted on Abigail Morley, Catherine Smith and Emer Gillespie, *Ekphrasis*, <http://www.ekphrasis.org.uk> edn, 2015 vols (2015) [accessed 29 November 2015]. Now found on Abigail Morley, *Ekphrasis, the British Library and Alice in Wonderland*, <https://abigailmorley.wordpress.com/2015/08/08/ekphrasis-the-british-library-and-alice-in-wonderland> edn, 2016 vols (2015), p. 1 [accessed 10 October 2016].

⁷ *Art & Life: 1920-1931 Ben Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson, Christopher Wood, Alfred Wallis & William Staite Murray*, <http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/exhibitions/2014/art-and-life/index.php> edn, 2014 vols (Cambridge: Kettle's Yard, The University of Cambridge, 2014).

gave me an interpretation of the art I was able to render in poetic form, allowing my poetry to become both a creative and a critical response.⁸

Familiarity with works of art has resulted in poetry that either assumes it or promotes it. Current Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy's pedagogic ekphrastic poetry creates familiarity through the informal language and contextualisation she employs to introduce her audience to pieces of art. In 'Standing Female Nude' the informal language of 'belly nipple arse' and 'river-whore' creates a ripple of shock arresting the reader's attention. Duffy concurrently contextualises the creation of the artwork by imagining that the model is posing 'for a few francs', 'concerned [...] with the next meal' in a cold studio.⁹ In 'The Falling Soldier', an irreverent poem that has sparked some debate, there is a dialogue that counterbalances the questions with factual context.¹⁰ The man is not falling back 'for a kip in the sun' or engaged in a 'breakdance to amuse your mates' but the story is in fact 'worse', '[w]orse by far', '[m]uch worse'. It is a photograph of a soldier being shot.¹¹ In contrast, contemporary poet Catherine Smith assumes familiarity with particular bodies of work. In 'Cut', a poem from Smith's visceral collection *Lip* (2007), she refers to Caravaggio's distinctive use of chiaroscuro: 'our bodies are half lit, we're / ripely beautiful as Caravaggio paintings'.¹² We are expected to conjure up an image based on our prior exposure to the piece of art in the style of earlier ekphrastic poets such as W.H. Auden or William Carlos Williams. My ekphrastic poems contain key elements of the artworks, thereby suggesting that prior familiarity is not a prerequisite. Each of the poems attempts to promote familiarity with the works of art by extracting and elucidating a key element of the artist's work. In 'Craxton's Paintings' I look at the physical division of the canvas, in 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings' the communicative nature of the still life and in 'Father and Son' the delicate beauty.

⁸ Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life (Natura Morta)*, (Bologna: Museo Morandi in Museo de Arte Moderna Bologna, 1951).

⁹ Carol Ann Duffy, *Standing Female Nude* (London: Anvil, 1998), p. 47.

¹⁰ Carol Ann Duffy, *The Bees* (London: Picador, 2012), pp. 13-14.

¹¹ Robert Capa, *The Falling Soldier*, (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1936 (negative date)) <<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283315>> [accessed 10 October 2016].

¹² Catherine Smith, *Lip* (Huddersfield: Smith/Doorstep Books, 2007), p. 22.

The gallery culture has highlighted an awareness of the physical aspects of the works of art and this is a key element in my ekphrastic poems. In 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings' the lines, '[i]n the museum in Bologna / where I first saw Morandi', set the poem within a certain context, informing the reader of the importance of the exhibition space. Likewise, in the poem 'Father and Son' I combine my own physical awareness of my presence in the art gallery with the tangible reality of the artwork. In addition, I replicate not only the style but also the textures of the items within the work. I echoed the 'tissue-wrapped flowers / standing in / frangible saucers' that I saw in the paintings of Winifred Nicholson in the 'packet of tissues' that I 'find at the bottom / of my bag'. These tissues become the canvas for my poem and the writing on them is transformed into an object just as the paintings on the wall are objects. I imitated the construction of the painting, the 'gentle / strokes of a black biro' suggesting the brush strokes of the paintings. Developing the poem along these lines I pick up on Nicholson's soft pastel colours by using the adjectives 'sheer' and 'gentle'. Thus I show that the creative process has been galvanised by an emotional response to the art and used the words 'tenderness', 'child's tiny ear' and 'kiss' to represent this.

In 'Craxton's Paintings', I followed a similar pattern as I worked to infuse my poem with the brightness and sense of joy the artist John Craxton brought to his work. I wanted to capture not only the Mediterranean sense of light but also the reality of the Greek sailors and the farm workers as Craxton represented them. By painting these people on large canvases in bold colours he rendered them larger than life and full of joyfulness. I deliberately employ 'bold words like angular, big and bright' to indicate:

the difference
between light and dark, the shadow and the relief

the soft pastels and pinks and hard dark browns,

greens and blues

I finish off the poem with reference to William Carlos Williams's 'The Red Wheelbarrow' with the image of 'white chickens'. Giving examples of subjects of his paintings, I talk of 'beautiful young men eating chips' and 'barefoot sailors'. Likewise, in 'The Man Next Door' I refer to colours and textures that typify Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists:

impressionistic
flowers and fields,
or crowds of Renoir figures
using Gauguin colours
and the stillness of Bonnard

incorporating 'the swirling energy of Van Gogh'. While poets may be drawn to strong visual elements such as texture and colour it is a challenge to render them poetically. Stevie Smith commented that: '[c]olours are what drive me most strongly, colours in painted pictures, but, most strongly of all, colours out of doors in the fresh cool air, the colours I see when I'm walking in London streets, in the country or by the sea'.¹³ Despite extolling the power of colour her poems are remarkably lacking in description of colour or texture and her accompanying drawings are simple black and white line drawings. The bold tone of her voice within the poems seems to take the place of the bold colours she experienced in real life.

In addition to capturing specific elements, as part of the creative response, a poet may seek to represent the entire structure of a piece or collection of art. Frank O'Hara plays with this idea in his poem 'Why I'm Not a Painter'. In the poem, he explores both the similarities and differences between his composition of a poem

¹³ Stevie Smith, 'What Poems are made Of', in *Me again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1981 (1969)), p. 127.

entitled 'Oranges' and Mike Goldberg's 1955 painting 'Sardines'. He sets up the conceit that he and Goldberg have different approaches. He shows how Goldberg removes elements of his painting in order to reveal the subject matter of the title while he himself employs a diversionary conversational technique in order to assert: 'how terrible orange is / and life'. Goldberg omits elements until only the essential aspects remain: in this case, two words, 'Exit' scratched in the top right corner and 'Sardines' across the bottom of the painting, both of which stand out from the bright confusion of angular shapes. By contrast, O'Hara uses a clear narrative structure to guide the reader through his thought process; he diverts attention in order to reveal the heart of his poem. His characteristic conversational lines that enjamb seem to randomly cause the reader to seek syntactical meaning by reading at a certain speed. This both serves to demonstrate his love of the conversational diversion and highlights the energy and movement found in the poem and the painting. While the entire poem is set up with the premise that their techniques are at odds, it does in fact demonstrate the similarities between the two, how both pieces are set to reveal, despite their apparent refusal to confront, the subject matter directly and clearly. Furthermore, in order to look at Goldberg's conceptual framing of his topic, O'Hara frames a poem within a poem. Thus both pieces are doubly framed: by the page and the canvas and by a more sophisticated conceptual framing. In addition O'Hara encourages the viewer to work for the meaning within the poem, just as the viewer searches for meaning in Goldberg's scrambled images and sporadic words. Both pieces go beyond the canvas and the page by inviting the reader and the observer into a dialogue and encouraging them to understand the convoluted reveal that is at their heart.

Similarly, exploring the idea of representing the structure of works of art, 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings' imitates elements of Morandi's paintings in the stanza division, punctuation and lexical choice within the poem. The division of the poem into three stanzas echoes three recurrent shapes in his work: bottles, vases and jugs. This division, combined with the end of line punctuation, slows and controls the pace of the poem and echoes Morandi's quiet domestic paintings. The

shape of the stanzas with the varying line lengths suggests the assortment of receptacles found in the paintings. Furthermore, the three stanzas stand syntactically alone but communicate with each other, just as the objects in the paintings stand physically alone but appear to interact. Lexical choice in this economical poem was of key consideration during the drafting stage. I wanted to imbue quietness through use of the adverb 'subtly' while the verbs 'look', 'see' and 'whispering' indicate communication. Finally, just as a still-life draws attention to its subject, I draw the reader's attention to the Italian phrase 'natura morta', dubbing it the 'Schrodinger's cat of art' and according it an entire stanza, just as Morandi accorded a canvas to each assortment of items.

In 'Craxton's Paintings', I create a collage of cut-out images from a collection of paintings. I represent the structure of John Craxton's almost mathematical cubist-style division of the canvas apparent in this period of his career. I brought this sense of division and structure into my poem by dividing it into seven two-line stanzas. In this poem I use the museum not simply to contextualise my work but rather to allow it to influence the structure of the poem. By reimagining the positioning of the physical art objects or the elements within the painting, a poet can create a new perspective on the work, highlighting the themes behind it or reflecting their own impression of the art. Taking control of public museums and art galleries by gathering selected pieces of art together in a virtual space is another trend within ekphrastic poetry. In the ten poems found at the start of *Pictures From Brueghel* (1962) Williams creates a virtual gallery of works physically scattered amongst various European collections.¹⁴ The first of these ten poems 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' takes as its subject matter the same painting W.H. Auden used in 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. In this well-known poem, Auden amalgamates several paintings into a single one, taking creative control of the works of art and using them for his own poetic purposes.¹⁵

¹⁴ Or 12 poems as the final poem 'Children's Games' is split into three parts. All of these paintings are to be found in public museums and it is likely that Williams saw many of them in real life.

¹⁵ Opinion is divided on whether this was intentional.

For ekphrastic poets there is an intense connection, interplay or even tension between the verbal and the visual. For some poets the text of the poem itself sometimes becomes visual. William Carlos Williams saw text as an image or an object. He stated that after the 1913 Armory Show, 'the poetic line, the way the image was to lie on the page was our immediate concern'.¹⁶ He became particularly interested in line arrangements and stanza divisions. It was in Williams's final collection *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962) that the literal rendering of a painting into poetic form became of paramount interest to him.¹⁷ In 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' Williams articulates and echoes what he believes to be Breughel's viewpoint and style of painting through the structure of the poem. His laconic language and simple structure reflect the subject matter of the paintings. He uses stanza breaks to assist the reader in moving around the painting, focusing in on a single image or aspect of the painting with each stanza. These include: the farmer, the sea, the sun, the coastline and the drowning of Icarus. While his poem is a description of the painting, these aspects all take centre stage in Williams's work just as they occupy the foreground in Breughel's painting; despite this Elizabeth Allen believes that the poem challenges the authority of the painting, for instance, by highlighting the sun. In the painting she perceives that it is on the horizon whereas in the poem the farmers are: 'sweating in the sun / that melted / the wings' wax'.¹⁸ Williams was attempting to bring the essence of Breughel's approach to painting to his own work. In 1961 he commented: '[a]s I've grown older, I've attempted to fuse the poetry and painting and make it the same thing [...] I don't care whether it's representational or not'.¹⁹ The visual aspect of his text had grown in importance.

¹⁶ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1967), p. 135.

¹⁷ Bram Dijkstra, p. 56.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Allen, 'The Ghost of Icarus', *Southerly*, 68. No.1 (2008) 188.

¹⁹ Walter Sutton, 'A Visit with William Carlos Williams', *Minnesota Review*, 1 (Spring 1961), 321-322. quoted in Henry M. Sayre, 'Ready-Mades and Other Measures: The Poetics of Marcel Duchamp and William Carlos Williams', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 8 (1980) 21.

To some extent this interplay between visual and verbal has influenced my work. Line breaks are my primary route to controlling the visual text. In 'Apples' three lines from Gertrude Stein's poem 'Sacred Emily' from *Geography and Plays* (1922) are reproduced: 'Apples / Apples / Apples went'.²⁰ By giving each word its own line Stein drew attention to them, singling the words out, revaluating them as objects and reconsidering the objects that they represented. By utilising 'went' at the end of the third line she links them again. Stein's interest in deconstructing text has led to critics such as Marjorie Perloff referring to Stein's 'Cubist syntax'.²¹ It is certain, that like Williams, she was fundamentally influenced by early twentieth-century art movements. She spent a significant portion of her life living in Paris mingling with artists such as Pablo Picasso. She was an avid if financially limited collector of works of art, many of which she bought with her brother Leo Stein.²² 'Apples' refers to a Paul Cezanne still life that the siblings had invested in. In the division of their assets Gertrude Stein lost the painting.²³ I was drawn to Stein's poetic representation of this experience and the idea that Picasso replaced her painting with a depiction of an apple. I wanted to echo Stein's Cubist language and so repeated the pattern from the quotation, with the lines 'Took / Took / Took them'. In addition, I sought to deconstruct the language, reconsidering the metaphor that is originally posited in the first stanza and suggesting that a non-metaphorical language, one that looks closely at the structure, is a more compelling kind of truth.

The idea of the visual text was something that poets such as Liliane Lijn, Ann Noel, Edward Wright, Hansjoerg Mayer, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Lynette Roberts experimented with later on in the twentieth century. Lynette Roberts' poem 'Rainshiver' was written 'using all words which had long thin letters so that even

²⁰ Gertrude Stein, *Geography and Plays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012 (1922)).

²¹ Marjorie Perloff, 'Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein', *The American Poetry Review*, 8 (1979), 33-43.

²² Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 272.

²³ Patrick O'Brian, *Pablo Ruiz Picasso : A Biography* (London: Collins, 1976), p. 511.

the print of the page would look like thick lines of rain'.²⁴ She employed words such as 'gills', 'drills', 'chills', 'billing birds' and 'daffodil spring' to give the impression of rain.²⁵ In another approach, some poets seek to connect images and text. For Stevie Smith, as with the Romantic poet-artist William Blake, text and image were inextricably linked. Stevie Smith's irreverent and naive drawings are a satisfying accompaniment to her poetry. Although they were not necessarily executed at the same time or even deliberately created for a particular poem, they either add a layer of detail and interpretation to the poem, they mirror the poem, or demonstrate the idea behind it.²⁶ Jack Barbera and William McBrien record in their 1985 biography that she frequently described her accompanying drawings to a poem prior to reading it aloud.²⁷ Drawing was certainly something she enjoyed doing and in her 1961 interview with Peter Orr she commented, 'I'm not a trained drawer, you know. It's rather more like the higher doodling, or just perhaps doodling without the higher'.²⁸ Like her poems the drawings appear artless and simple and demonstrate her idiosyncratic style. William May sees a great tension in Smith's work between the verbal and visual, citing among other poems 'Silence' in which she writes:

It is better to see the grass than write about it
 Better to see the water than write a water-song
 Yet both may be painted and a person be happy in the painting,
 Can it be that the tongue is cursed, to go so wrong?²⁹

Smith's personal creative endeavours suggest that she found a pleasing harmony in mixing text, art and aural sound. In readings of her poems such as 'Longing for

²⁴ From Lynette Roberts' diary, entry dated 23 June 1940 quoted in William May, 'Verbal and Visual Art in Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 55.

²⁵ Lynette Roberts, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2005), p. 26.

²⁶ Letter from Stevie Smith to John Haywood 2 January 1943 cited in Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Biography* (London: Sutton Publishing, 1988 (reprinted 2002)), pp. 160-161.

²⁷ Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Heinemann, 1985), p. 378.

²⁸ Stevie Smith in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press and Ian Scott-Kilvert*, ed. by Peter Orr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966b), p. 229.

²⁹ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by William May (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p. 684.

Death because of Feebleness' and 'Mother, among the Dustbins' she described the drawings that accompanied them.³⁰ For the latter she describes the scene as she sees it in her mind's eye.³¹ The accompanying drawing is perhaps a little crude but she has captured something sanctimonious about the child's lips and a weary intelligent caring expression on the mother's face.³² Smith's interest in art extended to ekphrastic poetry. In 'The Lady of the Well-Spring' she explores a character's physical transmission into Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting 'La Source' (1902). In the poem she plays with the idea of rejecting conversation in favour of complete absorption in a painting. The 'English child Joan' runs away from the 'drawing room' and the 'difficulty of conversation' effectively into the painting where the 'great white lady', the 'fair smooth lady' holds her as a willing captive. Calvin Bedient and Ingrid Hotz-Davies argue that Stevie Smith follows Renoir's painting into the realm of the erotic.³³ However, I would argue that Smith uses the curiosity of the child to escape into the artwork. The art becomes the destination that Joan runs towards but once there she has no wish to escape back to 'sophisticated conversation' now she 'fully sees the beauty her eye embraces'.³⁴ Although Smith appears to reject words in favour of the visual she in fact highlights the importance of both oral and textual communication. Joan enters into a question and answer dialogue with 'the lady' and Smith communicates her idea in poetic form without an accompanying picture. She thus negates her own suggestion that words are somehow irrelevant in the face of art.

This competition between art and poetry can be satisfied to some extent with the fictitious creation of a piece of art. While most ekphrastic poems are examinations of well-known art pieces there is no compulsion to use actual art. In 'One Man On High' the photograph is essentially fabricated. It is a synthesis of elements from photographs that hint at the sublime figures in dramatic landscapes, moody black

³⁰ Stevie Smith. *The Spoken Word: Stevie Smith*. CD.

³¹ Stevie Smith. *The Spoken Word*.

³² Stevie Smith, p. 126.

³³ Calvin Bedient and Ingrid Hotz-Davies both argue that this is a poem about an 'erotic awaking'.

³⁴ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by William May (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), pp. 357-358.

and white shots. The landscapes of Ansel Adams are combined with the portraiture of Yousuf Karsh. In the poem the image is of a brooding figure staring off into the distance and the poem touches on the narcissistic desire to centrally position both the picture and self in another person's life. The final lines use the pronouns 'we' and 'I' to draw attention to this: '[w]e will place the photograph on a wall / as a glossy reminder / of how I look / when I contemplate the void'. The photograph is described in this final line and the first two lines: 'I will stand on a mountain / and gaze into the distance'. This description centres and frames the processes of creation and hanging.

Approaching artwork through poetry is a self-aware attempt at interpretation. In the second stanza of 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings' the idea that the paintings can inspire is explicitly mentioned. My persona is aware of observing the paintings and of trying to comprehend them. The central tenet of 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings' is the idea that the inanimate objects Morandi paints represent people. This idea was first posited in Mario Chemello's documentary *Giorgio Morandi's Dust* (2012), a film that was screening in the exhibition space at the time of my visit, and became central to my understanding of the art. Chemello commented that the repeated bottle shape imitates the ubiquitous image of the Virgin and Child to be found in the churches of Bologna.³⁵ Furthermore it is possible that they also depicted real people whom Morandi knew. Certainly the churches of Bologna abound with 'mother and child' images and it is intriguing to consider that Morandi, who spent his entire life living in this small city, explored the importance of connection and proximity between people. In this case the poem becomes a poem about both the art and the art criticism. My understanding of the artwork is one of tensions and contradiction; the seemingly inanimate shapes that are also communicating figures and the concept of 'natura morta' as both 'nature dead' and 'nature alive' interacts with this idea. The tension between proximity and distance in the artwork is echoed in the poem in both the line ending and in

³⁵ *Giorgio Morandi's Dust*. Dir. Mario Chemello. Imago Orbis. 2012.

the clustering of the 'bottles, vases and glasses' together. Pulling the syntactical unit into separate lines is often dictated by natural pauses but in the lines, '[a]nd you said natura morta / was nature dead / and nature alive', the tension is not fully released until the final full stop. The line breaks quicken the pace of reading and effectively add to the tension within the poem.

The idea of shared aspirations is a familiar trope in ekphrastic poetry. For instance Elizabeth Jennings' poem 'Visit to an Artist' was written for the artist and poet David Jones. They shared a faith and ideas about the purpose of creativity, considering 'art as gesture and as sacrament'.³⁶ Both William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara had an intimate connection with the art world. Williams was exposed to Cubism through groups such as those around Stieglitz and 291, Walter Conrad Arensberg and the artists' colony at Grantwood.³⁷ Frank O'Hara was linked to Abstraction Expressionism through artists such as Jackson Pollock. Williams's poetry demonstrates a significant interest in art and his prose, such as the prologue of *Kora in Hell* (1920), *I wanted to Write a Poem* (1958) and his *Autobiography* (1967), contains many references to artists. He was profoundly influenced by his mother's love of art: '[h]er interest in art became my interest in art'; he was involved with artists early on in his poetic career.³⁸ Even the writers he mixed with were, in his words, 'closely allied with the painters'.³⁹ Williams's initial interest was heavily skewed in favour of Cubism. He later stated that:

We'd have arguments over cubism that would fill an afternoon. There was a comparable whipping up of interest in the structure of the poem. It seemed daring to omit capitals at the head of each poetic line. Rhyme went by the board. We were, in short, "rebels", and were so treated.⁴⁰

³⁶ Elizabeth Jennings, *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012) 71 and William May, p. 55.

³⁷ Bram Dijkstra, p. 22.

³⁸ William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. by Edith Heal (New York: New Directions Books, 1978), p. 16.

³⁹ William Carlos Williams, p. 148.

⁴⁰ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1967), p. 136.

Poems such as 'The Rose', which was based on Juan Gris' collage 'Roses', in his 1923 collection *Spring and All*, demonstrate the influence of the Cubists and Dadaists. In addition, they share intertextual links with writers such as Gertrude Stein who were also influenced by artistic movements.⁴¹ This influence was apparent through both Williams's sentence and image fragmentation.⁴²

In a similar vein my poetic has developed from a connection with contemporary art. The idea that 'my life is my art' was brought to the forefront in the 1990s with Tracy Emin's 'My Bed'. Emin claimed this piece which showed the 'absolute mess and decay of my life...was a good thing for the zeitgeist of the time'.⁴³ Later work that has followed in the same vein has also influenced me. Mark Wallinger's 'State Britain', which won the Turner Prize in 2007 and Michael Landy's 'Semi-Detached' (2004) were seminal pieces for me. The former (a perfect replica of the protest camp ensconced in Parliament Square at the time) and the latter (a replica of Landy's parents' house) both demonstrated, just as Emin had, that daily life could be successfully displayed as art. Landy's house was particularly intriguing with the carefully tended house frontage standing in contrast to the slightly neglected rear. This was artwork that spoke to me.

I was drawn to Morandi's work because of the careful examination of the minutiae and the ordinariness of life that his collections of vessels undertake. This resonated with me, as much of my poetry is observational study of quotidian occurrence and to some extent my poem is a dialogue with Morandi about my own poetic. In his poem 'Why I'm Not a Painter' O'Hara posits the idea that the poem is a dialogue with Mike Goldberg about the nature of the creative process. The veracity of this is called into question when we realise that, the poem within the poem, 'Oranges', was written in 1949, several years before 'Why I'm Not a Painter'. However, the

⁴¹ Marjorie Perloff, 'Lines Converging and Crossing: The "French" Phase of William Carlos Williams', *The Missouri Review*, 2 (1978), 89-123.

⁴² Bram Dijkstra, p. 218.

⁴³ Tracey Emin, *Tracey Emin's My Bed / TateShots*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/tracey-emins-my-bed-tateshots> edn, 2016 vols (London: Tate, 2015), p. 1.

central point, which is that O'Hara felt that his work was comparable to art and indeed to some extent explicable through it, holds true.⁴⁴ 'Oranges' had already become inextricably linked with the artwork as it was the inspiration for a series of twelve paintings produced by Grace Hartigan in 1952 in which she interwove the text with abstract images.⁴⁵ By referring to 'Oranges' and linking it to Mike Goldberg's 1955 painting O'Hara distorts the linear nature of the narrative, taking creative control of it and reworking it to fulfil a creative purpose. O'Hara plays with the sense of lineation by demonstrating the passage of time with phrases such as: 'I drink; we drink', 'the days / go by' and '[m]y poem / is finished and I haven't mentioned / oranges yet'. He synchronises the composition of the poem and the painting suggesting that they were done simultaneously.

The purpose of the poem is not to offer a faithful account of an occurrence but rather to explore the act of creation and the connection between visual art and connecting thoughts and ideas. It invites both the artist and the reader to enter into a dialogue on the portrayal of creative ideas and to this extent the poem mirrors the artwork. Both the painting and the poem follow, as John Ashbery said, the 'Abstract Expressionist idea that the work is a sort of record of its own coming-into-existence'.⁴⁶ This is an idea that I explore in 'Father and Son', a poem that records its own coming into existence. The poem is composed on a tissue 'with gentle / strokes of a black biro' in the art gallery.

Michael Davidson argues that for some poets 'the reading of the painting is also an engagement with all hermeneutic acts, literary as well as existential'.⁴⁷ Davidson, a proponent of a Heidegger-based existential analysis, finds that 'painterly poets' such as Max Jacob, Guillaume Apollinaire, Gertrude Stein and The New York School

⁴⁴ The 12 poems (originally 19 in number) can now be found in Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (California: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 5-9.

⁴⁵ Terence Diggory, 'Questions of Identity in Oranges by Frank O'Hara and Grace Hartigan', *Art Journal*, 52. No. 4 (1993), 41-50.

⁴⁶ Peter A. Stitt, 'John Ashbery, the Art of Poetry no.33', *The Paris Review*, 1983

<<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery>> [accessed 19 June 2014].

⁴⁷ Michael Davidson, 'Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 42 No. 1 (1983) 77.

demonstrate through their work their acts of thinking and reflecting.⁴⁸ This is apparent in 'Why I Am Not a Painter', a poem both in response to and in dialogue with, Mike Goldberg's Abstract Expressionist painting 'Sardines'. For O'Hara the art is a stimulus to explore concepts not necessarily embodied in the art itself, in particular the act of creation. The notion that shared creative aspirations fuel ekphrastic poetry supports Peter Verdonk's idea that a postmodern 'ekphrastic poem embodies a communicative triangle between the artist, the poet's persona and the reader'.⁴⁹ Michael Davidson finds that the postmodern 'painterly poem' interacts with the art as a text not as a static object. Davidson, who criticises Gotthold Lessing's understanding of how time and space affect words and images and Murray Krieger's belief that ekphrastic poetry is about physical objects, argues that neither recognises that the poem may signify the poet in the act of thinking and creating.⁵⁰ For Davidson the fundamental aspect of 'painterly poems' is the line of communication between the poet and the artist.⁵¹ My ekphrastic poems seek to express a sense of admiration, as 'Father and Son' does, or a closer examination of what the artist was trying to achieve, as 'Craxton's Paintings' does, and in this way they enter into a dialogue with the artist.

Poets seek their inspiration from diverse sources but seeking it from an artistic creation invites the poet to enter into a dialogue with the art and the artist, to utilise their linguistic skills in order to engage with the art in an emotional, intellectual and creative interaction. Frank O'Hara engaged on a very personal level with artists, as did William Carlos Williams and both found museum culture offered up a rich experience. Stevie Smith engaged with art very much on her own terms, mixing her own drawings with her poetic material. The ekphrastic poems from my collection are part of a poetic tradition in which the poet's persona demonstrates a self-awareness of the act of creation by making self-references to

⁴⁸ Michael Davidson, 69-79.

⁴⁹ Peter Verdonk, 'Painting, Poetry, Parallelism: Ekphrasis, Stylistics and Cognitive Poetics', *Language and Literature*, 14 (2005) 237.

⁵⁰ Murray Krieger, p. 292, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Edward Calvert Beasley, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, (1766) 1853), p. 255.

⁵¹ Michael Davidson, 69.

it. They reflect the artwork in the structure of the poem in addition to the content. They are interpretative rather than descriptive but then as John Hollander argues '[u]ltimately, poetic thought is interpretive'.⁵² The poems draw the reader into a dialogue between the poet's persona and the artist's perceived ideas and work. They engage on a public platform utilising art galleries and museums as an entry into the artwork. Each poem embraces the current accessibility to art, making reference to public exhibition spaces and nodding towards the ever-evolving virtual communication networks. They are fundamentally interactive poems, interacting both at the creative level with the art and at the consumption level by inviting reader participation in the comprehension and enjoyment of the poems.

⁵² John Hollander and J. D. McClatchy, 'John Hollander, the Art of Poetry no. 35', *The Paris Review*, 1985
<<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2866/the-art-of-poetry-no-35-john-hollander>> [accessed 19 June 2014].

Chapter 3

Ideas in things: objects in poetry

What You Brought with You demonstrates an interest in a relationship among ideas, people and objects. Tangible objects make staged appearances within the fifty poems, playing a crucial role in exploring interpersonal relationships and participating in current cultural dialogues about loss, waste, social mores and happiness. Developing a poetic that accords significant space to objects would have been inconceivable without Modernist and Post-Modernist developments during the twentieth century, in particular in the ‘Imagist’ movement, which played a vital role in redefining poetic space for objects. The Imagists felt that late Victorian poetry was too concerned with narrative and moralising to accord objects a proper and independent place in their poetry. In the 1910s the self-styled ‘Imagists’ turned this relationship on its head. Poets such as T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, F.S. Flint, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and later Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams wrote poems in which the object took centre stage and the message of the poem was side-lined.¹ They believed that objects should be examined for their own worth rather than as a physical representative of an idea.

This chapter will explore: allotting concrete items a centrality within the poem; the idea of the poem as an object; the ability of objects to represent ideas; and the contextualising nature of objects. It will demonstrate that my poetic in regards to my use of objects is a fluid and flexible attempt to make use of objects and explore the possibilities they present. Each poem varies in its approach to the use of objects and this is influenced by a number of published poets. My aim is to examine human issues and ideas through the objects without eroding the value or part they

¹ Andrew Thacker, *The Imagist Poets* (Devon, England: Northcote House, with British Council, 2011), p. xiii.

play in the poem. *What You Brought with You* validates the viability of placing everyday objects in poetry and I will set this within the context of twentieth-century and contemporary poets. I will explore Imagist and Objectivist reactions to Victorian poetry by examining the work of William Carlos Williams. In addition I will examine how Frank O'Hara used objects to explore commodification and cultural capital. The difference between these two avant-garde poets demonstrates the shift in the position of objects within poetry from Imagist isolation to celebration in context. Between the 1920s and the 1950s objects become repositioned within a wider social dialogue. The chapter will touch on how contemporary poets such as A.R. Ammons, Blake Morrison and Rebecca Lindenberg have followed in this tradition of according objects poetic space. It will suggest that there is a noticeable reluctance by these poets to embrace fully the poetic value of objects. This is clear in A.R. Ammons' long work *Garbage: A Poem* (1993) where despite the subject matter ordinary objects seldom appear and are not accorded significant poetic space.² Blake Morrison's politically relevant work uses objects as props in a story, for instance the 'Phillips screwdriver' in 'The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper', where they primarily serve a narrative function.³ In contemporary poetry, objects are often imbued with significance such as the 'empty chest' in Rebecca Lindenberg's 'In the Museum of Lost Objects', a poem in which the objects hold great financial and social significance. Ultimately the chapter will demonstrate the divergence of my own work from the work of these contemporary poets.

The roots of my poetic stretch back to the Imagists who were particularly concerned with exploring the visual perception of 'concrete things'. This movement was born out of 'dissatisfaction with English Poetry', which F.S. Flint wanted to see strengthened 'by pure vers libre: by the Japanese tanka and haikai'. T.E. Hulme, one of the first to write imagist poems, led this revolution, arguing for a

² A. R. Ammons, *Garbage: A Poem* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 121.

³ Blake Morrison, *A Discoverie of Witches* (Lancaster; Sheffield: Litfest, 2012), p. 69.

new kind of poetry that consisted of 'accurate presentation and no verbiage'.⁴ Ezra Pound, whose flair for promotion ensured the success of the movement, articulated three primary principles in *A Retrospect* of which the first was the '[d]irect treatment of "the thing", whether subjective or objective'.⁵ This directive is at the heart of my own poetic. Poems such as 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' seek, as the title suggests, to examine only the toothbrushes. The Imagists' rejection of what they perceived to be a subordination of the thing to subjective emotions and abstractions in favour of the isolation and examination of the thing itself has directly influenced my work. 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' owes much to such seminal work as William Carlos Williams's 'The Red Wheelbarrow' and 'Between Walls'. Donald Markos describes the latter as 'as pure an imagist poem as any Williams ever wrote' although the former is by far the more famous and is often held up as an Imagist manifesto.⁶ Despite this, or possibly because of this, Roger Mitchell asserts that 'The Red Wheelbarrow' 'drew perhaps the greatest derision of all early Modernist poems, greater even than *The Waste Land* (1922), because of what looked like its pointless ordinariness'.⁷ This interest in what might be considered anti-poetic subject matter was fundamental in developing the role of objects within contemporary poetry. Both Williams's poems are manifestos for the 'direct treatment of the thing' and a homage to the use of everyday objects in poems.

In *What You Brought with You* I accord objects poetic space and try to resist the objects attaining abstract, symbolic or allegorical status. If the object becomes symbolic within the poem, this symbolism does not translate outside the context of the poem. So while in 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' the pink toothbrush may be interpreted to symbolise the end of a relationship, outside the poem a toothbrush does not carry this symbolism. By keeping the symbolic nature of the

⁴ F. S. Flint, 'The History of Imagism', *The Egoist* 2:5, 1 May 1915, p. 70

<<http://library.brown.edu/pdfs/130693648162504.pdf>> [accessed 25 September 2014].

⁵ Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', in *Pavannes and Divagations* (New York: New Directions, 1974 (1958/1918)).

⁶ Donald W. Markos, *Ideas in Things: The Poems of William Carlos Williams* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994) p. 135.

⁷ Roger Mitchell, 'Modernism Comes to American Poetry: 1908-1920', in *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. by Jack Myers and David Wojahn (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 230.

objects within the confines of poem I retain the integrity of the ordinariness of the objects as they exist outside the poem. I refuse to allow them to become simply the physical representation of an idea. By resisting culturally weighted, heavily symbolic objects I highlight the ordinariness of the objects within the poems. The process by which these articles appear in my poems varies. The object itself may be the primary motivation behind the poem as the titles themselves suggest: 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes', 'Batteries' and 'I'm Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar'. Items may find a place in the poem during the writing or re-writing stage, which was the case with poems such as 'On The Way To Work' and 'Problem Solving' in which the objects participate in the sketching of an observation. In the pre-writing, writing or rewriting stage I may become aware that I have subverted the original use of an object. In 'I'm Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar' the jar moves through four functions, as: a receptacle for mayonnaise, a waste product, a found object, and finally a painter's water receptacle. Moving between functions allows a re-exploration and re-contextualisation of the original object and links it to a new and personalised meaning. The jar becomes the painter's personal item endowed with meaning through a recreated function and history. Close attention needs to be paid to the object to ensure its journey is comprehensible. In rewrites of this particular poem I focused on expanding the number of objects to ensure a convincing narrative for the recovered glass jar. I built up the artistic imagery using words such as 'easel' and 'horsehair brush', repositioning the mayonnaise jar within an artistic context. The narrative culminated in the image of 'rows and rows of glass jars' adorning the artist's walls thus broadening out the story from the original jar to all the jars my poetic persona had ever thrown into the bin.

'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' can be read either as a poem simply about two ablutionary articles or as a metaphor for the end of a relationship. The former reading renders the poem as simple imagery much in the vein of the Imagists themselves. The latter promotes a different response and understanding. The role of the toothbrushes is integral to this. A toothbrush is a familiar, personal and

ubiquitous object and so renders itself an ideal choice for a poem about relationships; they too are familiar, personal and ubiquitous. The poem plays on the process of perception. The poem subtly encourages the reader to explore the notion of relationships, their familiar, personal and disposable aspects. The intermingling of the reader's unique perceptions of items, combined with the nuances of the poem, ensures the poetic exploration is a personal and intimate experience. The reader is no longer simply encountering an object; they are perceiving it. Their conscious perception of the object is affected by prior experience or knowledge that they possess.

In the attempt to focus on concrete items, the idea that the poem itself could be a concrete object was compelling. In a later attempt to develop some of the ideas associated with Imagism, William Carlos Williams, together with Louis Zukofsky, Basil Bunting, Charles Reznikoff and George Oppen developed the 'Objectivist' theory of poetry. For Williams objectivism was 'an antidote' [...] to the bare image haphazardly presented in loose verse'.⁸ The fundamental argument was, as Williams explained in his autobiography: 'the poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes'.⁹ This conception of the poem as an object was part of a wider artistic trend. Williams commented: '[i]t all went with the newer appreciation, the matter of paint upon canvas as being of more importance than the literal appearance of the image depicted'.¹⁰

Developing the Imagist idea of the poem as an object and replacing the 'image' with the 'object' was a crucial change for these poets.¹¹ Now the poem could be structurally analysed as an object itself. This could be done by both examining the content contained in the poem and the arrangement of the words on the page. For example, Williams, who was profoundly influenced by art, in particular Cubism,

⁸ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1967), p. 265.

⁹ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography*, p. 264.

¹⁰ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography*, p.265.

¹¹ Andrew Thacker, p. 105.

became concerned with, as Bram Dijkstra phrases it: 'the careful delineation and presentation of objects'.¹² Dijkstra points to Williams's 1923 collection *Spring and All* as evidence of this, claiming that Williams strove to create a style of American poetry which would display similar attributes to the paintings produced by Stieglitz and the group around him.¹³ The poems are littered with everyday objects, their quotidian recognisability arrests attention, for example: 'Wrigley's', 'night-tables' and 'hairpins' in 'IX - Young Love' or 'imitation leather' 'paper clips' and 'gummed labels' in 'XII - Composition'. When the poem is considered as an object, narrative and ease of understanding can become subordinate and accessibility can be marginalised. The seemingly subjective line breaks and stanza divisions that appear to be sections of a personal perspective echo the Cubists' cut-up images. Williams was less concerned with narrative than with allowing the words to stand alone, albeit somewhat disjointedly. This ensured that the objects within the poem could be appreciated for what they are and not subordinate to a narrative or an argument. Williams's early collections have profoundly influenced my poetic. Objects that make an appearance in my collection both guide and shape the narrative. Despite the crucial role within the poem, the meaning the objects are accorded exists only within the poem, the meaning is not a universal meaning and does not transport out of the poem. As a result the poems are a guarded repository of the ideas they hold. I would hope that this results in poems that can be counted as objects in both an abstracted and a concrete sense.

Williams's marked interest in materiality and his statement 'no ideas but in things' can be traced back to Ezra Pound's dictum that 'the natural object is always the adequate symbol'.¹⁴ Pound felt that a focus on the concrete rather than the abstract produced a better poem while Williams's phrase 'no ideas but in things' became something of a mantra for later poets. However Williams's rejection of metaphor

¹² Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech. Cubism, Stieglitz and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 130.

¹³ Bram Dijkstra, p. 130.

¹⁴ William Carlos Williams, *William Carlos Williams Collected Poems II 1939-1962* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2002b), p. 55. and Ezra Pound, p. 130.

and abstraction was not absolute. He certainly felt that by injecting a certain concrete nature into his poems a new kind of poetry could be created, one that tapped into American speech and the American way of life and was thus more relevant for readers. However despite his assertions about his interest in the concrete, Linda Welshimer Wagner argues that he, perhaps partly because of his continual experimentation, frequently used abstractions in his poetry. She comments that he found no difficulty in this 'so long as he tied them to directly observable life'. Wagner gives the examples of two 1944 poems, 'Death' and 'To be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday', where he 'moves between concrete images and abstract statements'.¹⁵ Williams's primary concern seems to be with what Wagner refers to as 'the local' or everyday life.¹⁶ Williams's poetic centres on making poetry relevant and ensuring it contains elements of the material world.

His sense of the material is a reflection of the new wave of American industrialisation that was taking place at the time. In his introduction to *The Wedge* (1944) he asserts that 'a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words' and in 'The Poem as a Field of Action' that 'the modern poet has admitted new subject matter to his dreams—thus, the serious poet has admitted the whole armamentarium of the industrial age to his poems'.¹⁷ Poets such as Frank O'Hara would later reject this concern with 'mechanical functionalism' as industrial issues became less of a societal concern, although the interest in the material lingered in post-modern poetry and beyond.¹⁸ The poetic use of objects was of such importance to Charles Olson that he argued in his 1950 essay 'Projective Verse' that a poem was overall, 'a matter, finally of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used'.¹⁹

¹⁵ Linda Welshimer Wagner, 'William Carlos Williams: Giant', *College English*, 25 No. 6 (1964) 428.

¹⁶ Linda Welshimer Wagner, 'William Carlos Williams: Giant', *College English*, 25 No. 6 (1964) 428.

¹⁷ William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1969)256. William Carlos Williams, *The Poem as a Field of Action*, University of Washington edn, (1948) <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237854>> [accessed 01 August 2015].

¹⁸ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery, and Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 41.

¹⁹ Charles Olson, *Projective Verse*, (1950) <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237880>> [accessed 11 April 2013].

Fundamentally these objects were to be seen as objects and not through the lens of 'any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem'.²⁰

For Williams, who saw the poem as an object, there was little division between structure and content. He believed in the physical power of a triangular relationship between objects, people and ideas engendered by a combination of content and structure. Structure and content had a fundamental and interlinked relationship; he argued in his autobiography that 'it must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day'.²¹ Williams saw poems as 'mechanical objects made out of words to express a certain thing', believing that 'once the writing is on the paper it becomes an object'.²² He demonstrates this in his 1934 poem 'This is Just to Say' which is structured as an object (a note).²³ The originality of this poem lies in the simple but effective structural choice of employing a short domestic note as a poem. Poetic focus is given to the plums, 'that were in / the icebox' and that are described as 'delicious / so sweet / and so cold'. The plums do not represent anything else, they are simply plums that have been consumed; however they do act as a communicative link between the poet's persona and his wife. Both the structure of the note and the contents allow the reader to consider the nature of the relationship the poet's persona has with his wife and by extension an aspect of the reality of marriage.

Robert von Hallberg asserts that this poem is a good example of Williams's poetic approach, which favours demonstrating that human experience, especially sensory experience, requires no interpretation. For von Hallberg, the entire focus of this poem is primarily the sensory experience of the subject consuming the object - simply a poem about eating plums. Von Hallberg finds that Williams's most

²⁰ Olson.

²¹ William Carlos Williams, p. 265.

²² *Interviews with William Carlos Williams: "Speaking Straight Ahead"*, ed. by Linda W. Wagner (New York: New Directions, 1976), pp. 73 and 98.

²³ *William Carlos Williams Collected Poems Volume I 1909-1939*, ed. by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, 2nd edn, 1 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 372.

recognisable poetry is autotelic in its approach – the poem is a poem to be read and understood, the plums in the poem are plums to be eaten and enjoyed. He comments that ‘This Is Just to Say’ ‘short-circuits conventional expectations of “meaningfulness”’ because ‘[t]here are no apparent complexities or contradictions to interpret and that is just the point’ and ‘[t]he only thing that invites interpretation is the label of “poem” implied by the unjustified margin on the right’.²⁴ Certainly by structuring the poem as a brief note Williams gives the poem an autotelic aura. The materiality of the poem is highlighted. There is an interworking of content and structure and a triangular relationship between the people (Williams and his wife), the objects (the plums) and the idea (the effective communicative role of the note).

Williams verbalised the link between objects and ideas in his 1944 revision of a poem finally called ‘A Sort of a Song’ in which he first used the phrase ‘no ideas but in things’.²⁵ In the poem Williams places great emphasis on inventing and composing poems with words ‘slow and quick, sharp’.²⁶ His choice of words is instrumental in this; he refers to ‘saxifrage’ as a ‘flower that splits / the rocks’, the Latin name for this flower literally translating as ‘stone breaker’.²⁷ By using this example Williams suggests that each object or word in the poem be chosen carefully in order to explore particular ideas.

A familiar link between idea and object is found with the objects in poems that approach the concept of loss. Leontia Flynn, in her 2011 collection *Profit and Loss*, introduces objects not as abstractions or metaphors but as connectors between people who will never meet. In ‘The Dream House’, for instance, ‘balled-up tights’ and ‘Post-its’ are remnants of previous unseen and unknown occupiers. In other poems she accords objects significant poetic space such as in ‘The Floppy Disk’ or

²⁴ Robert Von Hallberg, ‘The Politics of Description: W.C Williams in the “Thirties”’, *ELH*, Vol 45, No. 1 (1978) 143.

²⁵ William Carlos Williams, p. 580.

²⁶ William Carlos Williams, *William Carlos Williams Collected Poems II 1939-1962* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2002b), p. 580.

²⁷ William Carlos Williams, *William Carlos Williams Collected Poems II 1939-1962* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2002b), p. 580.

in her long poem 'Letters to Friends'. Both of these poems dwell on the obsolescence of objects. In the latter, the emotional weight of the 'boxes of old junk' is heavy: the 'humbug wrapper' 'in between... the vital things' reminds her of the pointlessness of these saved items. They also serve to suggest the relentless technological change that has been wrought on her life. Linking objects to loss is a recurrent theme in Flynn's work. In 'My Father's Language', names are lost as Alzheimer's takes hold and '[e]verything is a thing'. The objects in this poem no longer signal loss, they themselves are lost through the lack of language. The poem highlights the struggle for people to connect when anomia takes away the ability to identify and name; the poet's persona poignantly clinging on to an increasingly defunct language at the end: '[t]he thing's not lost. No. Take this thing'.²⁸ For Flynn, language is a real connector between people.

Losing objects seems to be a compelling theme for contemporary poets Leontia Flynn and Rebecca Lindenberg. The latter delves into an exploration of lost objects in her 2012 poem 'In the Museum of Lost Objects'.²⁹ Her poem is an elegy to lost objects and by extension lost ideas and is entirely different in this aspect to the other poems discussed in this chapter. Her description of the misplaced objects in a museum is her point of entry into an examination of the relationship between herself and her partner, the poet Craig Arnold, who tragically disappeared whilst hiking in Japan. The objects in the poem are referred to as 'gone', 'hidden' or simply not in the 'empty' rooms. By asserting their lack of a material presence Lindenberg explores the connection physical objects have with the concept of cultural and personal memory. In addition to naming the objects, Lindenberg uses the physical space of the page to arrange the words in seven sentences divided into thirteen two-line stanzas; thus they appear almost as objects on shelves.

The objects Lindenberg chooses are vital to the success of the poem. She uses them to echo the importance she places on Arnold's unwritten poems which she

²⁸ Leontia Flynn, *Profit and Loss* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p. 28.

²⁹ Rebecca Lindenberg, *Love: An Index* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2012), p. 96.

imagines will be represented by 'an empty chest' that the museum curator 'has acquired'. The 'empress's bones', the 'vellum gospel' or the 'jewels' can all be readily identified as valued cultural artefacts.³⁰ By juxtaposing these objects with Arnold's unwritten poems she ensures both the value of the poem as a physical thing and the value of the poetic text. The physical space the poems would have taken is to be represented by 'an empty chest' in 'the poet's gallery' and she highlights both the physical nature and unspecified valuable ideas contained within the unwritten poems by keeping 'a few of your pieces / for my private collection'. By turning the poems into objects to be compared with 'jewels' and 'the scrolls of Alexandria' she highlights the importance of physicality.³¹ In addition Lindenberg's technique of allowing the items to be both present and absent is effective. By stating what they are she gives them a presence but by calling them 'lost objects' she removes them. The lost objects carry such weight and importance that they are equated not only with lost ideas but also with lost people. Overall, by imbuing the objects with a special almost sacred meaning Lindenberg emphasises their importance. The objects are ultimately utilised to serve as a link between Lindenberg and her exploration of the idea that something is lost when a physical object is gone.

Loss is a passive action, an imposition and something that implies lack of choice and loss of control. The objects in my work are associated with active choices and premeditated actions. Rather than exploring loss, I consider discarded or re-appropriated objects. In 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes', the toothbrush is discarded, as are the cotton buds in 'On The Way To Work'. In 'Father and Son' a tissue is appropriated for the transcribing of a poem. In 'I'm Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar' the object is first discarded before being discovered and reused. The active process involved establishes a connection between the characters in the poem and the object, and the latter becomes a conduit for communication.

³⁰ Rebecca Lindenberg, p. 96.

³¹ Rebecca Lindenberg, p. 96.

Each stanza in my poem 'On The Way To Work' contains an object that assists in determining the situation and the characters within the poem. The various items, a bridge, blanket, handbag, cotton buds, shell necklace, pavement and railings, are a mixture of public and private articles. I expect that the reader's perception of the objects in 'On The Way To Work' will affect their understanding of the character in the poem. A man 'wrapped in a blanket' under 'Elizabeth Way Bridge' is marked out as homeless. There is a sense of deprivation and impermanence associated with blankets in such a setting. The juxtaposition of private and public objects, the blanket and the bridge suggests confusion and blurring of boundaries. This effect is repeated with the 'yellow tipped cotton buds' that are 'strewn in front of him' on the pavement, on the same pavement that is later 'stained with long dark patches of urine'. By examining the situation through objects that confuse and blur the boundaries between the privacy of the home and public nature of the street. I hope to engender a physical reaction with the reference to urine and cotton buds in order to promote empathy over the distressing nature of the situation. I hope that the poem takes the concept of homelessness and starts to transform it into a feeling.

Cultural concerns associated with waste and recycling are brought to the forefront in 'I'm Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar'. The neighbour's tenacious evaluation of the contents of the bin proves to be a timely intervention that circumvents the recycling process; the object is simply reused and a new meaning is bestowed on it. Waste is an emotive subject. Recycling, although now governmental policy, started life as a grassroots movement and there is an element of the evangelical about it.³² The continuous loop of reduce, reuse, recycle has become a familiar symbol but the first two practices are so at odds with the consumer society that it is difficult for people to practise these precepts. This poem explores the idea of reuse through the

³² A series of EU directives such as the 1999/31/EC landfill directive had a significant impact on the UK. European Commission, *Waste*, http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/landfill_index.htm edn, (18 September 2015), p. 1 [accessed 25 September 2015]. Landfill waste fell from 83% in 1995 to 49% in 2011. David Baldock and others, *Report on the Influence of EU Policies on the Environment*, http://www.ieep.eu/assets/1230/Final_Report_Influence_of_EU_Policies_on_the_Environment.pdf edn,
 2015 vols (London: Institute for European Environmental Policy, 2013)iv [accessed 25 September 2015].

subject matter; the 'rows and rows / of glass jars' stand as a testament to an ongoing and dedicated practice. By the end of the poem, my poetical persona realises that the waste is being put to practical use. This in turn suggests a tinge of shame and embarrassment. These feelings are linked and juxtaposed with the similar response my poetical persona has when the neighbour is pulling items from a bin at the beginning of the poem.

For writers, reuse is a familiar concept, where language is concerned. Writers sift familiar words, reappraise and rearrange them in order to imbue them with new meanings. 'The garbage heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again', A.R. Ammons commented in a 1996 *Paris Review* interview.³³ Poets not only want their work to 'fly' but to have impact. I decided that a light-hearted approach would be most effective in this poem. In order to lend veracity to my work I researched artists' practices and visited several studios to obtain a stronger impression of the practicalities of artistic creation. The recycling and reusing of items such as jars in the day-to-day management and running of a studio is a practice that artists frequently engage in.

While the objects in the poems mentioned above are disposable, objects that are meaningful to an individual or society acquire a new level of power. This was a consideration when I composed the poem 'One, Two, Three' in which 'the ring' carries cultural weight. It is symbolic not only of a single matrimonial relationship but of all matrimonial relationships. Beyond that it refers to the wider societal expectations inherent in the nature of such relationships. The poem relies heavily on the reader's perception of rings and relationships. It is this perception that makes the poem effective. 'One, Two, Three' contains a single possession thus highlighting its importance. In addition the poem uses concision as a tool; its specific linguistic palette focuses attention on both the object and the idea in the

³³ David Lehman, 'Interviews - A. R. Ammons, the Art of Poetry no. 73', *The Paris Review*, 1996
<<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1394/the-art-of-poetry-no-73-a-r-ammons>> [accessed 27 September 2015].

poem. The ubiquitous wedding ring is a familiar cultural artefact and endowed with a shared cultural meaning. Despite this there is scope for the reader to bring their own nuanced interpretation of the ring to their reading of the poem. Without the reader's interpretation of the triangular relationship between people, objects and ideas, 'One, Two, Three' would be ineffectual.

For the New York School of Poets, especially the poets and art critics John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, a striking aim of their work was to celebrate popular culture through the placement of objects in their work.³⁴ O'Hara's work is full of objects that invite us to interpret them through our preconceptions from outside the poem. These two poets were immersed in a dialogue with their cultural surroundings and with artistic circles. Just as radical developments in the visual arts inspired and shaped the work of certain modernist poets such as Pierre Reverdy, Guillaume Apollinaire and William Carlos Williams, so too it inspired the poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Their poetry features objects which serve to contextualise their work within an economic and cultural milieu.

In Frank O'Hara's work we glimpse the object as a commodity reflecting the consumer society of the 1950s and 1960s. O'Hara's desire was to celebrate ordinary items in a context that was highly personalised. He brings objects to his poems to draw us into his cultural urban environment. The objects he uses both date and contextualise the poetry, in addition to grounding the poetry in a language that is accessible. In a considerable number of Frank O'Hara's poems we find objects that link us to a zeitgeist. In 'The Day Lady Died' O'Hara sprinkles everyday items such as 'a hamburger' and 'carton of Gauloises' into the elegy. These objects are meaningful because they are ordinary and quotidian and this works within the poem; they typify what is in essence a 'day in the life of O'Hara', a

³⁴ Mark Doty, 'The "Forbidden Planet" of Character: The Revolutions of the 1950s', in *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. by Jack Myers and David Wojahn (Southern Illinois University: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), pp. 131-157.

quite ordinary day in which, however, he heard the unexpected and upsetting news that Billie Holiday had died.

Everyday objects are integral to the themes of O'Hara's poems, providing depth and complexity through their cultural dimensions. In 'Interior (With Jane)', one of several poems written to and inspired by the painter Jane Freilicher, he examines the role of objects, stating that they can 'be what we are afraid to do'; they 'cannot help but move us'.³⁵ He gives as examples 'a can of coffee, a 35c ear / ring, a handful of hair'.³⁶ These objects are more than just physical entities. They represent the complex facets of human existence: the mundane, the tawdry and the personal. The human perception of these objects takes on a pronounced significance, the objects become symbols; they speak of and represent our sensitivities and worldview.

The objects in this poem are given centre stage quite literally as they appear in the centre of the poem where the eye is drawn to them. He begins the poem with a rather grand statement about 'the eagerness of objects to / be what we are afraid to do', misleading the reader into adopting high expectations as to the nature of these objects before finally teasing the reader with the banality of the actual items. They are physical examples of the triviality of human life but it is because they are the 'really stupid things' like 'a can of coffee, a 35c ear / ring, a handful of hair' that they 'cannot help but move us'. Generally O'Hara's use of objects is relaxed, enthusiastic and celebratory although nonetheless meaningful. In his 1950 poem 'Today' he excitedly rejoices in a plethora of objects, claiming that '[t]hey/do have meaning'.³⁷

Here the objects become the subject of the poem but their importance is regulated by human interaction with them. 'Kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas' are fun and

³⁵ Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Donald Allen (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p. 21.

³⁶ Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems*, p. 21.

³⁷ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 15.

joyous. The jumbling together of 'pearls / harmonicas, jububes, aspirins', mixes expensive, exotic objects with mundane, inexpensive, quotidian objects. Like life itself, this line is a mixture of the rare, the fun and the everyday. The poem serves more than one function: it suggests that these objects have an integral importance and so have a right to be used as poetic material. Furthermore it asserts that it is the assortment of ephemeral, insignificant and perhaps weird objects that truly represent our lives.

It is in this spirit that I incorporate an array of objects in my work. The objects work to contextualise the poems and create a solid link between the concepts and characters. The ring in 'One, Two, Three' draws on this last idea. The poem shares certain characteristics with poetry written between the 1910s and 1960s such as the focus on an object, the connection between objects, people and ideas and the significance of real, everyday objects. It is also, however, partly at odds with those developments. 'One, Two, Three', whilst highlighting the importance of the object, relies heavily on the need for reader preconception. It does adhere to Olson's idea that the poem has an energy that derives from the object within the poem, something Olson referred to as the 'kinetics of the thing', the 'thing' being both the poem and the thing inside the poem.³⁸ 'One, Two, Three' is energised entirely by the ring. I would suggest that the fundamental importance given to the object in this poem is a legacy of the innovative and creative work produced by Imagists, Objectivists and Post-Modern poets. These poets highlighted the importance of using objects in an unsentimental way and drew attention to the importance of allowing the object to play a primary role in the poem. Allowing the object to engender an emotional response is not to imbue it with unwarranted sentimentality.

In my poem 'Father and Son', I work to engender an emotional response through the objects. The engagement with the objects is achieved by linking them to the

³⁸ Charles Olson, *Projective Verse*, (1950) <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237880>> [accessed 11 April 2013].

self. It is this connection that invites the reader to participate in a dialogue with the poem, the objects within it, the poet and themselves; and fundamentally this dialogue is what I seek to develop and achieve in my work. Several objects feature in this poem; all are entangled in a relationship between the poet's persona and the unborn child. Images are repeated in the two stanzas: the 'packet of tissues' echoes the 'tissue-wrapped flowers' in the paintings; and the concept of an object within an object is repeated from the flowers in a painting to a poem on a tissue. While writing this poem, I paused to research tissues in more detail, as I wanted to draw attention to this commonplace object and elevate it within the poem in order to identify it more closely with the paintings. The intention behind the inclusion of precise proportions was twofold: to draw attention to the functionality of the object and to accord it poetic space and thus more validity than it might otherwise garner. Transforming a disposable item into something that carries emotional significance separates the object from its mass-produced counterparts. In addition disposable items are often valued for their specific functionality so by changing their role within the poem I have the opportunity to highlight a different aspect of them.

Specific place and time is a key aspect of my poetry demonstrated through the lexicon and the setting. The ekphrastic poems in particular such as 'Father and Son' and 'Morandi's Unremarkable Paintings' refer to actual art galleries and museums. As a writer I frequent museums and art galleries, regularly finding that they provide a source of inspiration and encourage creativity. Meeting with other writers in Cambridge museums has resulted in the composition of several poems, such as 'Father and Son'. In the various rewrites of the poem I examined the relationship between the narrator and the painting and returned several times to the gallery in order to seek inspiration for the direction of the poem.

Researchers in museum studies have found that objects in museums are particularly potent material for visitors. Gatewood and Cameron's 2004 study of 'numinous experiences' in museums led to Kiersten Latham's 2013 detailed

exploration into visitor reactions to museum objects. Latham concluded that visitor experiences were 'dynamic, transactive' and 'holistic' due to the 'transaction between object, viewer, and environment', describing the entire experience as a 'deep state of knowledge that is felt integrally as both emotion and intellect'.³⁹ Museum object writing workshop organisers Nikki Clayton and Mark Goodwin have explored 'the poetic triangle of objects, people and writing creatively' and found that a simple relationship exists: 'the triangle (or equation) of object-emotion-poem'.⁴⁰ Their experience has given them significant evidence that 'the poetic triangle of objects, people and writing creatively can provide the means to enable lay people to access and experience the depths of hidden meanings in the relationships between people and objects'.⁴¹

Using objects within poems is an essential part of my poetic. This poetic is founded on the belief that poetry should be accessible, concrete, demonstrate a tendency to concision, follow quotidian speech patterns and be relevant to the reader. Using familiar objects and allowing the reader to connect with the objects through the poem helps to fulfil these objectives. These poems follow in the tradition of twentieth-century poets such as William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara who also championed the validity of placing objects at the centre of poems. Using Ezra Pound's rallying cry to give consideration to the 'direct treatment of the thing', Charles Olson's idea that content should be 'objects' or 'things' and Frank O'Hara's belief that quotidian objects 'do have meaning', I have allowed material objects to both inspire and fill my poems.⁴² By rendering impersonal ubiquitous objects into personal items, I offer up a poetic concern about the continual and prolific waste our consumer society causes. By recycling these items into poetry, I give the objects a new lease of life in the imagination.

³⁹ Kiersten F. Latham, 'Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects', *Visitor Studies*, 16 (2013) 16.

⁴⁰ Nikki Clayton and Mark Goodwin, 'The Poetic Triangle of Objects, People and Writing Creatively. using Museum Collections to Inspire Linguistic Creativity and Poetic Understanding', in *The Thing about Museums Objects and Experience, Representation and Contestation*, ed. by Sandra Dudley and others (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 194.

⁴¹ Nikki Clayton and Mark Goodwin, p. 195.

⁴² Ezra Pound.

Although many contemporary poets demonstrate a familiarity with these ideas, most do not accord disposable, mass-produced objects significant poetic space. By contrast, I do, drawing attention to the presence of these quotidian objects by using them to forge dynamic relationships between characters. In my work objects that are often considered irrelevant or lacking in emotional value are given new meaning. Often appropriated, repositioned or reconsidered, they play a valuable part in the observation of a relationship between people. Objects featured within my poems validate their meaningfulness by inclusion, demonstrate that they are essential to the poem and above all that they enrich the reader's exploration of ideas through particular human-object relationships. This exploration of the relationship between people, ideas and quotidian objects is at the heart of my work.

Chapter 4

Saying it as it is: the role of quotidian speech and language

The employment of quotidian speech and language is a virtually ubiquitous facet of contemporary British poetry. The notion of 'anti-poetic' has become antiquated; the battle for the inclusion of non-traditional material was fought and won in the early twentieth century. Its current use is due to prevailing fashions for accessibility, reality, diversity and a sense that anything goes. In contemporary poetry quotidian language appears in different guises depending on the style of poem and subject matter. While it may account for the entirety of a poem it is as likely to appear as interjected vocabulary, phrases or sentences. It is often utilised to influence the sounds or rhythms within the poem, inducting the reader in a particular auditory environment. It can allow the poet to play with the idea of specificity, simplicity, intimacy or immediacy. This chapter will examine these features in more detail and argue that the use of quotidian speech and language is both a democratic move and a search for realism. It will argue that poetic speech is imitative rather than actual speech. It will conclude with an examination of the essential part the poet's lexicon plays in the role of democratisation and contextualisation of their poetry. Reference will be made to my own work in addition to two American poets, William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara, and five British poets: Stevie Smith, Carol Ann Duffy, Fleur Adcock, Hugo Williams and Tom Leonard.

Representing actual speech is fraught with problems. A transcript of a conversation would make dull reading without the non-verbal clues and responses that we are programmed to look for. Poets have a tendency to imitate actual speech rather than reproduce it. They do this primarily through structure, vocabulary and sentence construction although the final results vary widely. For

example, Frank O'Hara achieved a fluent conversational style through the structure of his poems. In contrast, Tom Leonard employs a phonocentric approach in order to highlight the oral nature of language. My work follows in the footsteps of O'Hara's remarkably accessible work. Just as in O'Hara's poetry, the speech that appears in my work is not a transcript of actual speech, rather it employs elements from dialogue, speech rhythms, grammatical structures and vocabulary choices to give a sense of quotidian speech. The following paragraphs will explore the nature of this speech in reference to lexicons, grammar and cadence.

Firstly, vocabulary is a key component in the portrayal of quotidian speech. It can denote a connection with an environment, it contemporises work, it specifies a familiarity with a particular lexicon and it indicates key themes. A poem that exemplifies these four aspects is 'Proletarian Portrait' by William Carlos Williams. Williams's microcosmic approach hones in on a particular moment in the life of a specific woman and manages to represent the macrocosm of the suffering of the working class in the 1930s' depression. Just as with his other portrait 'To A Poor Old Woman' found in *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935), 'Proletarian Portrait' zooms in on a seemingly trivial moment. By giving the subject poetic space it accords it relevance and importance. Williams's interest in the lives of ordinary people was a direct response to the sights he witnessed in his role as a physician working in Rutherford. Perhaps the most painful poem to come out of his job was 'The Raper of Passenack' which rather than painting a portrait of the victim's physical condition depicts inner fears. In these concise poems each word earns its place in the poem. In 'Proletarian Portrait' the 'big young bareheaded woman' is contextualised in her urban environment. Williams thus provides both a portrait of the woman and of the struggling working class. Williams draws attention to the idea of a portrait that he posits in the title by focusing on specific physical details within the poem. He builds a physical description of her: she is 'bareheaded', 'hair slicked back', with a 'stockinged foot'. Additionally, the world in which we observe her is starkly physical, she is wearing an apron, standing on the

'sidewalk', and the vocabulary is concrete and real - 'shoe in hand' she is examining the 'paper insole' and 'nail'. The use of the present participles of 'standing', 'toeing' and 'looking' at the end of the third, fifth and seventh lines, infuses the poem with an interesting mixture of action and inaction. This reinforces the concept of a portrait but suggests it is capturing a woman mid-movement rather than in a static position. In 'Matching', a poem similar to the extent that it is also a miniature portrait, I return to the idea posited in the title by recycling and expanding on the language with 'tiny, striped socks', 'blue and white', 'matching stripes' and 'not a stripe in sight'. The poem is focused on the single image of a mother, baby and child but it also represents wider social issues of parenting and the sense of losing control over a child who is establishing independence.

I have a particular interest in employing the use of everyday language and to some extent Williams's poem misses this. For example, it is perhaps questionable whether the girl would describe herself as one of the 'proletariat'. It is a poem written from an outsider's perspective. Although within the same collection Williams does experiment with the use of everyday language such as in the short poem 'You have pissed your life away' and in 'A Poem for Norman Macleod' where the phrase 'no bull' recurs. Interestingly, despite the subject matter of many of his poems, everyday language is not as common as might be expected. However, his use of ordinary subject matter combined with clear, concise language is particularly effective at portraying ordinariness.

Language has a unique power to either convince a reader of familiarity with, or induct a reader into the vocabulary and grammatical structures of a particular subculture or group. Two poets who have influenced my work in this respect have been Philip Larkin and Fleur Adcock. Philip Larkin first caught my attention with his use of expletives in 'This Be The Verse' but it was in 'Poetry of Departures' that I developed an appreciation of how he juxtaposes informal language such as slang words with language articulating the specific items or people that the slang represents. In 'Poetry of Departures' Larkin sets slang words such as 'junk' and

'bastard' that are to some extent the antithesis of articulation alongside erudite language such as 'audacious, purifying. / Elemental move'. With the word 'junk' he flanks it with specific vocabulary that expands and explains it: 'specially-chosen junk, / The good books, the good bed'.¹ In addition he employs idiomatic utterances such as: '[h]e chucked up everything / And just cleared off'. Larkin expands on this with the lines '[w]e all hate home / And having to be there'.² Larkin both demonstrates his familiarity with this mainstream slang and unpicks it, demonstrating how to use it eloquently. In doing so he challenges what might be termed the linguistic ghettos that slang inducts us into. Larkin embedded speech within the poems without the use of speech marks. However, he draws attention to it as speech with a number of techniques which include the use of a different tone and vocabulary. In addition, he manages the reader's expectations by setting up the poem with the first line '[s]ometimes you hear, fifth-hand / as epitaph'.³ I am drawn to the idea of taking speech directly from real-life situations and poems in my collection. 'Phil' and 'Fribble' do just that, taking inspiration from conversations and revolving around actual utterances. In 'Phil' the language of the protagonist is informal, 'see you at the party', 'will there be hot girls there? / Cool chicks...Hot chicks', and to some extent the quirky 'I'm geographically single'. The utterances are clearly defined as separate from my poetic persona through the use of speech marks.

Fleur Adcock demonstrates a particular interest in the flexible and ever transforming nature of language. In her anti-sentimental poem 'At the Crossing' she wonders at the fluidity of language: '[d]o they say gay?'; 'Do they say foreign?'; of some things she is certain: '[t]hey say young. / They say London. Grab it, they say'.⁴ The employment of contemporary language plays a role in Adcock's poetic positioning of herself as a contemporary relevant poet as she is able to demonstrate her engagement with key issues. This is evident in poems such as

¹ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite, 2nd edn (London; Toronto: Faber & Faber, 2003) p. 65.

² Philip Larkin, p. 65.

³ Philip Larkin, p. 65.

⁴ Fleur Adcock, *Glass Wings* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2013), p. 9.

'Smokers for Celibacy' where she outlines all the reasons why sex is far more dangerous than smoking by using specific terminology such as the names of diseases. She ends the poem with the line '[j]ust give us a fag' which employs an informal reference to cigarettes.⁵ She employs technologically current words such as 'googling' in 'Match Girl' and 'Skype' in 'Alumnae Notes' to demonstrate a familiarity with current communication techniques and thereby open herself up to a wider audience. Language, in particular the lexicon of technology, carries with it a particular time stamp. This is an area that I find drawn to in my poetry. I employ a contemporary lexicon with 'pixelated windows' in 'First Communion', the hash tag in 'I am reading' or the text message in '160 Characters Remaining'. This sets the poem within a contemporary context, thus drawing in readers by using a language familiar to them. These are all words that have become common parlance in the last twenty years. Other words such as 'batteries' in the poem of the same name, 'post-it' notes in 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle', the 'fridge' in 'Staying in', or the plastic toothbrushes in 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' all point to the twentieth century. Some of this lexicon is used to draw links with pioneering poetry such as the 'line of marching / electricity pylons' and the 'buzzing black wire' in 'Washing Line' which refers back to Stephen Spender's 'The Pylons': '[n]ow over these small hills, they have built the concrete / That trails black wire / Pylons, those pillars / Bare like nude giant girls that have no secret'. These words both contextualise the poem within a time frame and contribute to the construction of a plausible quotidian sound, which is entirely due to their frequent use in the real world. In a similar vein, Hugo Williams's self-described 'middlebrow', matter-of-fact and accessible work utilises quotidian vocabulary to root his poem in the everyday world.⁶ He uses words such as the 'white plastic chairs' in 'After the Writing Course', the bus in 'My Chances' and the 'sponge-bag' in 'Among the

⁵ Fleur Adcock, *The Incident Book in Poems 1960-2000*, (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), pp. 215-216.

⁶ Hugo Williams. Dir. Poetry East. Poetry East at The London Buddhist Centre. 2014
<<http://www.poetryeast.net/News/hugowilliams-1>> [accessed 04 April 2015].

Combs'.⁷ 'Keep it simple and make it visual', he asserts in his 2000 essay 'Leaping not Blabbing'.⁸

Specificity is a key aspect of quotidian language; reality is nothing if not specific. In this collection specific times and places can be noticed. In 'On the way to work' the days of the week and times of seeing the homeless man are recorded. In this instance such detail gives a sense of reality and pertinence and also evokes comment on the relationship between the two characters in the poem and on a contemporary cultural reverence for data and structure. Reference to specific urban environments in the form of place or street names is a recent phenomenon in contemporary British poetry. At the turn of the century it was notably lacking although some poets like John Betjeman had always championed it.⁹ Naming real places such as 'De Freville Avenue' in 'The Walk' and 'Elizabeth Way Bridge' in 'On The Way To Work' echoes the specificity of life itself. Rather than approaching an observation in a general way, specificity enables the observation to be humanised and contextualised.

Secondly, grammatical structures play a key role. Many of the sentences used in my poems are grammatically correct and not dissimilar from sentences found in prose. However spoken English is often ungrammatical or incomplete and this makes an appearance in my poems, for instance the ungrammatical sentence that makes up the second stanza in 'Batteries':

Testament to her mother's time,
in the outhouse,
cobwebbed,
a meat safe, chamber pot and mangle

⁷ Hugo Williams, pp. 240, 248 and 257.

⁸ Hugo Williams, 'Leaping Versus Blabbing', in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, 2012 edn (Tarsnet: Bloodaxe Books, 2002a), p. 229.

⁹ Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

Although not a natural utterance, this draws on ungrammatical elements often found in spoken English. It plays on the perception that spoken language is inherently less formal than written language. While much of the poem mimics typical straightforward prose, this section subverts that idea, drawing attention to the words, freezing them in time and space and thus accentuating their role within the poem.

The third and final aspect of the use of quotidian speech is the portrayal of particular speech rhythms, which is often achieved through dialogue, grammar and the arrangement of the words on the page. This allows the reader to access a distinct sound. This was a topic that concerned William Carlos Williams from the 1920s onwards and manifested itself in poetry that paid close attention to the rhythm, speed and content of American speech. Williams commented that '[f]rom the beginning I knew that the American language must shape the pattern [of the poem]; later I rejected the word language and spoke of the American idiom – this was a better word than language, less academic, more identified with speech'.¹⁰ It was, in his own words: 'a language which has a rhythmical structure' that 'has not been taught to us in schools'.¹¹ His 1923 collection of prose and poetry, *Spring and All*, makes a leap forward in his demonstration of colloquial speech rhythms. Careful enjambments ensure a distinctive poetic voice and his use of colloquialisms, such as in 'XVII. Shoot it Jimmy!' where he uses sentences such as '[m]an / gimme the key / and lemme loose -/ I make 'em crazy', gives the work a definite American tone.¹² Williams later commented that: 'I let form take care of itself; the colloquial language, my own language, set the pace'.¹³ Williams was a democratizing modernist, his poetry was part of a reaction to nineteenth-century poetic material that shied away from a gritty and down-to-earth reality. The

¹⁰ William Carlos Williams, p. 65.

¹¹ Letter to Henry Wills (1955) in John C. Thirlwall, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 346.

¹² A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, p. 216.

¹³ William Carlos Williams, p. 73.

language he employs is often specific, economical, colloquial and anti-poetic and he felt it was 'language modified by *our* environment; the American environment'.¹⁴

I have a particular interest in inserting quotidian dialogue into my work. This direct speech serves to distinguish between the voices in poems, distancing my poetic persona from the language I am examining. It is effective in promoting the sense of immediacy that is engendered by real life conversations and reflects the informality of speech in contemporary society. This informality is a result of changing fashions, and in addition to being found in normal daily interactions, it is depicted, portrayed and propagated to a widespread audience through television and other media. Several of my poems contain snippets of dialogue such as 'see you at the party' in 'Phil' and 'more to come' and idiomatic speech such as 'no time to lose' in 'Feminist Knitting Agenda'. It is the ubiquitous everyday sound rather than any remarkability or noteworthiness that leads me to use them in the poems. To keep a lightness and conversational tone I frequently employ contractions, for example, 'couldn't' and 'you'd' in 'Keeping Birds' and 'Problem Solving' respectively. Embedding contractions in the poetic text associates it with oral and informal language. In '160 Characters Remaining' I use non-fluency features of speech such as the 'silent pause' at the end of 'for the evacuations...' and the repetition of the pronoun in 'Your your m mum...'. Repetition of words at the start of a sentence typically demonstrates that the speaker is uncertain about what they will say; here the emotion the father feels is portrayed through his inability to speak.

The following part of this chapter will explore the structural techniques, the inspiration behind the use of speech and the ultimate purpose in employing it. It is useful to understand the context of quotidian speech patterns within contemporary poetry, which primarily reaches back to the late eighteenth-century and a democratic move by William Wordsworth. He explored 'fitting to metrical

¹⁴ Stanley Koehler, 'Interviews, William Carlos Williams, the Art of Poetry no. 6', *Paris Review*, 1964
<<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4486/the-art-of-poetry-no-6-william-carlos-williams>> [accessed 28 February 2015].

arrangement a selection of the real language of men' in his and Coleridge's 1798 collection *Lyrical Ballads*.¹⁵ This collection caused a notable reaction by introducing sounds and noises that many thought had no place in literature such as '[b]urr, burr--now Johnny's lips they burr' in 'The Idiot Boy'.¹⁶ At the same time Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his so-called 'Conversation Poems', exploring idiomatic and natural sounding speech in blank verse. Half a century later in America, Walt Whitman utilised both quotidian speech and subject matter in his brand of democratic poetry in his continually revised and expanded collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855-91). In the wake of this an Anglo-American poetic dialogue concerning the role of quotidian language developed.

By the beginning of the twentieth century it was far more usual to employ regular speech patterns in poetry. The Imagists set out to 'use the language of common speech' while T.S. Eliot stated '[a] poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him', and that for the poet '[t]he music of poetry, then, will be a music latent in the common speech of his time'.¹⁷ In his 1922 poem, *The Waste Land*, we hear, amid the cacophony of voices, traces from the music halls alongside elements from literature, the newspapers and the financial world. Other early twentieth-century poets such as Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen and Stevie Smith utilised everyday language to great effect. However my primary interest in quotidian speech rhythms, dialogue, idiomatic speech and vocabulary owes much to William Carlos Williams. He developed Whitman's idea of a democratic poetry and was particularly concerned with utilizing and portraying the 'American idiom'. He felt American poetry needed to react against the stultifying English forms and rhythms that were so different from the language he heard around him.¹⁸ In his short poem 'Question and Answer' he questions the

¹⁵ Wordsworth's preface of 1800 in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1963), p. 235.

¹⁶ Kenneth Hayne, *English Literature and Ancient Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 65.

¹⁷ Richard Aldington and others, *Some Imagist Poets* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1915) <<http://library.brown.edu/pdfs/1331579015396431.pdf>> [accessed 04 April 2015]. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 262. Donald Hall, 'T. S. Eliot, the Art of Poetry no. 1', *The Paris Review*, 1959 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4738/the-art-of-poetry-no-1-t-s-eliot>> [accessed 02 March 2013].

¹⁸ William Carlos Williams, p. 402.

validity of American literature in terms of its connection to everyday life: '[w]hat's wrong with American literature? / You ask me? How much do I get?'¹⁹ His belief that the sounds and words of everyday idiomatic speech should be incorporated into poetry has influenced a variety of poets including Frank O'Hara, Carol Ann Duffy, Fleur Adcock, Hugo Williams and Tom Leonard.

Williams was a significant influence on Allen Ginsberg who like the other the Beat Poets permanently altered the accepted definition of literature with his bold, garish and expletive language in the 1950s and 1960s. Ginsberg, who entered into an exchange of letters with Williams, commented that Williams 'was trying to adapt his poetry rhythms out of the actual talk-rhythms' and that he decided to follow suit by taking 'four-or-five line fragments [of prose] that were absolutely accurate to somebody's speak-talk-thinking and rearranged them in lines, according to the breath'.²⁰ In a similar vein to Williams's 'Question and Answer' poem Ginsberg argued against the 'hypocrisy of literature' because it was 'supposed to be different from—in subject, in diction and even in organization, from our quotidian inspired lives'.²¹ He felt that 'there should be no distinction between what we write down, and what we really know'.²² This idea is now embedded in many poets' practice. More recently in 2009 Fleur Adcock commented in an *Oxford Poetry* interview: 'I try to write as if I'm speaking to someone, addressing someone in an informal way, in a room or in a natural situation'.²³

Adcock's concern to link poetry with every day concerns shows her most recent work exploring dementia, the walking stick she tries out 'on the pharmacy carpet', the worry of losing language in 'Nominal Aphasia' and the sister 'younger than me'

¹⁹ A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, p. 321.

²⁰ Allen Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*, ed. by David Carter (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 268-269.

²¹ Thomas Clark, 'Allen Ginsberg, the Art of Poetry no. 8', *Paris Review*, 1966
<<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4389/the-art-of-poetry-no-8-allen-ginsberg>> [accessed 25 February 2015].

²² Thomas Clark.

²³ Sarah Dence and Mark Wormald, 'An Interview with Fleur Adcock', *Oxford Poetry*, III.3
<http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/interviews.php?int=iii3_fleuradcock> [accessed 04 April 2015].

with osteoporosis. Exploring familiar, culturally relevant topics is a key aspect of my work. In 'Matching' and 'The Walk' I explore parenting choices and life choices in 'In Bottisham', 'The Knitting Project' and 'An Illustrated Obituary'. Adcock voices concerns although she often aims to keep a poem lighter than its topic would suggest it should be. 'Things', for instance, starts with a light-hearted platitude: '[t]here are worse things than having behaved foolishly in public'. But the poem gradually changes in tone as 'the worse things come stalking in' and the ending is humorously dark as they 'stand icily about the bed looking worse and worse and worse'.²⁴ Of 'Things' she wrote: 'I thought other people would recognise the sentiments'.²⁵ 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' performs in a similar way using humour to deflect attention from and modify the serious issue underlying it. Adcock uses familiar meters to present her material arguing that to do so the poet has 'to be able to conceal the formality, make it sound as though it's natural utterance'.²⁶ I approach my work from a different angle, relying on speech rhythms to mould and shape my work. The sentiment behind Adcock's work is akin to my work. She argues that poetry should not be about 'large meaningless concepts'.²⁷ Rather '[a]rt is whatever you choose to frame'.²⁸ My collection demonstrates just that, most of the poems focus on quite minute and seemingly trivial ideas which I expand into substantial ideas.

Carol Ann Duffy commented in an interview in 2009 that you 'can find poetry in your everyday life, your memory, in what people say on the bus'.²⁹ She has been dubbed a populist poet partly because of her work, which tends to be lyrical and accessible, and catches the 'music of the quotidian'. She talks of putting the everyday into her poetry and tries to think of new ways to promote it to 'the

²⁴ Fleur Adcock, p. 287.

²⁵ *Poem for the Day Two*, ed. by Retta Bowen and others (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), p. 364.

²⁶ Sarah Dence and Mark Wormald.

²⁷ Fleur Adcock, pp. 137-138.

²⁸ Fleur Adcock, *Poems, 1960-2000* (London: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), pp. 157-158.

²⁹ 'Carol Ann Duffy: "Poetry is in Your Everyday Life, Your Memory, in what People Say on the Bus.. Or just what's in Your Heart"', *The Mirror*, 2009 <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/carol-ann-duffy-poetry-is-in-your-391635>> [accessed 27 October 2015].

Facebook generation' in statements such as a 'poem is a form of texting'.³⁰ Certainly in poems such as 'The Falling Soldier', a poem about Robert Capa's famous war photograph in her latest collection *The Bees* (2011), she employs words and phrases such as: 'kip in the sun', 'arse', 'breakdance to amuse your mates' and 'a rock 'n' roll mime, Elvis time / pretending the rifle's / just a guitar'. A jaunty and familiar approach led one reviewer to describe it as 'an Irish jig' but her appeal to a younger audience is undoubted.³¹ Her unexpectedly playful language opens up new possibilities for understanding the subject of the poem. There is a pedagogical element to her work which is apparent in the subjects she chooses to write about. In poems like 'The Falling Solider' she appears to be using informal, fun language in order to engage a youthful audience. Her established place on the school syllabus for many years perhaps affected this.

While my poetry utilises speech rhythms and informal everyday language, I do reject the phonocentric approach that wholeheartedly gives orality centre stage because there is a tendency to produce poetry that is hard to engage with. Poets who employ regional dialects within their work such as Tom Leonard have influenced me to some extent as I realise that I align myself with what might termed a standard dialect rather than a regional form of English and wish to portray that in my work. Leonard began experimenting with colloquial dialogue in the 1980s and 1990s. He is known for employing an urban Glaswegian dialect in his work. Leonard describes his poetry as 'phonetic work' rather than 'Scots', thereby distancing himself from a nationalistic identification and demanding that

³⁰ Eavan Boland, 'Book Review - between the Me and the Mass: 'Mean Time' - Carol Ann Duffy: Anvil, 6.95 Pounds', *The Independent*, 1993 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review--between-the-me-and-the-mass-mean-time--carol-ann-duffy-anvil-695-pounds-1487148.html>> [accessed 18 March 2015]. Liz Lochhead, 'The Bees by Carol Ann Duffy - Review', *The Guardian*, 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/04/bees-carol-ann-duffy-review>> [accessed 17 March 2015]. 'Carol Ann Duffy: "Poetry is in Your Everyday Life, Your Memory, in what People Say on the Bus .. Or just what's in Your Heart"', 'Carol Ann Duffy: "Poetry is in Your Everyday Life, Your Memory, in what People Say on the Bus .. Or just what's in Your Heart"', *The Mirror*, 2009 <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/carol-ann-duffy-poetry-is-in-your-391635>> [accessed 27 October 2015]. Joanna Moorhead, 'Carol Ann Duffy: 'Poems are a Form of Texting'', *The Guardian*, 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/sep/05/carol-ann-duffy-poetry-texting-competition?CMP=tw_t_gu> [accessed 03 May 2015].

³¹ William Logan, 'Sunday Book Review: Heart's Desire 'Rapture' and 'The Bees,' by Carol Ann Duffy', *New York Times*, 2013 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/books/review/rapture-and-the-bees-by-carol-ann-duffy.html>> [accessed 04 May 2015].

his work is seen as a 'personal articulation'.³² His work is a powerful induction into a very particular aural background. By pioneering work like this he opened up the possibilities for poets by demonstrating that their voice and their version of the English language is as valid as any other form. Leonard argues that 'what people should realise is that whoever they are, they own the language that they speak and that the culture they are a part of and their own experiences is no less important than anybody else's and that therefore it is material for art'.³³ A disheartening result of utilizing colloquial speech or dialect in this way is that the poetry lacks widespread accessibility; the reader is required to make a significant effort to understand the poem unless they are already familiar with the dialect or the vocabulary.

Portraying reality speaks of the poet's milieu. Unlike Williams my collection does not attempt to capture anything as broad as a universal 'British idiom'. Instead in the style of Stevie Smith I focus on portraying my own familiar audial environment. As with the subject matter, my speech patterns and vocabulary are a result of my own particular context and environment; labels such as British, female, middle-class, university-educated, southeast accent might apply to contextualise my voice. A myriad of other elements such as my life choices, my profession and my home life might serve to explain the poetic content. My own complex combination of life experience and interpretations informs and shapes my work and allows my life and my speech to become, in the words of Tom Leonard, 'material for art'.³⁴ This articulation is presented to the reader through the use of: dialogue, grammatical (or ungrammatical) construction and lineation.

Stevie Smith was particularly adept at incorporating particular and disparate aural elements to create a unique auditory environment. Her distinctive style spanned

³² Tom Leonard, *Journal 2014-2009 - June 24th 2014*, <http://www.tomleonard.co.uk> edn, 2015 vols (2014), p. 1 [accessed 17/03/2015].

³³ *Tom Leonard on Language and Social Status. Tom Leonard on Language and Social Status*, BBC 2. 1998 <<http://www.tomleonard.co.uk/main-publications/intimate-voices/the-six-oclock-news.html>> [accessed 17 March 2015].

³⁴ *Tom Leonard on Language and Social Status. Tom Leonard on Language and Social Status*, BBC 2. 1998 <<http://www.tomleonard.co.uk/main-publications/intimate-voices/the-six-oclock-news.html>> [accessed 17 March 2015].

five decades and irreverently combined aural snippets from her world including church newsletters, hymns, music hall numbers, nursery rhymes and casual fragments of conversation. This amalgamation effectively captures her genteel suburban auditory environment. There is a beguiling innocence in her choice of language and topic which she highlights through her playful auditory approach. Much of her work has endearing song like couplets inserted into it and several of her poems consist of a single couplet. 'My Hat' being one good example: 'Mother said if I wore this hat / I should be certain to get off with the right sort of chap'.³⁵ Some of her poems follow consistent rhyming patterns such as 'Sea Widow' while in other poems she mixes rhymes with unrhymed lines shifting the tone and music of the poems. This is noticeable in poems such as 'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock' or 'The Frog Prince'. Her idiosyncratic voice takes a prominent role in her work and is noticeable both on the page and in her audio recordings. Many of her pieces are collages of sound almost like audio scrapbooks.

Following this practice the poems in my collection incorporate familiar phrases. While this consists primarily of aspects of internal monologues such as in 'Mixed Tape' and 'Craxton's Paintings, it also takes the form of extracts from publications, handwritten notes and conversations such as in 'An Illustrated Obituary', 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' and 'Fribble'. These poems do not simply incorporate aural elements; they seek to convert personal and subjective experience into compelling poetry. Frank O'Hara was particularly adept at doing this, commenting that he was 'mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it'.³⁶ In his bid to represent his own reality, his 1964 collection *Lunch Poems* contains poems that have a sense of immediacy and spontaneity about them. Many of them consist of long meandering sentences with a distinctive orality. Aiming to 'bring forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial', he includes names of friends, places and events with phrasing derived from conversational speech

³⁵ Stevie Smith, *Selected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (London: Penguin Books, 1975 (reprinted 2002)), pp. 176-177.

³⁶ *The New American Poetry*, ed. by Donald Allen (New York; London: Grove Press; Evergreen Books, 1960), pp. 419-420.

patterns thus giving much of his work a characteristic easy conversational style.³⁷ He aptly identified the collection as 'I do this, I do that poems'.

For Frank O'Hara immediacy was a key component of the reality of a compelling conversational style, something he notes in his mock manifesto 'Personism' where he says, '[w]hile I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem'.³⁸ By questioning the efficiency of poetry as an effective form of communication and simultaneously suggesting that poetry should be as real and immediate as a telephone conversation, he draws the reader's attention to the role spontaneity plays in the nature of speech. In O'Hara's excited first person monologue, 'Having a Coke with You', he juxtaposes urbane, cosmopolitan experiences with the all American experience of 'having a Coke'. He references exclusive, expensive places in Spain and France, 'San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, / Biarritz, Bayonne' and demonstrates his sophisticated knowledge of art with references to old masters such as Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo in addition to the more modern sculptor Marino Marini.³⁹ By asserting that 'having a Coke' with someone you like 'is even more fun' than these sophisticated pleasures, O'Hara roots the poem, albeit ironically, in a ubiquitous American image.⁴⁰ The title draws on the widespread image perpetuated through advertising that Coke was a fun thing to have, an idea that was succinctly captured in the later 1966 advertising campaign that 'things go better with Coke'.⁴¹ Coca-Cola was one visual symbol of the American lifestyle and by tapping into a fun, modern and above all American experience and comparing it to sophisticated European experiences O'Hara light-heartedly and perhaps critically draws on and questions the consumerist culture of his environment. This is not the only poem in which the drink appears; in 'A Step Away from Them' he mentions it by name.⁴²

³⁷ *The New American Poetry*, pp. 419-420.

³⁸ F. O'Hara, 'Personism: A Manifesto', in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 498-499.

³⁹ Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Donald Allen (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 175-176.

⁴⁰ Frank O'Hara, pp. 175-176.

⁴¹ Coca-Cola, 1966 *Things Go Better with Coke U.S. Ad*, <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/press-center/image-library/1966-things-go-better-with-coke-us-ad> edn, (2015) [accessed 28 February 2015].

⁴² Frank O'Hara, pp. 110-111.

The use of the familiar diminutive in these poems contributes to the light-hearted approach.

Frank O'Hara injected a sense of the immediacy of conversational speech by creating his own rhythms inspired by quotidian speech. He achieved this not through utilising dialogue but primarily through the structure of the poems. He employed long unpunctuated sentences; jumped from thought to thought in a seemingly artless manner, made informal and familiar references to people, places and ideas and slipped everyday words into sentences with weightier cultural references. His use of enjambments to break up his long, often unpunctuated sentences, usually allow the reader to pause for breath in such a way as to catch the intonation of the piece. In 'Having a Coke with You' he energetically jumps from the title straight into the poem with the first line 'is even more fun that going to San Sebastian'. He invites the reader into his intimate friendship circle in poems such as 'Why I Am Not a Painter' where he compares a shared philosophy found in his poetry and Mike Goldberg's painting. In addition his humorous confidence in his work gives us the sense he is sharing a huge joke with us. As the sun tells him in 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island', 'You may / not be the greatest thing on earth, but/you're different'.⁴³

Enjambments and stanza divisions work both aurally and visually to ensure emphasis on certain words. Laying out the syntax and meaning over several lines controls the pace of the poem. In 'The Man Next Door' the narrative is divided into several stanzas that consist of no more than two sentences each. The line divisions mimic pauses in natural speech but are not examples of actual speech. The line breaks primarily draw attention to the end words such as in: '[h]e is an artist / and has built / at the bottom of his garden / a studio / where he paints'. By placing 'a studio' on its own line I separate it and draw attention to it in poetic space just as it is in real space. By placing 'artist' and 'paints' at the ends of lines I highlight these

⁴³ Frank O'Hara, p. 586.

as key words. By stretching out the information about the studio over three lines I seek to represent the distance between the house and the end of the garden. The arrangement of the words in these lines demonstrate the importance of space in the poem and make the encroachment on that space more effective.

The stream of consciousness style that is structurally portrayed through the long, barely punctuated sentences, gives the poem a sense of breathless speed. They are seemingly off-the-cuff and appear unpremeditated. Take for example the lines: 'I look/at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world except/possibly for the Polish Rider occasionally and anyway it's in the Frick/which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can go together the first time'.⁴⁴ O'Hara employed line endings to great effect, using them to draw breath, most clearly demonstrated in his 1966 recorded poetry reading in which he pauses significantly at the ends of the lines.⁴⁵ In the above lines O'Hara moves, with a sense of fun, from an almost conventional expression to the entirely unexpected conclusion of the sentence. He tackles the love poem and manages to provide an exciting twist to a potentially clichéd and hackneyed topic.

Pioneers such as William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara and Stevie Smith laid significant poetic groundwork. Their interest in the quotidian, the conversational and the irreverent has permeated my own poetry and the work of many contemporary poets. The employment of everyday spoken English is something that Carol Ann Duffy, Fleur Adcock, Hugo Williams and Tom Leonard all share although they each draw from a different aural environment. Williams who sought a democratic, everyday rhythm that 'has not been taught to us in schools' would perhaps be interested to know that poetry like Tom Leonard's, which has radicalised the use of colloquial speech, has now been taught in schools for over

⁴⁴ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (California: University of California Press, 1971) p. 360.

⁴⁵ *USA Poetry, Frank O'Hara (1966)*. Dir. Richard O. Moore. Thirteen/WNET New York. 1966 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/12/newly-surfaced-footage-of-frank-ohara-in-richard-moores-usa-poetry-1966/>> [accessed 28 February 2015].

two decades.⁴⁶ Frank O'Hara who found he could 'use the telephone instead of writing the poem' would see something similar happening in the work of Hugo Williams or Fleur Adcock's work despite her use of meter.⁴⁷ The salient point is as Stevie Smith so aptly put it: '[a]ll Poetry has to do is to make a strong communication. All the poet has to do is listen'.⁴⁸ Listen, capture and then infuse one's work with the quotidian environment. The result is likely to be informal, there may be toothbrushes and tins in the poem and a familiar conversational ring to it but this allows it to be accessible, relevant and enjoyable. As poetry becomes markedly specific and representative of real life it demonstrates that all material is potentially poetic material.

⁴⁶ Letter to Henry Wills (1955) in John C. Thirlwall, p. 346.

⁴⁷ F. O'Hara, p. 498.

⁴⁸ Stevie Smith, 'My Muse (1960)', in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), pp. 148-149.

Conclusion

This thesis is both a demonstration and an exploration of carefully constructed, observational poetry. The collection of poems succinctly articulates recurring themes of mortality, love, relationships and behaviour within an everyday setting. The exegesis examines how technical decisions and content choices have resulted in a collection of poems that handle these situations with lightness and subtlety. The collection and exegesis work in tandem to explain and illustrate the processes that lie behind these particular poems.

The collection of poems invites the reader into my world, encouraging them to participate in my own experience and perspectives. The reader is inducted into my auditory world. The rhythms and sounds contained within the poems follow the cadence of my own voice. Furthermore, the subject matter is semi-autobiographical; each poem contains some small element of reality such as a chance phrase or observation that became the inspirational springboard for the writing process. The particular cadences of my voice, my concerns and interests feed into the recurring themes of the nature of ordinariness, disposability and observation. This distinctive timbre assists in allowing the poems within this manuscript to flow well together.

The poems were all written as stand-alone pieces, intended as individual observations. However, when collected and ordered, the separate poems operate as a whole, each participating in a wider dialogue concerned with social constructs and mores, behaviour and relationships. The order of the poems became significant as I sought to expand these themes. For instance, I explored work relationships in 'Apples', 'Lyn's Poem', 'I'm Glad I Washed The Mayonnaise Jar', 'An Illustrated Obituary', 'I am...reading', 'Monday Morning Arrival' and 'Problem Solving', moving between ideas of work as a satisfying and absorbing aspect of life, and the disconnect between one's sense of self and the constraints of everyday life.

The poems are not grouped together in themes, a popular choice for first collections such as Fleur Adcock's *The Incident Book* (1986) where she divided the poems into sections such as 'Schools', 'Telling Tales' and 'Thatcherland'.¹ By spreading my key themes throughout the collection, I encourage a slow digestion and mulling over of each theme. By interweaving the themes, I hope to draw lines of communication between them, relating them to each other. The dynamic between the themes helps to define my work and to give the collection cohesion. Collecting the poems together made me very aware that I did not want to weave a narrative between the poems such as is apparent in the recently published collections of Hugo Williams, *I Knew the Bride* (2014), and Jo Shapcott, *Of Mutability* (2010).² Had I attempted to contrive connections where none existed, the result would have been artificial. The poems do not fit together in that way, they were after all each written to be consumed as separate pieces. Overall, I would describe this collection as moving more towards creating a sense of a milieu in its approach to themes, perhaps most akin to Frank O'Hara in his exploration of New York in *Lunch Poems*.³ It is a milieu of my own making, my own environment, with words and images quite specific to my life.

Collecting the poems together and the final arrangement of them called to mind Maggie Anderson's ideas about poems 'keeping company' with each other and how 'they must dance well together'.⁴ Selecting and arranging the poems was in large part facilitated by the dynamic between the pieces. The themes dance from poem to poem, one picking up a gesture, a move or a thought from another. For example, 'An Illustrated Obituary' takes the concept of accepted social behaviour from 'One, Two, Three' but diverts the topic from marriage to death. 'Craxton's Paintings' and 'Father and Son' are set beside each other as they both examine my poetic

¹ Fleur Adcock, *Poems 1960-2000*, (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000).

² Hugo Williams, *I Knew the Bride* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p. 65., Jo Shapcott, *Of Mutability* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 64.

³ Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems*. (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1964).

⁴ Maggie Anderson, 'Keeping Company: Thoughts on Arranging Poems', in *Ordering the Storm. How to Put Together a Book of Poems*, ed. by Susan Grimm (Cleveland: Cleveland State University Poetry Centre, 2006), p. 89.

response to pieces of art, one suggesting that a poem can attempt to replicate a display of art and the other that in the act of that creation the poet moves and thinks like an artist. There are word links between the poems, '2D' from 'Conversations' jumps into the title of the next poem – 'Two'. However more frequently there are conceptual links. 'On The Way To Work' focuses on specific times and is followed by 'Blackberrying', an activity that can only happen at a specific time of the year. 'Feminist Knitting Agenda' is flanked by 'Not Waving' and 'Lyn's Poem', which both feature strong and articulate women. There are also hidden links, primarily geographical links, between the poems. Many are based in Cambridgeshire where I live.

The selection criterion for inclusion in this collection was dependent upon both the poem's approach towards the quotidian and its effectiveness. This latter point can be broken down into three aspects: namely my personal response and relationship to the poem, responses from readers and a sense that the poem is developing and expanding a strand of contemporary British poetry. The poems here have all been through numerous drafts. Just as some of the poems explore the idea of disposability, this collection is testament to the pruning a poet becomes familiar with, the very necessary but equally difficult task of sifting through and discarding work and ideas. Some of my poems have never progressed beyond the initial draft and as many as have been included in this collection have been abandoned in files marked up to revise, edit, rewrite and reconsider.

Putting the collection together was something of a challenge. Initially I attempted to order them in a purely linear, and suspiciously chronological, fashion on the office floor, and later blue-tacked them to the garden fence. However, the sheer number of poems made this unwieldy. I then experimented with pinning the poems to a rotating washing line. This was an effective organisational method but ultimately the British weather drove me back indoors and I laid the poems out in a grid form. This far more manageable arrangement allowed me to see the poems in sections and thus see links between poems. I was able to extract, reorder, insert

and check on the progression of poems in small groups and focus on how they worked together. Organising the poems so that they naturally led on to each other became of interest. Placing together poems that were different in subject and style allowed contrasting poems to stand out from one another. Distributing poems that contained similar themes evenly throughout the collection ensured that those ideas ran throughout the length of the manuscript. In addition, it allowed the themes to interact as much as possible, thus creating an effective dynamic between them.

Expanding on the idea of the structure of the collection, I would also note that alongside a thematic pattern, a technical journey exists. I take the idea of a poem revolving around an image with an implicit but somewhat submerged commentary underneath and fashion it into poetry where the image and observation are on equal terms. This is noticeable if the collection is approached in a linear fashion and is most clearly demonstrated in the first and final poems, 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' and 'In Bottisham'. In the former the image of the two toothbrushes in the bathroom suggests the metaphor of a failed relationship, obfuscating it and bringing into question whether it is a metaphor at all. In the latter, the image of the house decorated to resemble a seaside cottage sits comfortably alongside the concept that perception alters reality. The shift between image and comment is perhaps most noticeable in 'Blackberrying'. The final lines, 'and put the berries / in sensible sized portions / into the freezer', implies that the poem is about the nature of a relationship as much as it is about the practice of picking blackberries.

At its core, the collection is a vehicle for expressing quotidian subjects in quotidian words and grammatical structures. Thus, a significant aspect of the selection process was assessing how effectively each poem achieved this aim. Susan Grimm posits the idea that for a collection to work, 'being able to perceive a rationale is

the key'.⁵ I would hope that the rationale behind this collection, namely that of collecting thoughts, observations images, sights and words that are at the concurrently compellingly distinctive and reassuringly ordinary and crafting them into neat poetic constructs, is clearly stated. I hope the poems are both stimulating and thought provoking and that they articulate the previously unarticulated. I aimed to highlight this in the first poem, as this is potentially the first contact a reader has with the collection. 'A Poem Only About Toothbrushes' which together with its epigraph is positioned as a manifesto; all objects can be accorded poetic space. The first poem both carves out a place for ordinary objects and considers the disposable aspect of those items. The final poem 'In Bottisham', although less amusing, has an optimistic observation; adapting and taking ownership of one's world allows for creativity. The entire collection works on the premise that ordinariness has a centrality to our lives. The initial and final poems communicate not only with each other but also with the entire collection and assist in establishing the tone for the collection.

The commentary has focused on four key elements of relevance to my poetic. The structure of my poems made poetic closure a clear choice and the significant impact art has had on my work suggested that a chapter on ekphrasis would serve to examine the role of inspiration. In order to highlight the essential democratic and accessible aspects of my work the key themes of quotidian objects and speech were of particular note. Each chapter has explored my own work in relation to twentieth century poets such as Stevie Smith, William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara and Philip Larkin and it has discussed how my work builds on their poetics. By drawing on relevant examples from later poets, I have contextualised my work within a contemporary setting. Just as the poems work together, so too do the chapters. The thesis divides and subdivides. Technical chapters flank the central content-based chapters. Equally, the first part of the thesis explores how aspects of the poems contribute to the sense of the whole poem while the latter part

⁵ *Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems*, ed. by Susan Grimm (Cleveland: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2006) p. xii.

examines the importance of quotidian material in the poetic construction. Together all four chapters explore the intricate interweaving of content and structure that contributes to the success of the poems.

The exegesis has tackled some of the challenges that I, as a free verse practitioner, have experienced, namely construction, inspiration, content and rhythm. The first chapter explores the notion of poetic completion and focuses on poems as entities which show a clear sense of purpose and direction. Crafting a poem without the assistance of metre, rhyme or form requires the poet to construct their own pattern. In this chapter my comparison of poems with jokes suggests that the 'set up' and 'pay off' that make both successful is achieved in the final words. Examining the role of poetic endings best demonstrated my concept of a clearly defined poetic structure. The second chapter moves from the idea of constructing the poem to the question of inspiration. This was a logical step as inspiration is so integral to the process of writing. I sought to examine how art has inspired not only single poems but also my entire poetic with the concept 'my art is my life'.⁶

The third chapter examines how everyday ordinariness is portrayed through both content and technique. Examining the importance of vocabulary choices through the placement of tangible objects within the poems reveals that these not only contextualise the poems but explore human-object relationships. The final chapter is an examination of the role of speech in structuring rhythm, looking at how the familiar sound of my own voice was realised through line breaks, sentence structure and vocabulary choices.

There is a dynamic and dualistic relationship between this collection of poems and the accompanying exegesis. They work together to showcase and examine the poetic behind my work. Together they have demonstrated that this particular quotidian-inspired free verse poetry succinctly articulates elements inspired by

⁶ Tracey Emin, *Tracey Emin's My Bed* / *TateShots*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/tracey-emins-my-bed-tateshots> edn, 2016 vols (London: Tate, 2015), p. 1.

my life. I show how mundane objects such as jars, cotton buds and batteries can be used to make implied and nuanced observations. This is a collection of poetry that leans towards ordinary language and speech as its model. It is poetry that builds upon a century-long tradition of celebrating the quotidian but it is my own particular view of the world, my own particular juxtaposition of ideas and images. To this extent, it is a fresh poetic voice making a unique contribution to our poetic culture, a voice that is, I hope, both vibrant and intriguing.

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