

WRITING *THE SEE-THROUGH MAN*:

Poetry and Commentary

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Abstract

‘Writing *The See-Through Man: Poetry and Commentary*’ is a Creative Writing thesis in two parts. The first part is a collection of poems called *The See-Through Man*, written specifically for this project. It comprises thirty short poems (of approximately one page in length) and one long poem, ‘1969’ (approximately sixty pages in length). The second part of the thesis is a personal, critical commentary which reflects on the evolution of the themes in this collection, from an initial desire to write about the male nude in art, to a desire to write about masculinity, to, finally, a desire to write autobiographically on issues of male embodiment. It reflects, retrospectively, on the creative processes behind the writing of the poems, with specific reference to technical experiments undertaken during the writing of key poems. It uses my own contemporaneous journals to piece together their ‘histories’, from idea to final draft. It also reflects on the influence of other poets and poetic traditions, with particular reference to the long poem, the prose-poem and the sonnet (and how assigning a central place to the sonnet grew out of a translation of Michelangelo). The sonnet, for example, comes to be understood as a metaphor for the Apollonian male body (considered to be a negative construct) and the versions of sonnets in the collection as examples of that form undergoing Dionysian adjustments. The end of the commentary explains how this leads to the formulation of a Queer poetics, one in which texts signify not solely by their apparent themes but also by their ‘open’ and inter-penetrative forms. The single poem in the collection which best exemplifies this poetics is ‘1969’, although the whole collection is structured in order to demonstrate it. The thesis contributes to the field of Creative Writing and to Queer literary studies.

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The See-Through Man

Serpent

Adam? You decent?
It's me. The Serpent.
Sick of you naming
each beast, bird, as if
words are yours to fix,
it's high time you got
eyed up, subjected
to my iris'
speckled copper way
of seeing. Your teal
basilic vein's quick
gecko flicks its tail
upon a stone – pulse!
Gone! Where? I circum-
slitherate muscles'
horizons, awed by
your body's Earth, gaze –
a way of feasting
while staying unfed.
Is this desire? I'm
done for! My passive-
aggressive revenge:

to wear your sphincter
like a purple crown
of thorns, to enter
your ribboning wet
canyon of gut, to
slide to your stinkpit
tannery stomach,
then up to your light-
well windpipe, to your
tongue – finally! – your
famed tongue! It lolls like
a spent athlete, half
in shadow, half sun
& I see now – you’re
sound asleep. When you
wake what strange dreams you’ll
rub from your eyes! You’ll
find me basking in
the place where your tongue
used to be. & you’ll
taste of your own dark
cavities, & you’ll
give all the wrong names
to Creation, &
they’ll pulse & pulse &

pulse like a poultice
of maggots in a
dead elephant's cheek,
chewing loose what they
named, resurrecting
it. Adam? Wake up!

After Michelangelo

1.

My wet-nurse – her lot were stonemasons.

So this stone in my blood's from her milk.

Plus thrift & a fear of worklessness.

Snowfields clutch fistfuls of whiteness long

after the sun's dipped. I'll live on long

after these popes & aristos. *Long*

shadow, long hurt, said the gypsy. But

now? Joy! I scald palms building a snow-

man for Piero de' Medici.

2.

Make the world rabid, berserk, make it chase its own tail,

that I might wriggle free of its skin, this itchy suit,

because I've smashed it: The Pietà, & Alessandro

pushes the dust of the long left calf of Christ out into the street,

leans against the broom, a moment, squinting against the city,

tensing his own left calf in such a way

my eyes are leashed again to its every ligament. The pity
is how I eat my words,

& want to wear this dogskin one more day.

3.

Claw-chisel's *ting-ting* sits in for the beat
of my dead heart – all I dare say I am,
concentrated at that hot, live blade-edge,
spitting chips of Carrara, exhaling
dust of Carrara, till my own putrid,
brute flesh is eclipsed – thank God – from the eyes
of both myself & others. What swells out,
paradoxically, from my subtractive
art's hot strokes: a colossal soon-to-be
assassin, a giant giant-killer,
sizing up the glory of an elsewhere –
my David, my *Il Gigante*, greatest
in nakedness, hardest. With bow I drill
his soft navel, an ocean, an elsewhere.

4.

My eyes are the jellies your light smites.

Best I think of you as this, as white

light smacking into the see-through hearts

of these sea-creatures. For though they smart

with the shame of being such eyesores,

you, as light, rouse them so they peruse

the underside of the sea's swaying

roof, resurrect them from silt, deep dark.

As light you pierce deep my eyes, & hard.

5.

V of torso, of opened blades, of shears,

has haunted me, taunted me, one hundred & forty four thousand years.

Why? Because Tommaso, one afternoon, was pruning olives

down where the lavenders grew between the beehives, stripped to the waist –

& in those days I believed I'd bear my best fruit

here in Paradise,

so I knelt close to the soil & shivered, silverly, for Death, as olives do,

waiting for the sap to rise into the cut

& I ignored the V of his torso. The euphoric stink of it.

The Tip of the Tongue

(After 'Uomo Del Mio Tempo' by Salvatore Quasimodo)

My fighter sings the sky, its killer note
a point along the taut meridian
of death.

Same tune as I persuade a shy
& hypersensitive device to tuck
just like a frog beneath a road.

& then

I whistle it again as I clean knives.
My favourite blade becomes a glowing door-
crack. Lit room beyond.

That's me with stone. Sling.

I hum it even then.

& that's me too:

"Let's go into the fields," I sing, brother
to brother, hand now fist.

I have a right.

A reason. Even ideology.
They're gadgets I outgrow. The tune is scored
down twisted staves of DNA.

It stays.

In Varanasi, 1991,

temples in their hundreds piggybacked to
paddle in the Ganges' clotted shallows.
Nights, I lay awake. Mosquitos howl. Cows
low. A bell. A motorbike. Old men hoik
phlegm. & once, a sitar played a raag so
wise, so distilled, my ears had journeyed lives
to swoon in it. Morning – I wracked my brain
but I'd forgotten how it went – my brain
a small & leaking skiff. I felt bereft.

Wrecked.

I'd like to think some rosepetal-thin
facsimile of that melody's still
gently pressed between two pages of my
hippocampus.

But no.

Best think of it
gone.

If that comes back to me then what else?
Tunes which lure me into under-rivers
bunged with unburnt corpses.

How do they go?
How they go's how they went.

How they went's how
they'd leap from the tip of the tongue once more.

I'm ready for bed & I shall soon be going. I'll have one hand curled round the haft of this axe, I'm not daft. But otherwise my features will soften like ice-cream. Any kid could lick
me.

Tomorrow? It will steam in the sun, trot to eat applecores from my palm, like any other day.

Horses have always shied from bearing the weight of my bones.

I've never been a-wenching by the railway cuttings, nor blackberrying down the lane. Not a single lass has ever looked me in the eye, except that Nell, that blind one, who once read a thousand words of Braille down my spine, in a long, long line, then ran.

She never let on what it said. Just ran. Fast. & tripped, as escapees do. Though she made those grazes & bruises tell another tale when she got back to her father.

I keep a mouse in my pocket. I've never hurt a fly.

I'll let you into a secret. Being a giant – a freak – an eyesore – is like drawing black cotton wool from a wound, slowly, endlessly. It's a trick I pull off so well, it no longer hurts. I even
do it for laughs.

But I'm ready for bed now & I shall soon be going. This David? This upstart? I hear he's a cocky wannabe. I hear their mouths fawn & water for him. Poster-boy. It-boy. With his big feet & his dainty pee-pee & his big head.

Believe me, he's toast! & with these hands I'll mill his puny skeleton into the flour for the bread.

What toys will he deign, will he dare to bring to fell me?

A slingshot?

And He was Uncovered Within His Tent.

And Ham, the Father of Canaan, Saw the Nakedness of His Father...

(Genesis 9. vv21-22)

Dad lies on his back, unwrapped, a present of strewn, starkers bones, far punier than dads ought to be, let alone this dad – my dad – not so much my dad as a saviour of nations, too intent on the sight of green horizons ever to have heard my voice tug at his tunic's hem.

How his blood's boiled down! It must've reduced to a clot of brimstone deep inside him for him to be, on the outside, so white, so dry. Snappable as saltfish.

Against my palm I check his breaths – & track across his eyelids' hemispheres the lone, crackling cyclone of a dream. *Shem! Japheth! Here!* My brothers are coming. Despite myself, I take an inventory of his body, to see how like, unlike, my own it is, to hang each detail on a nail inside my brain, so when my skin begins to match, crease for crease, sag for sag, I'll know how far, how far I've come in this life:

the canvassy ruckle of his elbow, its granularity; & yes, I can't help it. I look. The moving floundering of his penis, like a cuckoo, just-hatched, wedged at the top of his thighs.

& there. Again. I can't help it. & neither, it seems, can he. Across his abdomen: spat out milk-globs, like small flicked pebbles. His body jumped out of his body.

Now I'm catatonic with the fear that he'll wake. That he'll see me. That he'll see himself being seen by me. & I see the pebbles loosen, tearfully enact that formula where $x =$ the

changing viscosity of semen, y = gravity, z = the texture of six-hundred-year-old, living,
human skin: the formula for pebbles loosening into glistening streaks of loss down his left
side.

Twelve locusts crawl up out of my throat's furred vinegar, haul themselves up my tongue into
my mouth – & out! They drum against goatskins stretched against the sun's noon weight.

I cover him.

These offices which I perform, averting my eyes, harbour in my memory like tarnished
booty.

Shem & Japheth burst in, hot-faced. “Ha! What? Pissed?”

The locusts fizz past them.

1969

A Film in Five Parts

Part I

Titles, white Times New Roman on indigo screen. Music fades in: Miles Davis 'In a Silent Way'. Indigo screen becomes grey. Slow panning shots of wedding in grounds of house on shore of Lake Como, northern Italy. Sunshine. Children chasing each other. Laughter. Then a voiceover:

I

saw you – saw a wedding-guest on his

toe, like me, eyeing up

talent & that unpoured prosecco,

so

please, might I take this chair at your side?

I want to talk you through

this script I start filming tomorrow,

though

I wish I had my crew, because this,

here, now, would be a peach

of an opening scene: this sparrow

made

of fluff & matchsticks, flitting over

our heads, finding the sky's

a pastel-swagged marquee – its brief go

at

a life here, & its leaving. & then
these wide-eyed newlyweds,
the hushing dancefloor as they tiptoe

out

for their first naff dance, chaste under their
families' reckoning

gazes. *La vostra figlia? Figlio?*

Your daughter? Son?

Or

is it our mother? Father? Trimmer
than we both remember.

Now we're rolling. *Action!* Mum loves snow,

jumps

off the last bus, still smiling, strangely
awake to her own weight,
her own tensing calves. It's five below –

raw

January, roach-end of the Sixties.

January 17th 1969, a market town near Nottingham, England

She's – what? – twenty? I've cast

The Love Bug still on at The Odeon

an unknown, a girl I'll never know,

Two drunk teenagers at the back singing *Hey Jude*

for

whom free love, demos & isms have

been dopplering past like

snyezhinka: 'snowflake' in Russian

faraway teen screams on waltzers – no

way

they'd wash here – this town – this puritan

snoflinga: 'snowflake' in Swedish

stronghold where carbolic

women have frowned for years because *Joe's* –

the

ragaeeg al thalj: 'snowflake' (Arabic)

caff – has a jukebox, pinball, boys &

frothy coffee. Women –

mothers – keep tabs on the status quo.

Fiocco di neve (Italian)

Iced

air smacks her thighs. She hugs her houndstooth

coat tight. It all comes back:

the to-do about miniskirts. *Go*

fulg de zăpadă (Romanian)

out

in that? Blast your eyes! You're not right sharp!

(My grandma's gristlevoice.)

Behind: red bus judders, smokes, dies, though

Lumihiutale (Finnish)

she
counts white cotton swabs of breath one whole
minute before she screws
her heels, dabs off lipstick, walks... walks... so

ptit-shelleg (Hebrew)

she
can compose the lines of an excuse –
why so late back, why hair
reeks of Player's No.10's. Hark! Snow

a brand of cigarette, once made in Nottingham

creaks
beneath her every footfall, each creak
a little wooden door
about to open downward. Look! Snow's

copo de nieve (Spanish)

shooshed
this market square immaculate since
she caught the five-fifteen.
Streetlamps' sucked fruity lozenges show

how
random, skittish, each snowflake's downfall,
how – though gravity's fate –
each swoops – stalls – joyrides – nowhere to go.

I

want the look a bit *Tim Burton*, the
flakes of snow not quite real –
her dad’s Hillman Imp a marshmallow.

qannik (Inuit)

Now

zoom in beyond the naked eye! Here!

hiononi-fatha (Greek)

Shoot this one flake as it

sneaks into her ear on the wind’s flow –

kar-tanesi (Turkish)

slips

yuki no hana (Japanese, literally ‘snowflower’)

down her auditory canal – jumps her

timpanic membrane – plucks

her cochlear nerve pianissimo

to

her temporal lobe, her cerebral

cortex (applause of blood

thundering behind walls) – slides gung-ho

down

the banister of her spinal cord –

dives through unfelt tissues,

plush velvets of organs – till the bow,

the

rupture, the imperceptible give:

the give when this snowflake

presses, pinpricks, into the hollow

&

seat-edge silence of the orchestra

pit of my mother's womb.

My chapel grandparents hear, below,

Unlocks door.

Tiptoes in. Shot of key swinging

her

on hook, catching the light.

shiver on kitchen linoleum,

unstrapping stilettos.

Split-screen we'll watch, too, this flake stow

its

spiked star in the middle of her heat,

bud slivers & quavers,

bloom lungs like ice-chrysants on window

panes,

grow eyes like cornflower-blue hailstones –

is this me? Alive? &

if I'd thawed would Mum have felt it? Known

I'd

melted? *Best if it don't take, girl. Or*

*get wed. Dear God, don't be
under my roof when the blighter's born.*

(intermezzo...)

On Seeing Sam Taylor Wood's One-Hour Seven-Minute Video of David Beckham

Sleeping (I Metamorphosed into a Baboon)

He does jack shit. But then he licks his lips,
a kiddywink gone beddy-byes, so lamb-
like blood leaps – Mexican waves – & you swim
inside your flesh. You want – don't you? – to touch his lips?
Did I say 'lips' again? You dribble eyes
into his elbow's crook, his moist sfumato,
your anus swells, becomes a beef tomato –
your reeking fangs – your Easter Island nose –

Once, I woke on a bench in Monza station.
While I'd slept it had crept, stretched itself parallel
on a bench very close. Did its sallow, domed
hydrocephalitic head – the Zurich train
slammed past en route to Milan – contain a hell
or heaven? He'd mirrored you. You leave, ashamed.

Two Men Sitting Opposite Each Other on a Train, Who, Bizarrely, Are Going in

Opposite Directions

Fish-mouths hole-punch surface of a river.

Humans hungry to prove they've got innards.

Leaking amber-gooked bandages for eyes,

returns from a London hospital, thinks:

garlic-clove slivers of my eyelids – gone!

Eyebags, impediments to Beauty – gone!

Crows'-feet, tripwires on the path to Youth – gone!

He's wading upstream to his ageless tomorrows.

Opposite seat. Train's crossing estuary.

Mudflats clipped together with buoys, gulls, terns.

A man who behind his cataracts keeps

crawling out of Warsaw sewers to be

gutted, or saved,

craves sea.

Daughters mouth

like mothers,

treat him like a doll with no ears.

Angel of the North

1.

“Peace? Let’s spit on it!”

The gods lined up & spat into the cauldron, each, in turn, from dawn till dusk, till the cauldron was brimful of spit & not a single one of them could spit any more. Laughing, they lit a fire beneath it & went off, arm in arm, to drink.

Next morning, they heard singing. Those who could manage to crawl out of bed looked into the bottom of the cauldron – where they saw that all that divine spit had turned into the first Human Being. They called it Eve-Adam. & because, not being a god, & having fresh ears, it could take no sides, they lifted it out & set it on the throne of a new, united land where it carried on singing to its heart’s content. The gods’ cheers could be heard from the height of the sky to the depth of the sea.

So loud were their cheers that the Vulcher-gods, sat hunched and miserable in The Dead Tree, heard it & crawled in panic. For if there were no more fighting there would be no more corpses left out on the battlefield to feed on, & so nothing to feed the Vulcher-chicks with their yellow-clown-mouths.

So that same morning, one of the Vulcher-gods stole Adam-Eve from under the gods’ noses & brought it to The Dead Tree. They hung it from a branch & took turns to peck holes in its body. It bled. It died. & they caught its blood in a helmet & took the helmet back to the

gods, setting it carefully down at the bedside of Wodin, who had had a whole skinful more than most & was snoring loudly, causing thunder all over the world. They hopped & hobbled away, & watched, from a distance.

Finally, Wodin woke. He was so thirsty he did exactly what the Vulcher-gods had hoped he would do: he drank down that helmet of blood in one go. In fact, he was still smacking his lips when the other gods came running. Some were shouting: “Where’s Eve-Adam?” Some were shouting: “Where’s Adam-Eve?” They had looked into the height of the sky & into the depth of the sea. Then they came to Wodin.

“Wodin,” they said. “Where’s Adam-Eve? Where’s Eve-Adam?”

They saw the blood trickling down his whiskers & down his neck & put two & two together. So angry were they that they threw a rock at him. Wodin picked it up & threw it right back at them. & so began the wars of the gods, all over again – much to the relief of the Vulcher-gods who could now feed corpses to their chicks’ yellow-clown-mouths, just as they had done before.

But not even the Vulcher-gods could have foreseen the gift that the blood of Adam-Eve had bestowed upon Wodin. For Wodin, of all the gods now the most outcaste & alone, could now only speak Poetry, the first of the gods to do so. & from then on, anyone who dared to kiss Wodin’s lips, or lick sweat from his body, would be able to do likewise. & so Poetry entered the world.

Caedmon loved that story. The lads, as usual, were taking turns in the Mead Hall, passing the harp round as they chanted it. They listened like captivated, boisterous children, feeling an ache for those Brave Olden Days which none of them had ever known, which none of their grandfathers had ever known, making the ache, for them, the more sweet. & so the story was passed among them like a glowing coal in a pair of tongs. Each waited his turn. Each wanted to outdo the last narrator in skill & drama. Each took a sup of beer as the harp neared. Each wiped his beard with the back of his hand. & Caedmon did too, in readiness. Except that he wasn't ready. He felt panic-stricken. & his stomach churned, as if full of rancid milk. *Eve-Adam was dancing in the cauldron, because the cauldron was still hot.* & then? Suddenly all eyes were on him, eager for him to continue... *Adam-Eve was dancing in the cauldron, because the cauldron was still hot...* & then? & then?

Caedmon got up. Swayed. His chair crashed backwards. He ran to the barn & hid among the haybails, his heart knocking to be let free of such a shameful & unmanly body. What would his ancestors think of him? What was missing in himself, that he should be unable to take the glowing coal of the story & pass it onward? Yet – why should he be part of their... their... *gang*? He was angry with himself. The story was more his than theirs – wasn't it?

He vomited, then slept.

Caedmon knocked on the Abbey gate the next morning. “Abbess Hild!”

Hild sighed & had a servant bring him up to her study. Without looking at him, she continued to brush her hair with an ebony & mother-of-pearl comb.

“Well? Speak! Problems with the pigs again?”

“No, Ma’am”.

“The sheep?”

“No.”

“The cows?”

She turned round to see him kneeling, right there on her scrubbed flagstones, with his eyes closed & his lips quivering. & right there on her scrubbed flagstones he recited a poem about

The Creation, in his own English tongue.

He told Hild that it was of his own making – that he’d woken up with the nine lines of it jumping around in his mouth. She was incredulous. Firstly, that an illiterate herdsman should have composed such an oddity. Secondly, that he should be beseeching her, right there on her scrubbed flagstones, for admittance to her Abbey. & then she thought: *well why not? With the Lord’s help I could even make a project of him, a project which might bring us notoriety, & coin, beyond all reckoning. The first Christian poem in English! & a new kind of poet! Here! Under my protection & tutelage! But, if the pilgrims really were to come flocking to hear him, to this, our windswept outpost of civilisation, there would need to be more. A provenance. A miracle. Something unique....*

“Was there not an Angel there with you in the barn? There must have been! Did you not see
one, in the rafters?”

Caedmon looked at her, still on his knees, & shook his head.

“Think carefully. Are you quite sure there was not an Angel? Dictating the poem? Or
whispering it in your ear? Not an Angel, in the rafters, swinging his strong, bare legs,
mischievously, like a youth?”

The tiniest flicker of recognition passed between them.

“I suppose yes, Ma’am. I’d as lief there had been an Angel, as not”.

Hild walked to the window & saw the morning sun folding out over the North Sea towards
her.

It was already 663A.D. There were Vikings coming. There had been signs & portents. &
the world perhaps needed this rough poet, since it was all ending so savagely, & so soon.

3.

I’m in ‘The Swan & Three Cygnets’ in Durham for my brother’s stag-do. The lads are
bluetoothing a vid of *two lezzes fisting each others’ vadge*s till everyone has it yelping in his
palms & is laughing & aghast. Between rounds I make a run for it, hoping that they’re too
wankered to notice I’m gone. But they do notice. & just as I’m about to duck out of that pub

into dazzling blue air I overhear one of them say: “If your bro’ had been born a real man
he’d have been able to take his beer more.”

I glance back & see them chink glasses with my brother. “But he’s actually alright for a
nonce.”

“He is. He’s alright,” says my brother, who knows I could drink them all under the table if I
needed to. It’s just that I don’t need to.

Then they’re all agreeing – lots of wide-eyed nods & over-egged sincerity. All of them too
tanked up for the usual ironies.

& suddenly I’m in the cathedral, in the Galilee Chapel, swaying beside Bede’s tomb of
polished limestone – Bede who wrote about Caedmon, & about what he calls the “someone”
who came to Caedmon in the barn, who made an English poem dance in the cauldron of his
mouth.

& then, as I walk out into the nave, I become aware of a stone-echoed conversation some
twenty feet or thirty feet above me. I look up & see the nubbed body of a khaki spider,
suspended precariously between orange, horizontal threads.

“He’s a soldier. Local lad,” whispers a woman at my side.

“Really?”

She beckons for me to incline my head so that she can whisper into my ear. “Oh yes. Afghanistan. Both his legs in a grenade attack in Helmand Province. God bless him. & this is all for charity.”

I look again & see that he’s a man with two stumps, combat trousers tied into knots around them. He’s in a harness, inching himself along a cable from which it’s suspended, inch by inch, pulling himself along with upraised, muscular arms, inch by inch, each arm braided with tattoos & each arm ending in fingerless, weightlifters’ gloves. A khaki T-shirt. A darker khaki bib of sweat. A swallow inked in flight on his neck. His flushed, swollen neck which shines with sweat. His flushed, swollen neck over which slide, slowly, inch by inch, patches of subdued blood-maroons & royal blues from the Rose Window. Glows. Glowing over him. Christ & twelve apostles & twenty-four holy men from the Book of Revelation, slide, glow, over him. Inch by inch.

& it’s the fact that I can hear his precision breaths filling the cathedral, from the height of the cool stone above me to the depth of the cool stone below me, as if this whole cathedral’s breathing through him.

& it’s his savaged, wrong, astonishing body.

& it’s his concentration.

& it’s the manning, the righting, of the weight of his body, pinioned by fluorescent cables to that vast air.

& it's the tiny, splashed coronas of sweat I witness, a few minutes later, drying on the nave's
cool flagstones. Sweat fallen directly down from his neck,

from his back,

from his brow.

His neck,

his back,

his brow.

Niqab

My kids are high as kites this time of year
what with Halloween and a stop-start wind
so strong I'm pushed one step back.

Doncaster,

South Yorkshire, England, you'll all of you hear
my end-of-break whistle. I'm Muslim. I'm here.
My eyes an oblong, the rest black.

Defined,

not like the girl and boy up on the poster –
how much desired – defaced. Not by the fear
of not fitting in – that fake life – skin jeans.
Not by mirrors – or eyes – or magazines,
but by Allah

whose breath lives in this wind.

Some kids still loop-the-loop, but are resigned.
They don't see clothes. How sexed – unsexed.
Just me. This. How the sky just flexed.

Farmer's Wife, 1955

Soon as Baby come out they said they'd have to confiscate it. Said I was a slut. A traitor. Said Christians would raise it. Said my husband's been a saint. But I been hiding that baby
this last ten years! Here! See? Behind my wrist's blue wires.

Lordy, he's mischief! I shoot bloodhot milk from a metal bucket: *Peeyow!* Unwing bluebottles, flick onto a hotplate, pop like popcorn: *Peeyow!* This morning, that lame horse between the eyes: *Peeyow! Peeyow!* He's singing *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*, even as I unbutton my husband's fly, lift out the blind mouse.

I catch sparrows with custard creams, a twig, a string, a propped-up pudding bowl. For their feathers, see. Feathers. Bashing dark. I knead the cold dough of my husband's head on pillows filled with bashing dark.

Was them jackdaws this afternoon begging me to hold their unhatched eggs? Yes. Them bindweed blooms too, perling through the barbed wire on the top paddock, telling me to eat them: they were snapped silk parachutes from the smalls of German boys' backs.

Your daddy's body changed me, see. It changed me forever.

I'm sat with the top half of this kitchen door swung out wide against the night. A square of stars. & if God should snatch me up this minute I'd let my heart beat against this one photo
of the father, wipe my hands on this pinny,
just be done with it.

1969

Part II

Music fades in: Cilla Black, 'Step Inside, Love'. On screen the words: April 19th 1969. St. Mary's church in the same market town near Nottingham. Shots of cowslips, buzzing bees, gravestones, feet in wedding shoes. Then the voiceover:

Spring.

Woodpigeons woo-woo-w, plunge in, out

of yews. Mum wrings her hands,

sweats at the lychgate. The tiles'll burn

soft

sound: bells

soles of her white slippers, the aisle's cool

bells

terracotta chequers,

bells

black – burnt umber – 'll be coals which burn

bells

each

bells

bells

step, each step, as the organ wheezes

ecstatically, as her

heart leaps, laps, as she feels something turn,

hears

that thickset Methodist hymn: ...*the rock,*

& not upon the sands.

You need not fear the storm or the earth-

quake

shock. You'll be safe for ever more if

you build on the rock. Is

it too late to turn? What's a bride worth

if

she turns, threads all her white fabric

back through the lychgate's eye,

staggers out through sudden dunes, gives birth

in

the lea of a leafless tree? Would lone

coyotes circle her

staunch ed epicentre – let a cut-tooth

howl

for the gunmetal-blue taste of fresh

placenta be ripped off

into the wind like a lost balloon?

She

doesn't turn. She walks... walks... heel to toe

past a hundred husbands,

past handbags, hatpins, sprayed-stiff hairdos,

walks...

walks... over black & burnt umber tiles

which bulge – reproduce – till

the aisle squeezes past a hundred pews,

a

hundred hundred hand-shielded mouths which

start lisping bets – whether

she shows – & end hurling names – jeers – boos –

Music: The Doors *The End*

dirt –

no, no. Wait. It's okay. They're smiling.

The altar's in focus –

cross so polished the King of the Jews

has

slid off that brass vertical – treacle

off a warm spoon – & found

himself glistening in far-flung news:

at

the grimed clavicle of an M.O.

in 'Nam, who fingers, strokes

& kisses him, then retrieves jump-boots

blown

off a man's stumps. It's three weeks later.

The ankles sputter blood –

time to dress wounds now shelling abates,

May 10th 1969,

Ap Bia Mountain

(“Hamburger Hill”),

now

Vietnam, near the Laos border

sunbeams prise open the smoking palms

in this gashed glade at the

base of Hill 9-3-7. Serg. Gates

Music: Eric Burdon and the Animals, *Sky Pilot*

slits,

smells deep his high school sweetheart’s mail

as Doc chit-chats – binds up

singed holes with Disneyland heartbeats:

There-

there, there-there, there-there, while stuttering

lionpurr of chopper-

blades seeps through helmets, flak-jackets – What’s

new

in Baltimore, Sarge? – seeps, seeps like blood.

Bitch gone to college, smokes

weed, gets into this ‘peace’ & ‘love’. That’s

what.

Bitch got love for niggers, faggots, gooks...

*Hell yeah, she got buttons
on her pretty flowered blouse for shirts*

*who
ain't even born yet, but none for me.
Don't even tell her room-
mate 'bout me. Us. This. He gestures, spits*

Music: The Jimi Hendrix Experience, *If Six Was Nine*

as
Doc works to stitch up his life in time,
(instead of saving nine
strewn out there, roasting on their own spits

in
green elephant grass). *Keep talking, Sarge,
you're doin' jus' fine. Serg.*
holds paper against sun till it floats

like
an aquamarine box-kite he flew
once at Oregon Ridge
Park. *Mom, I'm letting out more string... Gates?*

1947. He was eight.

Ink
tilts, drips into sky. *Dearest Ray, we're
marching, changing, I'll die*

Music: The Byrds, *Wasn't Born To Follow*

if the foetus of a patriot's

part

of my body for one more minute,

DIG??? *That's why I'm dumbass*

drunk as I write this baby, my throat's

hoarse

from chanting – women of the world are

rising up! I WILL NOT BE

PREGNANT!!! YOU WILL NOT BE MY HERO!!!

COME

HOME... I'll retrain your fingers – touch me

as equal not rifle,

stage groovy bed-ins like Yoko

&

John... Forever & ever, Cassie.

Ray Gates bites on her words

as war recedes like a Star Trek show

switched

off. Lives don't stay on one page but merge,

impinge on others' lives –

forwards – backwards – sideways – to & fro –

such

that stories are like overlapped tags

in an underpass, sprayed,

resprayed. Could've been an embryo

in

any womb. Could've been somebody.

Could've been a dead-end

in a clinic's kidney-dish: bio-

waste.

June 28th 1969

Morph that bright stainless steel curve to rear-

near The Stonewall Bar, New York

light of an NYP-

D Paddy Wagon, smashed by the toe

of

a drag-queen – Cherry L'Amour – who hops

Music: Velvet Underground, *Here She Comes Now*

back down a neon-lit

sidestreet, back behind a thrown-

up

barricade. *Tell Andy to film this!*

(Warhol)

Fuck! Toma esto y

Take this and

metetelo entre el culo!

shove it up your arse!

This

one big enough, madre? Pan down a

mother (motherfucker)

gutter of glass smashed to

flashing police-blue sugar. I throw

one bottle for each night these putas say

bastards/prostitutes

“Cherry, honey, you ain’t

free to wear heels like Monroe’s, no, no.”

I

is US citizen. I is free.

When Mami & Papi

It was 1929. Rodrigo Perez Gonzago was seven years old

bring me here from Puerto Rico

Our

Lady of the Harbour she whisper

to me ‘cross a cold scrap-

yard of waves: “Eres guapo pero

You’re beautiful but

one day

tu

you’ll be

seras – un dia – aun mas guapa...”

even more so...

She shoulders through grey smoke

to The Stonewall’s bar – Drink! We need ammo! –

The Stonewall Inn, Greenwich Village,

New York, a gay bar whose clientele spontaneously

drools
her mauve-clawed fingertips down her broad
chickenwire curves – bustier,
bustle – *I's free, at last! Dios Mio!*

demonstrated against a police raid which took place in the early
hours of June 28th 1969. Many were
mourning the death of Judy Garland who'd died the day before.
*(My God!) The ensuing riots are now considered
a milestone* in the ongoing campaign for gay rights.

Free
at last! Ain't that what the Rev'rend said?
Don't you know that goes for
us homos as much as the Negro?

Rev. Martin Luther King

She
plucks a cigarette, sucks a saffron-
yellow flame, which kneels for
her. She sees this flame in Orlando

three
decades, two years, later on TV –
it's licking two towers
in New York. Then she'll be Rodrigo

September 11th 2001

P.
Gonzago a second time, a man
who asks a nurse the way
from communal lounge to his condo –

Rodrigo Perez Gonzago, seventy five years old

where

he turns it on again – the money-shot – top

storeys going down on

lower, gobbling hot, silver dust, slo-

mo

gagging as one & then the other

collapses, a trick they'll

perform from Oslo to Borneo

the

rest of our lives, in living rooms, in

front of children, wigs of

smoke shaking out people in slo-mo

for

all time, shaking out forever-texts,

snowflakes, jewels, glass, dust. For

Rodrigo a whole rusty silo

of

anger's unbolted. Here. Now. He slides

across his wardrobe door,

bends his shrivelled, veined cigarillo

limbs

Music: Philip Glass, *Music In Contrary Motion*, (1969)

a piece conceived in 'open form', i.e. it never really ends

& could, theoretically, continue augmenting forever.

down to his stacked shoeboxes: past selves,
claws out clouds of pink, dove-
grey tissue till the first stiletto

heel

emerges like the finger of God
on the Sistine Ceiling –
though he's spat curses through the shadow

of

the valley of Alzheimer's this past
fifteen years these white heels
cry out like relics from Sinai: *Lo!*

Take

us! Wear us! Walk back into the lounge!

Fuck al Qaeda! You're

free at last! Libre al fin! Vamos!

Free at last! Let's go!

She

teeters, Cherry L'Amour again, heel
to toe down a carpet
of ashes – sparks – smouldering charcoals –

to

the lounge where, one by one, the other
residents' gummy eyes
turn, surface, rise out of their glass bowls –

first
to the fierce fuscina of her lipstick,
then to her Biblical
heels. *Roddie?! Roddie?!* & she cajoles

from
their brittle hands a pattering
shale of applause. & she
hooks cheers, like stunned fish, from the rockpools

of
their mouths. Takes guts, don't you think? Wait! Don't
go! Is the wine or this
unstaring story why your face pales?

The wedding-guest moves to get up to leave...

(intermezzo...)

Sex On Maspalomas Beach, Gran Canaria, Two Minutes Before Dawn

“Maw

More

Mine

Maw

More

Mine,”

lament the seagulls, helplessly. They’re serial-killer philosophers. When they sit on the sea’s lens, their silence is a baulk at their own omniscience – they see the deaths of all fish who ever lived, who’ll ever live, all at the same time. They sieve so much blood through their beaks. & when they dive, one-by-one, through the dark glass, it’s not fish-flesh. Not hunger. Not at first. They just want to taste the world, for a second, the way fish taste it: they want, just once, to taste Innocence. Doubt. Not knowing how it all turns out. & this is their curse.

Or their propaganda.

Angels, too, are like this when they peer down on us humans having sex.

We yanked on cold, gritty trunks, prised ourselves out of that hollow-between-dunes, our Xanadu; mounted, giggling, its dissolving crater, in time to see a Canarian fisherman drag an angel, by its legs, from the sea.

You could still make out – by the time the surfers & joggers arrived – the dimpled swathe that fisherman & that angel had left.

Daniel Craig: The Screensaver

...& when I fail to focus, when I tire,
he rises like a Christ newly baptised
in sky blue trunks, reminding me desire
will always lie in wait & be disguised
as men with healing hands & cute-cruel lips
& arms I'd die for should they ever press
too hard against my throat.

When water drips
from him the fish swim to his feet, confess
how happily waylaid they are, congeal
in spasmic foil &, even then, mouth how
the breeding pools upstream are no big deal.

Before my eyes bake white like theirs I vow
I'll hit a key. Before I go berserk
I'll kill him with one finger. Wake up. Work.

Poem While Reading Frank O'Hara, Lachanau, Southwest France

I don't know as I get what Frank O'Hara is driving at
with his *I do this, I do that* it's like sand astonishing
one grain at a time as I lie on my surfboard absorbing
constant ocean-boom, splintered wavebreak, treble hiss petering
out towards me like something acidic *Mesdames? Messieurs?* Iced-
tea in a can's a saviour – watch his tanned, scoured feet in flip-
flops leaving me, but daydream into the salty inlet be-
tween that big toe & the next one to it my tongue.

Ten minutes surfing though my tongue was still beached between his toes
I'm dripping, shaking, collapse, back, onto, my, towel, count haloes
of each looped, yellow thread but can't, oesophagus & eyes still
wasp-stings of salt, squint sunbathers like sausages on a grill
but can't, but can't, *Andy, Karen, Robin, you hungry?* It's crap
we can't count everything, spot-on that this poem's got a gap.

Epithalamion

This moon does a human ear
pressed bloodless against the glass.

Do outlaws do monogamy?

Does my in-breath ape your out-breath?

You run towards me, your feet raising moths
like confetti in this borrowed light.

Here on the outhouse roof the tiles
still press the memory of sun into buttocks, calves & ankles.

I'll be Achilles to your Patroclus,

Enkidu to your Gilgamesh,

Hadrian to your Antinous.

Come on up! Take my hand in holy, animal husbandry!

Have we not fought to walk in the same story?

This sky feels like the hold of an old Dakota,
musky with the weight of dark blue horses.

The whites of their eyes are stars.

Let's bail into our bodies' finitude, jump down
into lavender; fireflies; transfused poppies.

Let's make love on the earth.

We keep combusting,
retrieving our clothes from ashes.

That cast-iron Jesus at the edge of the maize-field hangs,
his thighs streaked with rust.

This phalanx of sunflowers is on tenterhooks, about to do jade & flame again.

A quinine tang of air.

Something new.

I do

I do

I do.

Pine

Once, from a summer train, I saw a burning car
in a peach dusk cornfield.

Two boys running away from it, laughing.

In winter I saw that same car in a costume of snow, sinking
as if with the joy's weight.

I found out this: that there's no such thing as sin.

Take last night, here in Festalemps:
a white hair of lightning clove a pine
clean in two.

I held the man I'd stolen, killed for, close. We smelt black smouldering. Flesh.

Not us.

It.

This morning we walked to where the pine had split and burnt.

Ants were making chains of themselves,
sneaking off with jewels
of resin.

1969

Part III

On screen the words: July 20th 1969. Tinny music from a transistor radio: 'Sugar, Sugar' by The Archies.

Cue

aerial shots. Pan across high-rise,
concrete geometries,
grid-punched windows. Home-sweet-domiciles

of

Sixties' urban Britain. Here, pinned high
in a kiddyblue sky,
so close to – so sealed from – her neighbours, miles

from

the nearest horse snorting in a green
field, Mum plays house. Quick! Let's
glide right into the flat now. *On trial's*

how

it feels, perhaps. The elation of
novelty. An overlong
truancy. Do nuclear missiles

or

race-riots trouble her? Unlikely.

She wears a round-collared
orange blouse, flicks through catalogues, smiles,

curled

high summer in a scuffed, teal armchair,

formica kitchenette

behind. Clocks siesta. Egg chuckles

in

a pan (red Tefal: a matching set). She

heaves herself up to switch

on the telly – turn off the heat – keels

like

an entranced, manoeuvring galleon,

heavy with loot – finds a

plate – an eggcup – & is cochinealed

by

sunlight, unbeknownst to her, as she

balances her dinner

back – slowly – across the room – is rolled

by

her own hips back across the threadbare

carpet, to the armchair.

She eats. But finds herself more enthralled

by

BBC news rising out of a

grey-sea-noise blizzardbox:

how a white saucer of moon has swelled

to

mimic the parabola her own

belly makes – as if that

quick left hook, that kick inside – just felt –

might

be a moonquake felt by Armstrong too,

might be a long shudder

sent along a universal fault-

line,

demanding hot-off-the-press headlines

around the world: BABY'S

KICK COSMICALLY DEFIANT!

She

scribbles in shorthand, tots up shillings

for wool, while on telly:

The Eagle has landed

Music: David Bowie, *Space Oddity*

“That’s one small step for man, one giant

leap

for mankind”. I should’ve said “a” man,

the “a”, the indefinite

article, was what I meant

to

say, meaning one small step for me, here,

my hand on this ladder,

yet one incomparable moment

in

human history. But “a” was not

said, or, if said, was slurred,

not heard, despite his avowed intent

(“lost

in transmission”, NASA will insist).

His left boot – slow – steps down

into inch-thick bonemeal: shot of bent,

bright

rubble-plain curled around his visor,

subzero cemetery

of meteors, each smashed, an accident –

Music: Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata”

as reconfigured by Katie Paterson in her 2009

installation “Earth-Moon-Earth” in which a

recording from the original score is digitally

encoded, reflected off the moon’s surface

& then replayed, but with some notes -

one

day or one aeon ago? Who knows?

Cold scars. Devastation:

a bleached peach-pit scoured of succulent

flesh,

which ants – thorough surgeons – have picked bone-

clean. Armstrong continues:

I'm king of the castle! Triumphant!

Sure

beat those bastards – forgive me, ma'am – those

Ruskies who couldn't cut

it. But where the hell are brave men meant

to

ride their racing hearts now we've done this?

Another thing – no hoof-

print of God's anyplace evident –

I

just feel the weight of vast, unhomely

universe leaning in,

unbreathing, unworded, ignorant

of
me, my crew, this tinfoil Eagle &
this blue jewel, this grail of
where we're from. Meanwhile the "a" he meant

to
say, casualty of his botched lines, lifts
like a dandelion
seed off into that same firmament,

Armstrong
bounces
slo-mo
across
Mum's
belly.

mopes
through a thousand light years' galactic
tundra & comes, slowly,
to know itself: how, if it didn't

buck
up, waive its false, sovereign uniqueness
& sow itself into
a brand new alien alphabet

there'd
be no new words. This isn't, by the
way, an allegory.
It happened. But, likewise, no moments

days –

years – exist without being moistened

or bothered by others.

So no snow-white page, no precedents,

no

intoning of Hebrew: *Bereshit*

In the beginning

bara Elohim et

God created

hashamayim ve 'et ha 'arets,

Heaven & Earth (Genesis 1.1)

no

intoning of Greek: *en arkay ayn*

In the beginning

ha Logos, because Time's

was the Word (John 1.1)

a kaleidoscope, all shuffled bits

of

mirror, gem & grit – we all repeat,

Music: John Cage, *Cheap Imitation* (1969)

rejjig & recombine,

more alive the more our body lets

this

dream of pure beginnings melt away.

Mum feels... future-bound? Is

future-bound bound by her future? Bets

are

off as to what she feels. Bluebottle –
a fidgety sapphire –
spins in rapture – trapped – panics – headbutts

an
underlip of lampshade. Our future's
looming – as cocksure as
my milk-teeth – as submerged snowdrops' heads

punch
through topsoil – permanents deep behind
them in my unborn jaw.
The fly's thwacked – stunned – eggshell's binned – bed's

made –
but knowing this block of flats, like most
of Nottingham, is built
on sand – not rock – moves her – each tick bodes

ill
in the lift-shaft – each kick in womb – each tick,
each tock – to tears of shame
for having become like all the hordes

who've

fallen before her, for having made
her dad's eyes shattered plates
ploughed up into air. She's snipped the cord –

(how
easy! – she hadn't even known it
was there!) – which leashed her to
the sticky homesoil. I've taken – caught

her
out – yes – outed her. Did every bus
say “harlot”, every gas
bill, every drunk mumbling in the street?

&
every label in every new dress?
(For how many years? What?
Still?) Or – becoming a heavyweight

tight
inside her – do I displace that shame
just as I squash her lungs
up into her ribcage, make her short

of
breath (once short-changing her fourteen floors)

Mary

Mary

quite

contrary

how

does

your

garden

grow?

With

silver

bells

&

cockle

shells

&

just as I displace her pretty
bladder, stomach, spine, gut – push her heart maids
like all
a small, white egg to one side? Fact is, in
I don't budge an ounce of a
her shame – well how can I when it's part row
of
her – as it's part of me – owned deeper
than vertebrae, deeper
than our own eyes? "*We gotta get out*
of
this place, if it's the last thing we..." The
Animals thump from a
transistor as Mum grips the car-seat
of
that old banger of a duck-egg blue Music: Steve Reich, *Piano Phase* (1969)
Volkswagen Beetle – is
driven up Rad- – whoa! – another bout
of
contractions! – fast through the night up Rad-
ford Road – or – rather – the

city's spun like a neon – *Scream! Shout!*

Go

on girl! – -studded carousel around

her. *Jesus! Is this why*

you not scream? The midwife fishes out

her

tiniest scissors, unpicks black seeds

of twine behind the lips,

in wet, watermelon gum – Mum's mouth

sewn –

sewn – sewn – sewn together, so all her

screams, like demons, stayed locked

in the gullet going *MMMMMMMMMM MMMMMMMMMM MMMMMMMMMM*.

MMMMMMMMMM

Who? ask midwife – nurse – caressing her.

You? Why? So as not to

wake the ward? Wake the WORLD if you want!

Does

Mum free her screams as I ready mine?

The noise of cut-apart

fruit? Dividing rivers? Does she want

the

midwife, lashed to the waterwheel of

her pain, to go down with

her, slicked with the scalding sediment

of

this Swanee they know of old? *You've got*

the right to scream! Okay?

Mum nods, an animal covenant –

&

oozes murderous. Her body's thrown

against white walls: a slicked

wet pot, or a wobbling continent

which

gobbles up Time – & spews back out a

thousand-year glacier,

inch by inch: the oddest thing's they count

flocon de neige: 'snowflake' in French

toes,

fingers, not of warm flesh but of cold,

compact snow, snap a puce

umbilical's icicle, decant

cáithnin sneachta: 'snowflake' (Gaelic)

a pint of shimmering white slush from
my lungs before I hiss my
first clear breath. Thus, they see how I'm meant

bông tuyết (Vietnamese)

not
for incubator or crib, but for
the ice-burred, lonely
cavern of a freezer compartment,

(the
likes of which I'll sleep in for the next
forty years). & I'm meek
& strange & perfect – bawl no complaints,

not
even when thermometers are slid
in disbelief into
my side. I watch their arteries wince.

(intermezzo...)

Blood Oranges

That reminds me – an old Nottingham lad
once collared me in Tesco's, said "Two bags
of oranges for a quid!" "I only
want one bag," I said, sad. "Me too," he said.
"But one bag's one fifty. So let's put two
bags in your basket. Here's a quid. Sling me
mine at the exit. We'll both be winners."

The Atlas mountains float improbably,
snow-leafed, nibbled by fishbone aerals.
Between satellite dish, baked pink rooftiles,
a stork does his pointless calligraphy.

That lad's long dead now, but these alive-ish
Marrakech oranges remember him:
I've made them find a rhyme for their own gasped flesh.

Mr Universe

I'll make my muscles caged geese, force feed them

ephedrine, Captagon, Testoviron,

until the day I wake in a costume

of their plucked, gorged carcasses, walk on stage

arid, shredded, basted, to be judged

not by shrinking mirrors (who's the Daddy?

You are! You are!) but by Schwarzenegger –

Mr Universe. Compulsory pose

no.7 will have it in the bag.

I'll be snakily vascular, bigger

than Ozymandias, man magnified –

each new mass of muscle-fibre founded

on rubble, on damage done to the old.

Halotestin. Stromba. Parabolan.

Describe me on that Day of Days. Nothing

worth seeing now but this work-in-progress,

me sewing my jockstrap – like a princess! –

steam tumbling through square-jawed light – this locker-

room window – this sweat-steeped glove beginning
to uncurl from the grip of the Kingdom
yet to come, as if there might be other
ways to live.

Clenbuterol. Masteron.

Men Are Rarely Killed Outright By Electric Shock

Pull the victim clear by the coat tail, if dry.

Your belt, or braces, can be slipped round his leg, or arm, to pull him away.

You can also protect yourself by standing on dry wood, or dry, folded newspaper, or a dry mackintosh.

Two or three firm slaps with the flat of the hand between the shoulders will bring the patient's tongue forward.

But be aware that he may not speak.

Not for several hours.

Not, perhaps, for days.

Years, even.

On no account touch him if you think your own spine may become an earthing rod.

Should you deem it necessary you may walk away.

But do not look back.

Not until the hairs on the back of your own neck lie flat again.

Not until several hours have passed.

Days.

Years.

A lifetime.

Poem While Reading Miroslav Holub In The Genito-Urinary Clinic Waiting Room

Live, alive-ho! These bugs! These bugs! Alive!
They've leapt between us since we flapped in slime,
jump ship, like pirates, to the brink of Time.
We're hit. We take in water. They survive.

& here we wait for test results, pretend
to read. You: *What Car?* Me: *Holub's Selected*
which permeates my bones till I'm infected.

Does every rhyme of loins sound out the end?

If you weren't such a bloke I'd hold your hand
uncurl it, break it open like a tight
wet waterlily bulb, there to find – stowed –
the toxic larvae of angels. I'd wind
the clocks back to that hot, barbaric night.
I'd burn them off your palm, watch them explode.

Ungreen

This kid types: *want it bareback, want it raw.*

A tyrant queen. A chat-room for a realm.

In '86 a public info film

showed me my grave. Doomy dies irae

was soundtrack to plans for wake, bouquets, bier.

That soundtrack silenced me. Not viral loads.

That soundtrack bound – would kidnap me to wards

of walking bones – I'd die within the year

of ignorance (that's code for being queer).

Those bells bent – buckled – me into my fear –

My sixteen-year-old body quaked. I'd learned:

want's the spark of being burned.

This kid's cocksure no one was ever mourned.

I quake. Still want. A leaf ungreen. But here.

1969

Part IV

Aleatory music fades in: chime tree, sizzle cymbal wash, celeste, Aeolian harp. Through blue cigar smoke the two wedding-guests emerge, huddled close, as the reception continues around them. They blow smoke rings, meditatively. Then one of them continues:

We're

smoking these Sigari Toscani

Tuscan cigars. A brand of cigar

like proud new dads, except

popular in Italy among writers & artists since

the baby in question has long since

the late 1800s. Smoked by Clint Eastwood

grown

in the film *A Fistful of Dollars*, (1964), directed

by Sergio Leone with music by Ennio Morricone.

up to be the man you see before

you, alive & still nine

tenths sober! Now pan down the ward's plinths

of

beds – two more kissable babies born

now – Raschid &

Raschid Parvez Gorshani (1969-1978)

Rachel: two other lottery skins

Rachel Penelope Gallagher (1969-2054)

I

could've been poured into – slutty wine –

become two different

me's in. Pan past them – encounter skeins

of

planes' fluff-grey vapour-trails as we leap-

frog the Atlantic – find
a third, just born, in a ward in Queen’s,

New
York. Cassie folds it gingerly in
her arms, swears hers has
toenails which are ten translucent mints

or
edible sequins, that his insteps’
curves are porcelain teacups,
feels a crush on what is hers a sense

of
wanting to bubblewrap him from all
knocks. Then – lickety split –
he morphs – to toddler – to boy – to teens,

right
there in the starched sheets, still in her prised-
wide-apart arms. Teens to
awkward lust-buffeted stud who leans,

whose
head hangs back over her elbow – whose

faintly superimpose Michelangelo’s Pietà

taut, stubbly throat's exposed –
whose arm's grubby rope plumblines. She keens

in
blankness, tries to rock him back lifeward
but he bows the way a
limp rice-sheaf bows over shoulders, once

cut –
slackens – cools – stills – his un-marshalled blood
already easing back
from frontlines & outposts – blankly keens

as
the flesh of his lips blues. Why am I
capturing this gentle
untensing, the way blood reconvenes

at
the deep aorta, tugs his life down
below all graphs' axes?
Is this Past, Present or Future tense?

He's
died – or will die – of AIDS-related

Kaposi's sarcoma

(it's 1992), no defence

left –

not one – against the knocks & napalms

of infection. I want

to show you how a death like this means

no

less, no more, than any kind of death,

how it's not “just deserts”,

nor the “wages” of anyone's “sins” –

it's

as staggeringly meaningless as

the chance-in-a-million

meeting of sperm & egg, the chance-

shneyele 'snowflake' (Yiddish)

in-

a million haphazardry of a

snowflake's fall – & exact

place of apparent disappearance.

A

nurse steps in – checks vitals – watch – draws blinds,

Rick Princeton Gates (1969-1992)

parts two slats – bitten-down

nails – peeks at a kid – stamps at pigeons

ten

floors below on a brown, new-rinsed sidewalk –

stabs their slate explosion

with a polythene umbrella's glance.

Glance

back (forward?) to 1983 –

leave New York city for

a slatted porch deep in Wisconsin's

back

country. Ray Gates, now wheelchair-bound, runs

a woodcutting business,

Cassie, his wife – getaway cabins

for

cityslickers – it's big bucks helping

them hunt to find themselves.

Kick back, enjoy old-time ambience!

her

brochure says. Kick coke-habits! Kick-

start your manhood by

banging bits of lead into Bambi!

They're

side by side, silhouettes. Beyond, Rick

fingers the porn his dad's

just found, wonders if a kid can be

more

of a skid of shit on his dad's shoe

than he feels, doing this.

Ask me, he's got namby-pambier

year

on year & it's your doing. Jeez, can't

even look him in the

eye no more. So how can I drink beer

with

him? Be seen with him? Wish I'd stayed in

'Nam, let gangrene lick me

popsicle to stick another year

then

I'd never have lived to see my kid

reverse his flesh, turn it

all inside out like a carrier

bag

blown by any wind that fills it up.

God would turn a blind eye

if I shot him now. This carrier.

Rick

strikes a match to start a bonfire where

garden ends – woods begin –

to pull down dusk around each ear

like

a mask he'll wear now onward. His eyes

smart as magazines curl,

bubble, crack, whistle. *Don't stand so near*

calls

Cassie. He glimpses glossy bodies

unexpectedly lit

by infernos beneath them – they sear

quick,

first aubergine lesions then blue-fire-

rimmed fistulas, then crisped

bat-skeletons dance up into clear

sky,

welcomed by their live siblings

who flicker randomly

through the cool, mauveing air –

but

some glossy bodies manage to slide

free of pages, unstick

from their poses, become 3D-er,

spring

like tanned, priapic Action Men or

Ken dolls, out of the fire,

to the woods, tussling nettles, gorse, briar...

Ray

& Cassie don't see this. They've gone in.

Only Rick, aghast, left

out in the dark, sifting embers. A year

on,

he's played quarterback. Tick. Gone way past

second base with every

chick this side of Lake Superior.

Tick.

& now a crossbow's on his lap, in
the passenger seat of
his dad's souped-up Suzuki truck. *Veer*

high

*with your aim. Remember gravity
will pull your arrow down
some. Remember I been shooting deer*

since

*I was knee-high. Once shot two fuckin'
does with one bullet. You're
my legs now, son. We'll pull up down here.*

You

*climb that chokecherry tree. The engine
chews on the silence of the
backwoods, stops. Rick assumes the mien*

of

a carer – helps his dad onto the
hydraulic scissor-lift

on the back of the truck – a slight sneer

tugs

his almost-moustached top lip as this

old vet takes to his throne,

his camo'ed lookout, reptilian.

Then

Rick climbs the chokecherry, waits. A mile

away: a coyote's

alto-sax solo, dystopian

song

of lonesomeness – yip-yip-yayeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee – long

yellow ribbons of sound

strung through these trees' bare verticals – pyow! –

where

he'd shot cowboys before they'd seen

his eyewhites (he'd always

played Chippewa – it was the powwow,

'Chippewa': Anglicised name of the local Native American tribe

'powwow': tribal festivities, dancing

war-

paint, the way they were beyond the pale...).

Rick waits. This game's what men

do, honing the arrowtip of now –

it's

a test, a rite, & they wait. *We wait.*

Till this whitetail noses

down the ridge wearing the biggest crown

you

ever saw. I pull back the bowstring.

& my heart's like BAM BAM.

& already in my head the whole town's

told

the story of it. & I pull back

the bowstring. Let go. SLAM!

In the boilerhouse! But he ain't down –

son-

of-a-bitch flies like he's still alive –

reaches Dry Creek – a death-

bed of leaves. Awesome. The abstract noun

“fear”

congeals – here – now – into the liquid

obsidian eye of

the muscly, twelve-point buck who's gone down

at

last & shivers at Rick's feet. Out of
respect he doesn't touch
till the eye stops eyeing him (but how

do

you know when?). This fly knows when – burrows
down through the caramel
pelt. Rick's wide-eyed – wired – furrows his brow –

(flies

don't figure in his story) hears Ray
whoop triumph – his heart punch-
drunk – *darn, if you're not a hunter now!*

Tick.

Rick kneels at the deer's warmth, already
surges of cinnamon-
coloured leaves banking against the bow

of

its belly. If he looks up there's a
mirrorball, spinning, hung
from a branch. A barman says *Mmmmmmmiaow!*

Distant music: Jimi Hendrix 'Star Spangled Banner'

(dressed
as a cat), splays across a glass-topped
bar, as the woods re-mould
to a blue-dappled nightclub. His paw

'Area', a nightclub at 157 Hudson Street, New York

taps
a shoulderpad, purrs *Who's the new meat?*
in the rhinestoned ear
of the legend which is Cherry L'Amour.

Claws
off the chickens, sweetie! He come from
Buttfuck, Wisconsin, to
be with us tonight. Tragic! In awe,

Two years later. 1986. Rick is sixteen years old

their
eyes covet him & that which he has,
of which he's barely, yet
just sufficiently, aware. Rick scores

...which fades into

high,
wows even them, the tart seen-it-alls,
no underwear under
his tight, white, polyester trousers

Marshall Jefferson 'Move Your Body', which fades into

White Knight 'Never Give Up', which fades into

&

J.M. Silk 'Music Is The Key', which fades into

now pulling off his smiley-face T,

unafraid, unashamed,

Kraftwerk 'Musique Non Stop', which fades into

feels wetness pearling in the dark fuzz

Phuture 'Acid Tracks', which fades into...

of

his chest-hair, in the oystershells of

his armpits, starting out

of him, squeezed light, as his body rouses

to

the DJ's spun, visceral pulses,

as the track builds, builds, as

the mirrorball porcupines lasers,

as,

tucking the T in his asscrack, sways

like Michelangelo's

'Dying Slave', sways, eyes closing, raises

his

elbows, his hands, feeling his torso

becoming bread, wanting –

as the track nudges him toward grace –

to

break himself apart so all can eat.

You know the rest. You know.

The crumb's on your lips. You have the taste.

(intermezzo...)

Consciousness and the Long-Distance Runner

Heelskin: parmesan.
Blisters: boiled gnocchi.
Lungs: two ravenous
dogs locked in the chest
who must gnash a path
outward to a skin
salty as oiled, cured
ham. & big tonails
part like midnight-blue
mussel-shells – I'll be
down to shucks, scraps, crumbs
& picked bones one day.
The next, not even
that. Meanwhile I run,
shovelling distance
between me & this
gaunt pterodactyl,
from whom I once stole
an egg, safekept it
warm in my mouth as
I ran, then tripped, then
swallowed, & it lodged

in my trachea
where skin pooled around
it & it became
my Adam's apple.
What is consciousness
but the afterdust
of a footfall, or
its echo, or its
dislodged air? The shoe-
smack on the tarmac's
the primary fact.
I run along Trent
Embankment, through green
studs of Canada
goose-shit. The river
creeps like a cooling
girder. I arrive
in my flesh, this eat
or be eaten, this
breathe or be breathed. This
pathos. This Fuck You.
This not stopping

The Mystery Of The Incarnation

is how God, like an asteroid shooting toward Bethlehem, should, instead of crushing our bones into diamond, compact Himself so nicely into the baby Jesus.

In my grandmother's back-kitchen I was feeding the mouth of the metal mincer – *Gurney & Sons, Sheffield* – which was clamped on the edge of the fold-out, formica table, daring my fingers to push the scarlet meat as close as I could to the grinding teeth, pretending it wasn't my other hand turning the handle & making those vicious teeth grind.

“Hark! That'll be yer mam!” said my grandmother, as she scooped a tater from a tub of dark swill, & scalped it. She'd fought Jerries in the War. She could scalp anything & eat it.

“What?” I asked. I stopped grinding. “*What's my mam?*”

“*That's yer mam!*” she said.

I looked at the plate which cradled the meat. The crescent of blood.

Twelve minutes later there'd be twelve meatballs, waiting for the electric crackle of the fat in the pan to give them bubbling haloes.

Twelve days later I'd be seeing Star Wars at the Savoy Cinema on Derby Road.

Twelve years later I'd be allowing a man to shoot a flare deep inside my body. The light would crackle over the silent waters inside me, crackle over its own dying arc. I would think

him God, for a while.

God made meat.

Very densely incarnate.

Chop It!

When do you own your own body? At twelve?

At twelve my grandma hollows out my arms into storm-drains, stands back & watches as her
grief drops down them in torrents.

Chop! Chop! Chop it!

Since granddad died last week she's been taking down photographs. The back garden's a
forest of them, still in their frames. One of my jobs is to take an axe to them, springing
weddings, cricket teams, from drunk parallelograms till my bicep throbs like a beehive.

Still she says *Chop! Chop! Chop it!*

Words which smell of butcher's shops, the insides of animals. I chop. She gathers the wood
for a fire. If I'm man-of-the-house, shouldn't I put a stop to this? Or should I obey her?

How big her eyes are, as she strikes a match, lures all this wood towards her.

How big her eyes are.

The better for seeing through me, though she says I'm a godsend.

Glass beehive between her & the abyss.

Halfway up the wall. Still. Still. Except for your antennae – oars – which stretch out from the peashoot-green canoe of your body. Six springloaded Z's for legs. (Neither of us can sleep in this attic-room heat). A yellow line down the length of your back. A two-inch iron nail for a tail.

Since that night we spent together in The Pembury Hotel, Seven Sisters Road, Finsbury Park, I've not been able to find you a name, to identify your family, genus, sex. Did you crawl from an African's valise?

Still. Still. In the way that an explosive device is still. Except for your antennae, rowing an unseen current. If I should sleep, will you & your seven sisters nail me to this bed? Puncture my body at eight strategic points, two at each ankle, two at each wrist? Will a red-haired Russian maid find me in the morning & cross herself, because I look like Christ in his tomb, wracked, desiccated?

So it's you & me, kiddo. A vigil. Listening to how bedsprings through walls, to how piccolo breakpads of black cabs, to how Victorian flightpaths of sewers, to how underground trains, to how, when I was twelve, in London with a friend & his parents, I slipped off a packed tube train, thinking it was our stop, only to find that it wasn't our stop. I looked back & saw the heads of my friend & his parents, still on the train. Their eyes were glazed by travel, boredom. None of them had noticed. & I remember wondering, there in the chaos of the platform: *what if I don't get back on?*

Maybe I got back on.

Maybe I didn't.

Or maybe I did both, & since that day have been living two lives, rowing the river in two
canoes.

Bug. Medium. Spike. Spy. Are you picking up my other self?

Is he doing okay?

Berlin Taxi

My poems used to glitter, passed from lip
to lip like wafers of uranium
the Stasi never traced. Now every hope
is met by Pepsi – Sony – IBM –
& threading fumes – this beck & call – is all I am.

So that's The Wall! You've ticked it off: the friezes thumbed
with chewed gum on Bernauer Strasse. You hear
the sound the road-scar makes? Beats any themed
tourbus or Made-In-China souvenir!
dum-DUM – ich-BIN – the voice of cleft Berlin
still smirking up through cleaner, suaver, newer
layers. Where next? I'll work into the thin
blue dawn until I hear again it thrummed
through tarmac – rubber – driveshaft – chassis – bone.

1969

Part V

Close-up of a snowbaby's hand resting on a woman's collarbone. The woman's hair is longer than previously. She hums a nursery rhyme.

On screen the words: 1970. Then the voiceover:

Mum's	Mary
raw hands pick me up to pivot me	had
against her collarbone,	a
to weigh me against the blue toothpaste	little
of	lamb,
dawn squeezing through the curtain-slinks:	it's
it's penance – punishment –	fleece
to have her nipple frozen, pitch breast	was
to	white
the unhomely frequency of this	as
freak baby's cold tuning-	snow,
fork tongue, penance – punishment – for – lest	&
she	everywhere
forget – that night when snows blurred edges	that
of everything she'd known,	Mary
rubbed out her paths, let bounds be transgressed.	went
Of	the
her body. Of her eggshell self. Of	lamb
	was
	sure
	to
	follow

what's shameful. What not. Yet
she will love me the way the meekest

snow-

drop packs the fiercest punch – through steel soil –
to sweeten the air. She'll
work, make even of *me*, something blessed,

so

On screen: 1973. Teaching me to read.

each night, before she does the tucking-
in, before I'm left with
the peas & ice-cream & the lid's hissed

shut

with sealed-black air, she reads me tales &
guides my finger so each
word is summoned to its tip like a beast

of

an insect, marvelled at, tamed. I'll melt
my tongue round each word long
after she's gone to bed, star linguist

to

guarantee her quick praise each morning,

while each word mastered by
me is, for her, like a creaky priest

who
grants one grit of forgiveness on some
long, pocked & pitted path
of absolution. The very least

I
can do is mouth the words with her – watch
her mouth as I slip – by
heart – into Arctic wastes of sleep, eased

there,
ever more depth-charged with words, knowing
by instinct, not only
that I've done good by her, but that she's

done
good by me, & that, from the place where
two faults meet, there sprouts up
the shyest, toughest, savagest weeds.

It's 2003

But
I've been eyeing this old Harley, leant

against my freezer, in
this garage-prison my home. Its key's

left
one day in the ignition & my
fingers rehearse the twist,
the gentle twist. I know I must seize

this
blue-fuming buffalo graaaaaaawl, deep from
its black & cream teardrop
fuel tank, straddle it & grapple these

two
chrome handlebars, or I'll die here. So –
my snowskin scarved, leathered,
goggled over – every inch disguised –

Dover

I
take to the road, stow myself, my bike,
in a truck bound for France,
sneak out at Lille, breathe, stretch, terrorised

Calais

by
the thought that I'll never go back home.

Lille

Adjusting my scarf, the

white of me's exposed to the drunk eyes

of

joyriders – hear: *Lui, c'est vraiment un*

He's a real

taré! Rentrez-chez vous,

weirdo! Go back to where you came from,

fil de pute! Shocked to be so despised,

fucker!

I

wonder about this freedom. I mount

the bike. Each needle of

Metz

my snow is itching south, to idolise

its

Bern

own. I ride. Days. Till Alps – base-crystals

of testosterone a

microbiologist magnifies

Spiez

or

fists full of razorblades tucked between

knuckles – peep up. My heart

crunches fearfully as horizon

heaves

them higher & higher into view.

But it's joyful: the stuff

Lauterbrunnen

I'm made of heaped out in the open,

each

cleft an isosceles triangle

or rhomboid of burning

aluminium-white. This snow's the Zion

of

all those yearnings, nostalgias, I could

never put a name to.

This snow's what I recognise in

the

rear-view mirror when I glimpse chinks of

my own wrist, neck & ears

(with a road's yellow marks capsizing

out

of sight). I weep. The Alps pull open

stadia, deigning to

gulp the speck of me in, enclosing

kepingan salju (Indonesian for "snowflake")

me.

Schneeflocke (German)

It's falling now too: I'm riding through

veils of embroidered air,

slowing, till the bike's barely nosing

round

each hairpin bend. I abandon it.

I give my gloves the slip.

I wade offroad. Upward. Supposing

this

snow goes on, the bike'll be buried –

I'll look back & those gloves

will still be gripping handlebars, frozen.

Shame

can't help but wade towards any fix

of oblivion, as

a film seeks its own ending, goes on

till

it finds the familiar dark screen

it emerged from. I can't

help but wade higher on paths chosen

not

by me but by my white, white body,

which returns to itself,

In 1555 a priest named Olaus Magnus in

Uppsala, Sweden, discovered that each snowflake had six corners.

His 'scientific' drawings, however, do not show this.

Instead – bizarrely – they show snowflakes as

tiny miscellaneous objects: hands, silver bells,

cockleshells, letter

A's & waning moons...

flok debë re (Albanian)

sniegpārsla (Latvian)

snøfnugg (Norwegian)

snow to snow, & as the sky snows on,

bluen eira (Welsh)

snow

bleideag-sneachda (Scots Gallic)

on snow, the snowflakes float around me

in slo-mo, like tiny

lumehelves (Estonian)

doves drugged on altitude & ozone –

from

all the world's cold skies they've flown to me.

snjókorn: (Icelandic)

Their whiteness my blindness.

Their white polkadots my methodone

in

which I'll lie dreamily sepulchred –

dreamily wasted. *Hey!*

Frosty! I don't know who are you – don't

know

what are you – how you find this cave – don't

know who you teenk you are,

bustin' in my 'hood like Al Capone –

but

help me with theees, yes? I'm called Cherry

L'Amour – or Roddie P.

Gonzago – I leeve here blind, alone!

Cut

theees bandage – yes, more more tight! Now theees

safety pin. You teenk I'm

Jesus with bloody holes? It's lipo!

This

cave's candlelit (for me?), unalive

with boneyard mannequins,

boas, furs, wigs & white stilettos.

He

(she?) stands in the middle of this mess

while I, still coming to,

still snowblind in a kite-high doze,

find

myself dressing his self-imposed wounds.

He is Buddha-bald

with the jasmine-tea skin of boy-pharoahs.

I've

leaped between man & lady more time

than a dose of crabbis –

In Greek myth, Tiresias strikes two copulating snakes &

is changed into a woman. Later, having turned back into a man, he's

I'm known also as Tiresias –

blinded by Juno for revealing too much about female sexual pleasure,

Jupiter then granting him the compensatory gift of prophesy.

So

I know stuff, okay? Did they tell you

your fairytale end here

with me? Pah! Is as baloney as –

as

merda as – as farkakt as – as this!

shit (Spanish)... shitty (Yiddish)

He reaches under my

jacket, strokes my solar plexus,

digs

in his fingernails, scoops out a full palm

of it & throws it at

the rock behind me. *As lonely as*

I

am, at least my body's not a hull

of cold shame like yours. Go

south! Go! To Italy! Aero-lo's

a

spit away. But how can I go south,

let Spring rise through my boots,

tug these hexagonalites loose?

How

can I go south, when that sun angling
steeply down on meadows
will enter me, shrill as piccolos,

each

horrid shaft of it wheedling into
ears & orifices,
pulling me apart? But I go. Lose

the

I I am. I walk... walk... lumbering
fatalistically like
Frankenstein's monster, south, south, my muse

&

guide that fuschia-lipped oddosity –
feel sun fondle me as
I steal a rowing boat on Como's

north

shore, make oars crimp the tepid water.

I hear bells – probably

this wedding's bells – & a dog's bellows –

pot

luck pebbles of melody skimmed out

across this lake's cobalt

foil. Then sunshine at Bellagio

creeps

through me – my feet become cumulus,

then cirrus: a boatful

of flashing, slip-slop mirror row-rows

the

boat with me, or is me, row-rows till

no-one is rowing, till

I wash up on the shore, just below

that

stuccoed, yellow-ochre wall just there,

& gasp at my naked

body because I'm no longer snow

but

this pink flesh, bristling with hot, red blood.

It curls into fists

like opening poppies. How it flows!

Did

you think I was a friend of the groom?

Or the bride's ex-lover?

Pitched into the lake, *ubriaco*?

pissed

I'm

rather like this sparrow, chancing on

midges as the dusk soothes

us toward night. Because this sparrow's

an

innocent gatecrasher too – see how

crazy it is to be

in its body! How clueless! You're so

good

letting me bend your ear like this, talk

you through this unfilmed film

which has no last frame as it has no

first –

unless it's us, our features gently

petrifying with this

surfeit of shifting scenarios

as

the waiters strip the tables. Unless

it's you, my crew, the bend

of your face to these notes like the bow

of

a mainsail sensing a westerly,

a new blending of airs,

a sadder & wiser tomorrow.

Music fades in: Miles Davis' 'In a Silent Way'. Aerial shot of wedding marquee, then, rising higher, of Lake Como, then, higher still, of the Alps still glimmering with snow. Screen fades to indigo, then black. Titles.

(fine...)

Wasp, Marrakech

A megaphoned Allah-u-Akhbar,
on the far side of the city, sounds
uncannily like the sound that wasp
made at breakfast under a tumbler.

I'd imprisoned him in his vitrine,
so we could enjoy our cinnamon-
scented coffee & our prised-apart
oranges & orange-juice in peace.

I'd watched his crunchy little body
make do with a pellucid bleb
of pulp washed up near the rim, much as
I smugly, cruelly, now watch God dab-

dab His antennae on our window-pane
when, on the other side, we've just fucked.

I love it that He doesn't get us.

That He buzzes for our stickiness.

Smokers

Brothers! Sisters! They are even here, among us. How, then, shall we know them? & how shall we know if our own child is one? I shall tell you. We shall know them by their ingrained odour, their hollow-cheekedness, their sallowness, their pursing of the lips. Also – hear this! – by their fingering in their pockets, their licking, their sucking, of pens & pencils, their avoidance of sport, their need to be at the back, darting glances at exits, & yes, by their hankering after – & frequent disappearance to be with – their own kind.

Is there a way of standing? Yes, there is a way of standing. Is there a walk? Yes, there is a walk.

& why, brothers, sisters, must we not eat of their food – quiches – whatever? Because we never know what they have been fingering, what butts they have been picking up, putting to their lips, licking, sucking. No, if we value the integrity of our own bodies then we must not allow ourselves to be contaminated, tainted.

Nor must we converse with them. Our languages must flow as two separate rivers. Perversely they will take pride in this. They will acquire their special fag-words, their coded wit. They will cosy up to Death & The Devil & call it natural, call it a human right, a culture. They will make light of the dark they deal in.

& yet – because we are milksop soft & allow it –

they will set up homes amongst us. & they will continue to tempt our own dear children to swell their sordid membership, out there by the backdoors & fire-escapes. & they will continue to flick their wrists, stamping on the hard, blue corpse of winter, licking,sucking.

& they will continue to be at it.

At it, at it.

Lunch at the Argana Café

(i.m. the 15 victims of the terrorist bombing in Marrakech, lunchtime, Thursday April 28th, 2011)

This Easter nail-bomb could've spelled
the end for us,
if we were there now,
if we'd booked now.

But even if we were there now,
who knows – we might
have skipped lunch, not gone
to that café,

so might've missed the nail-bomb by
a mile, or by
a million miles (how
to measure it?)

Stock footage of Jamaa el Fnaa –
grill-smoke, snakes charmed –
cut with shaky vids
of a pitched, charred

aftermath, make it feel we've skipped
our deaths by half

an inch, a quarter

inch, a nail's breadth

of hot steel.

(An old, bony English girl demands to be in this poem. At this point. Now. She stokes an allotment bonfire. Her hair's upended filaments of loft-insulation. O where..? O where...? O where..? O where...? O where are we going with this hairdo?)

I want to pull you

close – stunned – the thought

that we are both now

crucified, back

to back, both sides of a future

where our deaths will,

in all likelihood,

play out without

the convenient rhyme, the sharp

mercy of the

simultaneous

we might've had

if we were there now, if we'd booked

now, if we'd had

lunch at that café,

& never grieved.

Because a figleaf spared Adam & Eve's blushes, it was deemed proper by the Victorians that that a truly enormous one should be made for the copy of Michelangelo's *David* in London.

His penis, of course, is negligible. His torso's the thing. Cocked. Flashing. Hard. Even
now.

If I had to be one of Michelangelo's works, I wouldn't be *David*. My ex so wanted to be *David* he had a surgeon suck egg yolks from his sides, cut slivers of garlic from his eyelids. I guided him home as he leaked into a corset. From then on a lesser man to me.

No, if I had to be one of Michelangelo's works, I'd be that half-blind sketch of the Crucifixion, where his lines inadvertently undo a lifetime's fetish – for the distinct, manfully embodied self - & suggest, instead, a self & canvas which quiver together, oscillating,
interpenetrating.

Who'd have thought at the hammam in Marrakech the hands of a woman would tumble like a djinn the length of my skin? & that those hands would bulldoze the idea of my skin so completely – the idea of its opacity, the idea of it being the city wall of my self.

Her hands were a dervishing saint, a tumbling devil, an eroding wind.

I was dunes.

Silica.

Now I've come to, it's as if I've had surgery. I'm groggy. Elated. I take a sip of sweet mint tea from a glass. I'm guided to the gift of a fig, which, when my thumbs prise apart its skin,
is dewy & blushy & tastes, subtly, of honey & soil.

I've never been as present as this. As opened. The shame in me never quite so slain.

Glove-Puppets

I swear to honour your body.

I swear to turn you on.

I swear, casting a line, with these bugs on it, down through your pupils'
two shocked manholes, to fetch up whatever god lurks there
for the likes of us. Or sonnet.

It'll gently slide its fists inside us,

uncurl its fingers,

gesture in the felt.

Commentary

(wordcount: 33,834)

STRATEGIES: An Introduction

Reflexivities

This commentary reflects, retrospectively, on the making of *The See-Through Man*. In this introduction I will begin, however, by taking a step back and, for a moment, considering the nature of this kind of reflection.

From the outset I knew that this project was going to be bipartite, in the sense that it was going to involve two parallel, concurrent types of work: making poetry, and a critical but personal reflection on that process. In the first few years there was an anxiety about exactly *how* these two types of work should relate to each other. At a N.A.W.E. conference on Creative Writing at Lancaster University in December 2005 one of the speakers quoted (or possibly misquoted) Seamus Heaney. Apparently, Heaney had once said that a poet's reflection on his own work is rather like the commentary on a slow-motion replay of a football kick. Extrapolating from this, I was soon proposing in my journal that this entire project could be said to be analogous to a live broadcast of a football match. The match itself would thus be my making poetry and the live commentary would be analogous to my journal or blog-writing (of which, more later). The post-match, retrospective analysis would then be analogous to this final commentary, now being read. Although this football analogy raised a few eyebrows, it was useful, fulfilling as it did my own need for a delineated structure or a chronologically-based *model* for my project. It also proved to be an effective way of explaining what an academically-situated Creative Writing project entailed (especially since, at the start of this project, few people seemed to know!).

I felt, too, an anxiety about the nature of reflection. *Reflexivities* might be a more apt word to use. As a poet I reflect on a poem in order to judge how successful it is – and it is hopefully a circular, symbiotic process, in that this reflection affects, in turn, the next poem, and so on. There is a desire not for repetition, but for improvement and change. But I reflect not only on the finished poem, but on the poem in the process of its being made, and even on the idea of it – before it has even begun to be set down. To use film terminology, reflection involves a constant oscillation between *focus* – on the choice of word, or the position of a comma, for example, and *long-shot* – on a poem's structure, or its philosophical implications, or its place within an oeuvre. It involves, too, the taking on board of other people's opinions, or of audience reactions. It also involves an awareness of the influence of other poets, or poems, or even of other art forms. To what extent am I passively allowing that influence? Or resisting it? Or actively seeking it? There is thus the question of following, or not following, a respected contemporary, or a school, or a tradition, or a heroic precursor. To whom, or to what, do I owe a debt? To use a Bloomian term, from whom, or from what, do I need to *swerve* in order to gain my artistic individuation?

All of this might seem a little laboured. But it is important to acknowledge that not only is reflecting on the writing process far from simple and surprisingly little written about, but also that it can only ever be, to some extent, disingenuous. Only some of these reflexivities, for example, will ever be correctly or honestly *remembered* – a commentary is a backward-looking genre, after all. And, as I have insinuated, some of them are not even entirely conscious. The nature of this project, however, has demanded otherwise: that I at least attempt to remember well. One of its first challenges, then, was to find a formal and consistent way to document as many of these reflexivities as possible, so that I might remember the making of the poems as well as I possibly could.

The Blog

From the start of this project in 2003 I kept a journal in which I extemporised on poems as they were being written and, more generally, on my writing life. In March 2006 I transferred everything I had written in that journal to a blog, www.talesofthemalenude.blog-city.com and from then, until the last entry in December 2009, I began to type my journal entries directly onto this site.

Admittedly I was jumping onto a bandwagon. In 2006 blogs were still a relatively new phenomenon and were much talked about in the media. I was intrigued to see how my writer's journal would make the transition from notebook to cyberspace. It was, then, something of a fashionable experiment. I soon saw, however, that it had advantages over the traditional notebook, the most obvious being that it allowed any interested parties, anywhere in the world, to leave comments on any of its entries. There was thus the possibility of creatively beneficial dialogue – and, though I never fully exploited this, the possibility of it being part of a network of blogs and therefore a community. Within a few weeks I was getting supportive and constructive comments from as far from Nottingham (where I write) as Australia, and as near as Derby! The awareness of gathering an audience of readers also meant that I felt an obligation to write more regularly than I would have done otherwise (and I still, in fact, bump into these readers who tell me they are disappointed that the blog has finished). This sense of obligation was beneficial to the project. Reflecting was becoming a discipline, in a way that writing in my private notebooks had never been.

However, writing a blog had other consequences, not least of which was an anxiety about the appropriateness of its non-academic style, given that I seemed to be publicly declaring it an integral part of an academically-situated project. On 11th March 2007 I wrote:

This blog is me planning the poems ahead of me, me reflecting on the poems behind me, and me recording the stony path *between* the poems. It could, of course, all be kept in a private notebook. But it's utterly appropriate that this is a **public** notebook. It's a symbolic gesture towards self-exposure. A protracted striptease. I suppose you could say I'm still 'coming out'. An over-compensation for all that secrecy I've been speaking of. Braver. But it's important that it's not written in a public language – one which is standardised, authoritative and stable. Because it must not pander to other people's expectations or be anxious to present a perfect face to the world. This is not the good son speaking. This is me stumbling, inconsistent and mischievous. This is me being ejaculatory, philistine and unsure. And a blog is braver than a notebook because, like the self, like the male body, it is porous. It allows in other voices. If you're reading this you can add to it, dissent, penetrate...

Two main points can be gleaned from this. Firstly, that my blog had quickly become symbolic of a newfound confidence in self-exposure. I was finding a voice in which I had not spoken before, one which was spontaneous and unedited and did not pander to audience expectations of what was 'appropriate' (which did not mind being 'silly' or 'wrong', for example), and which, though it dealt mostly with literary matters, unequivocally demanded a style far removed from Literary Criticism. The public nature of the blog also seemed uncannily consistent with one of the major themes I was exploring in my poems: that of the text/body allowing itself to be seen and allowing its boundaries to be punctured by other

voices (I will discuss this further in the first chapter, ‘Studs’, and in the last chapter ‘Summaries’). Secondly – and this was unforeseen – that my blog, though still mostly ‘reflective commentary’, was also becoming creative in itself. I was *enjoying* it. Often, for example, I felt that I was writing myself into a space where a poem needed to be, as if an entry was a kind of preparatory reconnaissance. Or I was writing an entry which increasingly was resembling a prose-poem – a fact which induced me to explore this form further, (I will discuss this further in the fifth chapter, ‘Stitches’). In consequence, then, the blog gradually became an exciting and influential part of my writing process.¹

The Audiences

In addition to the blog, I kept a loosely chronological notebook in which I wrote single lines, phrases, snatches of overheard conversation, snatches of dreams, quotations, ambitious and obsessive lists of hypothetical titles – anything which might kick-start a poem. This was a primary resource. The first draft of an actual poem was always on lined A4, written in biro, and accumulated densely and messily until I was forced, for fear of no longer being able to read it, to type it into a Word Document on my PC. Once printed out, this second draft was then attacked with biro... And so on. I dated and filed every one of these drafts, no matter how messy, and regardless of whether a satisfactory poem had emerged at the end of the

¹ This blog has now been deleted (although I have kept a paper copy). This is probably hypocritical of me. Despite my assertions here, I do not, after all, want its entries, which were written quite spontaneously, to remain permanently in the public domain. I do not want them to be taken out of context or to be considered as typical examples of my writing or of my thought – because they often were not! Ironically, the blog was a far more authentic reflection of the creative decisions and creative processes behind the writing of *The See-Through Man* than this commentary was ever destined to be. For example, although it did not record the minutiae of decisions made during the drafting of the poems, it did often record how poems refused to turn out the way I wanted them to turn out, how sometimes I failed to bring them to life and how I struggled with ‘1969’ and shorter poems simultaneously – or returned to old poems, thus making a joke of the linear plan I was meant to be following. The commentary is a heroic narrative imposed upon – or covering up – all this messiness. But I stand by this commentary’s inauthenticity in the knowledge that the alternative – the ‘true’ version of events – would have been almost impossible to write as well as extremely confusing and boring to read. The deleted blog is this commentary’s necessary ghost.

process. Over the years I have found that drafts of abandoned or stillborn poems, or early drafts of successful poems, might in themselves become useful resources for new, quite different poems.

There comes a point, of course, when a poem has to be declared finished. For me, such a declaration almost always proves unfounded, but, nevertheless, it was when I was approaching such a point that I usually sought some kind of audience. At the start of this project many of the poems were workshopped with supervisors and with my colleague, Jane Bluett, while a handful were workshopped with members of Nottingham Stanza, a poetry reading group I facilitate, and with members of the poetry subgroup of Nottingham Writers' Studio. Some were posted on my blog, on my MySpace site or, with video accompaniment, on YouTube, and subsequently received comments. The reactions of these various audiences have been instrumental to the development of my writing, although, without wishing to sound ungrateful or unduly cynical, I have learned, over the years, that it is healthy to maintain a certain detachment from all such reactions, given that they are rarely untainted by personal literary tastes, or by the loyalties of friendship, or by the vagaries of group dynamics.

I have read a large proportion of the shorter poems in *The See-Through Man* at various literary events in the East Midlands and in London. I used to believe that one of the best ways to gauge a poem's worth was to perform it to a live audience. Unfortunately, not all poems lend themselves to this. But I believed it possible to sensitise myself to an audience, line by line, as I read, to such an extent that I would understand where the poem gripped and where its hold slackened or failed. There have been many instances where the dramatic structure of a poem became clear to me only in the act of performance. Likewise, I have often seen from an audience's physical reactions whether the tone I was using – irony, for

example – was being successfully communicated. But over the course of this project I have realised that none of this is a failsafe test. Live audiences cannot be trusted implicitly. They have prejudices and moods, and have variable demographics and variable expectations and levels of concentration – so their reactions to identical performances might be different from one night to the next. What is more, although I am a good reader (and always try to push myself so that I move beyond reading into the realm of ‘performance’), many of my poems demand acting skills which, sadly, I do not possess. I therefore cannot expect live audiences to ‘get’ everything I have written. All in all, I have come to realise that, as with the workshops and correspondents mentioned above, a certain detachment is healthy and necessary.

Having said that, all my ‘audiences’, of whatever type, have helped hone my inner critic. They have all contributed, usually in subtle or barely detectable ways, to the decisions I have made which have moved me from one draft of a poem to the next. Over the following chapters I will attempt to map those movements, ultimately telling the story of how *The See-Through Man* became a collection. Chapter One, *Studs*, explores what I wanted – and what I still want – to write about, and the influences which helped determine my subject matter and the kind of poet I was setting out to be. Chapter Two, *Shorts*, maps the making of some of the shorter poems. Chapter Three, *Strides*, maps the making of ‘1969’, a long poem. Chapter Four, *Stitches*, maps the making of some of the prose-poems. Finally, Chapter Five, *Summaries*, shows how I shaped the collection from its constituent parts. It also attempts to summarise the poetics which emerged as a result of this project and which I will be taking with me into my future as a poet.

Chapter 1: STUDS

In this chapter there is one main objective: to document, and reflect on, how I set about delineating the initial theme of my poems – *the naked, male body* – and how, as writing and research progressed, this theme evolved. This requires a short overview of where I was, as a poet, at the start of this project and how and why I had arrived at my chosen theme. It would be disingenuous and misleading to pretend that this was plucked out of thin air and bore no relation to the rest of my life. It was certainly no whim. In fact, it was, like this whole project – as it turns out – phenomenologically rooted, and absolutely no other theme could have been more apt or more important to me.

In other words, this objective requires a little backtracking through the dark woods of my personal and intellectual history:

How I Arrived at the Naked, Male Body

Once upon a time, there lived a boy who all his life had been writing poems, locked in a tower with no books. Because his writing-life sprang up in parallel with his lived life, he realised he needed to find parallel parents. So when, as a teenager, he was let out of the tower into a world full of books, he came to adopt D.H.Lawrence as the parallel father he needed...²

² I should note that this ‘adoption’ (or literary ‘crush’?) took place in the midst of a family of other more-or-less contemporary influences. Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, Tony Harrison and Louis MacNeice were also favourites at school, for example, and were offered by my English teachers, and the exam boards they followed, as a kind of map of where British poetry was at. (Later, at university, they were joined by Hardy and Hopkins – as ‘contemporary’ as Oxford would allow). So, in truth, there was no top-down, patriarchal structure of influence, nor was there ever just one precursor. Lawrence was the closest in a whole web of kinships.

Having Lawrence as a father made sense. He was local. He talked about places I knew in a language I recognised – so he always seemed, in some sense, familiar and *mine*, that he had his roots in the same soil. We had even gone to the same school, Nottingham High School. (I also felt this, to a lesser extent, about Alan Sillitoe, taking a perverse pride that he and my father had lived on the same street in working-class Radford.) On a more intuitive and more significant level, I knew that Lawrence and I shared a similar psycho-cultural background in that we were both formed by a certain puritanical, self-abnegating, Nonconformist philosophy. Like Lawrence, I, too, was to focus on the one thing which that philosophy considered taboo: sex. I would argue that Lawrence escaped from his background by transposing his childhood concept of sanctity on top of the taboo act of sex, and onto the relationship between men and women, thus giving mythical and essentialist status to the notion of gender. I accepted this status, intellectually, for many years. It was corroborated by my readings around Jungian psychology. However, my own body begged to differ. Unable to find any deep interest in, or satisfaction in, women's bodies, my own body seemed to be unfairly and obstinately denying me access to this sacred binary dance of sexuality – and perhaps of gender too.

Was I gay? The notion was abhorrent. Since the government's 'Don't Die Of Ignorance' anti-Aids campaign of 1986/87 – since literally shaking with fear as I watched those films from my parents' sofa – being gay simply meant being ostracised, horribly diseased and imminently dead. It was a destiny I hardly dared acknowledge. What is more, my only experience of gay men had been the examples 1970s British television had provided: John Inman, Larry Grayson, Danny La Rue et al. And what early 1980s pop music had given me: Boy George, Bronski Beat, Marc Almond, Morrissey et al. All of these men were effeminate

in some way, and perhaps were also either clownish or seedy. None of them were role models. Their lives bore no resemblance to mine whatsoever.

Whereas Lawrence abandoned traditional religion and rebelliously fused the sacred and the sexual, I, in my confused, closeted frustration, turned back and embraced a newly-packaged version of the Puritanism my body was trying to escape. I became a Baha'i. Though it did away with the Christian idea of inherent sin, and had many progressive ideas, the Baha'i Faith still believed men and women were the 'two wings of one bird' and that homosexuality was an 'addiction to be overcome by prayer'. Though I was a devoted Baha'i for many years, my body acted independently and in shame, as a shadow to this newly acquired identity. It was being told that it was an addict. It was being told that it was a one-winged bird pathologically looking for other one-winged birds. Most of the time I therefore pretended not to notice my own body's existence.

Shortly after I became a Baha'i, during my English degree at Oxford, my intellectual horizons were further complicated. I encountered French feminist literary theorists such as Kristeva and Cixous and the work of poststructuralists such as Derrida,³ Barthes and Foucault. My tutor, Dr Lucy Newlyn, presciently advised me to read the latter's *History Of Sexuality*, which I found revelatory in its proposal that our identities, including our sexualities, are constructed by historical, cultural forces. Encounters with these thinkers would have a monumental, if slow to manifest, impact on all my deepest held beliefs. Like my peers I found Theory hugely stimulating, though few of us fully understood it. It seemed to chime with the times. The Berlin Wall had just been pulled down, and with it a lot of national and political identities which had hitherto seemed solid. But back in my room I

³ I heard Jacques Derrida, whose name was uttered in a tone of awe by my tutors and my fellow undergraduates alike, give his Amnesty lecture at the Sheldonian in 1990.

preferred thumbing through the hugely popular *Iron John: A Book About Men* by the poet Robert Bly, to thumbing through Derrida. *Iron John* was a guilty pleasure because it was not ‘intellectual’ and seemed diametrically opposed to Theory. Its weaving of poetry, myth, fairytale and psychology was appealing because these were genres in which I was already at home. They were also all at the service of the book’s central concept: that of male woundedness. Maybe this book gave me the get-out clause I needed: maybe I was not ‘gay’, after all, but simply ‘wounded’! To some extent it also reanimated that old Lawrentian idea of man, and the masculine, as a fixed pole. It is easy to be facetious and patronising, now, about this type of book (which would usually, I suppose, be found under ‘Self-Help’) and about the fact that it exhorts its male readers to hug their fathers and re-connect with their masculine energy. But, at the time, it was inspiring and comforting.⁴

After Oxford, I was unable to write poetry – and virtually unable to read any literature at all – because of the extreme self-consciousness and analytical scepticism which Theory had imbued me with. This continued for several years. I turned to reading fairytales as a way out of this impasse, finding that through them I could manage partly to revert to a way of reading which was, again, about innocent pleasure. A copy of *Old Peter’s Russian Tales* by Arthur Ransome became strangely talismanic, representing my belief that Theory could never entirely vanquish my bedrock love of the magic of literature, nor my vocation as a poet.

In 1995-6, armed also with Italo Calvino’s *Italian Fairy Tales*, I spent a year teaching English at a language school just outside Milan. During this year, at the age of twenty six, I came out to my flatmates and then, by letter, to my closest friends. By doing so I felt that I

⁴ For a flavour of the book, consider the following: “Finally, the Wild Man’s energy is that energy which is conscious of a wound... But the Wild Man leads the return we eventually have to make as adults back to the place of childhood abuse and abandonment... Because he is not a child, he knows stories, and can lead us into the personal suffering and through it” – Robert Bly, *Iron John, A Book About Men* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1991), p. 226.

was not so much admitting that I was gay as acknowledging the existence of my body at long last. My body was not a shadow. It was real. It was still, miraculously, alive. I was acknowledging, too, that it did not necessarily have to be the source of incapacitating shame and fear. The corollary of this was that I realised the untenability of my continuing to be a Baha'i. So I made the painful choice to reject The Baha'i Faith. To this day I have the disconcerting sensation of merely having put God under wraps, as if I have merely thrown a dust sheet over him and consigned him to the attic. (Poems like 'Wasp, Marrakech' certainly bear witness to this). Nevertheless, this decision would free up my mind to allow myself to revisit, with a clearer head, some of the intellectual territory of my Oxford days. I was a newly embodied, newly Godless thing, newly open to all sorts of uncertainties – especially – paradoxically – what being 'gay' actually meant. For example, I could now ask of myself some awkward and interesting questions:

If I was a man, then in what did my 'manhood' now consist?

If I was a gay man, then what kind of gay man was I?

Was I masculine? What *was* masculine? Was it deep in my DNA? Or was it learned, like a script?

If my 'Other', or my concept of 'Sublimity', was not to be found in a woman, and was not to be found in God, then in what was it to be found?

Was my being gay, like my being a Baha'i, just an identity I might take off and leave to one side, like a cardigan...?

And what did ‘identity’ mean...?

In retrospect it seems significant and strangely ‘neat’ that I came out to my parents (an act which demanded a further, enormous leap of self-acceptance), in 2003, at the age of thirty-three, the same year that I started this project. But truthfully, in 2003, I was not yet asking questions such as the ones above. I was not yet ready to be quite so brutally self-reflexive. My intention then was to write poems about *the naked, male body* as a kind of abstract entity. My decision to write specifically about naked, male ‘beauty’ partly derives from another book I had read in Italy, and one which has probably had the deepest influence on my ideas about gender: Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*.

Despite her infuriatingly repetitive, hyperbolic and sweepingly polemicist style, Paglia’s ideas proved attractive to me, first, because she returned me to that familiar – and now, it seemed, unfashionable – Lawrentian realm in which masculinity and femininity were a biologically determined duality. Secondly, she linked these two terms respectively to what she, following Nietzsche, called Apollonian and Dionysian drives, or modes, in cultural and artistic expression in the West. For Paglia, the Apollonian represents the cool, masculine attempt to revise, transcend or swerve away from the body. It is a ‘male line drawn against the dehumanising magnitude of female nature.’⁵ The Dionysian, on the other hand, represents chthonian Mother Nature – and the body, with all its potential for ecstasy, hysteria and barbarism. But, most significantly, although Paglia declares that these attributes are rooted in sexual physiology, she spends the next five hundred pages exploring how these two

⁵ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae, Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 28

modes have fought for supremacy within the works, and within the artistic lives, of various male and female poets and writers. So when she says:

Male artists and actors have a cultural function in keeping the line of emotion open from the female to male realms... Poetry is the connecting link between body and mind. Every idea in poetry is grounded in emotion. Every word is a palpation of the body.⁶

she seems to privilege the mind of the artist – and especially the male artist – as the locus of some kind of hermaphroditic imaginary, one which produces works which pick precarious paths between these two modes. This last point is what I found really compelling about Paglia's book. I may have misinterpreted her argument, but she seemed to be telling me that I, as a male poet, naturally partook of maleness and masculinity, but that, in my art I was hermaphrodite, bisexual, or that in my artistic psyche, at least, I was caught in an ongoing and necessary duel between masculine and feminine elements.

My interest in the male nude, as an artistic and cultural phenomenon, also starts with Paglia's book. Her chapter 'Italian Art', in which she discusses the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the work of Michelangelo, provoked me to catch a train down to Florence to see 'David' for the first time, a work which, despite being reproduced on coasters and tea-towels ad nauseam, would come to stalk me and the poems I would write. My decision to write specifically about naked, male beauty also partly derives from experiences I had on returning to the U.K., when I began my first relationship with another man and, as a consequence of this, found myself, in my late twenties, becoming unexpectedly – though not unwillingly – embroiled in the

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 18

narcissism and hedonism of gay club-culture. In the years that followed I finally discovered that the gay male body had potentialities not only for fear and shame but also for fun, pleasure and happiness, things my background could hardly be said to have prepared me for. With all the temerity of the once-repressed, I joined a circus- and Dada-inspired entertainment troupe and, with them, regularly danced half naked or in surreal costumes in clubs all over the country, once posing in angel wings in a cage balanced on a podium, once as a lizard, my body painted entirely with green rubberised paint, spraying sparks onto the dance floor with an angle-grinder...

However, amid these celebratory shenanigans I experienced how, in this environment, the gay 'gaze', at once lustful and envious (I want him, I want to *be* him), is also hyper-critical and fascistic. There was – and still is – a perpetuated ideal of male beauty, which Paglia would call Apollonian, and which a lot of gay men expect to find, either on that dance floor, or in the mirror, or both. (This ideal increasingly encroaches on the psyche of the young heterosexual male too.) Inevitably, of course, the majority of men fail. My partner at the time underwent various cosmetic surgery procedures to nudge him towards this ideal. I was the one who nursed him when pus dribbled down his cheeks and blood seeped from puncture holes in his sides. I never had much respect for him from then on, probably because I had been brought up to believe that vanity was a cardinal sin. Ironically, I also no longer found him physically attractive. Experiencing first-hand how this ideal could seduce, haunt and damage made me angry. And this anger has certainly been an impetus behind many of the poems in *The See-Through Man*.

In addition, the 'gay scene' gave me first-hand experience of gender-bending, as the media used to call it. As well as living embodiments of the insidious, untouchable Apollonian ideal

of male beauty, I saw effeminate youths, hideous drag queens, transsexuals, transvestites capable of ‘passing’, hugely musclebound hunks and everything in between. Any gender-identity was up for grabs. Maybe only men, with their Apollonian drives, and – specifically – maybe only gay men, with their more socially marginalised perspective and their erotic reimagining of their own – or other men’s – bodies, could so thoroughly objectify gender and make ‘fun’ of it (in every sense), rendering it unfixed: merely performative or arbitrary. In my registration document, written in 2004, I wrote:

Crucially I will explore the concept of male ‘beauty’ / male ‘physical perfection’ inherited from both the classical world and from theological discourse, writing poems which engage with manifestations of this concept in painting and sculpture, centring initially on the male nudes of Michelangelo, eg. his ‘angels’, his ‘Adam’, his ‘Jesus’, and, most famously, his ‘David’. I will write about them as art-objects, but, more significantly, use them as portals into the mythical and religious narratives which inspired them, reanimating such figures in my own retelling.... My retellings will bring eroticism, and issues of masculinity and embodiment to the fore.

One year into the project, my initial idea of writing poems about the male nude in art was already being complicated by an interest in masculinity and the semiotics associated with male nakedness. This welcome complication was partly due to my further reading into Gender Studies and partly due to *The Stickybook*.

There is no ending. Although, he arrived at the ‘naked, male body’ as a theme, and although this theme began to be expanded and complicated, it could be said that he continued to arrive at the male body from then on, ever after...

'The Stickybook'

Since I wanted to write poems about the 'naked male body', my supervisor, at the start of this project, suggested I collect together a bank of visual source material which might, in some way, help or inspire me. To this end, I hunted down hundreds of photographs of mostly naked, male bodies, and reproductions of paintings and sculptures of male bodies, taking them from art books, exhibition and museum catalogues, adverts, calendars, fashion magazines, bodybuilding, sports and keep fit magazines. I also went to a sex shop on Alfreton Road in Radford, Nottingham, where I live, and bought gay pornography. I cut out the images I found interesting, with a deliberately minimal analysis of my criteria, and glued them into a blank A3 book which henceforth became known as *The Stickybook*. The title betrays the ironically childlike and ludic way I found myself approaching this task. Over a still from a porn film I scrawled the phrase 'God made flesh' and, on the facing page, I scrawled the phrase 'filthy porn' over a photo of Michelangelo's 'Pietà'. Since *The Stickybook*, at that point, had a maximum readership of two (me, and my new partner), I was not seriously trying to shock anyone. More accurately, I was playing with the concept of 'shock'. Only after a year or so of amassing this material, and of collating and arranging it with this kind of punk aesthetic, that is, with as little thought and finesse as possible, and with an eye on half-humorous, half-mischievous provocation, was I able to look back and detect recurrent themes and understand the deeper meanings behind such strategies.

One thing which clearly interested me was the durability of certain iconic images. I found, for example, a photograph of the boxer Muhammad Ali whose naked flesh was apparently being penetrated by six arrows. With his hands crossed behind him and his head tilting on one side in passive acceptance, this was an obvious and ironic echo of various depictions of

the martyrdom of St. Sebastian. On the facing page I pasted a black-and-white reproduction of ‘The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian’ by Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo, from 1475. Next to that I pasted a photo from a porn magazine in which a man on a bed has rolled backwards away from the camera and has his legs in the air, exposing his testicles and anus. He is pulling off what look like a pair of long johns. Presumably this latter image is meant to be erotic, and presumably the readership of the magazine from which it was taken would find it so. However, to me the image seemed touchingly vulnerable and humorous. On showing this same image to a female friend, I noted that her reaction was one of quite severe disgust. How could one image engender such different reactions? I was intrigued. I was beginning to learn that I was not merely interested in the naked, male form per se, but – more importantly – what it meant to different people, especially with regard to deeply felt emotions around issues of shame, disgust, propriety and ‘unmanliness’. Concomitantly, I was beginning to realise that I would have to write poems which nosed forward into these difficult areas, at least in order to find out what I myself felt, and why. Creating *The Stickybook*, then, was not such a frivolous act as it had at first appeared. It was becoming not so much a resource of visual stimuli, as a mirror of my – up to that point only half-realised – preoccupations.

Another such preoccupation was with the mutually-defining flipside of beauty: ugliness. I found myself collecting many images of champion male bodybuilders who were not simply hyper-masculine but grotesque and, to quote one muscle magazine, ‘post-human’. This would lead to my reading the excellent *Muscle: A Writer’s Trip through a Sport with No Boundaries* by Jon Hotten, which explored bodybuilding and the lives of the competitors. Insights and information gleaned from this would, in turn, lead to the poem ‘Mr Universe’. This has the lines:

Describe me on that day. Not now. Nothing
to see now but this work-in-progress,
me sewing my jockstrap like a princess.

- an image directly lifted from one of my favourite photographs in *The Stickybook* (taken from *Blue*, an Australian homoerotic arts magazine), of a sportsman delicately, and with touching concentration, mending his torn jockstrap.

The making of *The Stickybook* enacted what I intended to do with the male body in my poems: I was making the male body into an object of scrutiny: an aesthetic and an erotic object. However, as the pages started to fill up with cuttings, it was becoming increasingly clear that I also wanted to describe the cultural and psychological semiotics of the male body, and, in particular, how it could be made to represent an enshrined ideal of masculinity. The collaging technique then became significant. My juxtaposition of visual embodiments of this ideal with images of ugliness and vulnerability served to emphasise that I was most interested in how this ideal could be deconstructed or transgressed, as did my scrawled bathetic, camp or ironic comments in the margins ('Ooooh David', 'Beauty? Beast?', 'I am penetrable, I am hard as nails', etc.).⁷ What is more, the juxtaposing of seemingly disparate images from 'high' and 'low' culture, eg. from Renaissance art and modern magazine adverts, and the consequent invitation to the viewer to make semantic connections between them, would, I believe, influence me in my poetic praxis – in the sense that it encouraged me into a more mischievously iconoclastic mindset and gave me the confidence to create, in my collection, a

⁷ The drive to deconstruct – or do mischief to – the ideal is evident in the phrase 'sewing my jockstrap like a princess', quoted above. I'm relishing the incompatibility of weightlifting (traditionally masculine) and sewing (traditionally feminine).

democratised mix of ‘real’ or naturalistic and more mythical first-person narrators, eg. Noah’s son, Michelangelo, a bodybuilder, etc.

The Stickybook was instrumental in changing, in my ‘Transfer’ document, the title of the project from ‘Tales of the Male Nude: Writing Poems About the Male Body as a Site of Desire, Anxiety and Metamorphosis’ to ‘Tales of the Male Nude: Writing Poems About the Male Body as a Transgressive Space’. In that document, of 2006, I wrote

The ideal of masculinity is often about being ‘defined’ and ‘hard’, one might say ‘Apollonian’: physically, in terms of muscle, and psychologically, in terms of being – or being seen as being – invulnerable. In the remaining years of this project I will write about the dangerous attraction of this hardness, about how the ideal of it is passed from father to son and is reaffirmed in rituals of sport, sex and hedonism, and about the damage that can be done to the self and to others in striving to achieve it. In addition, therefore, I would like to write poems which explore alternative, ‘Dionysian’ (‘Serpentine’?) masculinities, where the male body rebels against this ideal, becoming boundary-less, penetrable, grotesque or carnal – becoming, as I call it in my subtitle: ‘a site of transgression’. For example, I want to write about transvestism and drag queens, and the hyper-masculine ugliness of bodybuilding; about tattoos, amputations, surgery...

The main title, ‘Tales of the Male Nude’ already seemed to be becoming defunct. For my MPhil/PhD Transfer interview I also wrote the following:

...so I'm becoming aware that gender identity – even human identity – is all about the learned or copied gesture and the adopted pose. With possibly nothing behind it. More specifically, masculinity could be said to be a verb (and the subject of the verb can be male or female, gay or straight) but it's just an arbitrary verb – a way of doing – amongst many possible verbs. I find this liberating, but frightening. This is a crucial ambivalence. I feel as if my old Lawrentian certainties about what is masculine and feminine – what it means to be a man, and to some extent what it means to be a human being – are drifting away from me.

This paragraph shows that, by this point, *The Stickybook* had propelled me into a tentative exploration of Judith Butler's theories and Queer Theory, to an extent far beyond that necessary for the writing of my collection.⁸ There came a point, in fact, when I began to realise that my foray into Gender Studies and Queer Theory was a very successful way of distracting myself from the business of writing poems – which was meant to be my main work. I therefore decided to curtail it. I was also beginning to realise that the title 'Tales of the Male Nude' was misleading in that it was positing the object of enquiry outside myself, when in fact I increasingly wanted to write autobiographically, exploring *me*, and *my* embodiment.

This, then, is the journey of themes that I embarked upon for this project. From the male nude in Art, to men in myth, to masculinity, to a reappraisal of my own body and identity. But it has not been a linear journey from A to B. More like a process of accretion.

⁸ The specific text behind this entry was a passage in Butler's *Gender Trouble* in which she declares: 'Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of acts*.' Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 179.

“I’m Not a Gay Poet!” says Gay Poet

My particular ‘journey of themes’ has meant that I have had to engage with the idea that I am – or will be considered – a ‘gay poet’. Before I consider the extent to which I accept this title, and the extent to which my homosexuality has affected both the writing and the reading I have done for this project, the question needs to be raised: what exactly is a gay poet? One simplistic answer would be that it is ‘a poet who is also gay’ (or who ‘*happens* to be gay’). This suggests the possibility that some gay poets are able to separate their sexuality from their work. If this is possible – and I am not sure that it ever is, entirely – then it smacks of either conscious or unconscious self-censorship and of being in the closet, (all of which, of course, have been necessary tactics for many gay poets for fear of slander, discrimination or even persecution). My current themes clearly dictate that I cannot be in the closet. My gayness is an obvious and an integral part of this project.

Another answer to the question ‘what is a gay poet?’ could be: ‘a poet whose *raison d’être* is to write gay poetry’. This seems more accurate, but is problematic – for me, at least – because it might suggest that such a poet, (a), is only capable of writing on gay themes or (b), only ever *intends* to write on gay themes. In either case it is a somewhat reductive and restrictive definition. Yet this is the definition which I believe is most likely to be accepted as the answer to my question. What is more, the attribution of the title ‘gay poet’ will probably have the effect that all labelling tends to have: the gay poet is expected, by publishers and audiences, to stick to his or her form and *write gay*, just as an African American poet might be expected to write *black* (and also, presumably, *American*). Such labels might be a beneficial hook for marketing purposes – they allow a poet to find a core readership and to be promoted accordingly. They also have political meaning. Labelling

oneself 'gay poet', for example, is a gesture of confidence in an identity and in a community. It shows an eagerness to be seen and to be counted. I fear, however, that 'gay poet' is difficult to escape from, once fixed, and that there is the danger that such a label confines a poet to that core readership, and to that specialist shelf in the bookshop, and to none other. Also, I fear it has the effect of encouraging – in a work's reception – a focus on its 'gay' aspects at the expense of an appreciation of its artistry or on any other themes it might contain. So labels are useful. Brave. But I believe they also ghettoise and potentially can be very restrictive, in terms of both a poet's career and possibly even his or her aesthetic ambitions.

So am I a gay poet? Yes – in the sense that I have attended an Arvon retreat for gay writers, been published in *Chroma: a Queer Literary Journal* and read my work at 'GFest', an annual gay arts festival in London. Recently I even allowed myself to be introduced as a gay poet at an event which was not specifically 'gay'. So I have publicly accepted this label and I may well do so in the future. But I prefer to understand my homosexuality as a kind of 'extra nationality' in that it brings with it an extra culture, sensibility, knowledge and community which, at two extreme poles, I can either embrace or reject, or with which – and this is the more likely and realistic option – I can have a constantly shifting relationship of awareness and negotiation (much as a refugee will, throughout his or her life, be involved in a constantly shifting negotiation with an adopted country). Thus, I make my homosexuality part of my work in different ways and in varying degrees: sometimes very consciously, but – and this, for me, is crucial – most of the time completely *unthinkingly*, in the same way that I do my Britishness, or in the same way that any poet does whose identity or history – sexual, cultural or otherwise – makes him or her 'different' or in some sense polyvocal. And truthfully I am not interested in the connection between this extra nationality and *my* identity, if such a thing

exists. (My identity is merely, I believe, a hypothetical locus where many such extra-nationalities overlap.) The two things may be synonymous. They may not. I really do not care. However, I am very interested in how this extra nationality manifests itself in my work. So I may answer ‘yes’ but the question ‘am I a gay poet?’ is, for me, the wrong question. It provokes in me all the anxieties about labelling and about reductiveness which I have outlined above. A far more interesting and valuable question is: ‘is my work gay?’ and the corollary: ‘If so, *how?*’

The answer to this first question is also ‘yes’, and profoundly so, though perhaps not in ways that some readers, gay and straight, might expect. Stephen Coote, in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*, says:

For me, a gay poem is one that either deals with explicitly gay matters or describes an intense and loving relationship between two people of the same gender.⁹

I will concentrate, first of all, on the phrase ‘loving relationship between two people of the same gender’. The poems in *The See-Through Man* are, generally speaking, *not* about gay relationships. However, there are three which stand out, for me, as love poems. These are

⁹ Stephen Coote, ed., *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*, (London: Penguin, 1983) p. 48. It is interesting to note that seventeen years later, in the preface to *Word of Mouth: An Anthology of Gay American Poetry* (New Jersey: Talisman House, 2000), Timothy Liu asks, in relation to the task of anthologising, ‘Why then all this fuss to isolate and segregate something like sexual orientation?’ He actually never answers his own question. But he describes his book as a ‘gathering of poets whose poems represent a plurality of forms, poems that may or may not traffic in “gay experience” per se.’ p. xv. This in turn begs the question: if the content of a poem might not make a gay poem gay, then *what does?* The American poet, Brian Teare, recently said in an interview: ‘We as a community need to re-assess the relationship between “gay” and “poetry”. I’d argue that both terms are far more stretchy than we generally allow them to be’ (www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/05/19/brian-teare-poet-of-the-edenic-erotic-and-elegiac) Liu’s and Teare’s words are indicative of the current movement away from identity politics, and that politics’ need to carve a niche and a canon, and towards a more ‘stretchy’ and aesthetic approach to what a gay poem might be.

‘Epithalamion’ (p. 58), ‘Pine’ (p. 60) and ‘Lunch at the Argana Cafe’ (pp. 121-123). I will examine these now to determine the nature of their gayness.

‘Epithalamion’ positions itself in a long tradition of ‘wedding songs’ and does so self-consciously and ironically. (The words ‘old’, ‘new’, ‘borrowed’ and ‘blue’ are threaded secretly into the poem, just to make sure!) The poet Michael Hulse made it runner-up in the 2010 Stafford Poetry Competition, saying in his judge’s report:

Richard Goodson’s ‘Epithalamion’ is a rhapsodically gay celebration of sexual joy, unforced in its learning, unembarrassed in its desire, unstrained in the vigour and inevitability that meet in the closing threefold repetition of two all-important words.¹⁰

He is right. It is openly gay. In fact, I self-consciously claim a place for it in the tradition of gay male literature by inserting the lines: ‘I’ll be Achilles to your Patroclus, / Enkidu to your Gilgamesh’ (two pairs of male lovers from Greek myth and Babylonian epic respectively) and then ‘Hadrian to your Antinous’ (two male lovers from Roman history). When I wrote this I had in mind the following quotation from Gregory Woods’ *A History of Gay Literature*: ‘naming the major figures in the tradition has become the tradition itself’.¹¹ But otherwise, how gay is this poem? There is no description of bodies, no mention of genitalia and nothing about specific sex acts of any kind. True, the speaker addresses a lover directly but the gender of either is never made explicit (though, after that short list of famous male lovers, the informed reader assumes they must both be male too). There are mildly erotic, possibly homoerotic, lines. For example: ‘...press the memory of sun into buttocks, calves & ankles’

¹⁰ See www.imaginingstaffordshire.org.uk/poetrycomp2010judgesreport.htm

¹¹ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) p. 4

and ‘his thighs streaked with rust’. But the only reference to sex is in the lines: ‘Let’s make love on the earth. / We keep combusting, / retrieving our clothes from ashes.’ Is this gay? The fire metaphor is a universal trope. ‘Ashes’ might suggest death, and therefore Aids (the ‘gay plague’), but death and disease, too, have commonly been invoked in heterosexual love poetry – so where exactly is the ‘rhapsodically gay celebration of sexual joy’? Maybe, as Hulse says, this poem is rhapsodic and celebratory, but I would disagree that its gayness particularly inheres in its sexual content – because what little of that content there is could easily be transposed into a heterosexual love poem.

‘Epithalamion’’s gayness inheres, I believe, in its linguistic duplicity. Such duplicity – not just lexical double-meanings but anything embodied in a text which might be construed as having an alternative or additional meaning for those ‘in the know’ – has, of course, commonly been used by writers working under authoritarian regimes, in order to smuggle suspect or revolutionary material under the fence of censorship. I would say that the ‘gay duplicity’, of which I am speaking, works in the same way, for the same reasons. However, I would say that in some gay men’s everyday speech, and in a certain tradition of camp comedy written and performed by gay men, this duplicity might be said to be no longer a strategy of survival but an art, in the sense that it gives pleasure for its own sake (and not just for those ‘in the know’). This poem is built upon a duplicitous – or multiplicitous – use of the word ‘do’. It interrogates the ‘I do’ of the traditional heterosexual marriage vows. In the rhetorical: ‘Do outlaws do monogamy?’, for example, the second ‘do’ is in a slangy and camp register and means ‘practise’. Its proximity to the first line: ‘This moon does a human ear...’, which can only mean ‘impersonate’ or ‘act out’, and to ‘ape’ in the next line (‘Does my in-breath ape your out-breath?’) means that it is being destabilised and robbed of its sincerity. By doing this I am entertaining the idea that gay civil partnerships might not be as

valid, as meaningful and as stable as straight marriages – or I am, at least, mimicking and internalising the typical homophobic criticisms. I also satirise ‘matrimony’ by replacing that word with the more oddly sexual phrase ‘animal husbandry’ (‘Take my hand in holy...’ – which now becomes more like *wholly* – ‘...animal husbandry’). When I describe the sunflowers as being ‘about to do jade and flame again’ I am using ‘do’ in its more cynical, slangy sense again, this time to evoke the paradox that the newly breaking day *is new*, and yet at the same time a mere repetition, just as a new relationship feels unutterably new, and yet could be seen as repetition. (Likewise ‘jade’ is, I hope, an accurate word for the colour of the foliage of sunflowers – but is also meant to remind the reader of the word ‘jaded’.) I believe the final ‘I do’s cannot escape from all this previous irony and wordplay. They might even have the further meaning here of ‘I have sex with’. I suppose it is up to the reader to decide how sincere or how mischievous they are. But despite the games I am playing, ‘Epithalamion’ is still a love poem, and for me those final ‘I dos’ *are* sincere, their sincerity accentuated precisely because it is – or has been – called into question. Those last ‘I do’s are meant to be a triumphant rebuke to those who would say that a civil ceremony is a mere impersonation of a straight wedding. So this poem is a lot less erotic, and lot more slyly political, than Hulse’s comments would suggest. In fact, I would say that its gayness inheres not in its ‘sexual joy’ at all, but in its use of duplicity. Woods says: ‘Much of the poetry of gay men is energised by this paradoxical simultaneity of deferential and differential speech.’¹² I believe ‘Epithalamion’ enacts a kind of duel between the deferential and the differential, and does so mostly within the unstable semantic parameters of this one small

¹² Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p389.

word ‘do’, deferring, as it does, to its hegemonically accepted legal and sanctified meaning while simultaneously suggesting something more uncivilised and different.¹³

‘Pine’ is a love poem which grew out of the earliest draft of my long poem ‘1969’. I would say that it is very much a gay poem, but that its gayness inheres in its manoeuvrings of images, rather than in its eroticism. There is an implicit link of criminality or sin between the joyriding ‘two boys’ seen from a train at the start of the poem and the speaker who, seven lines later, tells the reader that ‘I held the man I’d stolen, killed for, close.’ The sin in question could indeed be the theft of his lover from another man or woman, but the Biblical-sounding ‘white hair of lightning clove a pine / clean in two’ and the assertion – possibly astonished, possibly tongue-in-cheek (or possibly both) – that the lightning has not struck *them* but a nearby pine tree, seems to suggest a sin of more grandiose proportions: the sin which the majority of religious-minded people still regard as one punishable by God, namely that of being gay. The pine, then, is the scapegoat. It is honoured at the end of the poem by a visit from both the ‘two boys’ and some ants. The idea of theft / sin is echoed again in the image of the ants ‘sneaking off with jewels / of resin’ but now the sin seems trivialised and the booty is made to sound sensual and appealing. The poem is thus a kind of fable in which

¹³ A similar linguistic duplicity exists in the prose-poem ‘Smokers’. The text is deferential in the sense that it appears to be a preacher’s monologue about smokers, and how to identify them, and thus seems to be toeing the line of ‘authority’. The preacher speaks of smokers as if they are sinners and outcasts. (The first draft was written as a performance poem shortly after the ban on smoking in public in Britain in 2007. Its original title was ‘Smokers: The New Queers’.) I deliberately use the idiom of evangelical Christianity – its vocabulary and cadences – knowing that religion has long been oppressive to gay people. But I give the speaker that language so that I can undo it (and therefore that speaker) from within. I do this by threading various double-entendres (eg. ‘what butts they have been picking up’ and ‘swell their sordid membership’) and various suggestively ‘gay’ and therefore completely inappropriate phrases into the text. By the end of the monologue it seems as if the tirade is *not* against smokers, but homosexuals. But by this point the speaker has been rendered duplicitous despite himself. His unreliable, fork-tongued, differential speech has made him a clown – or has made him, unknowingly, ‘one of us’ (- he also seems to enjoy saying the phrase ‘licking, sucking’ a little bit too much!). So this poem, too, could be said to be ‘gay’ in the extreme, though following traditions of camp comedy probably more than it does any specific literary model.

homosexuality is emptied of its 'sin', so that the boys, presumably, can go home and re-sin without fear of divine punishment.

Another love poem is 'Lunch at the Argana Café'. Ostensibly about a terrorist bombing, this poem is a meditation on life's precariousness in which the speaker comes to entertain the stark idea that had he and his partner simultaneously been victims of the bomb, neither of them would have had to face the grief of the other's death at some point in the future. Is it gay? The gender of the 'I' and 'you' is not specified. It seems to express a universal anxiety that a loving couple of any sex or sexuality might feel. But for me, it *is* gay. Growing up with the spectre of Aids has, in my psyche, incontrovertibly connected sex with the possibility of suffering and extinction (and *punishment*). I feel that without that connection the poem may well have been satisfied with the shock of hearing about the bomb on the news and the subsequent clichéd sentiment of 'there, but for the grace of God...' I believe that only my gayness could have prompted the speaker's further fatalistic suggestion (at once grotesque and heartbreaking) that it might be better if he and his addressee really had been killed there together, and simultaneously. The melodrama and self-theatricalisation of this thought could, arguably, also be considered gay. As could the possibility that the avoided death was also another avoided divine punishment. But then I am not only a gay poet but a gay reader. A straight reader might not see this gayness at all.¹⁴

¹⁴ As Woods says in *A History of Gay Literature* (p. 9), in reference to the gayness, or not, or some of Shakespeare's sonnets: '...All of this is irrelevant if any of the sonnets are amenable to being read by a gay reader *as if they were* "gay poems". If they work as if they were, they *are*'. To this I might add that any reader, regardless of his or her gender and sexuality, could, with the right sensibility (or training!) see the gayness of many texts. Timothy Liu, in the preface to *Word of Mouth: An Anthology of Gay American Poetry*, says:

I still question the notion of a "gay sensibility". One gets tired of the cultural stereotypes surrounding sexuality itself, although most gay men do pride themselves on using their own "gaydar" to sniff out their own kind... But are there signs as concrete as a colored handkerchief, or even a gaze that lingers a little too long, to mark a poem written by a gay man? Of course there are poems that overtly flaunt their sexuality... but there are so many quieter poems (and poets) who might elude the most finely-tuned gaydar (p. xviii) (cont.)

I would offer ‘Niqab’ and ‘Berlin Taxi’ as two further examples of poems which, in retrospect, I consider gay, but whose gayness might easily be ignored or overlooked. ‘Niqab’ is written in the voice of a female Muslim teacher who wears the *niqab*. I almost did not include this poem in the collection because it seemed at first so far removed from my nexus of themes. My decision to let it stay was based on my realisation that, like many of my poems, it was written in the voice of an outsider. Her marginality is not simply because she is Muslim but because she is refusing to be part of the dominant and dangerously sexualised culture in which she finds herself. She is

Defined,

not like the girl and boy up on the poster –

how much desired – defaced...

She demonstratively removes her body from this discourse by covering up. Some might argue that she is denying the existence of her body and her sexuality (and what is more, doing so principally so that her husband should have no fears that his ‘property’ is being coveted). But I wanted her defiance, and her genuine feeling of freedom, to be the lasting impression created by the poem – and for the reader to feel an unexpected empathy for this ‘Other’. Most gay men understand marginality, and some of them might understand defiance too.

Liu, then, also puts the emphasis on readerly perceptiveness, and – I believe rightly – sounds a warning note that the gayness in a poem might not be as loud or as obvious as many might like and expect.

And I would imagine that few gay men have not, at least in their youths, entertained ideas of celibacy or even of religiously sanctioned removal from the ‘problem’ of their bodies.¹⁵

Is ‘Berlin Taxi’ gay?¹⁶ This poem is about another outsider, a taxi driver who works through the night and so is therefore not part of ‘normal’ life. To make matters worse he is also a poet, and a blocked one at that, who seems to be nostalgic for the Berlin Wall, seeking out the ‘dum-DUM – ich-BIN’ of its ‘road-scar’ – an odd fact which suggests that this sound, or the division it represents, is the source of his identity and creativity. I wrote this poem because I wanted to explore the idea that my own creativity is similarly linked to the scar where my own psyche used to be divided (between what I was, and what people thought I was). So yes. For me it is essentially a gay poem. This is why I felt a wry satisfaction when, quite late in the drafting process, I decided that I needed to swap the octet and the sestet so that it made better sense – I realised then that I had made an inverted sonnet, or a sonnet for *inverts*.

I will turn my attention now to Stephen Coote’s ‘explicitly gay matters’. It is a vague, catch-all phrase, although the word ‘explicit’ inevitably suggests sex. The ghettoisation of the gay poet which I mentioned earlier perhaps is inevitable because it is founded on the assumption – still common, I believe, in both straight and gay literary communities – that gay poetry can only really be about gay sex. I have yet to write in any explicit or specific way about gay sex. For this collection I did not feel the need to do so. The last section of ‘Sex on Maspalomas Beach...’ describes two people who have just had sex (before the poem started) and there is

¹⁵ I am impersonating a woman, of course, as I do elsewhere in the collection – perhaps playing into the hands of those who would argue that this is a stereotypical activity for a gay man. Wearing that particular garment could also be interpreted as a kind of hiding, as wearing a ‘closet’.

¹⁶ Since the Weimar Republic in the early 20th century, it could be said that Berlin has had an association with underground decadence and homosexuality. This association was arguably popularised in the English-speaking world by Christopher Isherwood’s novels and memoirs, and through the cult film *Cabaret*, based on his *Goodbye to Berlin*. Most gay men still consider Berlin – like San Francisco – to be one of the *gayer* or more *gay-friendly* cities in the world.

only the phrase ‘we pull on cold, gritty trunks’ to suggest that both are men. ‘Wasp, Marrakech’ has the lines:

I smugly, cruelly, now watch God dab-
dab His antennae on our window-pane
when, on the other side, we’ve just fucked.
I love it that He doesn’t get us.
That He buzzes for our stickiness.

Again, there are no specifics. But only a gay reading of these two poems can do them justice – and make their gayness apparent. ‘Sex on Maspalomas Beach...’, for example, is a fabulist lament for a time before desire – desire being equated with the seagulls’ capricious and compulsive eating, and killing, of fish. The extreme proximity of death and desire, and the compulsion to have sex, at the expense of any loftier notions of selfhood, is probably familiar to gay men.¹⁷ Likewise, the word ‘fucked’ in ‘Wasp, Marrakech’ is not there for shock value or for pornographic detail. The harshness of the word is a furious whoop of victory against any religion which would send the two people in the poem to Hell. These are very gay poems, but again, actual gay sex is not described but merely implied. And if gay sex is implied, it is implied primarily because I have philosophical axes to grind.¹⁸

¹⁷ Although, is this ‘gay’? Or is it just particularly *male*? I do not know the answer to this question. But the ‘little death’ refers to the momentary extinguishing of the personality during the orgasm, and it is men – straight and gay – who often seem to be striving to achieve it at the expense of intimacy and sometimes even at the expense of pleasure. It is also men – straight and gay – whose desire can sometimes be indistinguishable from testosterone-fuelled aggression.

¹⁸ Incidentally, a few people who have read or heard my work have referred afterwards to its gay sexual content, as if this was explicit, and have been confused when I have demonstrated that that content is not, in fact, there...

Having said this, I do not think – as some gay poets suggest – that gay sex should be written about only in so far as it serves as a springboard to more ‘universal’ concerns. John McCullough, for example, in an article in *The Wolf*, quotes Ginsberg’s ‘A Supermarket in California’ as an example of work which goes ‘far beyond gay poetry, opening out from homosexual experience into an epic perspective on death, nationhood and what it means to dedicate one’s life to writing.’¹⁹ This is all well and good, but he goes on to suggest that

a good love poem should appeal to all genders and sexual orientations (as any poetry of quality should) and leaving genders open to question allows emotional access to everyone.

Such avoidance of specificity seems, to me, to be dangerously in cahoots with homophobic censorship, or at least with the idea that a gay poet should, in matters erotic, attempt to blend in with the ‘norm’ and not risk a potential reaction of shock or disgust. I would argue that arresting, imaginative poetry *can* – and perhaps *should* – be written about the specificities of gay sex (and without necessarily referring to universally understood emotions and universal notions of intimacy). It seems profoundly wrong to exclude any aspect of human experience from a poem. But this sermonising is just a touch hypocritical on my part. Although writing in a more explicitly homoerotic way has not seemed necessary or important in this project, I do wonder if I have been censoring myself – too anxious, perhaps, about my work’s reception.

To summarise my position, then, I am not a poet whose gayness is merely a curious and exotic biographical footnote. My gayness has been integral to the *The See-Through Man* and

¹⁹ John McCullough, ‘I Am Not a Gay Writer: Homosexuality and British Poetry’, *The Wolf*, Issue 20 (April 2009)

is likely to be integral to all of my future work. However, it does not inhere so much in a reference to sexual incidents or relationships. It inheres more in an array of *approaches* to my themes, and by approaches I mean the kinds of literary tropes – ironies, viewpoints, metaphors, double-entendres, symbols – I chose to use. As such, some of my work’s gayness might be apprehensible only through a ‘gay reading’. Extrapolating from this, I might also say that if the gayness of my work inheres in my approaches *more* than it does in my themes, then, hypothetically, I should be able to write on any theme – including, potentially, heterosexual sex – and still make it gay (or give some of my readers the opportunity to make it gay, if they wish to do so). Clearly my use of the word ‘gay’ is more *stretchy* than a common definition usually allows and this is the reason for my uneasiness at the possibility of acquiring the label ‘gay poet’. Actually, I am far more comfortable, ideologically speaking, with the term ‘Queer’ which, although yet another label, refers to what Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick calls

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.²⁰

‘Queer’ refers, in other words, to the proactive undermining of any rigid, unitary sexual or gender identity – or label – of any kind (including, of course, ‘straight’ and ‘masculine’). For this reason I would be happy to be called a Queer Poet, and for this collection to be considered my first step in a journey towards a Queer Poetics.²¹

²⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. p7.

²¹ According to the O.E.D the term ‘queer’ has been used in English since the 16th century and probably comes from the German ‘quer’, meaning ‘across’ or ‘slant’. It has largely meant ‘strange’ (and occasionally still does). However, it came to be ascribed to effeminate, dandyish or passive homosexuals in late 19th century Britain and since then it has slowly gained currency as a derogatory and abusive term for gay people generally,

‘We Are Fa-mi-ly’: Reading Gay Poets

The anxieties I felt about the gay label, described above, meant that for the early years of this project I resisted reading gay poets. (The great irony is that I harboured exactly those reductive misconceptions about gay poets that I feared I might be met with myself!) But when I finally relented, I discovered – naturally – a varied throng of voices, including poets who wrote on similar themes, or in similar ways, to me and with whom I felt a certain kinship. Foremost among these has to be the contemporary American poet Henri Cole. I especially liked his collection *The Visible Man* (1998), a title which my own clearly echoes, although it was not consciously chosen to do so. Cole writes about what it means to find oneself *thrown* – in the existential sense – into a desiring male body and does so with a psychological acuity, a theatrical intensity and an austerity which push him away from traditional notions of the lyrical and the beautiful. He makes use of both classical and Biblical myths as a way of dramatising and ferociously examining the Self. In a poem like ‘The Coastguard Station’,²² for example, he muses on not being *chosen* – not being an Apollonian, masculine man like the coastguards he sits and watches – and does so by referring to the story of Isaac blessing and choosing Jacob, rather than Esau. Maybe I liked him because I too had already used Biblical myths to try to say something about the body

especially in the U.S. In 1990 it was ‘reclaimed’ by Queer Nation, an anti-homophobia activist group in New York. This seems to have been a further turning point in its etymology. Since then it has come to be adopted as a self-affirming term by various theorists, artists and activists who do not want to engage with traditional, essentialist identity politics but who still want to make a stance against society’s sexual and gender norms, or against ‘heteronormativity’. So ‘straight’ people can choose to be Queer too - because it is not an attribute, but an *attitude*. ‘Queer’ therefore seems, to me, to be quite an inspiring and liberating term. However, the caveat I would add to this is that, unfortunately, the majority of gay and straight people still seem unaware of the word’s ‘reclamation’ and do not distinguish between ‘gay’ and ‘queer’, or perhaps still only know the latter’s pre-‘90s meaning.

²² Henri Cole, *The Visible Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 37.

(‘And He was Uncovered Within His Tent...’ and ‘Serpent’, especially).²³ I am not sure if I have particular poems which owe a debt to him. But I feel that I owe him thanks for having a sensibility which chimes with my own. In this project he has felt like an encouraging and empathising presence.²⁴

²³ The British poet Robert Hamberger has a section called ‘Bible Studies’ in his recent collection *Torso* (Bradford: Redbeck Press, 2007). It seems as if some gay poets are creating a sub-genre of poetry which reclaims stories from The Bible, the text which is still being used to condemn homosexuals around the world.

²⁴ Another major inspiration has come from the largely gay New York School poets, especially Schuyler, O’Hara and Ashbery, who, although their poems never deal directly with gay subject matter, often have a kind of camp or queer sensibility. Thom Gunn, Mark Doty and Gregory Woods have also been touchstones or ‘encouraging presences’, although in truth I do not feel my work has a great deal in common with theirs. Other significant ‘gay poet’ discoveries have been: Brian Teare who, in his first collection *The Room Where I Live* (2003) uses the fairytale as a way of dealing with some harrowing autobiographical material; Mark Wunderlich, whose *Voluntary Servitude* (2004) is richly, subtly homoerotic; D.A.Powell, whose poems often seem like camp, jazzy splicings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jacques Brel and a textbook on virology; Alfred Corn, whose ruminatory, Wordsworthian poems gave me the courage to keep on expanding ‘1969’ and also Rafael Campo and Carl Phillips, whom I appreciated for their formal rigour and formal experimentation. When I think about this roll-call of recent and contemporary gay poets (most of whom seem to be American), I think not so much about their influence on *The See-Through Man*, but more about the *permission* I feel that they have given me to pursue my chosen themes. It is also encouraging to know that most of these poets are, in the U.S. at least, widely recognised and honoured, and not just within the gay literary community, and that their audience could potentially be my audience too. As for matters of stylistic influence, from these and from others – I will consider them in the chapters which follow.

Chapter 2: SHORTS

Why Sonnets?

When I talk about short poems I am usually talking about sonnets. Before commenting on the sonnets and quasi-sonnets I have written for this project, it is important to state that from my early teenage years I have had what might be called an *anxious* relationship with the form. This began when I submitted a poem to *Rainbow*, the literary magazine at Nottingham High School, the minor public school I attended from the ages of ten to eighteen. I was told by one of the English teachers, rather condescendingly, that I was ‘trying to write a sonnet’. I am fairly sure that at the time I had little idea of what a sonnet was, let alone the intention of writing one. But, for an over-sensitive child catapulted into quite a bizarre, middle-class, homosocial environment, this one statement seemed to have all the force of an indictment. I was attempting something beyond my knowledge, my capabilities and – if I had interpreted his tone correctly – even beyond my *social station*. Immediately, the sonnet became a sort of psychopoetic battleground, the form by which I was profoundly intimidated since it seemed to be considered not only an apotheosis of technical skill but to be central to the literary canon. The feeling of *not matching up*, even of being *barred*, scored into me. From then on, sonnets became emblematic – ridiculously, farcically emblematic – and, for a long time, if I had been asked to write a sonnet, it would have been tantamount to being asked to prove my worth as a poet – and maybe even as a person! Why? Because, thanks to that teacher, I now conceptualised the sonnet as being some kind of rarefied, abstract form: fixed, inviolable, hard-to-achieve and with only two or three prescribed variations. Being asked to write one would also have been tantamount to being asked to *conform*. I would have started to feel fidgety and nauseous. Consequently, however, it also became an alluring challenge.

Because, despite certain rebellious instincts, I have never been averse to the idea of being welcomed into a tradition, and a continuum. This ambivalence, this anxiety, is, then, why I felt impelled to *ask myself* to write sonnets for this project.

The fact that the conceptualisation of the sonnet described above persists in my head has been difficult to comprehend or explain, especially since, during this project, I have learnt that the sonnet has never been a static and totally conservative form.²⁵ Since its earliest history it has been an arena of technical experimentation and a home for maverick sensibilities. For example, on reading Michael R. G. Spiller's *The Development of the Sonnet* I was surprised and inspired by the fact that, even as early as the 13th century, the Sieneese poet Cecco Angiolieri (c.1260-1312?) could not only use vernacular and vulgar Italian in his sonnets but could slice one vertically in half, making the two halves a dramatic slanging match between two characters. Guittone d'Arezzo (?-1294) writes a sonnet in which he repeats the word 'joy' and its derivatives (eg. 'gioia', 'gioiva', 'gioioso' etc.) so much that the actual syntax of the poem starts to break apart, very much in the manner of G.M.Hopkins' contorted but richly incantatory sonnets, written some six hundred years later.²⁶ There have also, of course, been many technically experimental sonnets written throughout the 20th century – by W.H. Auden, e.e. cummings, John Berryman and Paul Muldoon, for example (though they do not seem so avant-garde when placed in this wider historical context). The point I am trying to make is that sonnets, despite the various rules attached to them (the syllabics, the fourteen lines, the rhyme schemes, the 'turn'), have, from the outset, been fiddled with. In fact, the very constrictions of the form make its deviations all the more conspicuous, almost as if – and this,

²⁵ In this chapter I will discuss how my misreading – my idealisation – of the sonnet enabled me to make an analogy between 1. its form and 2. the ideal male body. This analogy persisted because it externalised a deep structure in my own psyche, that of 'not matching up'. But I would not become fully aware of this analogy until near the end of this project.

²⁶ Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 20-27

for me, is quite a revelatory notion – such deviations were the whole point of the form’s existence. All of which makes it an ideal form for a poet (a *faux-rebel*?) who wants to be in and out of the tradition, simultaneously. In fact, there is no reason why I should not feel entirely at home within its venerable – and yet, it seems, quite violable – walls.

Remixing Michelangelo

In the last six years of this project the sonnet has accrued further, contiguous anxieties. These date from a translation task given to me by my supervisors at the start of this project, in the last months of 2003, when I chose to translate a handful of Michelangelo’s sonnets from Renaissance Italian, and my concurrent reading of art-historical and biographical material connected with Michelangelo and his oeuvre. Since my theme at the time was simply *the naked, male body*, I felt that the translation of sonnets by a man similarly obsessed would be an interesting way of getting to grips with the form. I acquired five books of translations. The oldest, by John S. Harford, was published in 1857 and contains translations by Wordsworth and Southey and others which are presumably by Harford himself. Two, by Joseph Tusiani and Elizabeth Jennings, were published in the 1960s and two, by Frederick Nims and Christopher Ryan, were published in 1998, the latter being the only translation into prose.²⁷ Although there is no agreement about the numbering of the sonnets, it was possible, once the various translations had been matched up with each other, to compare the various ways the sonnets had been rendered into English. I came to realise that, despite wide differences in style and vocabulary, they were all, to some extent, trying to make

²⁷ *Poetry of Michael Angelo Buonarroti*, trans. John S. Harford (London: np, 1857) – though The British Library has the date as 1858. *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, trans. Joseph Tusiani (London: Peter Own, 1960). *Michelangelo Sonnets*, trans. Elizabeth Jennings (Manchester: Carcanet, 1961). *Michelangelo*, trans. and ed. Christopher Ryan (London: Everyman, 1998) and *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, trans. John Frederick Nims (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Michelangelo more *palatable*, either by heterosexualising him or by making him sound much more logical and mellifluous than he actually is in the original Italian. Harford does so partly by the way he contextualises his translations – by completely neglecting to mention in his prose explications, for example, that most of Michelangelo’s most passionate sonnets were written to a young man, the aristocrat Tommaso de Cavalieri. He makes palatable by omission. He includes only those late sonnets and madrigals addressed to Vittoria Colonna, the woman Michelangelo cherished as a spiritual mentor in his declining years. Of all the translations I looked at, only Nims – generally – makes Michelangelo’s homosexuality, as we now call it, more plain:

What in your handsome face I see, my lord,
I’m hard put to find words for, here below...

Compare this with Jennings’ more ambiguous and chivalrous version of the same lines:

I see in your fair face, my dearest Lord,
That which in life I cannot fitly tell...

It is important to note that Michelangelo himself is quite open about his love for Tommaso, in letters and poems sent to friends and sent to Tommaso himself (and what could be more explicit evidence of his passionate appreciation of the male form than his paintings and sculptures?), but – and this is paramount – he constantly insists that his love is chaste. He seems especially anxious that his passions should not be misinterpreted as sodomitical – understandably so, given the brutal penalties for sodomy at the time. A few lines later in the same sonnet, in Jennings’ version, he says:

And if the vulgar and malignant crowd
Misunderstand the love with which we're blest,
Its worth is not affected in the least...

His Christian Neo-Platonism seems to require him to put his libido, directed towards earthly – and male – beauty, on a sliding scale, at the top of which are the highest spiritual and intellectual drives towards the beauty of God.²⁸ As long as he remains chaste, then, his desires are not in *opposition* to God, but are rungs on a ladder *towards* God. Despite being constantly expressed in terms of ‘fire’ and ‘ardour’,²⁹ they seem, therefore, to him, to be immediately rendered innocent by being made part of this belief-system. I have no doubts about Michelangelo’s sincerity. But in my skewed, cynical reading, the very insistency of his Neoplatonic contextualising of desire seemed unconvincing. To me, it felt as if he was trying too hard to reconcile those two things which I believed (wrongly) that he thought could never be reconciled: his God and his desire for other men. He was trying, within his sonnets, to make himself palatable to himself. And this, I believed, was why the sonnets contain such tortuous language and such difficult, occasionally barely logical argument – all of which his translators, except perhaps Ryan, try to smooth out. It is because he is not quite succeeding in this venture. And this is why, despite both his own and his translators’ best attempts, there are still, in the sonnets, instances of homoeroticism – of candid, intense homosexual yearning

²⁸ The influence of the Neoplatonist Marcilio Ficino (1433-99) on Michelangelo’s religious thought and on his entire artistic oeuvre has long been acknowledged. Ficino repackaged and reinterpreted Plato’s philosophy for a Christian Renaissance audience. His emphasis on a belief in Beauty, as a mystical, redemptive ideal towards which the whole of man and nature strived, would become central to Michelangelo’s work.

²⁹ Such vocabulary was inherited from the love poetry of Dante (1265-1321) and Petrarch (1304-1374), two of Michelangelo’s heroes, and as such was part of the common lexis of romantic and chivalric love. My more carnal interpretation of these words is probably because initially I was unaware of this tradition.

– which resist, which refuse to be subsumed, within all this theologising. This, at least, was how I understood it.

All of the above made Michelangelo's texts extremely resonant and interesting and pushed me towards the decision that, instead of attempting faithful translations, I would write versions, or, as I called them, 'remixes' of his texts. I would choose those texts which seemed most amenable to my own 21st century agenda. This meant untying what I saw as the Platonist Christian rope which held them together and changing his proliferations of abstractions into imagery which was more readily grasped by the senses. I would emphasise the libidinal and the bodily. I chose the word 'remix' because this is the word for the manipulation of previously recorded dance music, by D.J.s in a studio, usually to emphasise certain elements of a track which were already there – or occasionally to add new elements – thereby giving the original track extended use in dance clubs and extended commercial viability. The successful D.J.s are the ones who leave a recognisable signature on the original, even to the extent that they are deemed co-creators. This seemed, therefore, an appropriate metaphor for what I wanted to do with Michelangelo's sonnets. I wanted not to translate them, not to give them a semantically accurate mapping into English, but to emphasise the homoerotic elements which I saw in them, thereby giving them idiosyncratic new afterlives. In my journal I wrote:

I must abandon the pretence that they're translations, still faithful to the original, because they aren't. Generally I'm changing too much. Why? When I read the poems I keep coming across a lot of intensely 'gay' imagery and emotion. In the translations I've got, all this has been glossed over or sentimentalised. I want to reinstate it, and emphasise it, in a modern idiom. Maybe I'm warping, rather than

translating. But I'm warping as much as any other translator has, just in a different direction. I want to make the sexuality, the lust, very apparent to a modern reader, as apparent as it surely would've been to Michelangelo himself and his addressees. In *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* Umberto Eco says: 'Faithfulness is not a method which results in an acceptable translation. It is the decision to believe that a translation is possible, it is our engagement in isolating what is for us the deep sense of a text, and it is the goodwill that prods us to negotiate the best solution for every line.'³⁰ So I shouldn't be anxious about being 'faithful'. I'm just isolating and negotiating!

(December 11th 2003)

I was on a mission, and a doomed one at that. There is a sense in which I wanted to rescue Michelangelo's texts from what I perceived to be the sexual guilt hidden between their lines. Now, in retrospect, I see how condescending and wrongheaded a notion this is, given his openness about his love and his professed chastity. Rescuing him from his 'guilt' would, concomitantly, mean editing out the very real faith which underpinned his whole personality. The further irony, of course, is that it was the guilt – or perceived guilt – in Michelangelo's sonnets which, for me, made them riveting. In hindsight it seems obvious that my anachronistically *gayed-up* remixes could, for this very reason, only ever have been less interesting than the originals, but nevertheless I went on, somewhat blindly...³¹

Having compared my various translations, I decided to use the prose translations of Christopher Ryan as my datum. They seemed to be the least poetic, in the sense of being the

³⁰ Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat, Translation as Negotiation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), p. 192.

³¹ Now it is abundantly clear to me that I was attempting to recast Michelangelo as an 'out', yet still guilt-ridden, atheistic gay man, i.e. as some kind of copy of myself. It seems equally clear that not one of those epithets can be attributed to him.

least musical, but also seemed the most syntactically and semantically faithful to the contorted logic of the originals, and the most unadorned. In fact, one criticism which could be levelled at them is that they do Michelangelo a disservice in that they seem to reflect the mind of an obsessive amateur theologian, rather than that of the poet he certainly was. However, I felt that if I used these I would not be influenced by the rhymes and rhythms, and the smoothing-out employed by the other translators.³² Basically, they made me feel freer to do my own thing. I also attempted to match Ryan's prose with the original Renaissance Italian, using my rudimentary knowledge of Latin and modern Italian, to see if I could tease any meanings from the original which Ryan had missed.

I chose four sonnets written to Tommaso to remix (see Appendix 3 for a reflection on the making of Remixes 1-3, pp.241-49). My last remix, 'Remix No.4', however, betrays some of the frustration I felt in my inability to bring Michelangelo into the 21st century. I used a Petrarchan rhyme-scheme for this, though assiduously avoided iambic pentameter. The sestet of it reads:

Touch me. There. Do you feel the fire
start to engorge, even now, my bloodshot eye?
In a man so past it doesn't that deserve some respect?
So what the fuck's going on? If fire rises – higher, higher –
and if I'm aflame – tell me, why aren't I
drawn up with it, now, now, to the celestial elect?

³² By 'smoothing-out' I mean the way the elegant musicality and poetic finesse of some of the other translations are in some sense *not* true to the more rugged and contorted originals.

(This is based on Ryan's translation which goes:

It is my good fortune that the fire of which I speak has even now taken hold in me to renew me, when I am already almost numbered among the dead.

How can it be, then, if fire by nature ascends to the heavens, to its proper sphere, and I am turned to fire, that it does not carry me upwards along with it?)³³

I feel sure Michelangelo used a few expletives in his time, but the scurrility of my 'fuck', so at odds with the sombre, grandiloquent original, seems to toll the knell of the death of this particular translation project.

What, then, had the benefits of this remixing been to me, as a poet, and to this project? I can identify three benefits. First and foremost – and I do not want to underestimate this – I had learned to overcome my anxieties about the sonnet form. I now felt that it was within my capabilities to write one and, on a purely technical level, had even begun to feel reassured by the neatness and stability of its scaffolding.

Secondly, while engaged in this remixing, I had begun to conceptualise the sonnet as a *masculine* form because traditionally it exhibits a logicity, a linearity and a discursive eloquence which, historically, have been understood as masculine traits. It is also – like the male body – a *closed* form. When I gave my paper 'How to Do a PhD in Writing Poetry' at Manchester Metropolitan University in April 2006 I outlined this concept and was surprised at the reaction from some of the delegates. Despite showing them how I was attempting to

³³ Michelangelo, *Selected Poems*, trans. Christopher Ryan (London: Everyman, 1998), p. 21

subvert the form, they assumed, I think, that such a concept was fundamentally sexist. What I must stress now, and what I should have stressed at the conference, is that I feel under no obligation to prove the truth or viability of this hypothesis by presenting an argument based on evidence, as I would in an academic, literary-critical context. On the contrary, it is merely a hypothesis I have found *creatively useful* in my own particular project. While still involved in the translation task, I wrote on my blog:

If I am deconstructing the idea of male beauty / male perfection (one hand pointing out how attractive it is while the other pointing out the psychological damage it does) then I will also be deconstructing the ‘perfect form’ in poetry. The preeminent ‘perfect form’ is, arguably, the sonnet. I will find ways of imitating and translating sonnets. I will continue my Michelangelo project – I like the idea of writing as Michelangelo in a regretful, disillusioned afterlife. But I will also deconstruct the sonnet by allowing it to metamorphose into free verse, or by penetrating it with other voices, idioms, registers. The ‘body’ of the poem will thus have apertures and scars, its form commenting on the penetrability of the male body, the impossibility of Beauty / Perfection (while also being enthralled by it) and, if the perfect body – like Jesus’ – is in the image of God – the non-viability of any kind of Truth or Standard.

(June 1st 2004)

Several years after the translation task had finished, I was still riffing, compulsively, on the same theme (see Appendix 2.2, p240).

To summarise, I have, in my schemata, made the text a metaphor for the body. This is hardly, of course, an original idea. (We regularly talk about ‘the body of the text’.) But more

specifically I have come to equate the sonnet with what Nietzsche, and, as I mentioned in the last chapter, more recently Camille Paglia, have called the Apollonian body. Many of Michelangelo's figures are, for me, more profound, more fascinating, precisely because they are grotesque. I believe that this grotesqueness is the Dionysian principle beginning to interrupt, corrupt, threaten or undermine the Apollonian principle in his art (a process which could be said to reach its denouement four hundred years later in the work of Francis Bacon). I know I have heaped a preposterous amount of significance onto the back of the sonnet, but, in a sense, I want my sonnets to exhibit similar tensions and negotiations between these two poles of Apollonian and Dionysian, and to do so in their actual forms – I want them to be, in effect, metaphors for the ideal male body under the threat of dissolution. These, then, are the 'further, contiguous anxieties' which the sonnet has accrued. But they are fecund anxieties. They have led to a continuous rejection of, and re-engagement with, the form of the sonnet which continues in my work to this day.

The third benefit of the translation task was that, through the carving and wearing of a Michelangelo-esque mask, I had, to some extent, felt liberated to express feelings I had never yet expressed in my own poems. Also, I had begun the process of more clearly realising how my own face was contoured, what kind of poet *I* was. I had realised, for example, that in my own poems I wanted to address the subject of the male body, and male desire for the male body, far more directly than Michelangelo had, or at least in ways which celebrated it for its own sake, without recourse to notions of 'Beauty' or 'Divinity'. Although always stimulated by philosophy, and although I might possibly have my own (very different) philosophical axe to grind, I did not want my poems to be arenas in which philosophical problems or hypotheses were debated or expounded. This is, I admit, a prejudice, initially instilled in me via the Leavisite – and, culturally, very English – type of literary criticism in which I was

trained in at school. In such criticism, the concrete is always preferred to the abstract. It is no wonder that, despite my empathy for Michelangelo on one level, and my immense desire to understand him, I also contemptuously and anachronistically (and I would come to see, *quite wrongly*) interpreted his abstract philosophising as mere self-evasion: as, in fact, an evasion of his homosexuality. The fact that, for many years, I, like him, believed in God, but then deliberately walked away from God so that I could fully accept my own homosexuality, goes some way to explaining my (mis)take on him. Through remixing Michelangelo I realised that, unlike him, I would very definitely be siding with the devil, and putting the devil's stench and heat and viscosity into my poems; that, unlike him, I was, at some point, in some sense, a poet who would have to be bold enough to call himself *queer*.

On April 23rd 2010 I went to see an exhibition of Michelangelo's drawings at The Courtauld Gallery in London. There was also a small selection of original manuscripts of some of the poems he wrote to Tommaso. I put on headphones and listened to an actor reading them in the 16th century Italian, following by the English translation (Ryan's). As I listened I followed the assertive, maroon loops of his handwriting, including his crossings-out. I hovered just one inch above the glass, the glass being just five or six inches above the actual stained paper which once had been in his hand. Unexpectedly, my heart was in my mouth and I felt close to tears, testament to the huge impact Michelangelo has had on this project.

After Michelangelo

The first poem which grew directly out of the remix project, and did so while I was still embroiled in the translations, was one which recently became the fifth part of a sequence

entitled 'After Michelangelo'. This poem, (the one which begins 'V of torso, of opened blades...') was begun in August 2003 and went through twelve tortuous drafts, reaching its current state in December of that year. It is a poem I have since performed on numerous occasions and, because the audience reaction has always been positive – they react favourably, I suppose, to the gentle eroticism and pathos – it has become a fixture in my live repertoire. This, and the fact that it represents a striking-out from the remixes, and as such feels like some sort of artistic victory, has given this poem, and the sequence it engendered, a certain centrality in the collection. By 'artistic victory' I mean a perceived escape-route from the frustrations and claustrophobia of translation,³⁴ and the discovery of a way to allow Michelangelo's continuing presence, but on my own terms.

In the sequence's title 'after' has two meanings, the first being *after* Michelangelo's death: I wanted to write as his ghost. This conceit would allow me the comfort – if that is the right word – of continuing to wear the same mask I had been wearing for the remixes, while granting me the freedom to be a new Michelangelo with new thoughts; specifically, a Michelangelo who finds himself in a Godless afterlife and one who regrets the Christian asceticism he had imposed upon himself while still alive. The second meaning of 'after' is *in the manner of* or *in imitation of*. In the margin of the first draft I had scrawled the ABBA/ABBA/CDE/CDE rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet, showing my intention of continuing to mimic the same model Michelangelo had. Although this is only a sketch, I am, however, already clearly breaking faith with that model, what with the lack of iambic pentameter and the more inexact rhyme scheme of

³⁴ By this I mean that towards the end of the translation project I was getting increasingly anxious to move on. I suppose I had begun to realise not only the extent to which Michelangelo's world view was different from my own but also the extent to which my translations had been forged from a radical misreading.

...haunted me
...years
...shears
...hinges
...haunches
...drawn
...born.

By the time I had reached the eleventh draft, dated 10.12.03, the poem had become looser, and then tighter, exploded and then reformed, several times. The fact that two of the words just used, 'loose' and 'reformed', have moral connotations is not lost on me. Had I begun to see the sonnet as indicative of some kind of moral stricture? Had I begun to see looser poetic form as therefore indicative of moral – and sexual – licence? That eleventh draft, very close to its current (and, I hope, final) form, reads:

V of torso, of opened shears
has haunted me
has taunted me
here in Paradise five hundred years.

Why? Because Tom was pruning olives
down where the lavenders
grew between the beehives
stripped to the waist. In those days I believed
I'd bear my best fruit here in Paradise

so I knelt close to the soil and shivered,
silverly, for Death, as olives do,
waiting for the sap to rise into the cut,
ignoring, ignoring the V of his torso
the beauty, the euphoric stink of it.

On the back of that draft, that December, I wrote the following notes:

This is one of the ‘Michelangelo In Heaven’ poems which will be part of a sequence. It was begun in the summer when I’d just started reading Michelangelo for the first time – and was an attempt to write an erotic sonnet. The eroticism got in the way of what I wanted to say. I got stuck on phrases like “the rubbed handle of his haunches” and then, in recent drafts, “oiled nut of his arse” – both of which have been ditched in this draft. They are both a little crude and a little arbitrary, whereas the simple phrase ‘waiting for the sap to rise into the cut’ arose OUT of the fantasy (allegory?) of being an olive tree (which hovers between a personal religious allegory, reminiscent of New Testament parables, and an erotic / masochistic fantasy). It arose OUT of what I wanted to say.

The drafts fight with the sonnet form. At one point it was good to escape from the form and write out what I wanted to say in prose, then return to a loose sonnet format. I’ve learnt that getting to the kernel of what I want to say involves breaking through decorative phrases and forms, but that returning to form gives a sort of elemental simplicity.

(December 2003)

These notes show my awareness that the erotic phrases I had at first introduced, and which I had considered so important – because through them I was reinventing Michelangelo as a gay poet – were not as imaginatively engaging as I had hoped. They were, in fact, merely isolated instances of titillation – and they had hypnotised me and blocked me from getting to the crux of the poem. Only when I recognised ‘you prune, I fruit’ as the key metaphor in the poem, and made Michelangelo first an apricot tree and then an olive tree (I had seen many doubled-over, *shivering* olive trees during my year teaching English in northern Italy), did these phrases finally drop out of the text. Ironically, the development of this metaphor led to ‘waiting for the sap to rise into the cut’ which, I realised, was erotic in the more profound and semantically rich sense that I had been looking for.

These notes also show how I was beginning to have the confidence to allow my material to find its own shape. The phrase ‘the drafts fight with the sonnet form’ indicates that, throughout most of the drafting process, the form was preoccupying me more than I cared to admit. Although I had made Michelangelo the ghost, it was definitely the sonnet which was still haunting me. Sometimes I found myself dancing with the ghost of the form of the sonnet when I should have been concentrating more on what I wanted Michelangelo – or my version of him – to say. I certainly recognised my Michelangelo’s voice more clearly when, in the last draft, I allowed him to speak in nine lines of uneven, and mostly more-than-ten-syllable lengths (echoing, in fact, Remix No.3 – see Appendix 3, p247).

That hard-won nine-liner then became the blueprint for the next section (‘make the world rabid, berserk...’), which I would subsequently place second in the ‘After Michelangelo’

sequence. The imprecation of the first line riffed on the same anguished themes and mannerisms I had heard repeatedly in the translations, but, as with ‘V of torso...’, I introduced my own ‘scene’, which I imagined almost as a still from a film. These two nine-liners sat together for several years until, in late 2010 and early 2011, I added the unrhymed sonnet, ‘Claw-chisel’s *ting-ting...*’ and two poems (‘My wet-nurse – her lot were stonemasons’ and ‘My eyes are the jellies your light smites’) which had three stanzas of three nine-syllable lines. All of these additions were each written virtually in one sitting, with little redrafting – proof, perhaps, not just of the benefits of total immersion in a subject matter but also of letting that subject matter ‘ferment’ over time. I liked the variety of forms that the sequence now had. That variety seemed fitting in what was becoming a series of snapshots of a man caught in a variety of moods.

But the sequence feels unfinished. I feel as if I could add a good deal more to it, such is my continuing obsession with the material. Despite this, however, I am satisfied that it is as finished as it needs to be for the collection. I feel that in this sequence, as it stands, I have proved that I have made Michelangelo my own, on my own terms, while in some sense respecting the fact that he was never ‘gay’ and while in some sense still remaining open to his complexity – and the fact that I will never be able to understand him.

Quasi Una Soneta

After my Michelangelo project, the challenge I set myself was twofold: to make the form of the sonnet my own, on my own terms, and simultaneously, in other work, to escape from it as completely as I could. I would say that the majority of the shorter poems in *The See-Through*

Man were recognisably sonnet-shaped at some point during their evolution. It seems that during the writing process I still needed the form as a touchstone and a reassurance, despite my latent intentions to corrupt it and undermine it. Take, for example, the first draft of ‘Serpent’, written in 2004, which is surprisingly polished and recognisably Petrarchan:

Adams’ given names to each beast, bird.
But as for that which nearly sat on me –
those two white globes of his anatomy –
has anyone named them yet? No? How rude! 4
I shall call them *buttocks... rump... arse... glutes*. And as for this
rock a tributary of a vein leaps over –
how does that woman of his keep sober,
keep from sinking to her belly to kiss 8
what I’ll call an... *ankle*. I search in vain
for something familiar or serpentine.
Thus: metaphor. Simile. Can he object
if, when I see his *bicep*, his *basilic vein*, 12
I see a gecko flick its tail upon a stone?
I shall map his parts. I am eye. He is object.

Initially part of a plan to write poems to accompany the panels of the Sistine Chapel (a plan far too ambitious ever to have come to fruition), this poem, or at least the idea behind it – that of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden making Adam a *seen object*, naturally assumed a position of thematic importance. On completing this Petrarchan draft, for example, I was already positioning it as the opening poem of the collection I was yet to write. But perhaps

because of this awareness of its potential centrality, I began to pile more and more material into it. For example, I soon had the Serpent lubriciously cataloguing more parts of Adam's body. I had the Serpent foreseeing the future, warning Adam about the destructive violence of which his pristine muscles were capable – a violence which could, however, be considered 'heroic' in some circumstances, if used in the protection of family and culture from an enemy, for example; and which could be considered 'good' if it were channelled into the hard graft of farming and building. I also expanded the idea, in lines 9-11 of the first draft, that the Serpent, in order to come to terms with Adam's un-snakelike body, invents metaphor and simile. The last stanza from a later draft, for example, reads:

I've got words enough for the both of us.
I've reaped this poetry from your rich, charged
body. Inch by sweet inch I've gouged us a
savage tunnel of language. And still an
age won't be enough for me to count the
ways in which your body corrupts beneath
my gaze and is unfinished.

This stanza shows that I had successfully struck out from the light, comedic tone of the first draft, largely by getting rid of its 'witty' rhymes. This tone, although entertaining, had been distracting me (and would also, I felt, distract the reader) from what I wanted to say. In retrospect the silly or witty tone established itself in the drafts of many of my poems. It did so, I think, partly because I knew it made for an entertaining poem and one I might enjoy performing. There would be nothing wrong with this, of course, except for the fact that I knew that it was often a kind of self-defence mechanism. The tone was protecting me against

the exploration of more serious or more imaginatively risky material which I might find embarrassing or disconcerting.³⁵ Eventually I realised that it might be sabotaging my better work.³⁶

However, the stanza above shows that I was beginning to explore uglier, more disconcerting imagistic territory (and I clearly liked the sensual /ch/, /j/ and /z/ sounds – by this point I was very much identifying with a Serpentine, corrupting language!). On the other hand, it sounded too much like a self-conscious manifesto, and what is more, it was tagged onto the end of a sonnet which had long since burst its seams, now occupying eight stanzas. I decided, therefore, to delete this stanza, and four others, chopping the whole poem down to three six-line stanzas (see Appendix 1.3, p238). It remained in this state for about four years, during which I performed it a handful of times at various events. The theatrical first line: ‘Adam? You decent? It’s me! The Serpent!’ always caught the audience’s attention and raised a chuckle. In fact, the poem probably remained in this state precisely because such a reaction suited my sense of vanity as a performer.

³⁵ One of Literature’s functions is, I believe, to challenge preconceptions or challenge the status quo, and to disconcert and possibly even embarrass the reader – all in order to provoke in the reader a constant reassessment of values and beliefs. The first reader of any literature is, of course, the writer him- or herself.

³⁶ In one of her Arvon/Chroma workshops at Totleigh Barton in March 2008, the Canadian poet Betsy Warland asked participants to draw a bird’s-eye view of where we would normally choose to sit in a public space – in a canteen or in a meeting, for example. I realised that usually I chose to sit in corners where I could people-watch, a position, I believed, of power. On reflection I realised that this was a position not of power, but of weakness – because actually I was trying not to be noticed, trying to be anonymous. Betsy suggested that the page we write on is also a public space and asked us whether we habitually occupied the page in ways which might be similar to the ways we occupied public spaces. I realised that I did. On the page I adopted similar strategies of evasion. I avoided digging for deeper ‘truth’. I preferred, instead, to make superficial or provocative statements, tied up with a pretty or showy bow (my insistence on calling the early drafts of my long poem ‘69’ rather than ‘1969’ is one small example of this). I risked little self-exposure. I preferred, instead, to be coy, or ironically detached, or cryptically concise. Although none of these strategies was wrong per se, I realised that if I was going to be a better poet I would have to abandon them or at least reassess how I habitually used them. The ‘witty’ tone of this draft of ‘Serpent’ is also, I believe, one of these strategies of evasion. Without Betsy’s workshop I might not have realised this.

I re-wrote 'Serpent' in February 2011. I had never forgotten that deleted 'savage tunnel of language', knowing that it was suggestive of the more imaginatively daring direction I might eventually take the poem. The rewrite was prompted, bizarrely, by a TV documentary I saw about a dead elephant, and how it rotted and how other life-forms thrived on it as it rotted. This was the provocatively Dionysian image I needed, one in which the Apollonian lines drawn between body and non-body, and even between life and death, were thrillingly confused. The rewrite even enacted a 'tunnel of language' (or mimicked a snake, or an intestine) in its form: now fifty-three lines, each of only five syllables. I had wanted to try out short lines ever since reading some of James Schuyler's long, thin poems the previous summer – and this rewrite of this particular material seemed like the perfect opportunity.³⁷

While 'Serpent' completely escaped the sonnet in its final form, many of my short poems did not. 'Daniel Craig: The Screensaver' is probably the most faithful to the form and proved popular, winning the Poetry Society's Stanza members' competition. Again, although a crowd-pleaser, I felt that its 'smoothness' and wry tone were also betraying my deeper instincts. I therefore deliberately set about tampering with both form and tone in the sonnets that followed. 'Poem While Reading Frank O' Hara...' (whose first line is a parody of O' Hara's line 'I don't know as I get what D.H.Lawrence is driving at...'),³⁸ was an attempt to allow my sonnet template to be occupied and haunted by Frank O' Hara's ghost, or at least my version of it. I let his apparently rambling style stretch the lines out to fifteen syllables. I also stretched out the gap between the octet and the sestet to mimic the way O' Hara makes a show of representing all his immediate experience in a text. The gap thus represents the ten minutes when the speaker was surfing and therefore incapable of writing, though, in the

³⁷ This long, thin form also seemed apt when I came to write 'Consciousness and the Long-Distance Runner' a few months later.

³⁸ This is the first line of 'Poem' from Frank O' Hara's *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p155

context of the poem, it is, I hope, also symbolic of the general human inability to hold on to, or be attentive to, experience. O' Hara, and then Schuyler, introduced to my poems the potential for a feeling of jazzy and mischievous immediacy.

I wrote 'Poem While Reading Miroslav Holub...' with a similar game-plan: that of allowing the body of my sonnet to be entered by the 'spirit' of another poet (or at least my version of it). Holub, the poet-immunologist, often puts a jaunty, surreal spin on quite abstract or ominous medical knowledge. He is thus very much present in the gallows humour of the first line ('Live, alive-ho! These bugs! These bugs! Alive!') and in the bizarre 'toxic larvae of angels' image in the dark but tender sestet. Holub is rarely 'tender' so I hope this last part of the poem shows, too, some kind of revision of his influence.

I believe my reading of Holub, and some of the New York School poets, was in different ways instrumental in guiding me away from the abstractions and austerities of Michelangelo and towards my own emerging style, and my own occupation of the sonnet form. 'On Seeing Sam Taylor Wood's One Hour Seven Minute Video of David Beckham Sleeping...' fuses some of those influences. The title is obviously comedic. The short phrases and informal language of the octet give it an improvisational feel which belies the torturous working out of its underlying metaphor – that of the ridiculous and ugly baboon (which, for many drafts, was an inappropriately noble wolf!) The sestet cuts, cinematically, to a scene in an Italian train station, the joky surrealism giving way here to a more mysterious and personal confrontation. I think it is these unsettling shifts in tone, together with a juggling of surreal and autobiographical elements, which rob the sonnet of its usual sense of logic and stability and which point the way not only towards my own take on the form but ultimately towards that which will make my future poems recognisably my own.

Chapter 3: STRIDES

'Gospel'

'1969''s five-year evolution began – I realise now – with the writing of a short poem called 'Gospel' (see Appendix 1.1, p234) in July 2006. 'Gospel' was written out of a need to come to terms with my mother's confession, a week before my civil partnership, that she thought my homosexuality was God's punishment for her own sin, namely the sin of having had premarital sex (with my father) and of having walked down the aisle, pregnant, with me. The title, therefore, is a rebuff to this – the *good news* in my poem being in the refrain 'Mama, there ain't no such thing as sin' (and, consequently, no such thing as divine retribution). Though I now consider it an unsuccessful sketch, 'Gospel' is, nevertheless, of importance, not only because it is the starting point of '1969', but also because it now seems pivotal in the evolution of this entire project. It marks an autobiographical turn – a turning of my focus away from the abstract male body, its various representations and its cultural semiotics, and toward my own body. My own body was now centre-stage for the first time. And with it came its history and all its claims on my sense of self – the whole issue of *embodiment*. Specifically, it was a turning, albeit obliquely, towards the crucial issue of sexual shame, one which I felt bound to address if I were to progress as an artist. Not since adolescence had I attempted anything so personal. It felt like a necessary, organic move. But also a frightening one. Not least because, as an adolescent poet, I had written a lot of portentous and self-pitying rubbish and I was anxious to avoid revisiting that particular oeuvre!

Firstly, I want to explore how 'Gospel' prefigures, in several ways, some of the technical and thematic aspects of the longer work to come. Obviously, the words 'mama' and 'ain't' in the

line ‘Mama, there ain’t no such thing as sin’, and that line’s repetition at the end of each stanza, was a deliberately ironic ploy to evoke the religious (specifically the black, evangelical Christian) idiom of gospel, blues and hymns. The poem reflects my listening habits at the time – I was listening to Johnny Cash’s last albums and it seemed appropriate that I should in some way echo the stark, Biblical imagery of his lyrics and some of these songs’ austere, hymnal quality. They reminded me of the Methodist hymnbook I used to leaf through when I stayed with my grandparents as a child (since there were no other books to read), and one hymn in particular which I have been unable to trace, whose lyrics I remember as:

Build on the rock, the rock that ever stands,
O build on the rock, and not upon the sands,
You need not fear the storm, or the earthquake shock,
You’ll be safe forever more if you build on the rock.

I wanted the same terseness and rhythmic rigour. It was also a temptingly mischievous idea to couch an anti-religious sentiment in a form which had a distinctly religious flavour. I decided to write much shorter lines than I was used to, to gather them into short, hymn-like stanzas and to score them with a pattern of stresses and syllables. This pattern was largely set by the first draft of the first lines, and the way it seemed natural for me to say them, as follows:

Like a hoofprint - - / -
In wet cement - / - /
I was proof of the done thing - - / - - //

The not meant.

- //

Down the aisle you

wore white. We wore

the mute joy of a snowstorm.

An ice dress.

Looking back at these lines, I am surprised at how much they contain in embryo – ideas which would later be expanded into major, recurrent motifs: the theme of accident, the ‘unmeant’, for example; the theme of transvestism; and the theme of ‘muteness’, the unwillingness or inability to speak. I finished ‘Gospel’ in France, in the last week of July 2006, writing in my journal:

I think my civil partnership has precipitated the need for this poem... It contrasts two weddings – implicitly – my parents’ and my own. (July 24th 2006)

I was also reading, almost exclusively, the *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, translated by John Felstiner. The sparse viscerality and Biblical references in many of these translations chimed well with the models I already had in mind. They also expressed intensely personal feelings through imagery which was often left unexplained, requiring, it seemed, a kind of reading I was not, at that time, used to. I wrote:

Not-understanding could even have more value if it awakens a more subliminal, associative type of reading. (July 22nd 2006)

Celan probably gave me the confidence to be more fragmentary in this poem and to drop in the seemingly disjunctive episode of the car crash, without any logical explanation. It is clear, now, of course, that the car crash is symbolic: another deeply anxious expression of the theme of accident – my own accidental birth being, of course, the principal one. Moreover, I could say that such an image is not simply an ‘expression’ of the theme of accident, but a kind of *transposition* of this central anxiety. I would consciously use transposition as a central imaginative strategy throughout the work which was to come, transposing, for example, a lot of autobiographical material and ‘anxieties’ into fictional narrative fragments which appear, on the surface, not to be about me at all. The car crash would, incidentally, later be edited out and reappear in the short poem ‘Pine’.

Although the formal constrictions of ‘Gospel’ had worked – had been conducive to engendering some condensed, strong imagery – and although finishing ‘Gospel’ had felt cathartic, as if by doing so I had pushed into important new territory, I soon considered it an unsatisfactory poem. I realised that I would probably not be including it in the final collection. This was partly because of the folksy refrain ‘Mama, there ain’t no...’. Here was I, trying to root around for a more personal idiom, yet in this line I was appropriating – arbitrarily, and without explanation – an idiom which was completely alien to me. It felt inauthentic and gauche. The irony of the mismatch between the idiom and the sentiment felt too easy – like a flippant gloss on something which actually needed to be addressed with much more depth and seriousness. Yet I was unable to delete it or get beyond it. I also did not like the way the poem as a whole perfunctorily alluded to a narrative to which the reader was not privy. I felt as if I was giving the reader short shrift, basically because of my own very real concerns about making such sensitive, private material – this revelation of my mother’s – into public art. This would remain an issue throughout the early drafts of ‘1969’.

At some point, however, I realised that to make a less abstract, less cryptic and more *generous* poem, and to explore, in any depth, the provenance of personal and family guilt which hovered behind this poem and most (all?) of the other poems in this project, then I had to overcome these concerns. I had to be a good poet *more* than a good son (and, of course, the significance of my surname is not lost on me).

Unpacking ‘Gospel’

I would not have the confidence to start unpacking ‘Gospel’ for another eighteen months, not until I went on the *Arvon/Chroma* writers’ retreat in Totleigh Barton, Devon, in February 2008. There, through a week of intensive workshops led by Betsy Warland, a Canadian poet of lyrical, imagist, Zen-like free verse, I gained that confidence. In one of her workshops she had encouraged us to take a single simile or metaphor from a poem we had already written and then extend it and explore it. In ‘Gospel’ I had used the image of the snowflake :

I’d settled inside you.

A too-soon snowflake burning your tongue

simply as a way of suggesting the accidental nature of my conception (and perhaps also the innocence and vulnerability of the foetus). Reflecting on the workshop in my journal I wrote:

... I took the snowflake metaphor and extended it, made it a snowman. My mum gave birth to a snowman which was me. I feel like the snow is melting and I’m stepping out of the snowman costume, finally. This is a strange but incisive metaphor, hinted at in the image of the boys joyriding and the accidental crash, and

the car in a ‘costume of snow’. But it’s obscure. I hadn’t allowed myself to run with the snowflake and find out where it took me. It seems there was an obvious truth waiting for me, an artistic solution, a purer, stronger image/story inherent within that metaphor, but I hadn’t the guts to follow it up. Or the correct perspective from which to see I was glossing over, being too hasty...’

(February 27th 2008)

I realised too, somewhat belatedly, that the conception-by-snowflake idea had richly religious and Freudian connotations which I could, and probably should, explore and that, imaginatively, ‘Gospel’ had only been scratching the surface. I was, to use Betsy’s terms, ‘strip mining’ rather than ‘pit mining’. When I shared this surreal giving-birth-to-a-snowman image with the workshop group it got a positive reaction. My worries about it seeming too farcical were dispelled (although it will probably always have a farcical element). The poet Maria Jastrzebska observed how it intensified, for the reader, the idea of the pain of childbirth. Suddenly I had the central metaphor – or conceit, perhaps – for a new, stranger, and far more extensive poem.

Thanks to Betsy’s workshops, I felt ready to move on to the first draft of ‘1969’. This was begun shortly after the retreat in Devon, in March 2008. I should say, at this point, that that retreat, specifically for LGBT writers, imbued me with a feeling of solidarity and belonging which I had never experienced before. That feeling was certainly instrumental in getting this poem off the ground.

One thing which unnerved me and excited me about ‘Gospel’ was its open-ended structure. This was a new departure for me as a poet. The only comparable work I had undertaken up

to that point was a series of seventy or so haiku I had written a few years before. Although ‘Gospel’ only amounted to thirty-eight lines I knew that it could potentially become – like that series of haiku – a great deal longer. Formally, the metered stanzas I had invented could be repeated indefinitely and, in terms of subject-matter, it was neither pure narrative nor pure lyric, both of which need some kind of curtailment. It was, essentially, a collage of little texts. And a collage can always be added to – not necessarily at its end, but at any point in its structure. It thus entailed a radically different method of writing. In my journal I wrote:

Unlike a sonnet there’s no definite endpoint. It moves incrementally and indefinitely. It’s like a pool whose surface is slowly getting bigger and under whose water there lie a lot of images, most of which I don’t want to rise completely to the surface... The danger is forgetting, or drowning amongst them.

(July 28th 2006)

The terse, hymnal meter I had initially sought, had, then, serendipitously broken me out of my obsession with sonnets, such that, by the end of July 2006, I was already conceiving of ‘Gospel’ as some kind of *anti-sonnet*. In the quotation above there are two points: first, about it not necessarily having an endpoint and secondly, about there being a proliferation of images, some of them, possibly, only half understood or left unexplained. In both points, I am expressing fear: the fear of not being entirely in control of what I was writing. By March 2008, however, I had realised that ‘1969’ was going to be an anti-sonnet of much greater proportions. This time, contrarily, not being able to see an ending to it – and therefore not being entirely in control – was thrilling.

The idea of writing a long poem had actually been fermenting for a few years. Early on in this project, my supervisors had set me the task of writing one, and, following my own remit of engaging with myths pertinent to the theme of masculinity, I had chosen, with admirable (foolhardy?) brio, to rewrite the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, based on Stephen Mitchell's excellent English version. My 'Gilgamesh' was another poem I would not be including in the final collection (though, as with all abandoned material, I am sure it will re-materialise in another form). Although I was pleased with some of its linguistic experimentation I felt that this amounted to little more than phonically entertaining 'surface': alliteration for its own sake, for example. It lacked the structural cohesion and the global unity of conception I knew a long poem needed. Over-ambitiously, I had transplanted the story to a nameless, war-torn Middle Eastern country and had done so without thinking through the political implications of such a move. Also, although the central male-male relationship was my focus, I had not sufficiently inhabited the story – imaginatively taken possession of it – with the result that the narrative voice of the poem did not have that sense of clarity and urgency necessary to sustain the reader's interest. I did, however, learn from these mistakes. I learned that any future long poem could not simply be conjured up on the page, in the act of drafting, as smaller poems often could. Instead, it would need a long, submersive period of 'thinking through' or 'imaginative clarification' – work largely done away from the page, between times of writing, on buses, on foot, and in every snatched moment. I learned, too, that not only would it need more narrative *drive*, but also a narrative voice whose authority and consistency would hopefully elicit readerly trust. By the time I came to write the first draft of '1969', then, my appetite for a long poem was whetted, and in many ways I felt ready.

Intentions for '1969'

I knew what I wanted. I wanted to re-cast the story of my being born out of wedlock in the shape of a half-farcical, Oedipal Ur-myth, one in which a young woman, miraculously impregnated by a snowflake, gives birth to a snowman. I wanted the snowman to melt, thereby revealing himself to be a man, after all, towards the end of the narrative, in true fairytale style. I also wanted it be interspersed with more naturalistic and historically significant scenes from the year 1969, so that the poem would be a tapestry or collage of that year: I wanted to include, for example, a scene about Armstrong's moon landing, about the Stonewall riots, about the Vietnam War and about Woodstock (though this last idea was later rejected). I wanted this collaging to serve two, somewhat contradictory, purposes. Firstly, to contextualise the central snowman-narrative, lending it, by proximity, the weight and 'authenticity' of historical events. Secondly, to create in the reader's mind a frisson of confusion about the epistemological status of all the realities depicted (to prompt the thought, perhaps, that what we consider 'history' might be just as fictional as tales about talking snowmen). I wanted, too, to draw a direct parallel between the guilt that the mother-figure feels in relation to giving birth to a freak in freakish circumstances, and the guilt that the freak – the snowman – himself feels about being different, and to show how this guilt, or shame, was passed down from mother to son, or at least mirrored. The melting at the end would therefore be some kind of absolution, or escaping, from this guilt, a leaving behind of the old, shame-full body (and an analogy of coming out, of course). The form was vitally important. I wanted the same clipped intensity that I had been aiming for in 'Gospel' – in other words: short, syllabic lines, although this time, because I knew it was going to be a much lengthier poem, I did not believe I could sustain the added constriction of a metrical

stress pattern. I therefore hit upon the idea of writing in four-line stanzas which followed an unmetrical 1-9-6-9 syllabic pattern. On my blog I wrote:

I want '1969' to run through the actual form of the whole poem such that, even when it seems to move on chronologically and thematically, speaking of different, recent events, that 'year' is still encoded, still reverberating secretly, constantly.

(April 2008)

So ironically, since the year 1969 is the *fons et origo* of the shame in question, and therefore in some sense emblematic of it, the implication is that the narrator never actually leaves that shame behind at all, despite relating events which take place in 1974, 1983, 1986, 1992 and 2001, and despite, too, the apparent rebirth of his body at the end of the poem. The rigidity and repetition of this syllabic structure is therefore an analogy for the rigidity and repetition of the shame described in the poem.³⁹

Influences on '1969': Sought, and Conceded

During the writing of '1969' the presence of Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' loomed, unexpectedly, closer – though, perhaps because of this, I deliberately avoided re-reading it. The 'Rime' was certainly at the back of my mind when I began, very early on, to add the notes at the side of the text, in a much smaller font.

³⁹ There is a question here about whom this 'secret' encoding is for. If most readers of this poem are poets themselves (and this is a possibility) then they may well count the syllables, in which case it is not much of a secret at all. In fact, I do not wish it to be a 'secret' – it is just an element of the poem which gives *me* pleasure, and I hope might give others pleasure too. And I hope that those who are aware of it might also see how, towards the end of the poem, it works to deconstruct the redemptive nature of the narrative. For me, at least, this lends the poem an exciting ambiguity.

The notes in '1969' perform several functions. Some of them have an exegetical function – the ones at the starts of sections, for example, mimic the kinds of notes found on film scripts and serve to set the scene before the 'voiceover' of the poem begins, while others translate snatches of languages other than English or give historical contextualisation for the events (eg. one of the notes explains the Stonewall Riots). Some notes indicate the music that might be playing if this really were a film. Even if the reader does not know the music I mention I feel that such notes do in some way contextualise or authenticate the poem, cementing its connection with the era.

There are other notes whose function I would say is not exegetical and which complicate the reading of the poem. There are snatches of nursery rhymes, for example, which, because they are written one word per line, have to be read down the page in one go, thus interrupting the flow of the reading. I wanted 'Mary had a little lamb...' to point up, with a touch of irony, the innocence and simplicity of the mother/child depiction in the main body of the text, the name Mary echoing, too, of course, that other famous immaculate conception. I wanted these suggestions to hover in the reader's peripheral vision, as it were, goading him or her to take them into account – stalling or colouring the reading. The other non-exegetical side-notes are the translations of the word 'snowflake'. Again, these momentarily tug the reader out of the main text, making no sense at all until – nominally – the line: 'from / all the world's cold skies they've flown to me' (on p. 111). I wanted to reiterate the point I make in other parts of the poem, that just as there is never one way of naming something, there is never one, pure, linear narrative (or, if there is, there are always others threatening to push in, or merge with it). The multiple languages might also be driving home the universality of the body-shame that the snow has, by this point in the poem, come to represent. (In one previous draft I had asterisks scattered down the white parts of the page to represent snowflakes and their

randomness, and in another I had letter ‘a’s, also representing snowflakes, but also representing the ‘a’ that Neil Armstrong infamously missed out in his NASA transmission from the moon. Fearing obscurantism, I thankfully managed to leave all this behind!).

As I began fully to realise the extent of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’'s influence on me, I decided, in one of the last drafts, blatantly to foreground it in order to let it loom into the reader’s mind too – as a way, perhaps, of borrowing some of that poem’s semantic *glow*, and also, I suppose, as a means of paying homage. The phrase ‘sadder and wiser’ at the very end, for example, is a direct borrowing. I also deliberately play with the dual meaning of ‘crew’- camera crew and ship’s crew. Since hating Eliot at school, I had been highly suspicious of literary allusion, thinking it elitist, but during this project I realised that such intertextuality was yet another way to make this poem more ‘open’, and so, for this reason too, I considered some kind of allusion apt. I did, at one point, think of including an albatross, but then decided that this would be a little too arbitrary; (what is more, *Monty Python* had already made an albatross a star of one of their sketches, so this bird had gained, for me at least, an unfortunate element of farcicality – and my poem was already about a walking, sentient snowman!). I decided, finally, that my most obvious allusion to ‘The Rime’ would be my inclusion of the framing device of the narrator speaking to the wedding guest. This implies that the guest, like the Mariner, will be similarly compelled to perpetuate the tale – though, more importantly, that the reader, like the guest, will be similarly compelled to listen to it. Such a framing device seemed appropriate since it underlined the fairytale-like nature of my poem, or, more to the point, that there is, in the poem, a to-ing and fro-ing between the fairytale and the naturalistic. Another model for such a device was in one of my long-cherished favourites, *Old Peter’s Russian Tales* by Arthur Ransome, in which all the tales are told by a grandfather to his grandchildren. Since I had first read it, around 1992, I had been

excited by the way this device made me aware of two mutually exclusive levels of reality within the text, and also made me question the epistemological validity of each. Was one more real than the other? Was I, as the receptor of *Old Peter's Russian Tales*, as fictive as the grandchildren in the text? Although, as a literary device, this framing must be one of the oldest and most traditional, I wanted it to act as a metaphor for the existential uncertainty which trickles through the whole of the poem – a poem kickstarted, after all, by a revelation which had certainly had me reassessing the truth of my own origins and foundations.

As I have said, I purposefully did not read Coleridge or Ransome while I was writing '1969'. However, I did read many contemporary long poems with the specific intention of learning from them, or of stealing from them, or of allowing myself – more deliberately – to be influenced. I made the following shortlist of long poems and sequences, based on recommendations and also loosely but not exclusively on a predilection for post-war American poetry, with no idea, of course, how – or, indeed, if – the works on it would influence my own. I see now, with some embarrassment, how utterly arbitrary it is:

John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and 'Flow Chart'

Basil Bunting's 'Briggflatts'

Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*

Ciaron Carson's *For All that We Know*

Alfred Corn's '1992' (excerpts)

Hart Crane's 'The Bridge'

David Harsent's 'Legion'

Selima Hill's 'Bougainvillea', 'Nylon', 'Bunker Sacks' and 'Grunter'

Wayne Koestenbaum's 'Model Homes'

Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*

Gary Snyder's 'Mountains and Rivers Without End'

Jack Spicer's 'After Lorca'

William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*

Gregory Woods' 'The Newstead Fandango' and 'Sir Osbert's Complaint'

Louis Zukofsky's 'A' (excerpts)

After spending such a long time writing and reading sonnets, I was awed, both positively and negatively, by the freedom and the space which the long poem could afford me. From this list, perhaps Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, as a homoerotic bildungsroman pitched, giddyingly, between fantastic myth and contemporary life, had the most emotional effect on me – and came closest to the mix of realities I wanted in my own poem, giving me, in some indefinable sense, the permission to go ahead with that idea. 'Permission', in fact, seems a far more potent and pertinent word than 'influence', in regard to this list. In these texts I was looking for familiar echoes, and, if I found them, I would feel that I had the permission to forge ahead with my own ideas. For example, Gary Snyder's poem 'Mountains and Rivers Without End', begun in 1956 and finally published in 1996, seemed to echo my desire to write an autobiography told in a series of sensually precise, haiku-like images, interwoven with snatches of myths, stories and conversations. In his poem the 'I' seems, to me, to be merely a spot of honey to attract words, and is eventually consumed by, and sublimated into, those words. It demonstrates Eliot's maxim that 'poetry... is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'. In 'After Lorca' Jack Spicer – in a more mischievously self-conscious manner – foregrounds 'the big lie of the personal'. So, having

read these poems, I felt that I had permission to write the personal, since, in a poem of this type, I would inevitably be transcending it.⁴⁰

Perhaps Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, originally published in three volumes, in 1960, 1968 and 1975, consecutively, had the biggest effect on me. It is an enormous collage of texts, all about the fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts. I cannot say that I enjoyed it, but, at six hundred and thirty pages, it made me realise that my own long poem might not be so long after all – and that I should not worry so much about trying the reader's patience! More importantly, I was impressed by the inclusion of such a variety of registers and discourses, from lyric to legal and historical documents, to letters, to conversations in various dialects. Olson seems to want to explode the very notion of what a poem is. Could I – should I – do this in *my* long poem? Reading it made me realise that a long poem might demand the use of a variety of voices and tones – and that it did not necessarily have to remain faithful to the expected lyric and 'poetic' modes. My inclusion of Cassie's letter (pp. 46-47) could be said to be the most manifest evidence for this realisation, as could my inclusion of scraps of vulgar Spanish ('metetelo entre el culo' on p. 49) and Biblical Hebrew and Greek (p. 67).

Less manifest is the research I did for '1969' into other 'texts': the tracking down of the NASA transcripts of the first moon landing, for example; the transcribing of dialogue from scenes in John Irvin's 1987 Vietnam War film *Hamburger Hill* – and even, independently of this, a transliteration of some – possibly useful – Vietnamese phrases; the watching of

⁴⁰ It might seem contradictory to invoke Eliot's and Spicer's comments in the context of a project which has always seemed to be moving *towards* the autobiographical. But the confidence to write autobiographically came with the concurrent desire to use that autobiography as grist to the mill: as material I could recycle or juxtapose or recontextualise with non-autobiographical material in order to create something which I hoped would be more interesting and meaningful than mere 'honesty' and 'authenticity'. See also my later discussion of 'theatricality' (pp.227-29).

countless amateur deer-hunting videos posted on YouTube (ostensibly to glean from them authentic and dialectally accurate vocabulary – although they also proved to be riveting insights into a popular rite of passage for many young American males); the watching of various films made in 1968 or ‘69, again for gleaning possibly useful vocabulary, eg. Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider*, John Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy* and Christian Marquand’s dire but very modish *Candy* (based on the Terry Southern novel); the research into late ‘60s popular music; the research into New York nightlife in the mid 1980s – the drugs they were taking and the music they were listening to. Although the evidence for all this research is not greatly manifest in the final draft of ‘1969’, the very fact that I was doing it with the intention of including disparate found texts shows the direct influence of Olson and what might be called his postmodern methods of construction. I suppose he provided me with the proof that a collaging approach could work on an epic scale, having been ruminating about such an approach since I had made *The Stickybook* a few years previously. In the summer of 2008 I was also greatly inspired by Susan Rubin Suleiman’s *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*, which, though pre-Queer Theory, suddenly made me think of Olson-esque collage as a specifically Queer literary technique and gave me a firmer, theoretical motivation for using it. For example, she says:

Could we see, in the Surrealists’ refusal of integration and hierarchy, and in their pursuit of heterogeneity in all its various forms – from parody to punning to collage – an analogue of the perverts’ refusal of ‘normal’ adult sexuality?⁴¹

This made me think that the form of my verse might be becoming aptly *perverse* since it was growing out of my need to contain many heterogenous and unintegrated narrative elements.

⁴¹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 150.

'1969' – Structuring - Drafts 1-12

The very first draft of '1969', written mid-April 2008, begins:

From
some scenes directors cut their own dads.
This scene. Pan-pan-pan-pan!
Mum, twenty-one, runs out into snow
which
has shooshed the world immaculate
for forty days and nights.
Streetlamps' tangerine lozenges show
how
random & unplanned each snowflake seems
how falling's a gamble
a skittish joyride on the windflow.
Yet
zoom in ! Closer! Her collar! Look!
One flake's frail cathedral,
light chiming through it, how that blind glow
from
her throat...

The 1-9-6-9 syllabic pattern has yet to draw attention to itself by being separated into separate stanzas, but otherwise this first sketch introduces many elements which would

remain essentially unchanged until the first full draft of the finished poem ('draft 12') in early April 2010. For example, I was already equating the narrator of the poem with a mysterious 'director' – and introducing film vocabulary (courtesy of www.filmeducation.org). A director would thus be my stand-in, directing the poem as if it was some kind of avant-garde film-collage – the words on the page being, in some sense, his thinking the film out loud, scene by scene. This was a device which demanded an emphasis on visual, unfolding events, rather than on static lyricism or interiority. I wanted the poem to move, not stay still – having written a boring 'Gilgamesh' poem, I was concerned about sustaining the readers' interest. In any case, it was a device which granted me a more comfortable objectivity towards the material, sublimating any dangerously autobiographical elements into the fictive – and it also clearly defined the position of the text in relation to the reader: the reader was now forced into the role of the director's assistant / camera-operator, obliged to wait on his every word. Furthermore, it gave me an excuse for not writing about certain things which I felt would complicate this poem, i.e. fathers and husbands: I could now say that an Oedipally megalomaniac director had simply excised them in the editing room.

Another element which would remain essentially unchanged is the rhyme-scheme. The second of the two nine-syllable lines in (what would become) a stanza ends with a word whose vowel-sound is repeated by a word in the same position in the next stanza. So the first of these words is, in the first draft at least, 'snow' and that sound is repeated in 'show', 'windflow' and 'glow' (with the intention that the poem would return to the same sound, and, finally, the same word, at the very end). Since I was envisaging my poem in filmic 'scenes', my initial idea was that each scene would have its own particular rhyme and that this would be repeated throughout that scene, no matter how long it was, in order to differentiate it from neighbouring scenes. It is difficult to recall with any certainty if I had any other conscious

reasons for rhyming in this way. Certainly rap music, which mostly employs the ‘mono-rhyme’, was in the back of my mind. Although not my favourite musical genre I had noticed that, in the mouths of a few of its practitioners, the mono-rhyme could lead to inventive wordplay and could effect a kind of hypnotic or angry compulsiveness. As a prize for winning the National Poetry Society’s Stanza groups competition with ‘Daniel Craig: The Screensaver’ I was given a free critique of my work by a ‘professional poet’. I sent off the fifth draft of ‘1969’. I believe that the person who wrote the critique had googled my name and decided, on the evidence of what s/he had found on the Internet, that I was a performance poet – because s/he said:

My immediate reaction is that this works extremely well as a performance piece due to the repeated stress patterns and the rhymes.

Apart from the fact that there are very few consciously repeated stress patterns, I am not convinced by the positivity of this comment because it is soon undermined by later statements that these repeated rhymes are ‘tedious’ and ‘getting annoying’. This ‘good on the stage, bad on the page’ argument discomfited me. On my blog I wrote:

I’d agree with this if they were end-rhymes at the ends of sentences or clauses but mostly they’re not, they’re mid-flow – so they should pass by unobtrusively in the flow of the reading experience. This begs the question, of course, of why these mono-rhymes are there in the first place. I suppose I wanted a kind of ‘horizon note’, a constant, or almost constant, sound-repetition like the drone of a sitar, over which other sounds play and make patterns. And I wanted to work out what effects I could achieve by strategically departing from this horizon note...

(June 2008)

In retrospect, my defence that these mono-rhymes do not draw attention to themselves because they are ‘mid-flow’ is a little shaky. I was – and am – well aware that any word placed at the end of a line, even a run-on line, is thereby given an emphasis, however momentary, and I was clearly choosing a large number of the words with this in mind. In truth, I vacillate on this issue: sometimes I wanted the mono-rhymes to be noticed and sometimes I did not. Having begun this eccentric and ‘tedious’ patterning, however, there was no question that I was going to abandon it – the critique, in fact, only served to strengthen my resolve to keep it. I suppose I was determined to make good what was being seen by this critic as a poetic technique more suited to performance poetry – a genre s/he clearly considered inferior.

As I wrote more of the poem, however, I became more anxious that my Poetry Society critic might have a point. To avoid tediousness, therefore, I began to adopt a much more impressionistic approach. I got into the habit of allowing a spate of mono-rhymes to be gently complicated by words which had the same end-syllable rhyme but with different stress-patterns, such that the end-syllable rhyme became less noticeable. For example, later drafts of the poem begin with:

bonemarrow – deathblow – origo – filmshow – snow – below.

More significantly, I also began to use consonantal para-rhymes quite extensively, in conjunction with the above, leading to ‘rhyme-strings’ such as:

lets – bets – headbutts – heads – bed's – bodes – hordes – cord – caught.

The peculiar thing is that, as the poem progressed, I increasingly began to write out a rhyme-string, such as the one above from pp. 67-68, and only afterwards constructed the poem around it, as if the words on the string were pins stuck in a map before the actual journey was embarked upon. In the example above, I knew I wanted to get from the word 'lets' to the word 'caught'. I then set about working out how I could do this, phonically, in an interesting and in a relatively gradual way, using words whose meanings I knew I could probably work with and contextualise. Only after I had done this did I start imagining a fly which *headbutts* a lampshade and snowdrops' *heads* which punch through topsoil. A case, then, of form dictating content. (This last phrase is too simplistic, of course. Occasionally, in the process of writing, I would realise that I had too much material to fit the rhyme-string, which would have to be altered accordingly).

It is important to note that the more impressionistic and incremental use of rhyme, described above, developed contiguously with – or possibly even affected – a changing perspective on how my fragments of narrative might work together. Although I had planned a chronological sequence of discrete scenes from the year 1969, and although, logistically, it was much easier to keep these scenes separate, I was increasingly disposed to seeing them as part of one, impressionistic and incrementally changing narrative where – like the rhymes – there was a melting, or *glissement*, between one narrative fragment and the next.⁴² In my blog I wrote:

⁴² I have stolen this word from Lacan. The French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) uses the verb 'slip' (*glisser*) and its corresponding noun 'slippage' (*glissement*) to describe the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the word and the thing. For Saussure, who first talked about 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' this was a stable relationship. However, for Lacan it was unstable and fluid. Consequently, according to Lacan (and the poststructuralists who followed him) when we try to mean something, or discover our 'self', we can only *slide* from one word to another. I see this 'slippage' in the poetry of John Ashbery, but also in the paintings of Francis Bacon where the male body is forever sliding or melting or merging with its environment or its own shadow. (And also, as I am about to say, in the work of Coltrane and Jarman).

I'm listening to a live recording of John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' at the moment. Something about '60s jazz, where bebop segues into something looser – maybe its flighty, inchoate, fluctuating quality – makes it conducive to my writing. And this piece seems resonant with '69'. I'm looking for the same kind of sustained intensity, I suppose, and yet, similarly, I want it to move quickly and lightly.

(June 2008)

There were other non-textual influences on the poem. I watched all the Derek Jarman films I could get my hands on. Most of his films also seemed to be giving me permission to tell a story in a more fluctuatingly impressionistic and more chronologically ambiguous fashion.

The summary of the events of the poem, as they unfold on the page, is as follows.

1. First the narrator, and would-be film director, begins to tell the story to a wedding guest at a reception.
2. The story begins with a woman impregnated by a snowflake in January 1969.
3. In April she gets married (although we never find out whom to).
4. As she walks down the aisle this scene morphs to Vietnam in May where Sergeant Bates has just had his feet blown off. He is reading a letter from his girlfriend Cassie.

'Glissement' is therefore a word which seems to have been waiting for me to appropriate it for my own purposes. I believe it tallies neatly with the idea of the Dionysiac corruption of Apollonian form. I suggest that it might also be used in a Queer context in that 'glissement' could describe too the active slipping away from any fixed gender or sexual identity. I will explore 'glissement' further in Chapter 5.

5. This scene then morphs to the Stonewall Riots in New York in June where Cherry L'Amour is a drag-queen.
6. There is then a flash-forward to Cherry L'Amour (now Rodrigo) watching 9/11 on TV in an old people's home.
7. Then back to July 1969 where the pregnant woman watches the moonlanding on TV, followed by a digression in which Neil Armstrong appears to speak to her.
8. The woman gives birth to a 'snowbaby'.
9. Simultaneously Cassie gives birth to Rick who morphs into a 23-year old, dead from Aids in 1992.
10. Flashback (forward?) to 1982 where Rick burns pornography at his parents' (Cassie and Sergeant Bates).
11. Rick hunts deer in 1983.
12. Rick dances in a nightclub in New York in 1986.
13. Then back to 1970, the woman suckling the snowbaby, and 1973, the woman teaching it to read.

14. The snowbaby becomes a snowman, escapes from his freezer and drives on a motorbike to the Alps where Cherry L'Amour (now Tiresias) tells him to go to Italy where

15. he melts and becomes the narrator, who finishes the story at the wedding reception.

'1969' was not split into sections until I made the first draft of the collection in May 2010. It was always meant to be one continuous poem, with no definite breaks between one scene and the next – so this numbering is arbitrary. To move from a church in Nottinghamshire to the Vietnam jungle I therefore made the cross on the altar metamorphose into the cross around Sergeant Bates' neck. Likewise, I mention an abortion clinic kidney-dish which metamorphoses into the headlight of a police van. I certainly had modern video special effects ('morphing') in mind when I wrote this, although kaleidoscopes, and the psychedelic graphic designs of the late '60s – sometimes based on kaleidoscopes – were also a factor. I wanted the *glissement* from one scene to another to seem spontaneous and random, even though previously the scenes had been arranged so that they were quite separate and unconnected. 1 and 15 are the frame. 2-8 are the woman's pregnancy mapped chronologically against the wider events of that year (with a brief visit to 2001). 9-12, the life of Rick, is then a kind of sub-plot, showing how the snowman might have lived in a different body. 13-14 is the snowman escaping and becoming human. But I did not want to draw the readers' attention to the poem's structure. I wanted all these narrative elements to seem as if they were in a kind of suspension, rubbing against each other, spontaneously, like the snowflakes littered through the text.

Cherry L'Amour (who also has the names Rodrigo and Tiresias) seems to be the most omnipresent and certainly the most queer character. I suppose her vulgarity and shamelessness is a necessary foil to the woman's timidity and her feelings of guilt at giving birth to a fatherless child. Also, she blurs or transgresses all boundaries – of cultures and of genders, most obviously, although, perhaps more significantly, by the time she appears at the end of the poem she is crossing beyond normal human lifespans and entering into the realm of myth. As the mythical character, Tiresias, she secures her central position in the poem, becoming the embodiment of its central message: that there are no origins (or, indeed, endings) and thus no possibility of telling a *straight* narrative; that there is no meaning or destiny or intentionality in events, only accident; and finally, that there should be no shame, or as 'Gospel' said, 'no such thing as sin'. I do not think it too far-fetched to suggest that in this, my Oedipal Ur-myth, she has also taken the place of the narrator's, and therefore the poem's, long deleted father. She is also described by the narrator as:

my muse

&

guide, that fuscia-lipped oddosity

suggesting, of course, that she might be *my* muse too.

Chapter Four: STITCHES

I was quizzing a renowned, literary academic and poet recently about prose-poems. This person – whom I will not name just to save their blushes – told me that, despite having enjoyed them for many decades, there remained a puzzlement about what they actually were and what they specifically could do which poems or other forms of short prose could not. This is not the place for a theoretical or historical survey of the prose-poem but, suffice to say, I was suddenly relieved and excited by that off-the-cuff confession. This chapter will reflect on some of my own forays into the prose-poem and why a puzzlement about *what they are* has come to make the form of central importance to this project.

Influences

During this project I read a lot of prose-poems.⁴³ I was most impressed by those of Yannis Ritsos and Tomas Tranströmer. Both poets sometimes achieve a combination of folktale-like simplicity and suggestiveness, often teasing the reader by skirting the edge of a narrative, or by letting a peculiar image or detail interrupt and become uncannily significant. Although Charles Simic is one of my favourite poets, his Pulitzer prize-winning *The World Doesn't End* I found too relentlessly surreal and obscure for my taste. I think a prose-poem has more subversive power if it metes out its kinks and dislocations with more restraint, using them to destabilise a more naturalistic context. Despite this assertion, however, I strongly suspect that Ransome's *Old Peter's Russian Tales*, and the hundreds of other fairy tales I read in the 1990's, and possibly also Angela Carter's short stories, have influenced me more – as have

⁴³ Before the project began I was already familiar with Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, which I love, with Francis Ponge's work and with Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*. So, although I did not re-read them, these major contributions to the genre of the prose-poem must also have been hovering somewhere in my readerly consciousness.

Biblical parables and snatches of various folktales and mythologies from around the world. Certainly all of these are hovering behind the almost childlike cadences and syntactical repetitions of prose-poems like ‘Goliath’, ‘Chop It!’ and ‘Mystery of the Incarnation’. I must mention, though, the American poet Mark Wunderlich’s *Voluntary Servitude* which I read late in 2007. I found a handful of his prose-poems very intriguing and they certainly opened my eyes to possibilities which I wanted to explore in my own work.⁴⁴ In many of them, for example, he uses paragraphs not as staging posts in a logical progression of prose, but treats them as autonomous blocks of text which seem disjunctive because they depict jarringly different scenes.⁴⁵ His ‘trick’ is then to draw parallels between these texts by isolating and recontextualising words or images they have in common, usually with some kind of suggestively erotic intent. This kind of poetic collaging – rubbing unlikely bits of stories together and seeing what sparks fly out – was a major inspiration.

I will now reflect on three of my prose-poems, which I think represent the progression of my ambitions for the form in this project.

‘And He Was Uncovered...’

‘And He Was Uncovered...’ is based on the story of Noah’s nakedness as told in Genesis 9. vv21-22. I had been reminded of the story of Noah whilst reading about The Sistine Chapel Ceiling, where this particular scene is depicted in one of the panels. I began the first drafts, initially called ‘The Drunkenness of Noah’, out of a sense of duty, then, to my project’s

⁴⁴ especially ‘It’s Your Turn to Do the Milking, Father said’, *Voluntary Servitude* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004), p. 29.

⁴⁵ This led to my decision to ‘right-align’ all of my prose-poems. This eccentricity, admittedly a bit of a gimmick, was so that they could be distinguished visually from both poems and normal prose. It also emphasises my reliance on the paragraph, rather than the line, as a basic unit (the line-endings merely being dictated by the computer).

theme: *the naked, male body*, and because the story dovetailed with my work on Michelangelo and his oeuvre. In the drafts I wrote during 2005, influenced by TV images of the tsunami in South-east Asia the previous year, I also depicted The Flood – and it took a long time to realise that The Flood was a distraction, and probably a cowardly avoidance strategy, inasmuch as it was Noah’s naked body on which I really ought to have been focussing.

Once The Flood was edited out, ‘The Drunkenness of Noah’ began to emerge in decasyllabic lines. Although this involved a certain skill in choosing and shuffling the words to make them fit that scheme, I always felt uneasy about the fact that most of the lines were run on into the next, with too scant a regard for the word which ended the line. I tried to coincide the endings of lines with endings of sentence-clauses, and I tried to avoid ending lines with prepositions and connectives, but despite this I felt that in some way I still was not doing the line justice. I felt that if I was bothering to have lines at all, then each one needed to have more justification for its existence than the mere fact of it having ten syllables. This is an uneasiness I believe I have started to overcome in more recent poems like ‘The Tip of the Tongue’, where stronger iambic and trochaic rhythms, and more attention, I hope, to the extra resonance of end-words has lent most of the lines a more satisfying integrity, even if they are run on.

However, in the early drafts of my Noah poem, the uneasiness was not overcome. What is more, I found the poem a little boring. Strangely, a son cataloguing his father’s body did not seem to be interesting *enough*. The introduction of the locusts – surreal and yet still Biblical – was a desperate attempt to put my own idiosyncratic twist on the material and reignite my interest. This helped, superficially, but I did not feel I had ownership of the poem until I had

read it at Nottingham Stanza (the poetry reading-group I facilitate) in 2010. One of the members expressed his opinion that the aura of taboo in the Biblical story must have been based on more than the mere nakedness of Noah, suggesting that we should interpret this nakedness as a euphemism for something more sexual. This provoked me to introduce lines relating to Noah's masturbation. This addition gives the poem the frisson of blasphemy it had perhaps lacked before, but, more importantly, it gives it more immediacy and dramatic focus. By intensifying both Ham's embarrassment and his empathy, it seems to make it a poem less about prophets and more about a father-son relationship. I made the line about the semen 'run out' from the text of this latest draft, just as the semen itself was running across Noah's stomach:

'...tearfully enact that
formula where x = the changing
viscosity of semen, y =
gravity, z = the texture of
six hundred year old, living, human skin,
a formula for the exponential
velocity of those flicked stones loosening into glistening streaks of loss
down his left side.

& my shamed eyes unstick, pull, watering,
away, as does my mouth, & twelve locusts
crawl up out of my throat's furred vinegar'

but, apart from being a touch gimmicky, this one extra-long line only served to remind me of my uneasiness vis-à-vis the ten-syllable stricture. By this point I already had a handful of prose-poems under my belt. I decided, therefore, to see what would happen if I abandoned lines and set it out on the page as a prose-poem, arranging the text into paragraphs according to where I felt a dramatic pause was needed. It could be said, quite rightly, that this was a sidestepping of my failure to make good lines. But once done, the text suddenly became a much more satisfying, more fluent reading experience – so I am hoping that this end justifies the means.

‘Figs’

The origins of ‘Figs’ lie in a short poem written on seeing a copy of ‘David’ in the Victoria and Albert Museum in early 2006. This reads:

‘Pirate

(On Seeing a Plaster-Cast of Michelangelo’s *David* in the V & A)

Once, your figleaf,
deployed for royal occasion,
swelled crinoline
with thoughts. Now, this schoolgirl blushes, smirks
to show she knows
how, like, sad your dick is,
how boring,
lifts a mobile to her eyes,

takes a photo,
sends your small exposure on.

You're a pirate jumping ship.

A copy of a copy.

And though bloodless

Still cocked still vein.'

This was too awkward and too flimsy to go into the collection and, despite being the result of many, many drafts, was kept in my 'unfinished poems' file for several years. Its main problem is an uncertainty in the tone. Basically, I do not think I had resolved what I wanted to say in this poem. The speaker who addresses the statue of 'David' seems ironic and knowing. His mimicking of the embarrassed but 'cool' schoolgirl feels patronising and seems merely to be a way of masking his own lack of viewpoint. The poem ends with elliptical double-entendres which I recognise as being based on some of my art-critical reading, especially ideas found in the excellent *Michelangelo and the Reinvention of the Human Body* by James Hall. 'Still cocked...still vein' thus eludes, in an obtuse and self-conscious way, to the idea that David's phallic power – his masculinity and his confidence – inheres not in his penis but in his torso. The lines 'You're a pirate jumping ship / A copy of a copy' try to extract from the girl's photographing the idea that masculinity itself, like the V&A David, is merely a copied gesture, pirated from a distant original. This is an idea lifted from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and one which deserves to be treated with a little less throwaway insouciance than I do here. I suppose the problem with this last part of the poem is precisely that it is based on interesting *ideas* which I have not managed to recycle, or

embed, in a sufficiently satisfying fashion – all I have managed to do is make them sound like cod-gnomic wordplay.

Nevertheless, most of what I wanted to say in ‘Pirates’ would find its way into the first paragraph of ‘Figs’. There, the form of the prose-poem freed me from the perceived obligation I would normally have felt to render the text ‘poetic’. I could write in a wry, journalistic style, pretending to be art-critic, if I wanted to, because I knew that a prose-poem gave me that little bit of extra space in which I could move on from that style and slide into other – including more poetic – registers. For example, the second paragraph, about the speaker’s ex and his cosmetic surgery, suddenly becomes more serious and confessional-sounding. The third paragraph goes back into art-critic mode, using my experience of visiting the exhibition of Michelangelo’s drawings at The Courtauld Gallery in early 2010. There, his late sketch of the Crucifixion had particularly affected me – emotionally, because, whatever one’s stance towards Christianity, that image will always be intensely charged, and also because I had read several biographies of Michelangelo and so felt that in some sense I knew the man who had made this work, who at this point was in his mid-seventies. It affected me intellectually, too, because the uncharacteristically impressionistic and tremulous quality of the lines, albeit due to failing eyesight and rheumatic hands, seemed serendipitously to tally with my newfound prejudice for the Dionysiac male body.

The fourth paragraph (according to Prof. John Lucas, who read the poem recently), enacts a sonnet-like ‘turn’. Certainly from here to the end of the poem there is a turn towards a more personal, autobiographical voice and a more overtly lyrical, metaphorical register. The masseur who ‘bulldozes the idea of my skin’ refers back to the Dionysiac body in the Michelangelo sketch. The phrase ‘it’s as if I’ve had surgery’ refers back, ironically, to the

ex's cosmetic surgery. The fig refers back to Adam and Eve's figleaves and the idea of shame. The word 'slain' refers back, obliquely, to *David*, and the slaying of the giant. So this last part of the poem is also attempting to reactivate ideas and images from earlier parts of the poem and bring them into a creative relationship, perhaps an *intensifying* relationship, with the almost-mystical experience of the massage.

This prose-poem was written quickly, in one afternoon, with what felt like a pleasing effortlessness, shortly after spending a few hours in a hammam in Marrakech. It is only in retrospect, in writing this commentary on it, that I realise that that apparent ease was actually hard-won and that it was only made possible by several years' accumulation of various research and reading activities, various failed poems and various life-experiences. The experience of the massage in the hammam was merely the catalytic agent which unexpectedly brought them all into some kind of creative harmony.

Angel of the North

'Angel of the North' is my longest and probably most ambitious prose-poem and was one of the last poems to be written for the collection. I would agree that its length (approx. 1700 words) and its more extensive use of dialogue make it appear much more like a short story, but I would argue that it *is* a prose-poem because it stitches together disparate narratives in the same way that many of my shorter prose-poems do – so, to be blunt, it fits *my* definition. Unlike the shorter ones, however, these narratives are clearly divided into three numbered sections. The first is cast in the form of an ancient myth. The second is in the form of a semi-mythical, semi-historical folktale. The third section is in the form of contemporary, possibly autobiographical, fiction. As with most triptychs the central section is probably the

most important for the understanding of the whole. The central section is, in fact, a re-telling of the story of Caedmon, the first known Anglo-Saxon poet, and how he entered a monastery shortly after having a poem dictated to him in his native tongue by an angel. I have always been drawn to this story. In fact, the very first entry of what was to become my ‘PhD’ journal, dated August 31st 2003, tries to give one reason why:

Caedmon is interesting to me because he seems to personify that moment in the histories of cultures when poetry moves out of peoples’ memories and mouths and onto the page. Oral culture never stops, of course, but there comes a point – maybe when individualism supercedes communalism, or when communities become mixed or fragmented, when the oral loses its momentum or its *raison d’être* and the text becomes paramount. To me, Caedmon IS that point, that cusp. He still occupies the space *between* the meadhouse (oracy) and the monastery (literacy)...

and I go on to ask, rather self-consciously: ‘Am I Caedmon? Am I in between?’ The answer, of course, is that I felt that I was. Or perhaps I should say that, in 2003, I was fancying myself as some kind of Caedmon in reverse, distancing myself from my elite, literary education and edging towards Performance Poetry and an engagement with more traditionally oral forms such as the fairy tale, a direction which – as I have already stated – I believed had already saved me from the detrimental effects of studying Literary Theory.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ I am glad to say that, over the course of this project, I have retraced my steps and am now on the road back to the monastery – in the sense that, much as I love performing, I no longer want to associate with the ‘Spoken Word’ scene. This is because most of that scene’s practitioners seem more allied to stand-up comedy, storytelling or rap – genres more geared towards entertainment and immediacy. In the future I hope to develop some of my performances within the context of genres I find more stimulating and more sympathetic to what I’m trying to do, such as Sound Art and Performance Art.

Another reason for being drawn to the Caedmon story, one much more relevant to this project, is his apparent shyness at taking the harp and performing. It may be far-fetched, and it may be too glibly transferring onto him some of my own anxieties, but I always interpreted this shyness as an unwillingness to partake in an intimidating, ‘macho’ performance ritual. In my mind, then, Caedmon quickly becomes – ridiculous though this might sound – some kind of proto-queer forefather. In the final section of ‘Angel of the North’ the first-person narrator leaves the macho ritual of the stag-do, possibly intimidated, possibly disgusted. The structural parallel with the middle Caedmon narrative is thus, I hope, made very plain. This parallel sets up the further crucial parallel between the angel and the soldier-climber inside the cathedral. With this I wanted to suggest that the first-person narrator’s witnessing of the soldier’s body was akin to Caedmon’s witnessing of the angel – where the angel caused Caedmon to write his hymn, the soldier caused, presumably, the first-person narrator to narrate the last section of the prose-poem. The witnessing of the soldier-climber is not autobiographical. He is as fictional as I suggest the angel in Caedmon’s story might also have been. As an image it came out of the blue, as images often do. But, like all such images, I can, in retrospect, detect a tangle of influences. The most apparent one was a TV documentary series I saw in which an architect and a professional climber climbed some of Britain’s most interesting buildings together, inside and outside, Durham cathedral being one of them. The last lines from Thom Gunn’s ‘The Corporal’, from his collection *Jack Straw’s Castle*, are also hovering behind the image:

Caught by the bulk’s fine inward flicker,
The white-toothed smile he turned to all,
Who would not have considered him
Unsoldierly as an animal,

Being the bright reverse of death?

Yet something fixed outlined the impulse.

His very health was dressed to kill.

He had the acrobat's love of self

- Balancing body was his skill

Against the uniform space of death.⁴⁷

My image is not of an 'angel of death', but it is important that he is a soldier. This is primarily because I wanted a subtle superimposing or after-image of meaning carried over from the first section, the narrative about the soldier-god, Wodin – a narrative which seemed to me to be the kind of pagan, heroic tale from which Caedmon might have been escaping. It is a Norse myth which I have substantially adapted and augmented (in fact, the only part which belongs to the original is the making of the first human being from divine spit). This superimposing serves, I hope, to intensify my soldier-climber's aura of divinity or mythic power. He is not only an angel 'in the rafters' but an avatar of Wodin. But – and here I find myself harking back to Lawrence – my version of divinity is physical in the extreme. The holy men depicted in the stained glass window 'slide, glow over him' sensually and I state that 'this whole cathedral's breathing through him.' And he sweats. I want the dripping of his sweat onto the cathedral floor at the end of the poem (and therefore the possibility of it landing on the narrator's head) to carry with it the suggestion of a baptismal rite. Once I had the dripping sweat at the end I went back to the first section and stitched in the line 'or lick sweat from his body', so that the paralleling is clear. Another example of paralleling is in the typically folktale-ish phrase 'from the height of... to the depth of...' which is in the last

⁴⁷ Thom Gunn, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 233.

section once, and in the first section twice. The echoing or bleeding-through is thus one of stylistics as well as content. This echoing of the Wodin narrative also serves, I hope, to intensify the soldier-climber's aura of heroism and masculinity, although I deliberately make Wodin a god who speaks poetry and 'enables poetry to enter the world' as a result of drinking the blood of the mysteriously hermaphrodite 'Adam-Eve / Eve-Adam'. By doing so, I suggest that his masculinity has been compromised or complicated. So maybe the soldier-climber's has been too. He certainly does not have a conventionally normal, manly body.

In fact, it is significant that the soldier-climber has lost his legs. I wanted him damaged. I wanted his soldier's body, and therefore his masculinity, to have been complicated. Throughout this project I have been studying Francis Bacon's paintings and a number of his damaged, metamorphosing male figures may well be another major influence on this final image in my poem, even down to the ropes holding him in place – which are like the abstract lines (sight-lines?) often skewering Bacon's bodies and the theatrical spaces they inhabit. The 'damage' makes my soldier and what he is doing more heroic, of course. It is also an exaggerated way of presenting a man who is not physically perfect, not Apollonian, whose boundaries have been broken, and yet who has attained, even if only in the moments of being witnessed, a kind of visionary sensuality. I want to imply, in this prose-poem, that such a body, or such a witnessing, is at the very centre of what I do as a poet. I want to suggest that by writing about such a body, I too am obeying the angel's commission to '*Sing me Freumsceaft*' or 'Sing me The Creation'. And just as angels are traditionally agents of metamorphosis, in-betweenness and intermediation, caught as they are between heaven and earth, human and bird, my soldier-climber is similarly located: literally, in his precarious balancing act, and symbolically, in the way I have made his body a violation of ontological boundaries – or at least an amalgam of differing realities as represented by three different

types of text. The triptych is about poetry and my role as a poet. I am saying that it is the poet's duty to excavate the moment, to find the archaeology of any given moment and to render it mythical, eroticised or numinous.

This stitching together of different narratives and therefore of different 'realities' is the thing that I feel I can do with the prose-poem which I feel I cannot do, or do so easily, in a short poem. This is primarily because prose generally sets up expectations in the reader of logicity, sequentiality and the possibility of *learning something*. When that prose metamorphoses into a different kind of text, or is interrupted by different kinds of text, a reader can easily be 'puzzled' and knocked off balance. So the prose-poem can subvert expectations. It can be subversive. Because of this, it has come to assume an important role in *The See-Through Man*. In a collection largely about the subverting of Apollo, the acceptable and knowable and eminently logical male body, the prose poem's poetics lends itself perfectly to a Dionysian corruption of Apollonian form.

Chapter Five – SUMMARIES

In this chapter I have two aims. Firstly, to discuss, briefly, how the collection *The See-Through Man* came to be shaped from its constituent parts. And secondly, to summarise how the writing of it has changed me as a poet – and has forced me to explore my own poetics. This exploration is ongoing, as my praxis is ongoing, so for this reason I will stop short of a manifesto. Nevertheless, a personal poetics is certainly what this project has yielded and what I shall be taking with me into the future.

Making A Whole

In the first draft of the collection, completed in June 2010, ‘1969’ was split into sixteen sections, each two or three pages long, and each with the title ‘1969 (cont.)’ – to make it quite clear to the reader that the poem was meant to be considered as one work. I split it for two possible reasons. (I say ‘possible’ because now, looking back, I am unsure as to which is the most *genuine*.) First, I split it because I was concerned about the structural coherence of the collection as a whole. I felt, for example, that one long poem would automatically have an overbearing relationship to the shorter poems, that – whether I placed it first or last – its size alone would seem to give it a pre-eminence which I had not anticipated and which I did not necessarily endorse. The sixteen sections, occurring evenly throughout, would, on the other hand, seem to give equal weight to *all* of the poems, while the frequency of their occurrence would give a patterning and therefore a unity. The second reason was that I might have been a little embarrassed at having written a text which might seem to purport to be some kind of *magnum opus*. The splitting was, in this case, an act of timidity and a way of disguising or hiding its length (in case it was, in fact, nothing more than an over-augmented folly!). It

could also be said that I might have been hiding my shorter poems in amongst the text of the long poem for a similar reason: hoping that they might thereby not draw attention to themselves.

Whichever reason is the most real – and I suspect both vied for position in the decision-making process at some point – the splitting into sixteen sections did not work. This is because I believe the poem gains a pleasing sense of narrative momentum only when it is read in longer stretches. In shorter stretches it fails to do this. Also, and crucially, it is because both ‘1969’'s mechanics and philosophy are predicated on the idea of the *glissement* or gradual merging of narratives, thus suggesting the interconnected and interpenetrative nature of human lives and the impossibility of isolating any one life. If I want a poetic text to be a metaphor for the Apollonian male body, and if I want that body's defined lines to be compromised by a Dionysian (or queer) fluctuality, then ‘1969’ is the text which best demonstrates this idea in my collection. Chopping it into so many discrete scenes completely undermined this. It was therefore, I see now, a serious aesthetic mistake.

The solution – or compromise – was to split the poem into only five sections. Five seemed a human kind of number (five fingers, five toes, five senses, five parts of the body touching the square in Leonardo da Vinci's ‘Vitruvian Man’...). It allowed for a sense of momentum in the reader's experience of the poem and an appreciation, especially in the second section, of the *glissement* of which I have been speaking. The five sections could quite neatly be summarised as containing the following material:

1. The conception.
2. The wedding – Vietnam – The Stonewall Riots – 9/11

3. The birth of the snowman – The Moon landing
4. The life and death of Rick
5. The snowman's escape.

I decided, following the same numerical theme, to have five short poems in each of the gaps (or 'intermezzi') and five at either end of it, making a total of thirty. This patterning is not essential at all, but to me, quite satisfying. The decisions about which poems went in which grouping were guided partly by the idea of gathering similarly themed poems together, and partly by the idea of having a variety of forms within one grouping. For example, the first five poems I see as my 'overture' poems and make something of a statement of my artistic intentions. They introduce my themes of male embodiment and the desires, dangers and vulnerabilities inherent in that predicament. 'Serpent' is an imaginatively audacious, queer re-write of a Biblical scene, and it seemed necessary to place it at the beginning for maximum impact. This long, thin, Schuylerian piece is followed by 'After Michelangelo', a sequence of five poems (one unrhymed sonnet and four nine-liners). This is followed by 'The Tip of the Tongue', written largely in broken-up blank verse and then the two quasi-Biblical prose-poems 'And He Was Uncovered...' and 'Goliath'. Interestingly, these five are also my most impersonal, in the sense that the 'I' in them is being used theatrically, with no autobiographical reference at all.

The five poems between Parts I and II deal with the aftermaths and effects of 'Beauty', or its denial. Those between Parts II and III are the most obviously erotic. Those between III and IV are mostly about understanding and connecting with other men. Those between IV and V play with the idea of being split from one's own body. The five poems at the end have the most religious and yet the most personal ring to them. But, having said this, when I chose the

sequencing I was also aware that readers might find relationships and resonances between the poems other than the ones I am suggesting here. I was aware that I could not dictate *how* my poems are read. They will be read in ways which will certainly diverge from any of my own prescriptions.

Inter-penetrativities: Towards a Poetics

At this point I would like to return to what I said about ‘theatricality’. What do I mean by it? It was probably as I was attempting to translate Michelangelo’s sonnets – and then writing the faux-autobiographical poems which grew out of this and became ‘After Michelangelo’ – that I realised the pleasures of inhabiting someone else’s persona. For ‘1969’ I went on to write monologues for a diverse array of characters, including: Cassie, a young American hippy; Rick, the young Aids victim; Ray, a homophobic Vietnam veteran; Neil Armstrong, the astronaut, and Cherry L’Amour, the Puerto Rican drag queen. The pleasure is that of briefly becoming someone else: the possibility of using their voices to say things I would not ordinarily want to say, or feel able to say. But my allowing the narrator of ‘1969’ to slide, promiscuously, into these various other personae suggests, too, the instability and arbitrariness of the Subject itself. This is why the narrator’s birth in Nottingham segues so swiftly into (or is displaced into) the birth of Rick in New York, as if Rick is the person the narrator very nearly might have been, had the die been cast differently. To drive this point home, I wrote, just before the leap to New York:

Now pan down Byron Ward’s plinths

of

beds – two more kissable babies born

now – Raschid &

Raschid Parvez Gorshani (1969-1978)

Rachel: two other lottery skins

Rachel Penelope Gallagher (1969-2054)

I

could've been poured into – slutty wine –

become two different

me's in...

The side-notes give these babies their full names – their shared initials, R.P.G, the same as my own, granting the reader a big clue that not only is the narrator of '1969' a kind of self-mythologisation of 'me' (as is the case with the first-person singular in perhaps all of my other poems) but that I consider my own identity to be a similarly slippery and chance phenomenon.⁴⁸ To summarise, then, I have used the first person singular almost by default in this collection, but have done so not in the traditional manner of lyric poetry, that of self-exposure and truth-telling, but as a way of exploring other characters (or, possibly, of exploring exaggerations or suppressed parts of myself). This is what I mean by 'theatricality'. However, ultimately, I have used it as a way of expressing my postmodern understanding of identity. I see the act of inhabiting a proliferation of 'I's' as a correlation with what Leo Bersani calls 'sexual surrender'.

Sexual surrender can be experienced not as a sensual gratification, but rather as a discipline in anonymity, one that helps us to escape from what Lacan has called 'the

⁴⁸ I was further emboldened to take a step towards 'self-mythologisation' after reading Elena Shvarts' work. Shvarts seems seamlessly to thread her St. Petersburg life into that city's larger myths and histories, mythologizing (in the sense of exaggerating and self-dramatising) herself in the process. I have been impressed, too, by Selima Hill who uses the 'I' to empathise with, and explore, extreme or unfamiliar mental states.

hell of desire' – the hellish desire that is the sign, or perhaps we should say, the symptom, of our psychological individuality: the desiring individual is erased in order to become a site of correspondences with the world.⁴⁹

My proliferation of 'I's, and my *glissements* from one 'I' to another, plus my various self-mythologisations, could all, in some sense, be said to be attempts to enact a dissolving of the borders of the Self – attempts to enact an infiltration, or dissolution, or opening out of the Self such that it is nudged towards some kind of gracious state of self-erasure, or towards being merely 'a site of correspondences with the world'. This is certainly the impetus behind the phrases 'I was dunes./ Silica.' in the penultimate poem 'Figs' and also behind the lines near the end of '1969' which go

...Then sunshine at Bellagio

creeps through me – my feet become cumulus,

then cirrus: a boatful

of flashing, slip-slop mirror row-rows

the

boat with me, or is me, row-rows till

no-one is rowing...

And if it seems too portentous to derive any moral, political or existential credo from this, these attempts can, at least, be interpreted as ways out of the fixed, impenetrable, Apollonian

⁴⁹ Leo Bersani, *Is The Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 7.

male body. They tally with various other textual strategies whereby the text, as a cipher for that body, is punctured or interrupted or infected by other voices or other kinds of text. '1969' finds itself interrupted – four times – by batches of my shorter poems. It is also constantly being penetrated by languages other than English. Even the 'flow' of the text is constantly threatened by the side-notes, which sometimes explicate or supplement what is happening in a non-poetic register (thereby forcing in another kind of voice) and which sometimes simply – and deliberately – distract. I am making the point that the poem (like the body, like the Self) can never be sufficient unto itself. It must be a 'site of correspondences with the world'.

Towards the end of this project I made the last poem to have been written for it, 'Lunch at the Argana Café', a test-case for this poetics of *inter-penetrativity*. This was perhaps my most autobiographical poem, written out of shock at a real event and grappling with a genuinely uncanny prescience about life's fragility. At first I wanted it to be as straightforward as possible. I let the first lines dictate the stark syllabics of it and said what I wanted to say until it had reached its end. But I was oddly dissatisfied with the first draft. In my journal I wrote:

It's too straight, serious and univocal. There needs to be an other, complicating, destabilising voice, otherwise it's too pat, too predictable. I need to open a gap in the poem to let in a different light. It's too much of a closed box if I don't.

So, at the most dramatic point in the poem, I penetrated it with a seemingly disjunctive paragraph:

An old, bony English girl demands to be in this poem. At this point. Now. Alone, she stokes an allotment bonfire. Her hair's up-ended filaments of loft-insulation. O where..? O where..? O where..? O where..? O where are we going with this hairdo?

The seriousness of the main body of the text – the existential *cri de coeur* of it – is thus undermined not only by a new and apparently irrelevant image (although the fact that she is ‘old’, ‘bony’ and ‘alone’ crucially connects it with the main theme of death, and the death of partners) but also by some oddly inappropriate vocabulary. The phrase ‘up-ended filaments of loft-insulation’ seems to belong in a comic novel, not in a poem – or at least not in *this* poem. The unnecessary repetitions of ‘O where..?’ suddenly tip the poem towards farcical melodrama. The expectations set up in those repetitions are then deflated bathetically when the question is completed with the intrinsically camp word ‘hairdo’.⁵⁰ The poem then returns to the earnest ponderings of before. Reading the new, penetrated draft of the poem is, I believe, more unsettling, and, because of that, a good deal more interesting.

Throughout this project the act of reading has slowly been assuming a more significant place in my poetics. I suppose I have come to realise that the act of reading is, in itself, a profoundly erotic activity in the sense that it allows for the occurrence of a kind of inter-subjectivity. The poem penetrates our minds as we, in turn, penetrate (or unlock) a poem, or – less phallically – we open it up to multiple readings as it, in turn, opens *us* up. This is why two of my poems have the titles ‘Poem While Reading Frank O’Hara...’ and ‘Poem While Reading Miroslav Holub...’ – I wanted to suggest that the bodies of these poems have been entered, beneficially, by the ghosts of other poets, as I am myself as a poet. I can never, for example, claim to be the sole originator of my work because the act of bringing it to fruition

⁵⁰ The question ‘where are we going with this?’ is one I have sometimes heard hairstylists ask their customers. Although usually asked seriously, the question is arguably very camp, even without the addition of the word ‘hairdo’. Philip Core defines camp as ‘Camouflage, bravura, moral anarchy, the hysteria of despair, a celebration of frustration, skittishness, revenge...’ (Fabio Cleto (ed.), *Camp – Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999’), p. 80). The word ‘hairdo’ suggests a coiffured cut which the old lady in the poem clearly does not have. It is therefore a lie which makes light of the rest of the poem. It is a joke which flirts with the rest of the poem’s darkness, briefly distracting us from it, but perhaps, in the end, only serving to deepen it.

is the act of being a medium for all those other poets who have influenced me and whose work presses itself so inevitably into my own. This is also why at the end of Part IV of '1969', Rick wants to

break himself apart so all can eat.

You know the rest. You know.

The crumb's on your lips. You have the taste.

The intrusion of the second person pronoun is a deliberate assertion that anyone reading this is also, in a sense, allowing him- or herself to be entered by Rick's body (or by his story). The reader is thus being instructed in the idea that no body, and no story, is distinct from his or her own. There is no such thing as foreignness. There is no such thing as a fixed, impenetrable Self. (Women, tutored by their bodies, perhaps know this already).

It seems I have come a long, long way from wanting to write poems about the male nude in art. The question of what my work is 'about', one which has naturally obsessed me during this project, has evolved from wanting to write about visual representations of the male nude in art and popular culture, to icons of masculinity, to deconstructors of masculinity, to my own male (and gay) experience. It has, over the last eight years, slowly become more wayward and exploratory in its themes, latterly reaching towards almost mystical statements about embodiment and bodily shame. This evolution was necessary, but, bizarrely, the question of what my work is 'about' has recently become almost redundant for me. I have reached a stage, I think, where I do not want my poems to be about one thing and so have purposefully begun to construct them so that they evade unilateral interpretation, as outlined in this and previous chapters. One influence on the redundancy of the 'about' question has

been my reading of New York School poets, O'Hara, Schuyler and Ashbery.⁵¹ In my own poetics, having come to make the 'open', penetrable and more polysemous text a metaphor for the more Dionysian, post-gay male body, I am at the point where the form of a poem potentially says more about my beliefs than its content. This is a thrilling point to be at. Ironically, it feels as if I am only just beginning.

⁵¹ All three of these poets, influenced by French Surrealism, bebop jazz and various mid-20th century movements in American art (Abstract Expressionism being the most cited), often allow – or seem to allow – the spontaneity of conversation or the eccentricities and randomness of stream-of-consciousness to be a guiding principle in their work. So the content of one of their poems might typically jump around in many directions, or, as is often the case with Ashbery, the poem might approach a theme only obliquely.

Appendix One – Some Earlier Drafts of Poems

1.1

After Michelangelo

The V of your torso's haunted me
this past five hundred years.
I test my fingertip on the opened shears
of your back, down to the oiled hinge,
my other hand on the rubbed handle of your haunches,
but no blood's drawn.
Still, you prune, I fruit: I'm born
a thousand times, a thousand times you taunted me
with your absence...

1.2

Gospel

Down the aisle you wore white.

I'd settled inside you.

A too-soon snowflake burning your tongue.

And because each unborn man's a transvestite

I wore that gown too.

It's mute joy.

Mama there ain't no such thing as sin.

To unpick that stained thread from our DNA

you taught me to read, to write, to mean,

to prove myself meant.

You smoked your accusers

through small tunnels, my mouthed vowels.

You eased a pen into my hand.

Mama, there ain't no such thing as sin.

But the more I wrote

the more my shadow longed, deeped, darked for boys' loins,

the more my tongue lapped

to tell stories of where I was, with whom,
forked to tell a tale,
even of who I was.

Mama, there ain't no such thing as sin.

Once, from a train, I saw a burning car
in a peach dusk cornfield.
Two boys running away from it, laughing.

Later, I'd see it in a costume of snow
still sinking with the joy's weight,
the not meant.

Mama, there ain't no such thing as sin.

And my being born's not the word which speaks against you.
And my veering off road's
neither your sentence, nor mine.

Why, just last night, here in Festalemps, Dordogne,
blue lightning clove a pine
clean in two.

The love of my life and I held close. Smelt black smouldering. Flesh.

Not us.

It.

Mama, there ain't no such thing as sin.

1.3

Serpent

Adam? You decent? It's me, The Serpent.

With a tongue-ful of blooms, fresh words, fresh cut,

“*Buttocks*”? “*Rump*”? “*Arse*”? “*Glutes*”? It's just that, so sick

of you naming each beast, each bird, I thought

I'd eye you up, map you, lay claim to you,

turn your ugly body into words I

can roll through my tongue, which are mine, which make

all of you – eugh! – mine. But words don't simply

name, they sorcerise, proliferate, then

spellbind, bind me fast: your blue, “*basilic veins*”,

proud on your “*biceps*” – geckos who flick their

tails upon a stone – pulse! – gone! I circum-

slitherate your muscles' horizons – my

eyes bend bend bend to catch a glimpse of

those geckos' tails – next thing I know the ache

of eyesight's end-in-itself, my sick gaze

a way of feasting while always unfed.

Look! My eyes two drops of molten copper!

Appendix 2 - Further Extracts from Blog Entries

2.1

I've been thinking a lot about diaries lately. Last Saturday I went to the Joe Orton exhibition in Leicester. His sister was showing round a gaggle of fawning theatricals. Eavesdropping, I heard her say that his name was actually John Orton and that there's speculation that the diary is sometimes designed to shock and is sometimes creative in the 'Joe' Orton it chooses to portray. I suppose diaries by their very nature are selective. They can never be totally honest or complete.

My great uncle Joe was the only other poet in my family... His diary from the 1950s, is a steady, faithful record of the circularities of village life, of family bickering, of the changing seasons, of his dog, his wife, his horticultural duties... How honest was his diary? There's no trace of self-fictionalising or exaggeration or awareness of a readership. But how much did he leave out? Would there be stuff he was scared to put in? Perhaps no diary – or blog – can ever be honest. The nature of the writing ties it too closely to the contingent, which is always slippery, fluctuating and half in cloud.

2.2

With the sonnet I feel I'm going behind enemy lines. Although Shakespeare wrote love sonnets to another man. Although Michelangelo wrote love sonnets to another man. Although there's a clear precedence set for couching homoerotic content in this form, it remains a form which seems to have a pre-eminence, a centrality, a cultural kudos, which, by default, makes it masculine and heteronormative. There's also an

inherently logical structure – thesis, antithesis, synthesis – which is traditionally seen as masculine. There’s also a sense in which the sonnet is a performance, a showing-off of skills, as the male bird shows off his tail feathers to woo the female (or another male). Sonnets traditionally chase down the meaning, pursue it till it’s captured or demonstrated. Bravo! Well done, old boy! It doesn’t surprise me that the sonnet is most often associated with the Renaissance, that its most famous proponents were Renaissance men. Because that was the colonial age. The individual (the man) proved his skills – and therefore the integrity of his selfhood – by mastering an object, pursuing it, understanding it, capturing it, celebrating it, holding it up to the light. That object could be a woman. A continent. A conundrum. A younger man. Writing sonnets was a colonial act. And the desire to colonise is always masculine (at least in the way that masculinity has been most commonly defined...)

(February 28th 2008)

Appendix 3 – Further Commentary on the Michelangelo Translation Project.

‘Remix No.1’ begins:

Non e sempre di colpa aspra e mortale
D’una immense bellezza un fero ardore,
Se poi si lascia liquefatto il core,
Che’n breve il penetri un divino strale.

- translated by Ryan as

To burn fiercely for an immense beauty is not always a harsh and deadly fault, if it so softens the heart that a divine arrow may then easily pierce it.

I change the tentative statement ‘is not always’ to the more affirmative rhetorical question ‘How can it ever...?’ I do away with the abstraction of ‘beauty’ and replace it with the earthier, more humorous ‘gorgeous bum’. I do away with ‘love’, inferred from the mention of the heart and of the Cupid-like divine arrows, because I believe that what we are really talking about here is not so much a rarefied or romantic love, but something earthier. Certainly such phrases as ‘D’una immense bellezza un fero ardore’ give tantalising admissions of physical attraction. I therefore change Ryan’s ‘softens the heart’ to the more erotic ‘soft enough to penetrate, molten’, ‘molten’ also being closer in meaning to ‘liquefatto’ in the original. So my remix begins:

How can it ever be a mortal sin

1

to be hot-fingered for a gorgeous bum	2
if, by that heat, there's a chance you become	3
soft enough to penetrate, molten?	4

‘Molten’ in line 4 also dictates my radical, but not, I believe, incongruous, transformation of Michelangelo’s central *arrows – wings – flight – ascension* metaphorical matrix into the *heat – lava – pumice* metaphors in my remix. (I have always been fascinated by volcanoes – and I think I was influenced by a TV documentary about Pompeii, shown at the time of writing.) The remix thus continues:

Moltenness can launch you from base, vile earth	5
-------------------------------------------------	---

(Here I transplant the very last phrase in the original ‘cose basse e vile’ to this part of the poem, translating it directly)

straight into the stratosphere, where, peaking,	6
you can strain to hear your Lord God speaking,	7
you can tread air, searing apex of the curve,	8
and refuse, refuse, refuse to plummet	9
as most passions, pumice stones,	10
brittle mementos in sweaty palms, do.	11

The lover does not ascend to God but attempts, pathetically, to maintain his position at the ‘apex of the curve’ – to maintain his lust, his euphoria, or maybe his focus on the object of his lust – before his inevitable descent and his cooling down into mere pumice. My ending:

If lust can deliver you to this summit, 12
vaporise your eardrums, fingers, fists, bones, 13
how can it ever be a mortal sin? 14

- returns to the same playful rhetorical question which started the poem, one which presupposes the answer *it can't!* Initially this was a way of covering up my inability to write a suitable line which ended with a rhyme with 'do' at the end of line 11. Then I realised that the position of this repetition was apt – it meant that the form of the poem emphasised the upward and downward trajectory, the fact that after the experience of lust one returns to where one started. On finishing the last draft, I commented:

...I like the arc of it, the way the first eleven lines is pretty much one sentence, forcing the voice to arc and strain to match the subject matter...

(This was a trick I would use again, in my Daniel Craig poem, and shows how performability was often not far from my mind, when writing.) But I also concluded that I now had a poem which

...despite my best efforts, has ended up sounding like a serious, almost pompous, theatrical monologue. It's not Michelangelo. And it's not ME...

Reflecting on this first remix now, I like the idea that the naïve, optimistic rhetorical question 'How can it ever be a mortal sin?' seems, at the end, emptied of its relevance. The lava metaphor undermines it. The reader is left thinking: if lust is so powerful, the important

question is whether one can survive it, *not* whether it is right or wrong. This is a thought which I realised was central to my project and one I knew I would have to make more explicit in later poems. However, I agree with the comment I made at the time. The voice in the poem is neither Michelangelo's nor mine. It does sound pompous. And 'gorgeous bum' is simply crass and inelegant.

'Remix No.2' tries to make sense of another strained argument, this one spread over a grandiloquent pattern of 'if...' clauses, and does so by again editing out abstractions, swapping some of the metaphors and generally aiming for a more colloquial and ludic register. Ryan's prose begins:

If one's heart is made of sulphur, one's skin of tow, one's bones of dry wood; if one's soul is without guide and without rein for its ready desire and its excessive attraction; if one's reason is blind, weak and lamed by the birdlime and the snares of which the world is full; it is little wonder that one should in a flash be burned up by the first fire one comes across.

I translate 'cor' not as 'heart', but as 'aorta', in order to strip the word of its metaphorical function – its hackneyed symbolic weight – and to defamiliarise it. 'L'alma senza guida e senza freno / Al desir pronto...' which in Ryan becomes a 'soul... without guide and without rein for its ready desire...' becomes, in my version, a Freudian pantomime, featuring the superego and the id:

Aorta: sulphur; skin: touchpaper; bone: tinderwood.

And no interfering superego

to nip libido in its here-we-go-
under-the-mulberry-bush, up-for-it bud.

The idiom ‘nip in the bud’ led to the image of the burning bush:

No wonder then, if, stumbling on my first spark
my foot should catch, balloon, a burning bush

This image, in my version, bridges the divide between the sexual and the divine in a way which Michelangelo could not, intellectually or psychologically, ever have allowed himself to imagine, at least in any public sense. It would have been too blasphemous by far. I like the surreality of this image. But in this, as in the other remixes, I am actually just swapping one kind of abstraction for another, in the sense that I am creating a new matrix of metaphors with little reference to events in the contingent world. And no matter how many individual images I try to recast or render more physical, I am, in truth, merely swapping elements within the same rhetorical framework and ending up with an algebraic formula which is largely the same – or, if slightly refocused, then equally arduous and contorted. ‘Remix No.2’'s last lines read:

Even the humblest artist
has something hard, asbestos, inside him...

Blame God I'm like this. I want to stand
where I'm most susceptible, will most combust...

Blaze with me, Tom, when I stand beside Him...

In the original, Michelangelo does not blame God; nor is 'Tom' (my inappropriate or improbable short form of Tommaso Cavalieri), though the poem's dedicatee, ever mentioned in the poem. The dots and spacings, the fragmentary nature of my remix, seem to testify to my frustration at trying to give birth to a 21st century Michelangelo and finding him, naturally, a little recalcitrant. Reading these individual lines now, I actually find them oddly resonant. But it is as if I can only give birth to separate limbs, none of which can be summoned into the shape of a functioning body. In my journal I try to pass this off as a virtue:

...burning bush, though not in the original, is an image which strangely and serendipitously unites what I understand as the two opposing metaphors at work in the poem: the fire of lust and the fire of God. At the same time I wanted to emphasise their incompatibility by breaking up the poem into four parts, with dots after the last line in each part to suggest unresolved, unfinished ideas (while still trying to maintain the Petrarchan rhyme-scheme).

That "I wanted" is interesting. The ever-present danger in writing a (self-)reflexive commentary – including this appendix – is that one can easily and unknowingly seduce oneself into constructing a linear, logical or self-aggrandising narrative of composition where no such narrative actually existed, or retroactively inscribe full intentionality onto what, in fact, was merely chance or unthinking bad practice. For example, the fragmentariness of my remix could just as easily, and perhaps truthfully, be interpreted as a failure to make the poem intellectually or imaginatively cohere. However, what I can say is that this fragmentariness

indicates that, through the writing of these remixes (which for me often felt like a gruelling form of combat) I was already being a rebellious apprentice of the sonnet form. Even before I had mastered the form I was already thinking of ways in which I could subvert it. But was this just impatience? Anarchism? Why was I doing it? The answer is that the sonnet, as I have already said, was accruing “further, contiguous anxieties”. It was, as a result of writing these remixes, already becoming a metaphor for an ideal of male physicality and male selfhood with which I had some serious issues. Before I discuss what these issues were I will comment briefly on the final two remixes.

In “Remix No.3” I used the sonnet beginning:

A che piu debbi' i' mai 'intensa voglia
Sfugar con pianti o con parole meste,
Se de tal sorte 'l ciel, che l'alma veste,
Tard' o per tempo o alcun mai non ne spoglia?

- translated by Ryan as:

What point is there in my still giving vent to my intense emotion in weeping or sad words, if heaven, which clothes my soul, neither late nor early rescues one from such a fate?

- which in my version becomes:

What's the point? My tongue bursting, thick with want?

1

What's the point of tears? Sunk words? If Heaven,	2
which clothes my bones with meat, won't undress me	3
of this destiny?	4

Typically I add “tongue” and “meat” and other elements, but of all the remixes this is, I believe, the closest to the original text’s ‘deep sense’ (in Umberto Eco’s words) – though the structure is much looser. Although there are fourteen lines, I abandoned the end-rhymes, concentrating instead on internal rhymes and a cluster of phonic repetitions which occur throughout (especially –urst / -est / -ess and pine / line / pain, both sets of sounds being united in the crucial word “pointless”). I also experimented with line lengths. The long fifth line –

What's the point, if some deep-embedded, last-legs engine drives me	
	to pine, pine... 5
if all die?	6

- attempts to mimic Michelangelo’s strained, prolonged longing, followed by the short sixth line which attempts to echo the finality of death, which empties this longing of meaning. I also tried to tease out the eroticism. The original, for me, is highly erotic. “Nudo” in the penultimate line is translated by Ryan as “defenceless”, which, given the military air of the pun on Tommaso Cavalieri’s name: “cavalier armato”, seems sensible. However, “alma veste” in line 3 (“clothes my soul”) and “spoglia” in line 4, translated prosaically by Ryan as “rescues” but also meaning “undresses”, indicate an important submerged metaphor of dressing / undressing in the poem which Ryan has chosen to ignore. This justifies, I believe, the translation of “nudo” as the more interestingly sexual and visual word “naked” in the last

line. Ryan’s question “who will enter there where sweetness wars with pain?” is, to me, clearly homoerotic. My last lines therefore read:

Who, in Heaven, will enter <i>me</i> , where sweetness contests pain?	12
If it’s only in being beaten that I’m blessed	13
then I’ll wait in your chains naked alone I’ll wait.	14

I get rid of the autobiographical pun “cavalier armato” because I think this sounds a little bathetic and twee after lines of such despair. When I went to hear James Fenton’s excellent lecture on Michelangelo’s sonnets at The British Museum (May 25th 2006) I was made more acutely aware of their reception – although Michelangelo allowed some to be copied and circulated within his lifetime, they were largely written as private gifts and mementos. I realised that such a pun would, in this context, be considered touching and humorous, and a seal of intimacy. I therefore felt justified in deleting it from my remix – simply because my remixes have a completely different context. This deletion seemed significant. It made me realise, that, although I was still transfixed by Michelangelo – and still am – I could not tug him, thrashing, into the present. I could not undo his beliefs or his personality while still pretending, in some sense, to *be* him.

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