Here Be Monsters: Body Imagery in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

A thesis presented by

David M. A. Francis
(Student number 198820395)
(ORCID iD 0000-0003-3916-1920)

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

February 2018

The School of Culture and Communication
Faculty of Arts
The University of Melbourne

The thesis is submitted in total fulfilment of the degree and has not been completed under a jointly awarded degree.
The reflection of life in poetry and in art of all kinds gave me joy and I enjoyed watching life through the mirror of art.

—from *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Leo Tolstoy (1879)
ABSTRACT

My thesis, entitled *Here be Monsters: Body Imagery in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, is 50% Dissertation and 50% Creative Writing. Poetry is a bridge between the experience of individual realities and a world of representation, making possible expression of what otherwise would be articulated mundanely or with difficulty. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was a poet of the Confessional school, and her poetry contains many references, both literal and metaphoric, to the human body. My hypothesis is that symbolic sublimation, through imagery and metaphors of the body, provided Plath with a distinctively personal and emotional poetic mode of expressing her desire for self-transformation.

The literature review considers: Plath's psychological disorder and its possible impact on her writing; the Confessional school of poetry and Plath's place as a Confessional poet; theories of metaphor and how Plath used metaphor and imagery in her poetry; and the factors that may have influenced her to use the body as a major trope. The hypothesis is addressed by firstly quantitative studies of Plath's anatomical terminology, comparison of Plath's references to the body with those of other contemporaneous Confessional poets, and assessment of changes in the amount and nature of body imagery throughout her poetry. Secondly, the thesis examines how Plath used metaphors of the body to explore her feminine and sexual identity, her vulnerability and capacity to wound herself and others, to attempt restoration and healing, and as representations of abjection and negation.

The creative component consists of a personal essay and original poetry. The essay, which introduces the Dissertation, is a memoir about my hands and the role they have played in my life, particularly in my career as a surgeon. The essay explores the education, emotions and evolution of my hands within an autobiographical context. My poetry responds to the Dissertation and is informed by the themes of Plath's poetry, namely the physical self and its parts, personal relationships, love, loss, and death. My poetry borrows from the Confessional mode of poetry and is largely free-form. My creative writing is informed by forty-five years of surgical practice and operative and anatomical dissection.
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis comprises my own original work towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, except where indicated. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used and quoted. The Dissertation of this thesis is 42,349 words in length, including headings, epigraphs and footnotes, but excluding the fourteen quoted poems of Sylvia Plath in Chapter 5, tables, figures, bibliography and appendices. The Creative Writing component consists of 10,552 words of prose, and ninety pages of poetry (sixty-three poems), the equivalent of 30,000 words of prose.

David M. A. Francis

2 March 2018
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is a record of pupillage, in that it has been for me a period of tuition and of gaining vision. It owes much to many, and my gratitude to my teachers who have travelled this journey with me is very deep. Firstly, I am greatly indebted to Professor Kevin Brophy, my principal supervisor. Kevin has supported and encouraged me over several years: he was my tutor for the "Extreme Poetry" course at the University of Melbourne in 2010, and kindly wrote the back-cover notes for my first poetry collection Promises Made at Night, published in 2013 by the Melbourne Poets Union. In addition to his teaching, guidance, constructive criticism and advice, he confirmed that my desire to know and write poetry later in life was worth pursuing. It has been my privilege and pleasure to be his student. I am also grateful to Dr Amanda Johnson, my co-supervisor, for her guidance and teaching while Kevin was on sabbatical leave.

I am very grateful for the generous teaching, advice and encouragement received over several years from my teachers of literature, creative writing and poetry. I am indebted to many people for their instruction in the art of writing and discussions about poetry. I thank my teachers who, in addition to Kevin Brophy, include Claire Gaskin, Jessica Wilkinson, Paul Mitchell, Elizabeth Macfarlane, Tony Birch, Amy Brown, Peter Rose, Jordie Albiston, April Jacobson and Sian Prior. I am indebted to members of two poetry groups – the late Anton Mischewski, Susan Wein, Leigh Mackay, Yael Hirschhorn, Debi Hamilton, Mary Jones, Barbara Kamler and Rod Marsh.

I am also indebted to Richard Matovich, author of A Concordance to the Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath. A print run in 1986 of only four hundred copies of his book was taken up largely by University and College libraries. The book has long been out of print. In his generosity, Mr Matovich graciously gave me his last copy of the publication. My gratitude to Richard for allowing me the privilege of owning this volume is immense.

Lastly, I thank my partner, the poet and writer Debi Hamilton, for the unfailing love and unending support she has so freely given to me while the thesis was undertaken. I thank her for the many hours of conversation about the work, Sylvia Plath's poetry and poetry in general; for her helpful comments, criticisms and corrections of the manuscript; for numerous cups of tea and coffee; and for the poetry we have shared.
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ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTES

Abbreviations within the text:

APA American Psychiatric Association
BBC British Broadcasting Corporation
BCE Before the Common Era
CE The Common Era
d.f. Degrees of freedom
DOB Date of Birth
ECT Electro-Convulsive Therapy
SD Standard Deviation

Literary abbreviations:


For the purposes of this thesis, "CP" refers to Plath's 224 "adult" poems in Sylvia Plath Collected Poems (pages 19-273), and not drafts of poems in "Notes on Poems 1956–1963", Plath's translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "A Prophet", or Plath's Juvenilia poems (pages 275-338).


[ ] encloses the line number(s) of a line or lines quoted from a poem.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
Chapter 1

Introduction

*It's a myth that writers write what they know. We write what it is that we need to know. What keeps me sitting at my desk, hour after hour, year after year, is that I do not know something, and I must write in order to find my way to understanding. The questions that drive me as a writer are not born of some good idea, but of a deeper inner need.*

—— from *Poets and Writers*, Marcie Hershman (1996)

1.1. Context of the Study

Childhood is full of petty traumas. Most are of little significance but some can be life changing. My working career, and eventually this thesis, came out of a trivial event that was to shape my life. At the age of eleven, I squashed the top of my right thumb in the door of my father's faded blue Volkswagen. A subungal haematoma – a contained bleed beneath the thumbnail – rapidly lifted most of the nail from the nail bed. The pain was excruciating, and my thumb felt as fat as the world. Two days later my mother took me to our General Practitioner, a silver-haired man as stiff as his starched white coat. He said little. He lit the wick of a methylated spirit burner, unfolded a paper-clip and heated one end until it was red hot.

    I can still recall my panic as he approached with the glowing paper-clip. "This won't hurt," he said, gripping my throbbing thumb. A tiny cloud of smoke arose as the hot metal burnt through my thumbnail, followed by a small hiss and spill of thick dark blood. The relief was instantaneous. Thus began my fascination with the body, and with the apparently shocking actions that could be used to treat its disorders. So it was, that in Dr Beard's rooms at Manly, N.S.W., in 1961, the seeds of my later decision to become a surgeon were sown.

    My relationship with anatomy has been long and consuming. As a teenager, I dissected formalinised rats in Biology at school. At home, I asphyxiated mice in a shoebox with the exhaust from the car, pinned them out on a cork board on the sun-room table, and dissected them, a biology text open alongside.
Later, beside five other medical students, I dissected a human corpse in the Department of Anatomy at the Edinburgh Medical School. The process was fascinating. Our corpse became the object of concentrated and extensive critical scrutiny. It possessed degrees of subjectivity and an agency that allowed it to become a cultural locus of sometimes contradictory spheres of reference from pathology, anthropology, sociology, psychology and, for one of us at least, spirituality. When preparing for Anatomy exams, I found the truth of John Donne's meditation: "Man consists of more pieces, more parts, then [sic] the world ... and if those pieces were extended, and stretched out in Man, as they are in the world, Man would be the Gyant, and the world the Dwarf" (Donne 19).

A year after graduating, I served as part-time Prosector at the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, preparing anatomical specimens for demonstrations to trainee surgeons. Six years later I was admitted to the Fellowships of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons of Edinburgh and England, and my surgical career began.

Forty-seven years after that minor injury to my thumb, having dissected hundreds of corpses and many different parts of several thousand living beings, I wrote my first poem on a humid summer's night while living in a hillside monastery in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. I do not know why I wrote it. Like the poet Anne Sexton, I had read almost no poetry until I started writing it. Months later, on returning to Melbourne, I continued to write poetry. I came by chance across a recording of Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) reading her poem "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.". It stimulated me to read her Collected Poems (CP) in which I discovered almost constant references to the human body, either in part or whole.

I was drawn to Plath's idiosyncratic use of body imagery, the apparent ease and skill with which she adopted the body as a poetic motif, and the compass of her interest in the body. As I read more widely, I found no similar appropriation of the body in the poetry of her contemporaries, such as Robert Lowell, Denise Levertov or Sexton. Plath evoked a tension between the whole body and the body in parts: body parts were given mythic forms of agency and independence; the whole body, although also mythic, appeared less frequently and expressed a dialectic of aspiration and abjection. Plath's poetry betrayed a fear of the inadequacies of her body, and a belief that only in death could she, and her body, be perfected. Somehow, through Plath's poetry, my years of surgical anatomy took on a meaning and significance I had not previously imagined.
The focus of this thesis is Plath's literal and figurative use of the human body in her poetry. My hope is that the critical and analytic aspects of the Dissertation are complemented by the lyric and narrative themes of the Creative Component, and that the thesis serves to increase our knowledge of Plath's poetry and our enjoyment of reading it.

1.2. Statement of the Research Problems

The essential problem that impelled this thesis is the absence of quantitative or qualitative analyses of body imagery in Plath's poetry. In spite of the vast literature about Plath and her writing, her exploitation of body imagery has been largely ignored. Professor Ralph Didlake, a surgeon and Director of the Center for Medical Humanities in Jackson, Mississippi, reviewed Plath's use of imagery in his 2009 paper "Medical Imagery in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath", and concluded: "lack of analysis of these medical images, as a group, becomes quite conspicuous when one considers the frequency with which such images occur across the spectrum of her poetry" (Didlake 135).

Although Plath scholars Steven Axelrod (Poetry), Claire Brennan, Adam Kirsch, Jacqueline Rose, Susan Van Dyne (Revising) and David Wood recognised the presence of corporeal representations in her poetry, they concentrated on Plath's biography, poetic style, use of metaphor, and feminist implications, rather than her constructs of the body as binding thematic tools. The extent and possible functions of Plath's corporeal images have not been studied; nor has their evolution over the course of her poetic career. Ignoring these aspects of Plath's poetry robs us of what I contend is an important means of understanding not only her work, but also her existential difficulties.

The second problem that motivated this research is the more general lack of analyses of corporeal references in poetry contemporaneous with Plath's. Nearly all of Plath's "adult" poems in CP contain references to the body, but we do not know whether she was participating in a trend or striking out alone.

The third problematic area is that the character and form of Plath's body imagery have not been examined methodically. Many questions arise, and are addressed in this thesis. What constructs of the body did Plath use in literal and metaphoric settings? Were the body and its parts used as metaphors for the apparent sadness and insecurities of her life, her trauma and grief, and for her desire to erase personal history? Did Plath deploy language of the body to communicate feminine subjectivity? How do such
images function? What is the range of possible interpretations of these corporeal metaphors? What purpose did the intense, and at times violent, body imagery serve? How is her repudiation and negation of the body consistent with an apparent need to restore the body? What do such insistent references to the body bring to her poetry? The dearth of knowledge or literary criticism about these aspects of Plath's poetry was a major stimulus for what I believe is original and exciting research.

1.3. Research Hypotheses
This thesis asserts that imagery of the body provided Plath with a means of expressing highly personal and private psychological and emotional experiences with an intensity that paralleled those emotions. Plath's figurative language of the body presented readers with epistemological signifiers, albeit oblique and at times circuitous, with which to discern and understand the reality of her life experiences, experiences that would otherwise remain unrecognised and incomprehensible.

Specifically, I hypothesise that Plath employed body imagery literally and figuratively:

(a) more widely and distinctively than her contemporary North American poets;
(b) to add vividness, force and physical presence to her poetry, thereby augmenting the aesthetic authority of her work;
(c) to write allusively about powerful emotions and subjects which were very personal; and
(d) to attempt to establish control, containment and amelioration of traumatic psychological experiences through the medium of poetry.

My hypotheses assume that whatever experiences of life are so painful that they are not translatable directly into speech become partially subsumed into the semiotic realm as symbolic substitutions, as proposed by literary scholar Philip McGowan (9-10). Although the real surpasses or exceeds the symbolic, the latter provides access to the former. In psychotic disorders, for example, only the subject has access to their reality or truth of the unreal, which may be expressed symbolically in physical symptoms (Searles 582-583). Only Plath knew her darkest experiences. Poetry, with its inherent symbolism and figurative language, takes the experiences of individual realities
and positions them in a world of representation, making possible the expression of what otherwise would remain ineffable.

My hypotheses imply that Plath's employment of body imagery was both symptomatic and strategic. I argue that it was symptomatic of her need to express her female identity and physicality, her anger and resentment, and the anxiety of trying to manage psychological suffering. Her body imagery was also strategic in that the symbolic body provided a target for the violent rage, jealousy and vengefulness she so frequently expressed towards herself and others (Frieda Hughes xv-xvi). The physical body is vulnerable to injury and wounding. It also heals after injury, and is therefore an ideal metaphor with which to illustrate the need for and the means of healing. The body also has abject aspects, and Plath's poetry is permeated by ideas of the abject and its negation.

1.4. Scope of the Thesis
My goal for this thesis is that the critical and creative parts form a coherent and integrated work, and that the tensions within Plath's poetry which I examine in the Dissertation are mirrored in the Creative Component, the two thereby complementing each other. The Dissertation and Creative Component are, as the poet and academic wrote, and I have quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, born of an inner need to know and to find my way to understanding.

1.4.1. The Dissertation
The Dissertation explores the extent and nature of body imagery in Plath's poetry. The literature review in Chapter 3 focuses on four areas that are central to this study: Plath's psychological illness, which I contend was bipolar II disorder; the recognition of Plath as a Confessional poet; theories of imagery and metaphors that are relevant to my reading of Plath's poetry; and the experiential and cultural contexts that may have influenced her to use the body so insistently in her poetry.

My research examines the 224 poems in CP written between 1956 and 1963, and does not consider Plath's Juvenilia poems or prose writing because of limitations of space. Her CP are examined for the number, validity and frequency of anatomical references. I also present a comparative, quantitative study of body references in the poetry of Plath's contemporaneous Confessional poets. Thirdly, a longitudinal study of Plath's CP is undertaken to demonstrate the evolution of her use of anatomical
references. I go on to examine qualitative aspects of Plath's constructs of the body in fourteen poems, interpreting her metaphors and imagery of the body for their range of possible meanings and intentions, with a view to answering the questions raised in Section 1.2.

1.4.2. The Creative Component

Nearly all of Plath's writing was rooted in the circumstances of her life. Frieda Hughes, Plath's daughter, wrote in 2004: "[Plath] used every emotional experience as if it were a scrap of material that could be pieced together to make a wonderful dress; she wasted nothing of what she felt" (Frieda Hughes xix-xx). My creative writing is informed by aspects of my personal life, including forty-five years of clinical surgical practice and operative dissection of the human body. My writing takes up the major themes of Plath's poetry: relationships, the physical body and sexuality, wounding and vulnerability, love and healing, and loss and death. I also explore the idea of journey as an existential theme. While Plath did not explicitly write about the notion of journey, her poems, when read as a single collection, reveal a progression of intensity of emotion and dis-ease that led to a specific endpoint.

The creative component of my thesis consists mainly of poetry but also prose. My prose writing, in the form of a personal essay entitled "Between Joy and Sorrow: A Journey of the Hands", foregrounds my hands and their importance in my life, not only as a surgeon but also in my non-professional life. Through my hands I learnt about and experienced the human body, both living and deceased. The memoir presents the complexities of the emotional truth of my hands by reflecting on the education, emotions and evolution of my hands within a larger autobiographical context.

Plath, although better known for writing almost five hundred poems, wrote a considerable amount of prose, much of which was semi-autobiographical. This included extensive journals, numerous letters, over seventy short stories, a novel (The Bell Jar), several chapters of an uncompleted second novel (Falcon Yard), the manuscript of a third novel that disappeared after her death, and commissioned works of non-fiction. Two children's books (The Bed Book and The It-Doesn't-Matter-Suit and Other Stories) and a collection of short stories (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams) were published posthumously. It is appropriate, then, that a portion of the Creative Component should be in the form of prose.
1.5. Significance of the Study
The importance of Plath as a poet cannot be overstated. Plath, like other Confessional poets, wrote about personal subjects, but her poetry exceeded the personal. She exposed private feelings, and brought the suffering of despair, anger and solitude into her poetry, transforming her experiences into "some of the twentieth century's most distinguished works of art" (Norton Poetry 593).

This thesis aims to contribute to our understanding of Plath's poetry. The body imagery of which Plath made such extensive use has not been examined systematically from either quantitative or qualitative perspectives. The absence of such study represents an enormous hole in our understanding of Plath and her poetry. The thesis addresses one way in which Plath transmuted highly personal feelings, experiences and mental states into the symbolic realm of poetry, an aspect of her work that has not been addressed in the more than five decades since her death. In examining these encoded symbols, the thesis is original and novel, and fills a gap in the critical scholarship of Plath's poetry. The research may also have broader applications in that it provides a template for study of the body imagery in the work of other poets.

1.6. Methodology
Methods employed in each of the three quantitative and comparative studies are presented in detail under "Methods" in each study (Chapter 4). The three studies involved careful reading of poems of Plath and ten Confessional poets, and identifying anatomical terms and signifiers of body anatomy. Comparison of results involved applying statistical tests, the justification for which is presented in appropriate sections of the chapter.

The qualitative research into Plath's poetry (Chapter 5) required an appropriate method of reading her work. Because the thesis is principally focused on Plath's written word, not her biography or psychological state, I commenced my reading using a semiotic approach, foregrounding the text and its signifying structures while minimising extrinsic factors such as biographical contexts. I began by identifying various constructs and images of the body that were relatively easy to interpret within the context of each poem. I then attempted to attribute these newly-discovered meanings to the same or similar images in more obscure or allusive poems, while also looking for overarching themes.
Later, I took a mimetic approach, in order to relate the text to social, cultural and particularly biographical events. Read alongside her journals and the writings of her husband, Ted Hughes, much of Plath's poetry seems directly biographical in inspiration, a contention supported by Frieda Hughes (xix-xx) and Plath herself: "my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have" (Plath, *Interview*). However, the issue with Plath is that her biography is so well known and dramatic that it threatens to overshadow her text and its aesthetic achievements. Thus, the apparent allusiveness of some of her poems and body imagery does not come from ignorance of the personal experiences that stimulated them, but rather an inability to understand the central structure and purpose of the imagery.

I believed it was important to focus on the poetry itself and to place the work not above the life, but to locate and emphasise Plath's aesthetic, technical and instinctive achievements in her poetry. I therefore avoided a psychoanalytic approach, where the focus is on the psycho-emotional character of the poet as expressed through fantasies or representational substitutes, with the text construed as an aid to insight into the poet's personality and psychic problems (Buchbinder 102; Ogden 293-295). Similarly, I did not undertake explicitly feminist, historicist, materialist or cultural readings of Plath's work because my interest was on the aesthetic and emotional contribution of body imagery to the overall achievement of her poetry. However, my approach does certainly not deny that Plath's political and personal experience of womanhood, her psycho-emotional history, her intimate memories of place, and her relationships with natural and cultural landscapes in all likelihood had significant impacts on her poetry, as I discuss in Section 3.4.

1.7. Structure of the Thesis and Chapter Outlines

The thesis is presented in seven chapters. I have designated the Introduction as Chapter 1 for the sake of clarity, consistency and ease of reference. Chapter 2 is a personal essay, the first part of the Creative Component of the thesis. Reasons for presenting the memoir at this stage are stated in the Bridging Statement (Section 2.1.).

My literature review (Chapter 3) has four principal sections. Firstly, I examine Plath's mental illness and contend that her cyclical depressive and hypomanic symptoms were consistent with bipolar II disorder. The literature indicates a significant association of the disorder's hypomania with increased productivity, ideational fluency, combinatory thinking, and sexual intensity. I argue that Plath's mental condition
facilitated her creative writing by providing it with nuance, individuality and original linguistic connections. I further argue that Plath was a "wounded writer", and that her poetry contains narratives of restitution, chaos and quest.

The place of Plath in the tradition of Modernist Confessional poetry is examined in the second section. I identify characteristics of the Confessional mode of poetry that distinguish it from autobiographical and confessional writing.

In the third part of the Literature Review, I examine theories of imagery and metaphor that are useful in reading Plath's poetry. I highlight what I believe Plath's use of metaphor contributed to her poetry: her enjoyment of writing, enhancement of the aesthetic value of her poetry, allusive portrayal of emotion and psychological suffering, and the definition of specific experiences in appropriate metaphoric structures.

The last section critically appraises factors that may have influenced Plath to focus on metaphoric constructs of the body. I contend that Plath had a life-long interest in the human body, that her sexuality may have been enhanced by hypomania, that she engaged with poetry of the body written by women and by feminist poets of the early twentieth century, and that all of these factors may have focused her attention on the body and encouraged her to use it as a poetic trope.

Chapter 4 presents three quantitative analytical studies that address the first two research problems (Section 1.2.). The first study identifies and validates the extent and nature of corporeal terms in the 224 poems in Plath's CP. The second study seeks to answer the question of whether Plath's literal and figurative constructs of the body were more abundant or in any way substantially different from body imagery in the poetry of her contemporaries. The third study seeks to resolve the question of whether Plath's body imagery changed quantitatively during the course of her writing. The raw data from each study are given in the Appendices.

Readings of Plath's poetry are presented in Chapter 5. My readings concentrate on Plath's specific use of body imagery, and lead me to conclude that her use of the metaphoric body was symptomatic, strategic and purposeful: firstly, it allowed her to allusively express her sexuality and explore her physical relationship with Hughes; secondly, the vulnerable body provided a target for her anger, allowing her to metaphorically wound herself and others; thirdly, the body offered an ideal paradigm for her desire to be transformed and reborn healed of emotional wounds; and fourthly, the body acted as a representation of all that was abject to her in her personal history, and that she wished to negate.
Chapter 6 contains my discussion of the critical work and the conclusions that I draw from the study. The chapter discusses issues of the connections between Plath's biography and her use of the body. I also consider the limitations of my research and directions for future research. The Bibliography and Appendices follow Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 contains a bridging statement to the second part of the Creative Component, my poetry. Ninety pages of poetry are presented, equivalent to 30,000 words of prose. Notes on the sixty-three poems and acknowledgements follow the poetry.

*   *   *
CHAPTER 2

PERSONAL ESSAY

*Between Joy and Sorrow: A Journey of the Hands*
Chapter 2

**Personal Essay – Between Joy and Sorrow: A Journey of the Hands**

*And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?*

—–from "I Sing the Body Electric", Walt Whitman (1855)

2.1. Bridging Statement

The human body is the principal focus of both the Dissertation and the Creative Component of this thesis. I maintain in the Dissertation that we see in Plath's metaphors of the body depictions of the sacred and the profane – the beauty of the living body and anxieties provoked by the injured or dead body. The body as metaphor can express both healing and wounding, and life and death.

The personal essay and the poetry of the Creative Component engage with these dichotomies and complement the Dissertation. I also hope that the essay and poetry stand alone as artistic achievements. My personal essay, or memoir, *Between Joy and Sorrow: A Journey of the Hands*, responds to themes that Plath developed and expressed through the metaphorical body – her sexuality, wounding and vulnerability, love and healing, and loss and death. The essay tells a narrative of my hands in an autobiographical context. It presents the emotional truth of my hands.

The hands were important to Plath – she referred to "hands" forty-six times and to "hand" twenty-six times in *CP* (Matovich 223-225), her sixth and fourteenth most frequently used body parts respectively (Appendix 1), and so I believe it is fitting to include this essay about hands in the thesis. The essay was written concurrently with the dissertation. The content of the essay informs the emotion of the writing, in the same way, I contend, that the abundance of violent and monstrous body imagery in Plath's poetry laid bare the emotion of her work.

The essay is presented somewhat unconventionally as the second chapter of the thesis, immediately before the Dissertation. I have done this in order to introduce myself to the reader, as well as to introduce the critical work. I have approached this thesis from the position of a surgeon and poet studying the use of the body as metaphor in the
poetry of, arguably, one of the modern world's greatest poets. I see the world and the body through the eyes of a surgeon and a reader and writer of poetry, not through the eyes of a literary theorist. My approach is practical rather than theoretical, and I have attempted to show this in the essay. The horror of the injured, fragmented and diseased body is very clear to me. It has a meaning and an emotional valence that might not be similarly felt by non-clinicians. Placing the memoir before the Dissertation positions the critical work in a far more vivid and elaborated context than would otherwise be the case. I hope the work and the reader benefit from this juxtaposition.

The essayist, philosopher and poet Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) recognised the extreme variability of essays by separating them into three domains – the personal and autobiographical, the objective and factual, and the abstract and conceptual. For Huxley (vii) "the most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best of not one, not two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist." My essay encompasses all three worlds, and I hope the reader finds in it that satisfaction so dear to Huxley.

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2.2. Personal Essay

Between Joy and Sorrow: A Journey of the Hands

And all this is metaphor.
An ordinary hand — just lonely
for something to touch
that touches back.

—from "The Touch", Anne Sexton (1969)

As I sit here, watching my index fingers tap away at the keyboard, I face the undeniable changes that the sway of time has brought to my hands. The skin is no longer supple; the veins that lie beneath are more obvious and tortuous; scars, as short white lines, are evidence of petty injuries long forgotten; freckles, a few sunspots and two small soon-to-be-treated skin cancers are reminders of cocksure, youthful carelessness under the Australian sun; my wrist and finger joints are a little swollen and tender; and the little fingers bear the family heirloom of crookedness.

Throughout my life, especially during my career as a surgeon, I have regarded these changing, even evolving, hands as intimate friends. I have felt compelled to understand their physicality and spirit, to use their drive and energy, to know their strengths and limitations and, now, to write about them. Their structure and function have permitted me to apprehend the world and to enter into exchanges with humankind in ways only they could show me and that are unique to the toil of surgery. The learnings and actions of my hands have enabled the intricacies of operating, as well as simple straightforward actions of my hands stretch from the intricacies of operating to the simple act of holding the hand of someone I love or someone dying. Our human selves are shaped in part by our bodily experiences, and the hands, through touching and feeling, are principal intermediaries in acquiring the insight, wisdom and truth that we all seek. With that comes both joy and sorrow.
According to my father, my hands were inspected and fingers counted within my first few minutes by a midwife who was no doubt wearied by the late hour of my arrival. At that moment, my hands commenced their long passage into curiosity about an unknown world to acquire knowledge and understanding only obtainable by touching and being touched – as Roland Barthes wrote, touch is the most demystifying of all senses. I imagine those infantile fingers reaching for my mother's breast, my thumb first finding my mouth and my hands being touched, looked at and remarked upon by my parents with the same sense of wonderment that I have today.

The earliest visual record of my hands is a dog-eared black and white photograph that I found among my father's personal possessions shortly after his funeral. The aura of a mother's love for her six-week-old son radiates from the picture, as she squints a little into the pale sunlight of what was to be her last English spring. Perhaps she knew, for in the moment of that photograph my father captured a discernible melancholy on the face of his beautiful young wife. She is dressed in a dark tweed suit, a flower in her buttonhole, looking down at me as I am propped in the crook of her left arm. An extravagantly long white shawl covers all but my face, forearms and hands. The light bounces off the shawl onto our fresh faces and my mother's high cheekbones. Maybe the photograph was taken on returning home after my baptism, I don't know. My eyes are screwed tightly closed, mouth open, elbows flexed, fists clenched, as if resisting the pull and yarn of a bright new day.

This photograph, as I see it now, demands a specific reception. My mother's neutral smile and sun-piqued eyes encompass the span of joy and sorrow – the joy of a new mother holding her child, and the sorrow of an impending unjust future. There is nothing contrived or complicit about this snapshot, taken in the small back garden of a two-storey, pebble-dash house in east London where I was born. The picture simply tells us, as Barthes wrote in Camera Lucida, "this has been ... the past as certain as the present, for what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch." It is witness to something that is no more, an emanation of a past reality, and the only means I have of touching my mother, albeit vicariously. I know, in principle at least, that the photograph is little different from any other picture taken of an infant by proud parents, except it is the first record of my hands.
Many times those tiny hands would have been held, played with, directed to objects, washed and dried, and inserted into mittens before expeditions through London suburbs doused with damp cold. They would have fought with and caused frustration to those trying to get a spoonful of breakfast Farex past my closed lips, and would have gripped my father's nicotine-stained fingers as he took me for my first stumbling walk one spring morning at the end of my first year. And often they must have been small wands of petulance and protest, as in that first photograph.

When I was a small child, my older sister played tactile games with my hands, clapping them together, holding my fingers, circling my open with her index finger, then running it up my arm to tickle me. Amid fits of laughter, my hands made their first discovery of sensuousness delivered by another's hand. When I was taught to write, my fingers co-operated to hold the pencil and, with the rest of the hand, to move it across the page. I came to know the fine soft friction of forming letters on rough pre-school paper, the sudden jar and halt when the lead broke, and then the flakiness of pencil shavings. My hands led me to the diversity of sensations that were becoming ever more relevant to my realm – playing with our cat, for example, coming to know the softness of her fur and warm belly, the sharpness of claws and incisors, the rigidity of her tail as she pulled away, the lightness of her offspring born in our laundry, and the sorrow of the finding one of them there, cold and stiff one morning.

In childhood, my hands played together, worked together and, on occasions, comforted each other. They learnt to communicate through touch and acquire the language of touching. They enjoyed a dialogue that was uniquely theirs. They reciprocated their individual energies and experiences, jubilant in their collectiveness and synergy. Their mutual tactile relationship was a continuous interchange of subjectivity and objectivity, in which passivity and responsiveness harmonised. The designation of toucher and touched alternated constantly between them. In time, my hands acquired a confidence and certainty in their separate and combined strengths that, I see now, was a harbinger of the capabilities they would develop during my surgical career.

Not only do our hands touch each other, but they touch themselves, an ability unique to the organ of the hand. Through touching themselves, hands come to know themselves
and to discover a wealth and diversity of self-sensations, their own solidity and integrity, their surfaces and patterns. Self-communication through touch is the hand concurrently talking and listening to itself, learning its presence and independence. Such knowledge is direct – there is no intermediary, as there is with sight where light is the go-between, or in hearing that depends on the vibration of air. The hand decodes the hand directly, explores itself and its own senses, and lets us get to know our hands, and therefore ourselves, more intimately. The hands come to know themselves as both touching and being touched, a learning that arouses us, not only neurologically, but at levels of emotion and thought that may pass unnoticed.

The development of the hands in comprehending the world resembles the growth of language, that essential flash of the human spirit – at first a few sounds, then recognisable words, later a vocabulary, and finally a complex lexicon. This parallel is apt and should not surprise, for the hand is a great communicator. Indeed, anthropologists suggest that gestural language preceded vocal language, the hands externalising long before the larynx what was realised internally. Bipedalism meant that the upper limbs were no longer required for locomotion, providing the hands with a hitherto unknown freedom. Over millennia, human hands became progressively refined and evolved functionalities that enabled them to grip, form shapes, and point. Our ancestors became aware of their hands as tools. At much the same time, patterns of coherent thought and creativity developed, and so the drive towards manual language must have been irresistible. As Steven Pinker, the Canadian evolutionary psychologist, said: "hands are levers of influence on the world that make intelligence worth having."

The hand has many ways of speaking, and the pathway from an initial motion of the hand to successfully communicating layered meaning is complex and highly contextual. A handshake, for example, possesses a range of connotations such as equality, reconciliation, congratulations or, most often, welcome. But here the hand may be duplicitous, for the firmness of the gripping or the gripped hand may not reflect the mind of the shaker. That our hands are given to making gestures and are employed for communication reflects the relationship we have with them. Our silent hands can produce signs that express a depth of interiority – images of the Buddha, for example, often include mudras, or hand positions, that express intention and authority, insight and compassion. Not all of our manual communications are so profound. I discovered as a teenager, with some smugness, that by extending the index and middle fingers while flexing the ring and little fingers of the raised hand, I could signal peace and goodwill,
but with a quick 180-degree rotation and jerk of the forearm, I could easily signify something quite vulgar.

The point is that hands, together with the arms, are as intrinsic to human communication as the tongue. In fact, the language of hands has long been recognised and acclaimed. John Bulwer, a seventeenth-century physician, described use of the hands for self-expression as "manual rhetoric", certainly an appropriate descriptor for sign language of the deaf, or a politician's prolonged gestural attempts at self-justification, or the riot of fists and fingers at a football game when an umpire makes a howler. In his 1644 treatise *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand, and Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*, Bulwer contended that human expression demanded motion which, he believed, was mediated principally by the head and hands. He argued that expressiveness of the hands was greater than that of words, and declared: "the natural language of the hand had the happiness to escape the curse at the confusion of Babel." Bulwer painstakingly listed 112 expressions generated solely by use of the hands, postures that he claimed "exceeded the numerical store of words". He overlooked, of course, that he used words to compile the list. Perhaps it was this limitation of manual signifiers that led our forebears, forty or fifty thousand years ago, to begin to verbalise their thoughts and emotions, instead of standing on two feet and waving their arms and hands around, getting not very far with their fellow hominids.

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Although similar – two halves of a whole – my hands were never identical nor precisely symmetric. I cannot now say when I first became aware of my right hand overtly asserting itself over the left. Presumably, it was at much the same time as I awakened to my hands themselves, as well as to other parts of my body, and to the relationship between my hands and body. Recently, developmental psychologists have suggested that "postnatal lateralised motor behaviour", or handedness, is determined in utero. Prenatal ultrasound examinations of the pregnant uterus reveal that the foetus starts inserting its "elementary somatopleuric bud", or thumb, of one or other elongation of its "dorsal primary ectoderm", or forearm, into its primitive oral cavity as early as the eighth week of gestation. The preferred side for foetal thumb sucking correlates very strongly with indices of handedness observed years later in adolescence.
It was my right hand that led me into experience and became my pointer, my proxy of first contact and execution. My right and left hands developed different and unequal roles in my life, the left usually subservient but never taken for granted. By degrees, the right became stronger and slightly larger than the left and, because of its eager dominance, suffered more knocks, cuts and calluses. Though ascendant, the right hand shared with the left a functional materiality, a certain happiness. Much later, in my surgical practice, I learnt to tie knots one-handedly with each hand but, curiously, although strongly right handed, nearly always employed the left to knot sutures.

Awareness of the abundance of life's textures arose in childhood through the experience of my hands. When I was seven, my father taught me to peel an orange with a penknife, a process of unconscious bimanual co-operation and conscious textural pleasure. With the orange resting in my left hand, he taught me to half-cut the crown by passing the knife, held in my right hand, around through the soft white mesocarp between the skin of the rind and apex of the segments, and avulse the crown and central core in a single movement. My thumb ran over the beaded exterior just ahead of the blade as it cut and tugged the rind from the segments, producing a single, curling strip of peel. Once skinned, the segments were disassembled by inserting a thumb, and then two, into the central space and plying them apart, bursting some of them, the juice spurting, running over my fingers. It is by such early, innocent and seemingly inconsequential actions that we are formed.

From being tentative and inchoate, my boyish hands grew, along with my bodily self-consciousness, to become larger than those of my schoolmates, and stronger too. I acquired the nickname "big mitts", an appellation that stood me in good stead when it came to matters of defending my territory or dealing with playground adversaries – "you don't want get thumped by those mitts", others warned.

Saturday morning school cricket, under Sydney's summer sun, brought a different education to my teenage hands. As I ran in to bowl, my eye measured the distance to a good length, while the blazing-red Kookaburra was gauged and counter-balanced by my thumb and two fingers placed obliquely across the raised seam. I hung on to the ball until the last moment, then willed it on a curving trajectory, around the tentative bat at the far end of the pitch, and onto the stumps. When batting, I clutched the ageing rubber grip of my bat handle with hands stuffed inside batting gloves that were too small and rapidly became damp if I remained at the wicket long enough. Whether it was the anxiety of facing the opposition's quicks or just the heat of the days,
I don't recall, but it was the presage of a sensation that I would experience over many years while operating in surgical gloves.

Cricket encouraged my hands to become attuned to each other, to engage in their silent dialogue while sharing a division of labour. Taking a catch, a sky-er in the outfield or a dolly at mid-off – for I was never trusted to field at slip – reinforced the temporal and spatial harmony that hands can share with each other and with the body as a whole. How important it was to get my adolescent body into the proper place and stance at the right time, to watch the flight of the ball against a background of radiant blue; to reach up and out, shape the hands correctly; and then to grasp the ball, imprison it in a cage of fingers and thumbs, in this momentous act of sporting triviality. In those fractions of seconds, some mastermind completely below the threshold of consciousness guided my body. Position, posture, the point of interception, the plan for gripping and retaining, were all calculated as if without my active intervention. The hands' spontaneous synchronicity brought joy to me and my teammates, and the certain felicity of hands touching in "high fives" as a sorrowful batsman trudged to the pavilion.

Equally, I discovered the uncertainty of touching. At the age of fourteen, walking on a late afternoon beach with a girl who would become my first girlfriend, I anticipated touching her. Such a surfeit of desire swelled in me – there was an overwhelming need to touch her, but my hands hung silently at my sides. After almost an hour of slow walking, I could wait no longer and took her hand. It was thin, her fingers long, her palm as damp and chill as mine. She glanced up and her brown eyes smiled, for she knew as keenly as I that this one action was more than touching. It was an act of awakening, an asking for acceptance and a statement of acceptance, set amongst a festival of meanings. We walked on, our fingers entwined, talking of things we knew little about, caring only for what our hands told us. That night, in a joyous, almost euphoric state, I thanked my hand for what it had done. A new part of my life had begun, for I had lost an unwanted innocence. Two weeks later, we walked along the same beach, holding hands from the start. On reaching the far end, we sat on the sand. With my heart pounding, I put my arm around her, my left hand passing across the nape of her neck beneath her dark hair. As I drew her to me, my right hand brushed her breast. I closed my eyes, and kissed her.

Beyond the desire to hold that girl's body, to feel her smooth tanned skin, to explore her every crease and coomb, I found myself in a wondrous space of tactile sensations that I knew had long been waiting for me. I experienced a hitherto unknown
jouissance, a state I now recognise as that emotion, that madness, called first love. But it was surrendered about a year after we first touched. My father decided to move our family overseas again, and we departed on an ocean liner one Monday in early autumn. What remains with me of that day is the gesture of her hand waving goodbye, its rhythmic movement in the late afternoon light still visible now, rippling through a prism of tears and sudden emptiness. Her motioning hand held my line of sight, and let me see her recede and become lost in the crowd of well-wishers leaving the ship. Her moving hand, I realise, was a metaphor, for movement is the quintessential seal of change. It was her hand, her open palm and spread fingers, that signalled the end, the hand I never saw again, pointing to what I knew, even then, was the sorrow of loss.

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In another decade and another country, as a second-year student in the Medical School at the University of Edinburgh, I came to know the inner mysteries of the hand. Our hands develop cognisance of their domain through what is called the somatosensory system, an extremely complex neuro-physiological arrangement of sensory receptors, muscles, nerves and areas of the brain. Millions of tiny receptors in the skin, hair follicles, muscles, joints and bones of the hand respond specifically to disturbances of the status quo – stimuli such as displacement, temperature, pressure, and proportionate shifts of compression, stress and position. I learnt, for example, that when a mosquito lands on the back of the hand on a humid summer's evening, receptors detect the minute pressure of the insect's landing, movement of hairs that are brushed by its wings, and piercing of the skin by the female's proboscis. Impulses from these different receptors shoot along nerves to the spinal cord and on up to the reticular activating system, a vital structure at the base of the brain that alerts sensory areas of the higher brain to incoming signals. Changes registered by receptors are interpreted in the cerebral cortex and allocated to concepts such as weight, vibration, position and pain.

The remarkable brain, in an instant, juggles these neural postings between its sensory and motor cortices and its "thinking" part. The decision to swat the pesky ectoparasite sends multiple tiny impulses, or packets of electro-chemical energy, along the interlaced wiring of spinal tracts and peripheral nerves to the appropriate effectors – the twenty muscles in the hand, twenty in the forearm, and more in the arm and shoulder. Consciously or otherwise, an infinite range of patterned movements is
available and can be adjusted continually and transitioned into other fine or gross movements. If required, the hands can work in combination, moving independently yet acting together to squash the now airborne pest between them.

The importance of the hands as agents of touch and manipulation is evident from the density and sensitivity of their haptic receptors and the amount of the brain devoted to the hands. The homunculi of the sensory and motor cortices are simplified representations of parts of the body on the surface of the brain – the area dedicated to the thumb is larger than that allocated to the entire chest and abdomen, and each finger is serviced by an area the size of that set aside for the whole arm. This highly co-ordinated anatomical and physiological circuitry underpins the education and activities of our hands, and allows them an independence and life that at times seems beyond our control.

It was at this time, as a medical student, that I, along with five fellow students, dissected an elderly female corpse, the first dead human I had seen. The beauty of that formalin-soaked, leathery body, lying rigid, naked and gaunt on a stainless steel table, resided solely in its structure, which we exposed with little diligence at first but with increasing attention and care. After overcoming my initial trepidation and reserve, I was able to touch the corpse, to cut it, place my hands inside it, find tissue planes with my fingers, and remove successive layers of mortified flesh to reveal its inner contrivances. There was no violence or mutilation in this rational exposition of body parts, but rather an alignment of enquiry, awe and respect. The structures beneath the skin were breathtaking in their splendour and complexity, their efficiency and compactness, their fragility and strength, and their uniformity and variability. Cautiously manipulating a scalpel, scissors, forceps and probes – instruments of the dissecting room – my hands became the vehicles for interrogating what seemed to me to be sacred mysteries beneath the skin. Slowly, anatomical knowledge made its way into my hands. In a trifling event that inspired his novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, Henry James recognised "the fatal futility of Fact" – perhaps nowhere is Fact less fatally futile than in the epistemological practice and discipline of anatomical dissection when preparing for a surgical career.

Schematic dissection and dismemberment of bodies allowed me to accumulate a unified corpus of knowledge about the human body and its parts. Dissecting a preserved cadaver is enthralling; exposing anatomical structures by surgically dissecting parts of a living human is a wondrous privilege. I have preserved a multitude of images from such dissections in numerous photographs and PowerPoint presentations, in a small number
of my own outline drawings for surgical publications, and, of course, in my memory.

Leonardo da Vinci wrote of his anatomical drawings, "You will become acquainted with every part and every whole by means of a demonstration of each part", and so it was that while dissecting my cadaver's stiff and shrivelled hand, I came to recognise the central narratives of anatomy – the correspondence between parts and the whole. The hand displays a tension and balance in its layered structure. The eight small carpal bones interlock and articulate precisely with each other, each exquisitely named according to size and morphology. The stout ligaments of the carpus hold the hand together and connect it to the forearm. Nerves divericate as they radiate like slender Roman roads passing to and from their fields. Two looped and connected arterial arcades give off digital branches that pass along the sides of each finger where the pulse can just be palpated in vivo. Veins are serpentine and seem to meander. Short muscles are crammed between the metacarpal bones. Tendons glisten and glide beneath tendon sheaths, extending from muscles in the forearm to the terminal phalanges of the fingers. The thick palmar skin is anchored onto a fat pad by deeper fastenings within the hand.

Of course, anatomists have known for centuries the beauty and sophistication of the hand's structure and movements. In his 1578 treatise *The historie of man, sucked from the sappe of the most approved anathomistes*, written for barbers and surgeons, John Bannister considered the anatomy and function of the hand as divine:

Thus if we wel perpend the construction, and composition of partes, and bones of the hand, our senses shall soone conceive the manner of the action, with no lesse admiration, in beholding the handy worke of the incomprehensible Creator.

The whole hand flexes, extends, abducts and adducts at the wrist. Fingers and thumb make similar movements at the metacarpo-phalangeal joints where they meet the composite palm. Fractionated flexion and extension occur at the interphalangeal or finger joints. The thumb can rotate across the palm in the action of opposition; its length and mobility allow the thumb to touch the tip and both sides of each finger, actions that are unique to humans.

The anatomist Helkiah Crooke wrote about the mechanics of grasp in his 1615 meditative volume *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man*: "The true office of the Hand is to apprehend or to holde, and his proper action is apprehension."
Crooke was referring to the two broad dimensions of prehensile movement: precision and power grips. Precision grips involve fingers acting with or without assistance from the thumb, the object of desire held at the tips of the digits – for example, holding a scalpel or picking up a pen. Power grips clamp or hold an object between the palmar aspect of partly flexed fingers and the palm itself, with counter-pressure from the thumb to give stability, as in holding a book or another's hand. Assignment of the numerous possibilities of manual dexterity to just one or other grip seems churlish, given the manifold tasks undertaken every minute of the day and the enormous degrees of freedom enjoyed by the hand in its role as the organ of manipulation.

A year after I graduated, I worked as Prosector at the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and dissected a human hand for a demonstration class. The hand's duality of cognitive and manipulative functions first dawned on me then. I saw the hand as an archetypal expression of a metaphysical essence, as a locus of bravura more complicated and enthralling than I had ever imagined. I realised that the hand was the ultimate example of all instruments and tools – the instrument that uses instruments, the tool that uses tools. The truth of Aristotle's claim, that the hand is not one single instrument but many, revealed itself. I realised that my hands and the hand they were dissecting were the same symbolic unit – the living enquiring of the dead and the dead serving the living, a theme that was to follow me throughout my surgical life as a transplant surgeon.

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I had been in Edinburgh – "Auld Reikie", as the eighteenth-century poet Robert Fergusson referred to the city in his eponymous 300-line poem – for just three months when, on a December Saturday afternoon, I set out to walk to the village of Duddingston. I was living in a student Hall of Residence, and my first-floor cell looked out towards Arthur's Seat, a stark, volcanic dome-shaped plug, about 350 million years old, that rises suddenly 250 metres out of the ground on the outskirts of Edinburgh. The village, with its quiet loch and cluster of stone buildings, sits in the palm of the huge basalt cupola's shadow, about a half hour's walk from the Hall. A pale sun struggled through the cold mineral air of a flawless sky. Not being aware that such unassuming beginning-of-winter days regularly ended in snow and sleet, I fell victim to the commonest of human errors – not thinking of the storms ahead when the weather
appears fine. As Halldór Laxness, the Icelandic 1955 Nobel laureate wrote, "Fine weather fools fine wits". And so it did. Soon after I set out, a lurid sky crept in from the north and freezing spittery mizzle began to fall.

The village's small sandstone kirk was built in 1124 by Dodin, a Norman knight, and is graced with a square tower. The gatehouse at the entrance to the kirkyard was added in the early 1800s to guard against "resurrectionists", or body snatchers, looking to steal recently buried corpses to sell to anatomists at the Medical School. The huge oak doors, with their heavy, wrought iron ring handles, were not locked. and I went in to escape the freezing damp. It was as cold inside as out. There was no artificial lighting, and the ashen postmeridian light struggled through stained glass windows in the south wall. The kirk was dour and humble, as befitted a Church of Scotland's place of worship.

I was alone in its musty antiquity, except for a few who, centuries before, had been placed in burial vaults in the kirk's tiny chapel. On one sarcophagus lay the horizontal statue of a knight, perhaps Dodin himself. I ran my fingers over the folds of his stone tunic and smooth hands that pointed skywards as if in perpetual invocation. The hilt of a long sword, a signifier of his status and insurance against possible posthumous revenge by accumulated enemies, separated his reverential palms. Except for empty eye sockets, there was hardly a trace of death about his marbled countenance, it being that of apparent happiness, no doubt envisioning a future alongside the imagined recipient of his prayers.

I had stayed too long. Once outside, I saw through the gathering gloom that the brooding face of the adjacent basalt monolith had been transformed into the realm of a snow land, a monochrome beauty foreign to me at the time. The air had become ironclad and smelt of snow. I pulled up the hood of my newly acquired, ex-Navy duffle coat and sank my tingling fingers deep into my sheep-skin gloves. As I breasted the rise back to the Hall, a thin shard of crepuscular light pierced a fleeting rift in the cloud, briefly highlighting the castle on Castle Rock in the old city, as if to direct the imminent snowstorm towards it. Then, as the night came in, the wind drove volleys of snow towards me, punching the air from my lungs, trying to cuff me off balance. Thick dry snowflakes peppered my face and caught in my eyelashes, then fell on my cheeks as tears. Snow crunched beneath my chilled feet as I trudged back to the frayed edge of the city. I was hungry and tired, and inadequately clothed and shod. Somehow, in the snow, time unfolded differently.
We met in the foyer of the Hall, almost bumping into one another under the sudden glare of neon light – I, going in, and she about to leave, rugged up in an ankle-length coat and woollen scarf. She must have sensed my condition.

"Och! Look a’ yue. Yer covered in snow. You’d be freezin’," she said in a lilting lowlands accent. In an instant, she set about brushing the caked snow off my hood and shoulders. I had no idea who she was.

"Turn aroond!" and she spun me around, sweeping away the white crusts from my back with quick broad strokes.

"There! That's betta," she smiled.

I turned back towards her, and for a moment I felt the touch of her eyes resting on my damp eyebrows, my icy cheeks, my lips. Without a word, I took hold of her cold wet hands in gratitude. They were slight, almost fragile, and I caressed them gently. She gave the smallest reaction, her fingers not pulling away but holding mine, a tiny gesture that I devoured. There was no leverage or attempt at possession in those two or three seconds of mutual generosity. Our hands gave us as strangers an unpremeditated closeness, an unspoken pact of solidarity against the common foe of coldness, and a fleeting access to each other. And then it was gone.

"Och, yer cannae do that. Ma boyfriend's waitin'!" She pulled her hands away and turned towards the door. Then, as if having second thoughts, she turned back. She leaned towards me and I caught the faint sweet smell of alcohol on her breath. She put her hands up to my cold face and kissed me hard on the mouth.

"Dinny forget aboot keepin' warm toneet!" she laughed, and skipped through the entrance, disappearing into the darkness.

That evening, "keepin' warm" alone in my student room, I made little progress with an essay on the principles of calcium metabolism. It was her hands that I kept coming back to, her mouth too, and the long wisps of blond hair that had fallen from under the hood of her coat. But mainly her hands – their motion across my shoulders, their answering with the gentlest squeeze as I held them, her cold fingers on my cheeks. In that brief moment, I knew her hands signified something of her inner self. Her brushing the snow from me echoed a kindness, a carefree sweetness she could afford to spend on an anonymous fellow student coming in from the cold on a Saturday night. The vagabond lightness of the sweep of her hand across my back and shoulders betrayed an assuredness and carnal ease that I came to know later for myself, not only with lovers but also in operating theatres when my hands surgically explored the bodies
of anaesthetised patients. That evening in my room, Immanuel Kant's contention that the hand is the window to the mind seemed so utterly believable, so obvious.

The confidence, albeit aided by a little vodka, with which she held my face in her hands showed a fearless tenderness. Her touch seemed full of promise, and I was suddenly aware of my envy of the unseen boyfriend. A crazy hope of meeting her again sprang up, a desire that lingered through the months of that dreich Scottish winter. I recalled the movements of her hands as a caress, as if they concealed a jewel, not as a commonplace brushing or sequence of dull strokes of a chore. I wondered if she knew she had done more than physically touch me, that in some way she had held me in her hand, given me joy and delight. What had our meeting been for her – just a tipsy flirtatious moment? Or perhaps some disguised manual expression of a deeper need for intimacy beyond physical contact, as Emily Dickinson described in her Poem 657: "This –/ The spreading wide of my narrow Hands / To gather paradise –"?

My first few operations were performed as a medical student under close supervision – suturing wounds in Casualty on weekend nights and, as a locum intern on a surgical unit, cutting off small skin lesions from the elderly and, unusually for a student, an appendicectomy. It was during my post-graduate surgical training though, when getting to grips with diagnosing and managing surgical patients, that I learnt to operate. My hands were the vehicle of this the pinnacle of surgical practice. For me, operating was nearly always exciting, on rare occasions frightening but, above all, addictive.

Operating was also sensuous. There was the feel of the scalpel, held precisely between fingers and thumb as it traversed and parted the skin, followed by a broadening swath of red. The soft, buttery-yellow fat beneath offered almost no defence. The tough, fibrous sheets of fascia encasing and joining muscles resisted momentarily, grating against the silent steel blade. My gloved hand would sweep into the opened abdomen that had never before seen light or felt air, and then hold and examine, almost caress, the shiny serous intestines and other organs – the "tubers and fruits" as Sylvia Plath called them. The hand was an organ of reconnaissance, for my fingers, within their thin latex rubber coverings, were my eyes. It was they that told me the state of tissues and organs not directly exposed, as well as the location of obscured vital structures – where to cut and where not to cut. My fingers commanded a vast array of instruments and, as
instruments themselves, did some of the dissecting, pushing away filmy adhesions or gently fracturing fat around enshrouded structures.

There were vivid colours as well: yellow-brown of iodine antiseptic on the skin; sky-blue disposable drapes; white cotton sponges and packs; body organs in multiple tones of mustardly-yellow, russet and pink; the brilliant blue-white dazzle of operating lights; and, of course, red blood. And then, smells: pungent, alcoholic disinfectants; blue-grey smoke from the electro-cautery's charred flesh; the flat sweet smell of the open abdomen; the stench of faeculent spillage; and the sour odour of gangrenous tissue. There were sounds too: the harsh rasp of the sucker clearing fluid from the operative field; the click of a ratchet on the handle of a needle holder; the soft hum and crackle of the diathermy sealing a vessel; surgical mantras of *clamp, tie, stitch, cut*; the background banter of anaesthetists and their machines; and, worst of all, the sound of torrential bleeding.

It was in such environments that my hands grew up. I witnessed their coming of surgical age, and observed their surgical learning, their acquisition of dexterity and a certain autonomy. I saw the joy and relief they were able to give to most, but not to all. I took from those operating rooms the stories my hands created, replayed them over and over during quiet moments, in dreams, and in the long hours after they had woken me in the night. Were these really my own hands? Often, especially early in my career, it was hard to believe the power of my hands, hard to believe what they could do and what they had done. But there was no contrivance about their successes, no escape from their failures, for in the words of the poet Robert Lowell, "my eyes have seen what my hand did."

Once qualified as a surgeon, I became aware that my hands, although obviously mine, were beginning to belong to others as well. Patients wanted to shake my hand, to look at my hands, hoped my hands would be steady for their operations, and even offered them good luck. My hands gained me access to a life in which changing the destinies of others was not only possible but became an almost daily routine. Because of my hands, I was usually listened to, often respected if not admired, and yes, by a very few, adored. I became a fragment of my patients' lives, just as they became part of mine – as Pablo Neruda wrote in his *Memoirs*: "Perhaps I didn't live just in myself, perhaps I lived the lives of others." It was this surgical life, lived and shaped by my hands, that revealed itself to be essential to me, for my hands had found their calling.
Among the many abiding images of my operating hands is a profusion of dead bodies – brain-dead but heart-beating cadavers that were organ donors. As with my dissections of the hand, the dead provided for the living. Always working quickly, mostly during the night and often without an assistant except for a visibly upset scrub nurse to hand me instruments, my hands removed hundreds of organs from corpses that appeared more alive than dead – their hearts drumming, skin pink, tissues bleeding freely at the dash of the knife. My hands, within surgical gloves a fraction of a millimetre thick, came to know the texture of each organ – the kidneys firm and pulsatile, sometimes fissured; the liver heavy and smooth, its edges almost floppy; the spleen dimpled and easy, but prone to fracture; lungs light and softly crepitant; and the heart, robust and thumping against my hands as if resentful, protesting at being lifted from the chest.

Of the many organ donors that continue to frequent my waking and sleeping hours, one has been a serial attender. She was a thirty-year-old woman whose car hit an oncoming vehicle on a country road in the early hours. Her blood alcohol was more than four times the legal limit. Two passengers in the other car died at the scene and their driver rendered quadriplegic. The woman, a mother of three, made it to Intensive Care but was declared brain-dead from her head injury a day later. Her husband agreed to donate her organs. The operating theatres were chaotically busy that day and so the operation was delayed until evening. Day-staff were asked to stay back to do the case. Everyone was tired, and the prospect of operating on a corpse late into the night filled no one with enthusiasm. It was after eleven p.m. when we started. The scrub nurse, who had been working since seven o'clock that morning, was scathing in her comments about the donor who, she said, had got her just desserts. A sense of immanent justice and righteous retribution pervaded the tone of her occasional remarks.

I made the standard full-length incision from neck to pubis, in order to examine with my hands the thoracic and abdominal contents and exclude previously unrecognised damage or disease. The body was thin and the organs had almost no surrounding fat. Under the acetylene brightness of the theatre's midnight lights, the anatomy was magnificent – each organ healthy, throbbing, beautiful to look at and sensuous to touch, even through surgical gloves. The organs were laid out as in the coloured illustrations of a surgical textbook, except for the mildly enlarged uterus that was obviously in early pregnancy.
Contrary to the scrub nurse's dudgeon, I found no moral ascendancy in that operation. There was no victory, no gain, except for the organs donated by a distraught man who saw it as a way to assuage the guilt inherited vicariously from the folly of his bibulous wife. It occurred to me later that the operation was evidence of an equilibrium, a "surgical equinox" even, a rigorous reckoning of actions and compensations. The appalling circumstances and consequences of the accident, the deducible punishment required by the nurse, and the morbid, almost macabre, process of operating on a living corpse in the middle of the night, had, for me, been set against the unqualified splendour of the corpse's visceral interior and, of course, the inestimable gifts unknowingly taken from the donor to salvage the lives of several seriously ill strangers. My hands had been the mediators in a performance that was intensely emotional but at the same time routine and rational. In the sorrow of such events and the extraordinary joy created by them, I saw a polarity that is surely unique to cadaveric organ donation. Undertaking these operations, I always found that polarity impossible to resolve.

And what of the living? I can recall most of the difficult operations, their sweat and lug, and the relief or intense concern once the skin was finally sutured. Only rarely do some of the quick and easy cases slip back into consciousness. The parts of the body on which I operated, cut out or cut off, or repaired, are indelibly tattooed and patterned in my memory. I remember very few of my patients' names, but I know their faces. The look, the whole physiognomy, of one middle-aged man in particular who underwent a kidney transplant is still vivid. I made rounds the following day and, as was my habit, stood by the bed and shook hands. I told him his operation had been straightforward and successful, and that the kidney had functioned more or less immediately. I can see his blue eyes brimming behind heavy rimmed glasses, his full head of white wavy hair, his Celtic skin, cheeks lined by fine capillaries, and the gratitude and excitement in his face as the reality of life with a new kidney started to dawn. I can hear his soft Welsh voice, struggling through his emotion to thank me. He clung to my hand with both of his. He could hardly believe that such good fortune had come to him out of the tragedy of a twenty-year-old being propelled headlong from a motor bike two days before. After eight years of never being well, he could now resume his former life and pick up all the quotidian minutiae that the rest of us take for granted – as much water, or whiskey, as
he could drink, dietary freedom, resuming work, a holiday away and, of course, passing urine. When I withdrew from his bedside, his tears fell on my hand as he kissed it.

I remember, too, a young man's parents who found some comfort in my hands. Their son had just finished his degree and was about to be married. He was the driver in a high-speed "car versus tree" nightmare, only this was not a dream. He had lost a lot of blood and was profoundly hypotensive. His pupils were dilated and his brain was probably dead, but his heart was strong. Just before midnight, my hands began an urgent sojourn into his abdomen in the hope that his brain might recover once the haemorrhage was controlled and his circulation restored. It was so important to do something, even in the face of hopelessness, and surgery is easiest to embark upon when there is no alternative and time is pressing. The young man bled from everywhere, and my hands failed to staunch his bleeding. I was not able to save him, not even long enough for his parents to tell him they loved him and to say goodbye. They grasped my hands in that shabby hospital corridor at five in the morning and, through their tears and grief, thanked me for what they perceived my hands had done.

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Years later, I lived in Kathmandu, a mystical, exotic, chaotic city that rapidly and almost completely consumed me. It was a rewarding time, setting up a kidney transplant service and teaching surgeons operations and management plans that were new to them, and then seeing very sick, immensely grateful patients being restored rapidly to health by the work of these enthusiastic Nepalese surgeons. It was arduous too, battling poor working conditions, inadequate facilities and local medical politics, while speaking few words of Nepali and being fatigued by the polluted heat and haze and humidity of that long summer. Shortly before my seven-month stay was over, colleagues at the hospital hosted a dinner for me at a restaurant in the Kathmandu Valley, out of gratitude for my work there. After an evening of speeches, expressions of thanks, and sad farewells, a surgeon with whom I had worked closely drove me back to my hotel through lashing monsoon rain. Not wanting to finish the evening, we talked in her car, as if hiding from the drumbeat rain. Her soft voice and hesitant English infused a closeness into the heavy night air. I had long been captivated by her – the form of her body beneath drab green theatre clothes; her black eyes, warm and glancing up above a surgical face mask; her dark Newari skin. And there, in the shadowy light of the car, her perfume, and her bare
shoulder not covered by the flame-red sari flashed with a brocade of black and gold thread, the colours of Shakti, the divine feminine creative principle. She gave me a gift – a small bronze statue of Ganesh, the Hindu god of successful enterprises and good fortune, the god we had adopted as the patron of our clinical program. I leant towards her, touched her face with my hand, and thanked her with a kiss. She took my hand as she turned away. Not here, she said, and we ran through the rain into the bright foyer of the hotel.

A sudden crash of thunder broke our thin sleep. The room was dark and for an instant she was uncertain where she was. It was her hand that I first became aware of, reaching out, searching for mine in the coal-black night, her hand wanting my hand as darkness pressed against us. There were tears in her voice, for ever since childhood she had feared the dark, she said, because she could never find the edge of it, the end of the darkness constantly receding. She snuggled into my shoulder, a swathe of her black hair across my chest. Her jewelled fingers began again to explore my body, their movements silken and hypnotising. I knew the language of her hands, for I had watched them endlessly during the last few months – how she scrubbed her fingernails and palms before gowning and gloving, passed a fine surgical thread through the eye of a curved needle, received instruments into her open gloved hands during surgery – hands that were strong yet agile, gentle and respectful of the tissues on which she operated. And at meal times in the dingy theatre tearoom, I watched with surprise as she ate with a bare hand, spearing her aristocratic fingers into the rice and vegetables and curry sauce. Only now did I know her hands as those of a lover.

Once permitted, our hands engaged a legion of movements that became sequences of seeking out and exploring the richest parts of each other. We could hardly see in the depth of that night, so our hands were privileged in those acts of intimacy. Uncovering our sensual selves was inextricably linked to tactile awareness and the sensitivities of the other. Our positions of toucher and touched alternated, became less definite, almost ambiguous, liquid, as the boundary between us blurred and faded. We found the physical joy and freedom of being wanted by another, the carnal pleasure of receiving each other’s wanting. The supple, luxuriant warmth of her breasts, the welcoming spread of her smooth groin. And at the heart of our union was the simple bliss of the offering and acceptance of mutuality that brought our bodies to the joy of a transient, ecstatic release from the world outside of us. Then we slept, both of us with a sense of repletion, of plenitude, as if we were never more to wake.
We found a freedom in giving ourselves to each other, losing ourselves in each other. By that unconditional and spontaneous acceptance of the other, it seems to me now we became secretly free and recovered a deeper independence. But how can a commitment to another lead one to be free? What does that freedom mean? We felt free in ourselves, but perhaps it was an illusion. Perhaps we were liberated rather than free. Albert Camus spoke of an "absurd freedom" in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, when "the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him". For that one night, we were released from a tension that had built over months in that long Kathmandu summer.

Beyond our bodily touching was the touching of the other's self, a revelation of availability that would, I believe, have led to access into her truth had I stayed in that city of Shangri-La. For in that one night there was the happiness of touching, of finding the mutual, sensual essence of what our lives could have been and what we could have held for each other had I not left. The appeal of her mystery, her body and its needing, I knew would have led me to a point of wanting to journey further, to touch and enter her inner self, augmenting the physical with what I can only call the spiritual. For in love, we see the other not just as body, but as soul.

But it was not to be. Our sensual enjoyment was a compensation, a recompense even, for love. Touching, however briefly, had been a way of bringing that core of ourselves to a location where we were each secure and together, a way of losing the space between ourselves, of what Martin Heidegger referred to as *entfernheit* or de-distancing, bringing something closer. Our hands touching in intimacy had been an act of recognition that made farness vanish, that reduced any sense of otherness. Being alone bears the mark of inestimable distance between individuals, some of whom describe that distance as darkness, one of the perpetual fears of humankind. Just as darkness is a contraction of life, so our touching had been an expansion.

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One of the dreams we have is to find a place between the extremes of the love we hold for others and the sadness of having failed them – a locus somewhere between joy and sorrow where it is possible for us to stand without need or regret. Whatever we discover about ourselves, whatever our abundance or scarcity, whatever abilities or shortcomings are exposed during our lives, we lose ourselves if we cannot find that place, if
we become remote from others, remote from our physical body and the pleasures and
pains it brings.

Immanuel Kant argued that the province of philosophy is defined by three
questions – What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? The hands can
help to answer each of these questions, I believe. Our hands are the masterful agents of
the wonder of touch, and provide unique ways of knowing and feeling and taking in the
world and connecting us to it. It is through the hands that we come to comprehend the
universe around us and ourselves. We can know what our hands tell us.

Then, if we listen, our hands tell us what we ought to do. Our hands demand that
we give back to the world in practical and aesthetic ways, thereby initiating or restoring
a bond with fellow humans who need the ministrations of our hands. Without
meaningful touch – giving comfort to others for example – our lives and the lives of
others become flat and atonal. We owe that to ourselves and to those around us. We
ought to touch.

And what of hope? What may we hope? It is that the hand knows not only when
it is touching but also when it is being touched, for in being touched it is awakened to
awareness. The great attribute of the hand is this awareness, its capacity to know. In his
treatise on the human soul, De Anima, Aristotle wrote: "the soul is in the primary way
that by means of which we live and perceive and think ... the soul is as the hand, for the
hand is a tool of tools, and the intellect is a form of forms and sense, a form of objects
of perception." We have forgotten in many ways what the world feels like. New
afflictions of the soul have arisen because of the distance we have allowed between us
and the world we no longer touch. Our hope, then, is that the hand remains the
functionary that provides for the soul, and the soul, as hand, shares its power to
apprehend, comprehend and proceed. This is the metaphor Sexton expressed in her
poem "The Touch" – the hand, as soul, is far from "ordinary", and cannot be kept
"sealed off in a tin box", as the poem goes, for the hand, like the soul, will grieve if
there is no one to touch and no one who touches back.

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2.3. Notes on the Personal Essay


*Thus if we ... the incomprehensible Creator.* John Bannister, *The historie of man, sucked from the sappe of the most approved anathomistes in this present age, complied in most compendious fourme, and now published in English, for the vtilitie of all godly chirugians, within this realme*. Aldersgate, London: John Day, 1578. Fol. 60v.


A six thousand word extract of this essay was long-listed for the Australian Book Review Calibre Essay Prize in 2018.
CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW
Chapter 3

Literature Review

3.1. The Influence of Illness on Plath's Poetry

Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation.

—from Ways of Escape, Graham Greene (1980)

3.1.1. Introduction

In this Section I review Plath's psychological symptoms as recorded in her journals, and argue that she suffered from bipolar II disorder. I review literature that suggests some sufferers of bipolar disorder perceive aspects of its hypomanic component as beneficial, and that hypomania at times may enhance creativity. I argue that Plath's hypomania facilitated her creative writing and heightened her emotional responses to adversity. Furthermore, I contend that Plath wrote with deliberation through the prism of her psychiatric disorder, exploiting her psychological condition by drawing on its creative drive, and the complexities and multiple layers of her recurring depressed and elevated moods. I introduce the concept of narratives of illness and contend that many of Plath's poems were in fact narratives of illness.

3.1.2. Plath's Psychological Illness

Plath's Unabridged Journals (UJ) is an incomplete record of her life from the age of seventeen to twenty-nine (July 1950 – July 1962), and is devoted to disciplined self-presentation and relentless self-criticism. Plath referred to her journals as "stream of consciousness stuff" (UJ 37), "descriptions and sensations" (UJ 77), and "a litany of dreams, of directives and imperatives" (UJ 191).

The UJ provides access to a rich store of information about Plath's psychological health. Prophetically, the first entry begins: "I may never be happy ..."
Intense feelings of depression, disillusionment, negativity, isolation, self-doubt, self-loathing, anger, guilt, frustration and jealousy are recorded with meticulous exactness (Vendler, Intractable 7). Disgust was strong in Plath's nature (Hardwick 102) – she was deprecating about her body and physical appearance, and she feared intellectual and academic failure (UJ 187). Feelings of paranoia, lack of identity, being overwhelmed by life, mind/body dissociation, possessing a dual personality and impending madness are all present. So too is suicidal ideation (UJ 149, 151, 185, 187, 274, 358, 391, 620). Plath's "panic bird" (UJ 424, 429, 486) referred to frequent anxieties over academic deadlines, social situations, her future as a writer, wife and mother, and "facing the blank page day after day" (UJ 486). Plath's depression was severe and chronic, extending well beyond simple teenage angst of a highly-strung, intelligent adolescent.

Plath realised for some time that she was pathologically depressed and suffering from "manic depression" (UJ 533): July 6, 1953 – "Right now you are sick in the head" (UJ 186); February 20, 1956 – "I am feeling very sick. ... deadly venom that comes from a sick heart. Sick mind, too" (UJ 202); June 20, 1958 – "I have been, and am, battling depression. ... I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering" (UJ 395).

An all-too-ephemeral joy comes across in a few of Plath's poems – "Metaphors", "Morning Song", "You're", "Words for a Nursery", and "Yaddo: The Grand Manor" being notable examples. Plath had times when she was euphoric, positive, excited, enthusiastic and inspired to write. Her manic elation, expansive moods and creative energy are easily recognised:

January 18 [1953]: Why all this sudden plunge upward of ecstasy? I was happier yesterday than ever before, so it is not as if one incident started me on the upgrade. ... There is the upswing, the turning, the sprouting of creative life again. I've gone through my winter solstice, and the dying god of life and fertility is reborn. (UJ 158)

February 26 [1957]: Tuesday. It is about 7:30. Have been awake since black 3:30, ... frigid gray dawn. Mind incredibly quick. Placing poems. Visions of books: poems, novels. Are we destined to be as successful as I picture? (UJ 272)
March 28 [1958]: ... I was taken by a frenzy a week ago Thursday ... and the frenzy has continued ever since: writing and writing: I wrote eight poems in the last eight days, long poems, lyrical poems, and thunderous poems: poems breaking open my real experience of life in the last five years: life which has been shut up, untouchable, in a rococo crystal cage, not to be touched. (*UJ* 356)

August 28 [1958] midnight: still tired, but curiously elated, as if absolved from suffocation – projects bubble. ... a lull in a merry go round of panic blackouts. (*UJ* 416)

Hughes (qtd. in Stevenson 126) reported in 1957: "Sylvia sits and writes for about 12 hours at a stretch, and gets too excited to sleep".

Episodic depression and elation were apparent during Plath's late adolescence (Rollyson 32) and became recurrent. Between episodes, Plath's *UJ* suggest that her mood was calm and she appeared to have functioned well mentally, academically and socially.

Plath drank alcohol excessively during her years at Cambridge, Boston and London (*UJ* 283, 329, 335, 357, 369, 480, 630; Alexander 215). She suffered episodes of self-harm by cutting her face, neck and legs, and attempted to drown herself at Nauset Beach, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1953 (*UJ* 269). Despite electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) and psychotherapy, her mood swings continued unabated. Plath attempted suicide by barbiturate overdose in August 1953, aged twenty. Further ECT, insulin hypoglycaemic shock treatment ¹ and psychotherapy in 1958-1959 did not ameliorate her symptoms. Plath intermittently continued psychiatric treatment until late 1962 (Rollyson 199). Her situation became dire after the breakdown of her marriage in mid 1962. Isolated, with little money, in a sparsely furnished, unheated flat in Primrose

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¹ Insulin hypoglycaemic shock treatment was used first in the 1930s for treating morphine addiction, schizophrenia, psychoses and depression. The practice involved administering increasingly large doses of insulin by intramuscular injection to induce a deep hypoglycaemic coma and physiological disturbances. The mechanism of any derived benefit was believed to be altered carbohydrate metabolism in brain cells (Drake 253-255). The treatment fell out of favour and was discredited in the late 1950s (Jones, *Insulin* 147-149).
Hill, London, during the coldest winter since the mid-eighteenth century (Macfarlane 151), without water or a telephone and with two small children who, like herself, had flu (Van Dyne, Revising 168), Plath committed suicide on the 11th of February 1963.

3.1.3. Bipolar II Disorder

Morbid states of depression and elation have been recognised for millennia. Hippocrates (circa 460-377 BCE) described melancholia and delirium. The physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia (first century CE) believed that mania and melancholia were different aspects of "one madness" (Angst 3-6). French physician Jean-Pierre Falret (52-68) described in 1851 the continuous cycle of depression, mania and euthymia as "la folie circulaire". German psychiatrist Dr Emil Kraepelin (Melancholie 325-335) used the term "manic depressive insanity" to describe affective disorders from the late nineteenth century. "Manic depression" was poorly defined until 1976, when depression with hypomania was classified as "bipolar II disorder", a subtype of bipolar affective disorders (Dunner, Fleiss and Fieve 905-908).

Bipolar II disorder begins typically during adolescence or early adulthood. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) identifies three defining characteristics of bipolar II (APA 123-154). Firstly, a spectrum of severe, episodic and often prolonged depression is associated with sleep disturbance, early waking, easy fatigue, feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, inappropriate guilt, diminished ability to concentrate and think coherently, and suicidal ideation. Secondly, sufferers experience periods of hypomania or mild mania, characterised by abnormally elevated mood, usually associated with increased activity and energy, decreased need for sleep, inflated self-esteem, increased goal-directed behaviour, increased sexual drive and activity, and the feeling that their thoughts are racing. Mood elevation does not equate with feelings of happiness, but rather of being on top of things and able to cope with whatever happens. Thirdly, episodes of depression and elation are cyclical and recurrent, and most affected individuals are euthymic and symptom-free much of the time.

The opposite moods and energies of depression and hypomania are often interlaced, with elated moods frequently riddled by melancholia and irritability (Jamison, Touched 2, 28). The aftermath of manic periods is usually depression (Jamison, Touched 32). Mood changes in bipolar II are unpredictable and chronic and, left untreated, episodes of depression and hypomania become more frequent and more severe (Anderson, Ian et al. e8508; Jamison, Touched 250). Approximately two thirds
of bipolar II sufferers have co-morbid mental disorders such as anorexia, severe anxiety, and alcohol abuse (APA 139). Self-harm occurs in 30-40% of patients (Novick, Swartz, and Frank 1) and doubles the risk of later suicide which is estimated to be at least fifteen times that of the general population (Nordentoft, Mortensen and Pedersen 1061). The prevalence of lifetime attempted suicide is one in three (APA 138). Lifetime completed suicide rate is 4.8-8.6% for female bipolar patients compared with 0.5-0.26% for non-psychiatric individuals (Nordentoft, Mortensen and Pedersen 1058-1064; Helgason 241-255; Bostwick and Pankratz 1925-1932). Goodwin and Jamison (406) claimed that 70-90% of all suicides are associated with bipolar affective disorders. A 6.5 fold increased risk of suicide is observed among first-degree relatives of bipolar II probands (APA 138). Plath's son, Nicholas Hughes, committed suicide in March 2009 at the age of forty-seven (Bate 561).

Care must be taken in making posthumous psychiatric diagnoses because clinical information may be inaccurate or unavailable, and outmoded descriptions of symptoms may lead to erroneous conclusions. However, autobiographical and biographical records show that from early adulthood Plath exhibited the triad of depression, mood elevation and intervening euthymic periods typical of bipolar II disorder. She abused alcohol, suffered from anxiety and self-harm, and committed suicide. I argue, therefore, that she suffered from bipolar II disorder. The connection between depression and hypomania was not recognised until the 1970s, and so it is not surprising that Plath's bipolarity went undiagnosed during her lifetime.

The importance of acknowledging Plath's bipolarity is, I believe, that it gives a more truthful picture of the person and the poet. It places Plath's conduct in its correct context. Rather than being seen as an over-sensitive, weepy "poet of suicidal imperatives" (Plumly 13) or as a "sexually rapacious man-chaser" as Plath biographer Anne Stevenson (101) claimed, she can be understood as a person with a psychological disorder characterised by extreme moods and behaviours. Moreover, her psychological condition provides context for the tone and mood of Plath's poems, many of which display an apparent obsession with self-destruction and death (Kenner 42; Lavers 104). Plath's disorder also accounts for her periods of creative inactivity (Rollyson 34). Immersed in "doubts, horrid stifled depression ... flavorless life ... scorn & disgust" in February 1957, Plath noted: "I feel really uncreative ... I must get back into the world of my creative mind" (UJ 272-275). Later she wrote: "How can I get rid of this depression
... I can't write" (*UJ* 447-448); "I sometimes feel a paralysis come over me" (*UJ* 467); "the words dissolve and the letters crawl away" (*UJ* 471).

Some have suggested that Plath's suicide was no more than a moment of artistic angst in a creative writer – Robert Lowell, for example: "Maybe it's an irrelevant accident that she actually carried out the death she predicted ... but somehow her death is part of the imaginative risk" (Lowell, qtd. in Hayman 130). Poet and critic Albert Alvarez (*Savage* 53) claimed her suicide was a cry for help that fatally misfired, an "attempt to exorcize the death she had summoned up in her poems". I believe that recognition of Plath's mental disorder provides an insight into her poetry and a far more accurate explanation for her death than simply writing it off as artistic folly. It identifies her suicide as part of a serious illness with a significantly high mortality rate.

### 3.1.4. Creativity and Bipolar Disorder

It seems counterintuitive that creativity in its many forms could be associated with such a destructive condition as bipolar II disorder, yet an intimate relationship between madness and "creators" was described long ago in pre-Grecian myths (Jamison, *Touched* 51). Plato (46-47) distinguished the detrimental effects of clinical "madness" from the "divine madness of enthusiasm and inspiration". In 1812, Professor Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania University wrote the United States' first major psychiatric treatise in which he noted a relationship between some types of mania, mental acuity and artist talent. Kraeplin (*Insanity* 17), emphasised the debilitating extremes of psychotic depression, but also recognised a link between increased artistic productivity and manic depressive illness: "Artistic activity may, by the untroubled surrender to momentary fancies or moods, and especially poetical activity by the facilitation of linguistic expression, experience a certain furtherance."

More recently, systematic biographical research has given strong support to a much higher rate of mood disorders in artistic populations than could be expected by chance alone. Nancy Andreasen (1288-1292), formerly Professor of Psychiatry at Iowa Medical College, reported in 1987 a significantly higher prevalence of bipolar disorders in creative writers: thirteen of thirty (43%) contemporary female writers in her study were diagnosed with bipolar disorders before or during the fifteen-year study, compared with only three of thirty (10%) well-matched controls; two writers, but no controls, committed suicide during the study period.
In 1993, Kay Jamison (Touched 61-72; 283-293), an academic psychiatrist, published a detailed review of mental illness in one female and thirty-five male British and Irish poets born between 1705 and 1805 and included in major anthologies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry. Jamison examined existing letters, journals and medical records, and found that 77% of poets had symptomatic manic-depressive illnesses, the majority exhibiting psychotic symptoms; 17% had been institutionalised, and 6% had committed suicide – comparative rates for each category in the general population at the time were each 1%. Akiskal and Akiskal (29-36) found during extensive psychiatric interviews with twenty award winning European writers that thirteen (65%) had experienced hypomanic episodes.

In a landmark 1995 biographical study, Professor Arnold Ludwig of Brown University, Rhode Island, demonstrated a complex relationship between creative achievement and mental disturbance (Ludwig, Price 4-7). Ludwig reviewed biographies of 1,004 deceased Western individuals (including Plath) that appeared in The New York Times Book Review between 1960 and 1990. Creativity was measured on a Creative Achievement Scale based on the amount, originality and posthumous recognition of their lifetime creative accomplishments (Ludwig, Achievement 337).

Ludwig observed that creative individuals (professional artists, designers, architects, musicians, composers, actors, writers and poets) had a two to three times higher lifetime prevalence of bipolar disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety disorders and suicide than non-creative professionals (military personnel, politicians, scientists, bankers, businessmen). Psychopathology differed between categories of creative individuals, with poets most likely to suffer psychoses and commit suicide. In a subgroup of thirteen female and forty male poets, forty-one (77%) suffered bipolar disorders and eleven (21%) committed suicide. Ludwig (Achievement 351) concluded: "poets not only may be susceptible to affective disorders, psychoses, and suicide, but they also may be influenced by the cultural expectation that they are supposed to struggle with their angst."

In 2005 Nowakowska and colleagues (207-215) at Stanford University reported that graduate students from creative disciplines had "temporal commonalities" (cyclothymia, irritability and neuroticism) more akin to bipolar patients than healthy controls. Importantly, their bipolar and student samples did not share these traits with patients suffering major depressive disorders. Nowakowska concluded that underlying
neurobiological factors accounted for the enhanced creative abilities of the students and bipolar patients.

These studies demonstrate a high prevalence of bipolar disorder in artistically creative individuals, particularly poets. What of the converse – creativity in sufferers of bipolar affective disorders? In 1988, Ruth Richards and colleagues (*Creativity* 281-288) from Harvard Medical School examined creativity in work-related and leisure activities in thirty-three manic-depressive and cyclothymic patients. Creativity, determined by originality and meaningfulness to others of lifetime accomplishments (Richards et al., *Assessing* 476-485), was significantly higher in these patients than in thirty-three healthy controls. Creativity was most enhanced in subjects with mild, rather than severe, symptoms. Jamison (*Manic-depressive* 363) also noted a similar non-linear "inverted-U" relationship between creativity and severity of bipolarity, indicating that mild hypomania heightened creativity whereas euthymia and severe mania did not.

The above studies, particularly the biographical studies, are not without methodological problems, but they clearly link creativity with bipolar disorder. They demonstrate higher rates of bipolarity in samples of creative individuals and writers, and higher levels of creativity in sufferers of bipolar disorders. They also acknowledge that many writers and artists are perfectly sane and do not need the drive of hypomania, and that behaviours apparent in mood disorders and artistic personalities may not be the same in nature or origin (Frosch 321-322, Andreasen 1292). My argument here is that Plath's considerable literary productivity and creativity (Section 1.4.2.) was consistent with a diagnosis of bipolar II disorder.

### 3.1.5. Positive Effects of Hypomania on Creativity and Writing

The literature indicates that hypomania enhances the lives of some individuals with bipolar disorders. Jamison et al. (*Clouds* 198-202) in 1980 reported significant increases in alertness, sexual intensity, productivity, creativity and sociability in both female and male bipolar patients during periods of hypomania. Nine years later, Jamison (*Mood* 125-134) reported on rates of treatment for mood disorders in forty-seven eminent British writers and artists, of whom eighteen were poets, and all of whom had won at least one of several major prestigious prizes for their work. The focus of the study was the role of mood in the creative process. All poets had experienced intense and highly productive creative episodes lasting between one and four weeks. Episodes were characterised by pronounced increases in enthusiasm, energy, self-confidence, speed of
mental association, fluency of thought, elevated mood, and expansiveness of ideas in 60-90% subjects. Intensified sexuality was experienced in 26%. Ninety per cent of the sample stated that the very intense moods were either integral or very important for the development and execution of their work. Other studies (Polatin and Fieve; Van Putten; Fieve; Anderson, Ian et al.) similarly reported that most bipolar individuals considered hypomania, particularly mild hypomania, as positive or beneficial. Ludwig (Price 7-9) and Richards et al. (Creativity 281-288) noted greater lifetime creative accomplishments were associated with mild but not severe forms of hypomania.

These studies indicate the expansiveness of thought and grandiosity of mood typical of hypomania are frequently perceived as improving creative drive and productivity. Psychiatrist Theodore Van Putten (179-182) formerly of the University College of Los Angeles estimated that 20-30% of bipolar patients temporarily discontinued medication and put up with the disruption and mental suffering of the illness's depressive phase so as not to be deprived of the heightened mood, cognition and creativity of periodic hypomania, a point also noted by Jamison (Touched 7-8).

The beneficial effect of hypomania on literary skills was recognised almost a century ago. Dr Gardner Murphy (539-571) observed that some manic-depressive patients started writing poetry during episodes of mania; rhyming, associations of sounds and word rearrangement were "definitely characteristic of very excited manics". Kraepelin (Insanity 15) also observed that patients produced rhymes, puns and sound associations much more often when manic: "spinning out the circle of ideas and jumping off to others [is] in high degree peculiar to mania."

Psychologists (Shenton, et al. 21-30; Solovay et al. 15-19) at Harvard University studied thought patterns in psychiatric inpatients: manic patients exhibited high degrees of combinatory thinking and merged incongruous perceptions, concepts and images which they "loosely strung together and extravagantly combined and elaborated", often in humorous and flippant contexts.

Anne Sexton (Writers 416-417) provided an insider's description of the creative drive of hypomania:

... when the heightened awareness comes over you, and you realize a poem is buried there somewhere, you prepare yourself. I run around, you know, kind of skipping around the house, marvelous elation. It's as though I could fly ... then I sit down at the desk and get going with it.
I argue that such cognitive changes are ideal catalysts for writing and creating poetic imagery—they endow already creative individuals with a far richer palette for creative accomplishment. Prolixity, generation of new ideas and associations, and increased speed of connections between thoughts during hypomania must benefit the process of creative writing. Autobiographical records indicate that Plath wrote a significant proportion of her poetry during hypomaniac periods (UJ 272, 356, 416). I maintain that the intellectual and neuro-linguistic advantages of mild hypomania accelerated the tempo of her work and benefitted her writing by facilitating construction of idiosyncratic and highly ingenious imagery.

3.1.6. Plath as a "Wounded Writer"

Plath bore the wounds of her psychological disorder, the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (Yeats 143). She exploited her suffering in her poetry (Frieda Hughes xix-xx; Van Dyne, Revising 67). Many poets have written about the psychological pain of bipolar disorder—Charles Baudelaire, Louise Bogan, Lord Byron, Hart Crane, Robert Lowell, Edna St Vincent Millay, Edgar Allan Poe, Sarah Teasdale and Anne Sexton, to name a few (Jamison, Touched 267-268). John Berryman, who, like Plath, suffered from bipolar disorder, won a Pulitzer Prize for his poetry, and later committed suicide, described how the dark emotions of the disorder contributed to his work (Berryman, Writers 322):

... I do strongly feel that among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal. Certain great artists can make out without it ... but mostly you need ordeal. My idea is this: The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business. Beethoven's deafness, Goya's deafness, Milton's blindness, that kind of thing. And I think what happens in my poetic work in the future work will probably largely depend not on my sitting calmly on my ass as I think "Hmm, hmm, a long poem again? Hmm," but on being knocked in the face, and thrown flat, and given cancer, and all kinds of other things short of senile dementia. At that point, I'm out, but short of that, I don't know. I hope to be nearly crucified.
Pablo Neruda disagreed that misery and anguish were necessary for the writing of great poetry. When a young literary critic declared that Neruda's poetry needed more suffering because it was weakened by the happiness it exhibited, Neruda (264) quipped: "appendicitis should produce excellent prose, and peritonitis might possibly produce some sublime poems."

I maintain that Plath can be considered to be a "wounded writer". Her poems are deeply infused with suffering brought about by emotional turmoil and her responses to life experiences, as I show in my analysis of her poetry in Chapter 5. Arthur Frank, Professor of Sociology at the University of Calgary, recognised that serious illness or wounding – physical or mental – lead to unpredictability and loss of authority over one's immediate destiny and environment (Frank 30-32). Frank argued that writing provided a means of regaining personal control, and reclamation and affirmation of the self that had been forced to accept degrees of contingency and dependency. Similarly, Nancy Mairs (15), an American writer, claimed that writing narratives of physical or mental disorders had helped to repair the psychological wounds resulting from her clinical depression and multiple sclerosis. Psychoanalyst Roy Schafer (31) believed that writing about illness reassured the teller "that there is a self to tell something to, a someone else serving as audience who is oneself or one's self."

Of particular relevance to my study of Plath's poetry is the work of Michigan psychoanalyst Marilyn Charles. Charles (346-347) believed that creation of metaphor was part of the transformative process of resolving emotional turmoil: the experience was considered, elucidated and transmuted into words in an act of self-assertion and self-discovery that provided the writer with crucial information about her/his relative place and safety in the world. Writing became a way of "translating primary awareness into patterned form that can be used as a way of finding oneself" (Charles 346) which, as Frank, Mairs and Schafer also claimed, aids psychological rehabilitation and recovery after illness. For some wounded writers, and I include Plath here, writing becomes a necessary support.

Plath scorned the idea that poetry was "some kind of therapeutic public purge or excretion" (UJ 355). However, I argue that she had an existential need to examine and heal her psychological wounds and, through her poetry, she looked for ways of resolving or ameliorating her condition. I further maintain that many of Plath's poems can be regarded as "narratives of illness". Frank (75-136) categorised illness narratives,
whether prose or poetry, into three broad ontological types: the "restitution" plot, in which the teller believes that health will be restored without a continuing threat to self; "chaos" stories, where the principal anxiety is existential and revolves around fear that health cannot be restored or improved; and "quest", in which illness is perceived as part of a journey that leads to some unspecified benefit for the sufferer. The essential feature of each narrative form is some sort of resolution or outcome of the suffering inherent in illness. Plath's linear narratives are frequently fragmented and displaced by repetitive, enigmatic interventions of trauma to the body. Her elliptical, highly imagistic and at times surreal physical catastrophes have a tendency to obscure the narratives of her biographical and personal crises. I contend that each of these three narrative themes is present in much of Plath's poetry, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

3.1.7. The Van Gogh Effect

Sociologist Nathalie Heinich (140-150) of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris coined the term the "Van Gogh effect" for the potential impact of disease or poor social conditions on an artist's legacy. An artist, or writer, suffers the misery of disease or social deprivation, and her/his work is held in low esteem and regarded as abject during her/his lifetime. Gradually, abject aspects of the artist's life are accepted, and the artist's work becomes enigmatic and eventually glorified. It is only after her/his death that: "the writer of abjection will escape his condition of waste, reject, abject. Then, he will either sink into oblivion or attain the rank of incommensurate ideal" (Kristeva 16). The artist's life of suffering or early failure is metamorphosed into a success that draws admiration, love, or veneration by posthumous collective guilt. The avant-garde or deviant artist runs the risk of obscurity but has a chance to become the founder of a new tradition for successive generations. Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) exemplified this paradigm.

Aspects of Van Gogh's life can be seen in many artists (Heinich 141). Several Confessional poets, such as Plath, Sexton and Berryman, were exemplars of the Van Gogh effect: they suffered from psychological disorders and committed suicide, experienced intense personal misery and anguish, their artistic style was novel and initially deprecated, and they received greater posthumous than ante mortem acclaim. The biographies of some of these poets, for example Plath and Anne Sexton, have to some extent supplanted their writing.
3.1.8. Conclusion

I argue here that recognition of Plath's chronic and life-threatening mental condition, bipolar II disorder, enables us to set her writing and her life and death into a more correct and honest context than most critics have allowed. All critics acknowledge the unhappiness and despair in Plath's life and poetry, some going so far as to claim, erroneously in my view, that her poetry was symptomatic of her disorder. My claim is that her writing was influenced, even facilitated, by her serious illness. The possibility has been ignored that such a destructive disorder could have aided, even driven, her creative linguistic skills, the origins of which, I contend, were more complex than simply a "creative visitation ... from the hell of rage" (Hardwick 102). I argue that the hypomanic component of Plath's condition fuelled her productivity and facilitated creation of novel and distinctive figurative language.

Plath's suffering pervaded her poetry. Although at times inhibited by depression, when she did write during euthymic or hypomanic states, her poetry still generally took the darker view of things, as if set in a context of sadness and despair. This is consistent with the intermingling of depression and hypomania that occurs as one phase of the disorder transitions into the other (Kraepelin, Insanity 99-116; Jamison, Touched 35). Acknowledgement of Plath's psychological illness provides a background for the anxiety and abjection that suffuses particularly her later poetry. To that extent, I argue that the influence of Plath's illness should not be underestimated. I see Plath as a wounded writer, belonging to what Albert Schweitzer (195) called the "brotherhood of those who bear the mark of pain". To view Plath's poems as narratives of illness is realistic because they expose her need for healing and restitution and are part of her strategy for metaphoric recovery, as I discuss in Chapter 5. Although Plath was cynical about the therapeutic value of writing (UJ 355), writing narratives of illness may well be a means for some, as Graham Greene (9) put it, to "escape the madness".

*
3.2. Plath and the Confessional Mode of Poetry

... there's nothing like a confession to make one look mad; and that of all confessions a written one is the most detrimental all round.

—–from Chance, Joseph Conrad (1913)

3.2.1. Introduction
In this Section, I review the emergence of the Confessional poetry movement in the United States during the late 1950s. I contend that Confessional poetry is distinguishable from both autobiographical and confessional writing; and, further, that Plath eagerly adopted the Confessional style and subsequently became a formative poet of the Confessional movement. I highlight the significance of poetry for Plath and argue that it was of existential importance to her.

3.2.2. The Confessional Mode of Poetry
The Confessional mode of poetry arose as a response to the formalist prescriptions of American Modernist poetry, the central tenet of which was rejection of the Romantic ideal of revealing individual experience and feelings. The Modernist approach was summarised succinctly by the poet Allen Tate (1899-1979): "a good poem had nothing to do with exalted feelings or being moved by the spirit. It was simply a piece of craftsmanship, an intelligible or cognitive object" (qtd. in Lowell, Prose 59). Younger American poets of the early twentieth century challenged Modernist conservative formality and its technical complexity and thematic restrictions, because they felt it inhibited poetic experimentation and expression (Davidson 60). Poets began to fuse the form and subject material of Modernist poetry with the lyric and meditative styles of the Romantics (Perkins 212). They re-introduced poetry of the first-person that was revealing and intensely personal, and that responded to contemporary issues – changing sexual mores, gender roles and family dynamics, as well as encroachment into everyday life of technology, consumerism, mass communication and psychoanalysis (Alvarez, Fiddle 20).
The idea that this new poetry was "confessional" was first articulated by poet and critic M. L. Rosenthal (Poets 231-232) in a review of Robert Lowell's 1959 Life Studies:

*Life Studies* is a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal ... It is partly Lowell's apology for what he has been saying in these pieces ... And it is partly his assertion that he cannot breathe without these confessions, however rank they may be.

The personal nature of Lowell's poems arose from his newfound belief in expressing intimacy and exposing his spirit (Bidart x). By addressing problematic relationships, existential anxieties and psychiatric problems, the poems presented a new voice and process in poetry, quite distinct from the dense, academic American poetry of the 1950s (Boshkoff-Johnson 357).

Rosenthal identified two criteria for defining poetry as "Confessional" (Poetry 154). Firstly, the speaker was positioned as the poem's central symbol, and functioned as a predominant trope. The poet's involvement was intensely self-absorbing in poems of witness, with the "flimsiest gesture towards self-disguise" (Rosenthal and Gall 399). The novelty resided not so much in the poetry being a personal statement, but rather that the experiential self was openly acknowledged. The poet was the "magnetic cohesive center for all the emotional and subjective currents running through the work" (Rosenthal and Gall 394).

Secondly, the poet as speaker directly expressed naked emotion (Phillips 8). Psychologically intense, private and often deeply painful experiences and memories were revealed within serious poetic dynamics. These personal subjects had autobiographical roots, and the speaker was positioned "at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization" (Rosenthal, Plath 69). "Confessionalism" was not a prescriptive formula for personal writing, but rather a means of literary exploration into intimate, personal experiences within previously taboo realms: perturbations of personal relationships, mental illness, sexual identity, physical desire, sexual intimacy, adultery, incest, masturbation, menstruation and abortion.

The term "Confessional" came to be applied to poets whose poetry was informed by psychological self-probings, and whose intimate and at times harrowing
style and subjects were expressed through a public voice (Perkins 382). Their distinctive attribute was an ability to communicate the inner truths of intimate experiences, as well as their responses to those truths, with a poetic discipline and technical sophistication learnt from the Modernists (Kirsch xv). Personal presence in the poetry conferred energy and freshness and dynamism, as well as a sense of enlargement of feeling and thought. Confessional poets wrote about suffering to interrogate the complexities and ambivalence of their emotional states (Perkins 590). By implication, readers were encouraged to think about and examine their own dark places so that, together, poet and reader could renounce the silence with which society cloaked its less comfortable and abject taboo subjects. But it wasn’t for everybody. One English poet, Veronica Forrest-Thomson (x), disliked the poetry for its "irrational elements ... and increasing complexities of poetic artifice, such as apparently non-sensical imagery, logical discontinuity, referential opacity, and unusual metrical and spatial organisation."

American poet and literary critic Adam Kirsch disliked the term "confessional". He wrote in 2005 (Introduction x): "the usefulness of criticism depends on its metaphors, and in confession it [Confessional poetry] found a bad metaphor." The descriptor "confession" to which Kirsch refers was Rosenthal's attempt to define a new mode of poetry and was accurate in as much as it loosely framed poetry arising out of revelations of deeply personal experiences and emotions.

3.2.3. Autobiographical and Confessional Writing, and the Confessional Mode of Poetry

Although autobiographical and confessional writing have long traditions in Western literature, the Confessional poetry movement only evolved in America in the 1950s. Autobiography is a narrative "controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw experience of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom" (Gornick 91). In the absence of scrupulous documentation, autobiographical writing is better described as remembered experience, or "memoir" (from the French mémoire, meaning memory). Memoir is shaped by the experience or emotional truth that the author wishes to communicate, not necessarily by the absolute truth of situations. Because autobiography allows authors to recreate and restructure their history, the boundary between autobiography and fiction must be regarded as unstable (Britzolakis, Theatre 11).
Writing in a "confessional" style is autobiographical but with the added nuance of disclosure of private, often malevolent, feelings, motivations or deeds, usually accompanied by a sense of guilt or shame. St Augustine's *The Confessions* and Leo Tolstoy's *A Confession and Other Religious Writings* are examples of confessional writing that expose perceived shortcomings and seek forgiveness. Jean-Jacques Rousseau admitted personal failings in his *Confessions*, but used them as a basis for social criticism. Whatever the motivation for such writing, some claim that it is self-serving in that it seeks catharsis and relief from remorse (Aleshire 16; Kirsch x).

The Romantic period's poems of confession were about the speaker's emotions, rather than the speaker her/himself. Such poetry does not fit Rosenthal's two criteria for "Confessional" poetry. As Rosenthal (*Poets* 226) noted: "The Romantics spoke directly of their emotions but did not give the game away even to themselves". Poetry of the Confessional school of the 1950-1960s was thematically distinct from confessional Romantic poetry. It did not have the strict documentary aspect of autobiography, penitential motivation, or the liturgical connotation of expressing guilt or disgrace. Rather, through mastery of poetic dynamics, Confessional poets exposed the defencelessness and ignominy identified by Rosenthal (*Poets* 231-232).

### 3.2.4. The Confessional Poets

Except for the principal figures of Lowell, Snodgrass, Sexton, Berryman and Plath, there is no consensus as to who can be identified as belonging to the school of Confessional poets. Other poets cited frequently, although inconsistently and sometimes controversially, include Adrienne Rich, Diane Wakoski, Louise Glück, Margaret Atwood, Elizabeth Bishop, Maxine Kumin, Denise Levertov, Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz and Allen Ginsberg (Perkins 411, 546-552, 588-590; Kirsch 1-270; *Norton Poetry* 269). By defining these poets as Confessional, they inhabit literary and historical landscapes linked by literary influences, putative biographical themes, and personal and professional relationships. It does not mandate that all their work was stylistically Confessional or that it did not intersect with other modes of poetry.

### 3.2.5. Plath as a Confessional Poet

Early in 1959 Plath attended Lowell's weekly poetry workshops at Boston University in the company of Anne Sexton, Kathleen Spivack and George Starbuck. Plath's poems at
that time were highly accomplished but brittle, "very tightly controlled – formal, impenetrable, but without the feeling that was later to enter them ... they had a virginal, unborn feeling to them" (Spivack 34). Lowell acknowledged the quality of Plath's 1957 poem "Sow" which she read in his class: "This poem is perfect, almost. There is really not much to say. It appears finished. But. I don't know. There's something about it ... " (Lowell, qtd. in Spivack 34). Lowell, struggling with his own mental health problems, was in the throes of writing Life Studies and changing his poetic style. His full response to Plath's heavily descriptive, unemotional poem can only be speculated upon: was his apparent doubt directed at Plath's restrained Modernist style, or did it reflect a reservation about his own evolving, untried, personally revealing form?

At that time, Plath was "... studying to change my ways of writing poems. ... My poems begin on one track, in one dimension and never surprise or shock or even much please" (UJ 465). She enthused about Lowell's new style of poetry (Alvarez, Savage 39) which she read with "excitement, joy, admiration ... & praise" (UJ 379). She delighted in the free association and juxtaposition of images, and appreciated the poetry's revelatory nature and intense emotional and psychological depth – "walking the tight-rope of the psyche naked" (Wagner-Martin, Life 135). Plath absorbed Lowell's Confessional style into her own poetry (Axelrod, Wound 65), although initially she found it hard to "discover the true life of the [Confessional] poem inside its technical scaffolding" (Wagner-Martin, Biography 160).

By the end of 1959, Plath's poetic style had evolved into a less structured form with vivid, almost hallucinatory, imagery. She began to voice her private emotional states with dramatic concentration and intensity. Whereas Plath's early poetry exhibited her ability and literary self-consciousness, her work now allowed greater portrayal of her personality (McClatchy 81). "The Stones" was the first of her poems to demonstrate this change (Hughes, Notes 1970 192). Plath worked hard to invent new forms that American poet and academic Stanley Plumly (14) believed distinguished her from other emerging poets. Drawing on her literary heritage of modernism and surrealism, and combining it with contemporary poetic influences, Plath produced a startlingly expressive and authentic voice. Her genius lay in an ability to capture experiences and convey the erratic path of her emotions in highly figurative, innovative language.

Plath's poetry was notably different in style and themes from the more conversational poetry of Sexton and other Confessional poets (Middlebrook, Poetry 159; Gilbert and Gubar, House 305). Plath found a distinctive voice as she emerged
from academic self-consciousness into inspired utterances and emotional immediacy (Britzolakis, *Theatre* 180). Unlike Lowell, who painfully and accurately analysed his dilemmas so that they gained universal significance and relevance, Plath exploited private experiences by metaphorically mythologising and encoding them in innovative and surprising language, frequently calling upon metaphors of the body to embody and express personal suffering. Occasionally, her poems were also wry, tender and even humorous (for example, "Tale of a Tub", "Child", "Metaphors"). Plath praised Lowell and Sexton particularly for venturing into peculiar, private and taboo subjects in their poetry, and claimed that Lowell's breakthrough into writing about very serious and personal emotional experiences facilitated development of her own Confessional style (Axelrod, *Wound* 12).

Plath's place as a key figure in the Confessional movement is generally acknowledged. She wrote "some of the twentieth century's most distinguished works of art" (*Norton Poetry* 593). However, Plath's aesthetic craft runs the risk of being overshadowed by the nature of her subject matter, the intensity of her psychological positions, and her extraordinary biography. Rosenthal (*Plath* 69) wrote: "a genuine confessional poem has to be superbly successful artistically if it is to achieve this fusion of the private and the culturally symbolic, but it must at any rate be far more highly charged than the usual poem." Kirsch (x), in arguing that the principal motivation of Confessional poets was aesthetic, emphasised the importance of art over autobiography:

[Confessional poets] approached their writing as artists, and their primary aim was aesthetic. When they turned to experiences like madness and despair and lust ... they did so in order to make effective works of art, not in order to cure themselves or shatter taboos. To treat their poems mainly as documents of personal experience is not just to diminish their achievement, but to ignore their unanimous disdain for the idea of confessional poetry.

Kirsch's view of the primacy of artistic motivation is informed by contempt for the appellation "Confessional" held by Plath (*UJ* 355), Lowell (Bidart vii), Berryman (*Writers* 322), Bishop (Millier 323, 361) and Sexton (*Self-Portrait* 334). Kirsch rightly highlighted the Confessionals' aesthetic craft, but I disagree that Plath's primary motivation, particularly for her post-Colossus writing, was aesthetic. Rather, I concur
with the view of the English poet Stephen Spender (200) who in 1970 wrote: "[Plath] is writing out of a pure need of expression, certified, as I say, by death". I have argued in Section 3.1.6. that Plath was a wounded writer who bore the wounds of emotional hurt and mental illness, and I argue in Chapter 5 that she had a need not only to express anger and suffering, but also to seek ways of resolution and healing, which she did through the ground-breaking artistry of her poetic narratives of illness.

I do not underestimate the considerable aesthetic craft Plath applied to her very personal subject matter. I concur with Rosenthal (Sequence 394) when he maintained that successful crafting of private experiences into poetry was underpinned by the Confessional poets' ability to exploit affective language. The language of Plath's Confessional poetry was certainly penetrating and expressive. As the literary critic Charles Molesworth (168) put his case for the aesthetic style of Confessional poetry: "The confessional poets were always stylish in their misery".

Alfred Alvarez, an apologist for the Confessional movement, believed that Plath progressed Confessional poetry by extending Lowell's model of autobiographical exposure. Plath did this not by writing more painful or revealing poetry, but by disguising the intensely personal in myth and metaphor, and subjugating biographical honesty to aesthetic artistry (Alvarez Fiddle 17). For Kirsch, this was problematic. He (245-247) argued that because Plath's experiences were cloaked in mythology and her "fictions" went far beyond fact, she disbarred herself from the Confessional school. Kirsch (246) claimed that Plath's solipsism flagrantly exalted her words over the situations about which she wrote, and "ferociously transformed it [her history] into surreal parables". I argue this self-mythologising was her deep and intimate experiences expressed through metaphors, and allowed Plath to achieve public significance for her private experiences. As such, she well and truly fulfilled Rosenthal's two criteria of a Confessional poet.

3.2.6. "This is the stuff of my life"

Writing was extremely important to Plath. She wrote creatively virtually all her life. From an early age, she regarded writing poetry and short stories as "serious play" (Rollyson 15). Plath described her first creative drought in July 1953 as: "shock. Utter nihilistic shock" (UJ 187). It was shortly followed by an episode of self-harm and a suicide attempt (Stevenson 43-47).
Plath declared in January 1955: "writing is the first love of my life" (LH 156). A year later, she felt "dependent on the process of writing" (LH 211). Plath believed she could be transformed into another self if only "her body could pass through language" (Axelrod, Wound 4). She could be mentally restored after the death of her father if she could write successfully: "All I need do is work, break open the deep mines of experience and imagination, let the words come and speak it all" (UJ 283). She equated writing with living (Axelrod, Wound 101), believing it offered a way to manage, if not heal, her psychic wounds, "those bloody private wounds" (UJ 318). Plath (Interview) told Peter Orr of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1962 "I don't think I could live without it [writing]. It's ... something absolutely essential to me." A few months later, poetry was her lifeblood, her "blood jet" ("Kindness" [18]). Writing gave Plath an identity: "This is the stuff of my life ... This my call, my work. This gives my being a name, a meaning: 'to make of the moment something permanent.'" (UJ 337-338).

There is little doubt that writing and a literary environment provided enormous emotional, and at times financial, support for Plath. Her marriage to Hughes – described cynically by Axelrod (Wound 187) as "a canny career move" – initially provided enormous impetus for her writing: "Living with him is like being told a perpetual story ... I feel a new direct pouring of energy into my own work" (July 1956, UJ 249). Literary life liberated Plath (Rollyson 177). She received independent professional recognition by publishing poems in prestigious journals (New Yorker, New Statesman, Observer) and reading poetry on the BBC. The Bell Jar was accepted for publication in Britain. She became less dependent on Hughes as her career progressed, a progression documented in her early 1962 poems "The Rabbit Catcher" and "Event" (Chapter 5).

Plath's separation from Hughes in September 1962 brought loneliness, professional isolation and loss of her creative mentor (Alvarez, Savage 41). The split jeopardised her "textual self that demanded constant attention, like a monster" (Axelrod, Wound 235). Yet in spite of the distress of abandonment, the forty Ariel poems written in October and November 1962 are regarded as some of Plath's best (Kirsch 270). My contention here is that writing was of existential significance to Plath, and that by writing poetry Plath managed to get through this traumatic time. Dr Walter R. Bett (74-75) wrote in 1952 about Edgar Allan Poe, who suffered from manic-depression and alcoholism:
Had this [alcohol] been his only weapon to relieve the depressions that overtook him, he would, like thousands of others similarly affected, have lived his life unknown and gone unsung by posterity. But he had a second weapon—his pen.

I see a parallel in Poe's situation with Plath's. Writing was Plath's life-blood and her weapon against depression. Her poetry of this time expresses her hurt through a convincing rhetoric of hurt, bereavement and anger. The highly distinctive voice and forceful female poetic authority that Plath produced in these poems and the poems of early 1963 enabled her to survive. Once she ceased writing, however, she was at risk.

Plath's faith in her poetic writing was never strong. Her poems "Snakecharmer" (1957) and "Words" (February 1963), for example, show distrust in the support that poetry can provide and in quality of her own poetry in particular. Her approach in these two poems is to negate her work because she feels it is worthless, as I discuss in Chapter 5. In her journals, Plath was often disparaging about her poetry (UJ 293, 396, 404). Hughes recognised Plath's lack of confidence in her own work when he wrote in a draft of his Birthday Letters poem "Apprehensions": "You were afraid your typewriter / would fall through the earth ...". In the published version of the poem (Hughes, Birthday Letters 140) he wrote: "Your writing was also your fear ... You knew it was there. / It hid in your Schaeffer pen" [1, 16-17].

My argument here is that Plath's writing, particularly her poetry, was of enormous importance to her, the "stuff of her life". As a Confessional poet, the lyrical "I" loomed large in Plath's poetry. Her poetry was a world created in her own image and embodied her inner experiences, often presented in metaphors and images of the physical body (Chapters 4 and 5). Once her faith in poetry, especially her own poetry, expired after the creative bursts of late 1962 and early 1963, her very existence was threatened.

3.2.7. Conclusion
I have argued that Confessional poetry was a distinct movement defined by Rosenthal's criteria of the primacy of the poet and revelations of intense psychological and personal experiences. Plath belonged within the Confessional school, which, I contend, is distinguishable from the styles of autobiographical poetry and poetry of confession. I have also argued that writing, and poetry in particular, was of existential importance and
support for Plath, without which her very survival was challenged. From his comment quoted in the epigraph, I take it that Joseph Conrad would not have approved of the Confessional style. Yet Plath's poetry was distinctive because of the very manner in which she confessed to her "madness" – or more appropriately, her extreme suffering and emotion – by crafting vivid narratives through which she expressed emotion in idiosyncratic and metaphorically inventive ways. Plath's particular skill was to conduct her craft and relate these painful and threatening experiences of her world through metaphor, as I discuss in the next Section.

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3.3. Imagery and Metaphor

Commitment to metaphor implies a principle of organic relationship of the parts of a poem ... it is the tail that makes the kite fly—the tail that renders the kite more than a frame of paper blown crazily down the wind.

—from "Irony as a Principle of Structure", Cleanth Brooks, (1951)

3.3.1. Introduction

Plath's poetry is magnificently surcharged with rich imagery and metaphors that are hallmarks of her poetry. In this Section, I review theories of metaphor that would have been familiar to Plath and are useful in reading her poetry. I review how metaphors may reveal a range of possible meanings and what attempts can be made to distinguish literal from metaphoric language. I argue that metaphors made substantial contributions to Plath's poetry at several levels, and I review how Plath's use of this linguistic device was received. I also discuss what I see as the unique value of the body as a metaphor in writing. Twentieth-century interest in imagery and metaphor extends into the fields of culture, visual art, science, philosophy, and cognitive psychology, but my review here is limited to poetry.

3.3.2. Imagery

Imagery is a key component of poetry, a point recognised long ago by Aristotle (Foley 662). During the Enlightenment, imagery was considered as a reproduction in the mind, a cognitive function linking experience (object) and knowledge (subject) (Friedman 560). René Descartes (1596-1650), in his "Meditations on First Philosophy" (34-40), wrote about two aspects of appreciating images: perception of a subject as an image, and the apprehender's imagination in evaluating the image. The proposition that imagery was a structural part of language and could be used to express new ideas for which there were no descriptors was advanced by philologist and philosopher Max Müller in 1894. British philosopher and critic Owen Barfield (51) recognised that images and metaphors could be used to signify novel aesthetic or non-material concepts
for which existing material words were inadequate until language was extended and allowed for literal description.

For Ezra Pound (200-201) an image was: "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time ... which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth." Pound's understanding of the cognitive component of imagery emphasised that the reader's role in finding meaning in imagery is active, not passive. "Meaning" has multiple levels of understanding of course, with a reader's interests, values, contexts, experiences and personal associations each contributing to the complicated task of elucidating meaning. Reader response theory of mid-twentieth century took this premise further by claiming that an image is a psychological or phenomenological interaction between reader and writer, involving the emotional, intellectual and aesthetic understandings of both (Holland and Greene 1146-1148). Semantic and syntactic features of imagery provide channels of communication between poet and reader that are additional to the affinity and materiality of vocabulary itself. Such stylistic devices differentiate the language of poetry from that of prose (Ransom 981).

Imagery includes a wide territory, as affirmed by William Mitchell (660), Professor of English at Chicago University, in 2012: "a poetic image, variously, is a metaphor, simile, or figure of speech; a concrete verbal reference; a recurrent motif; a psychological event in the reader's mind; the vehicle or second term of a metaphor; a symbol or symbolic pattern; the global impression of a poem as a unified structure."

Through imagery, then, the inward and subjective can be expressed vividly as outward and objective, allowing poets to challenge readers with something beyond the surface of language and to reveal significances that at first seem unlikely. Metaphor is placed firmly within literary imagery as a device for externalising and making thoughts and feelings vivid.

3.3.3. Theories of Metaphor

A metaphor is a figurative expression in which the ordinary or usual associations of a word or phrase are transferred to another context where they evoke new meanings (Martin, Metaphor 863). "Metaphor" is derived from the Greek μετ, αφέρω (metapherō), which means "to carry over or transport" (Liddell and Scott 505).

Two structural types of metaphor were identified by Aristotle (1457b): substitutional, in which 'A' substitutes for 'B', where 'A' and 'B' have some natural or
logical interrelationship; and analogical, in which 'C' is to 'D' as 'E' is to 'F', and the relationship between 'E' and 'F' is analogous to the relationship between 'C' and 'D' (Averroes 61). Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, recognised that metaphors function as concrete analogies to help the understanding of complex abstractions: "Man cannot understand without images", Aquinas wrote (qtd. in Hughes, Heart xv), a contention particularly relevant to Plath's use of allusive metaphors and imagery. Aquinas asserted that "the very hiding of truth in figures is useful" (Aquinas 182), as seen in his example that involves a metaphor of the body (Aquinas 183-184):

... by words things are signified properly and figuratively. Nor is the figure itself, but that which is figured, the literal sense. When Scripture speaks of God's arm, the literal sense is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member, namely, operative power.

Classical theories of metaphor have been extended by later theorists. Influential literary critic I. A. Richards (59-93) highlighted "tenor" and "vehicle" as basic components of metaphor, terms originally used by eighteenth century Scottish rhetoricians Hugh Blair (1718-1800) and George Campbell (1719-1796) (Friedman, Tenor 1421). Richards, in 1936, proposed that a metaphor established "co-operation" between its main subject or underlying idea ("tenor") and the word or phrase ("vehicle") that appeared anomalous and transferred its qualities and attributes to the tenor. He argued: "co-presence of the vehicle and tenor results in a meaning (clearly distinguished from the tenor) that is not obtainable without their interaction ... a meaning of more varied powers than can be ascribed to either" (67). This is a key aspect of metaphor. Richards believed that a metaphor was "borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts. Thought is metaphoric" (63), a concept later supported by linguists Michael Reddy (170) and George Lakoff (244-245).

Two lines in Plath's 1961 poem "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." illustrate these points. "The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful." [5] contains two substitutional metaphors. The first, "scalded sheet" is a figure of speech for sterile surgical drapes used to cover a patient's body that is outside the operative field. "Sheet", the tenor, is the literal word for a large linen drape. "Scalded", the vehicle, denotes being burned by hot
liquid or steam, and is a metaphoric substitution for autoclaving \(^2\) (Hugo 10). There are two conceptual domains ("scalded" and "sheet"), one being understood in terms of the other. The metaphor adds appeal and interest to the operative scene.

The second substitutional metaphor is "The scalded sheet is a snowfield" [5]. "Scalded sheet" is now the tenor to which the attributes of the vehicle, "snowfield," are transferred. The metaphor suggests that sterilised surgical drapes resemble the pristine whiteness of a blanket of snow, emphasising the cleanliness of a surgical operation. Also, the metaphor leads the reader to imagine the patient as inanimate beneath snow; allusions to stillness, freezing or death are supported by descriptors "frozen" and "peaceful". In each metaphor, new meanings have been obtained, in addition to the startling effect of Plath's oxymoronic juxtaposition of "scalded sheet" and "snowfield". Plath's two metaphors in one phrase is what Richards (67-69) called "mounting metaphor on metaphor".

An analogical metaphor appears in line 21: "blood is a sunset". Only two of the four terms are present, 'C' and 'E'; 'D' and 'F' must be inferred. The metaphor suggests a multiplicity of meanings depending on the construct inserted by the reader. For example, the construct "blood ('C') is to colour ('D') as sunset ('E') is to beauty ('F')" conjures the intensity of red blood. Alternatively, "blood is to body as sunset is to approaching darkness" suggests the negative energies of releasing blood, perhaps recalling Plath's self-harm by cutting (Section 3.1.2.). Thirdly, "blood is to bleeding as sunset is to the end of day" associates bleeding with death. And so on. These "hypothetical commonalities," as linguist Max Black (31-35) called relationships between tenor and vehicle, do not occur naturally or logically, but they are all equally present. The luxury of metaphor is its multitude of potential meanings.

Richards argued that metaphors could be understood in a number of ways by extracting meaning from each of their component parts: tenor, vehicle, their relationship, and the direction in which the tenor plus vehicle took the reader. When tenor and vehicle are linguistically remote, the resulting tension increases the vividness and power of metaphor (Richards 84-86). I contend that Plath was an expert in the creation of dramatic tension by her use of metaphors: for example, her description of bees as "a box of maniacs" [23] in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" is a brilliant image for

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\(^2\) Sterilisation by autoclaving in the mid-twentieth century involved placing items for fifteen minutes in high pressure, superheated steam at 121\(^0\) C in an autoclave, an adapted oven invented in 1881 by French microbiologist Charles Chamberland.
the busyness and hyperactivity of bees, insects that are highly organised and socially interactive.

A less enthusiastic attitude towards metaphor was expressed by literary critic Cleanth Brooks (Well 1217-1229) who maintained that metaphors were not the real "core-of-meaning" that constituted a poem's essence. Brooks encouraged poets to express meaning in textual rather than figurative language because he believed metaphors could warp the poet's intentions, thereby distracting readers from the truth. Half a century later, linguist Michael Reddy (164-188), then of Columbia University, similarly warned that metaphors could be misleading if they ignored their audience's knowledge and experiences. These points are well made and pertinent to Plath's more outrageous and confused metaphors of Nazism in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", in which she attempted to compare her own mental suffering with that of Holocaust victims, and for which she was roundly criticised (Section 3.3.7.).

In contrast to Brooks, Russian philologist and theorist Roman Jakobson (1153-1154), in 1956, acknowledged the primacy of metaphor in poetry, especially in Romantic and Symbolic poetry. Jakobson (1152-1156) argued that metaphor was a trope of resemblance or similarity between two conceptual domains and was quite distinct from metonymy, a trope of contiguity based on substituting a symbol for something symbolised within a single domain. Jakobson associated metonymy more with prose and Realist poetry. He believed that similarity successfully connected tenor and vehicle in metaphor, as opposed to Richards' enthusiasm for establishing a tense relation between disparate tenors and vehicles.

Jakobson's identification of styles and functions of language was widely influential (Martin, Metonymy 877). His metaphor/metonymy opposition highlighted the place of metonymy in poetry. An example of Plath's use of metonymy is the substitution of parts of the body for the function associated with them: she used the hand as a metonym for having ownership and being overwhelmed in "The Courage of Shutting-Up" — "He has seen too much death, his hands are full of it" [15]. Similarly, the head is a metonym for fevered thought in "Fever 103" — "My head a moon / Of Japanese paper" [37-38].

Continuing evolution of metaphor theory contributed to the understanding of metaphor in the mid-twentieth century when Plath wrote her poetry. More recently, the role of neuro-linguistics has been emphasised. Reddy postulated that the locus of metaphor is primarily in thought or one's "internal conceptual or emotional material"
(169), and argued that metaphor was a major part of the way we conceptualise the
world, language functioning simply as a conduit between speaker and recipient (164-
188). Metaphor is not merely something at adorns thought but is, substantively, thought
itself (Macfarlane 33). George Lakoff took this concept further by arguing that, rather
than being rooted in verbal expression, "metaphors are mappings across conceptual
domains ... grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge" (245), a
concept that has implications for all cognitive sciences.

Systems of metaphor are seen currently as central to our understanding of
experience and the ways we act on that understanding. Poetic metaphor is an extension
of conventional systems of metaphorical thought (Lakoff 246). Metaphors constructed
from bodily experience may reveal universal conceptual patterns (Martin, *Metaphor*
868). Thus for Plath, metaphors, and specifically metaphors of the body, were more
than a means of adding colour and aesthetics to her poetry. By using metaphors, Plath
could not only express her experiences, but she could also acquire an understanding of
her world, her body, and her psychological self – her "conceptual domains". Through
poetry, she was able to develop metaphoric strategies with which to attempt resolution
her emotional and psychological problems.

### 3.3.4. Distinguishing Metaphoric from Literal Writing

A continuum exists between frankly literal and frankly metaphoric language, to the
extent that some critics consider there to be no clear separation between the two
(Martin, *Metaphor* 868). Where along this spectrum readers position a word or phrase is
contingent upon how they cognitively stretch its semantic boundaries. At one extreme, a
word or phrase is taken as literal when it means what it states and nothing else. At the
other extreme, if, in accepted linguistic usage, the thing expressed means something
else, then the word or phrase is figurative (Barfield 51). Richards (80) maintained that if
tenor and vehicle "co-operated in a unified meaning" then the language was literal; if at
least two "co-operating uses" could be identified, usage was metaphoric.

Words or phrases positioned somewhere between the two ends of the spectrum
are more difficult to identify as metaphoric or literal. A clear-cut boundary may not
exist. Take, for example, Plath's use of "blue":

1. blue garments – "The Moon and the Yew Tree" [18]
2. blue sky – "Two Views of Withens" [17]
3. blue pallor – "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest" [14]
4. blue dreams – "Burning the Letters" [40]
6. blue hour – "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" [10]

The adjective moves progressively from the literal (example 1), increasing its connotative weight until it becomes solely metaphoric (example 6). The distinction between literal and metaphoric language is clear only at each end of the spectrum.

A word or phrase may work well in a literal sense but simultaneously have additional meanings – examples 1 and 2 could be read literally or metaphorically. Richards (79-80) maintained a word (the vehicle) "may support many different metaphors, may serve to focus into one meaning many different meanings". Examples 3 and 4 illustrate this: one's pallor is literally blue when one is hypoxic and cyanosed, or pallor may be metaphorically blue if one is melancholic; dreams may be recalled in which the predominant colour is blue, or the subjective experience of the dreams is sadness. When read literally, a single limited meaning is presented; when read metaphorically, meaning is extended to encompass additional concepts not offered by literal interpretation. It should be noted that, as one of the most significant features of poetic style, metaphors are assumed to be present in poetry by readers eager to interpret and dismantle them to "find out what the poem really means" (Martin, Metaphor 864).

3.3.5. Interpreting Metaphors

By interpreting metaphors, readers may find meanings that are not predetermined by language, logic or experience (Martin, Metaphor 863). When the reader becomes aware that the conventional meaning of a word or phrase is at variance with its literary context, a metaphor is assumed to be present. The reader progresses heuristically through denotations and connotations of the word or phrase to "unravel the riddle" (Black 32) and interprets perceptual and functional features of meanings in a general or gist sense. Psychologist and neuroscientist Valerie Reyna showed in a series of elegant psychological experiments that when imagery is remembered, the gist of the verbatim statement is stored (Reyna 39-57). Although a metaphor may not have been encountered previously, its meaning can be apprehended because it cues memory for the gist of what is presented (Reyna 43).
Recollected gist acts as a bridge between literal and metaphoric meanings, and helps the reader through the labyrinth of multiple meanings to arrive at several possibilities of meaning that are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Reyna 51). Each possibility varies in contextual and cultural strength and relevance. The reader strives to be sensitive to the poet's intentional clues (Katz 3-4), that is, the same cultural contexts that allow us to make sense of not only tropes but the world at large (Eagleton 109). Gist sense is episodically aligned to context and, if congruent, a specific interpretation is reached as less relevant meanings are filtered out (Black 39). Traits shared by tenor, vehicle and context usually indicate the implied meaning. New or emergent metaphors may not be understood through this process if tenor and vehicle exhibit little correspondence. This leads to reappraisal of gist sense and traits, from which unanticipated meanings become apparent (Martin, Metaphor 869).

Such heuristic interpretation may require some attention to the particular circumstances of the metaphor (Black 29). Interpretation of Plath's metaphors are aided by, but not dependent upon, specific knowledge of her circumstances – her familial, social and cultural contexts; her psychological illness; contemporary poetic influences and their structures; contexts of individual poems; and the settings of metaphors within poems. This is where Plath's biography becomes relevant. She writes under a mask of metaphors and codes to disguise herself so that she can be positioned at the centre of her poetic dramas and torments. At times we need her biography to recognise how she has transformed her history into "surreal parables" (Kirsch 246). The comment of James Fernandez (19), former Professor of Anthropology, University of Chicago, is pertinent: "symbols are generated out of a need, whether a life wish or a death wish, but there is no real interpretation that is not situational and strategic." To have a chance of obtaining insights into what Plath expressed in her poetry, the contexts of her metaphors are highly relevant.

3.3.6. The Contributions of Metaphor to Plath's Poetry

I contend that Plath had a good understanding of figurative language. She studied honours level English at Smith College, Massachusetts, and was a Fulbright scholar at Cambridge University, where her subjects included History of English Literary Criticism, The Essay, and Criticism and Composition. She was on the editorial staff of Smith Review and the Cambridge University weekly, Varsity. Plath taught first-year English in 1957-58 at Smith College, where she was "a brilliant teacher" (Stevenson
My argument here is that Plath was well educated in the theory and practice of English writing and understood the contribution that figurative language could make to writing.

Plath's usage of figurative language and metaphor in poetry enabled her to write allusively and vividly about her life, relationships and her mental states. According to Plath biographer Andrew Wilson (239), metaphors were "central to every aspect of her life." Axelrod (Wound 147) went so far as to say that each time the metaphor making process subsided (such as when Plath was depressed and stopped writing) "life itself waned, pain increased, and the desperately scattered and fragmentary author could renew her quest for a never achieved wholeness only by resuming the metaphor-making process."

Plath's enthusiasm for metaphor was evident in a letter to her brother, Warren, in 1957: "How I long to write on my own again! When I'm describing Henry James' use of metaphor to make emotional states vivid and concrete, I'm dying to be making up my own metaphors" (LH 330). The vital power of metaphor is revealed in Plath's *Juvenilia* sonnet "A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem", a response to Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter":

My native sleight-of-hand is wearing out:  
mad hatter's hat yields no new metaphor,  
the jabberwock will not translate his songs:  
it's time to vanish like the cheshire cat  
alone to that authentic island where  
cabbages are cabbages; kings: kings.  

Reference to vanishing to "that authentic island" suggests that either it was time for her to return to the real world as opposed to the fantasies of a metaphoric world, or she desired to escape into a world of fantasy or metaphor perhaps, away from her abject real world where she will vanish or cease to exist. In later poems, Plath's envisaged escape was into death.

I contend that Plath's figurative language made very significant contributions to her poetry. Limitations of space allow me to illustrate these contributions with only a few examples. Firstly, I assert that metaphors contributed enormously to the aesthetic achievement of Plath's poetry. They fuelled her poetry. Her numerous metaphors were
graphic, ingenious and distinctive. Friedrich Nietzsche (767) maintained humans translate experiences into metaphors that are individual and unique, and certainly Plath was a master of this. Two examples serve here. The creative acts of writing and producing children are figuratively interchanged in "You're" (February 1960) and "Stillborn" (July 1960), two poems that reveal Plath's cyclical elation and depression. Written three months before the birth of her first child, Frieda, "You're" is a light-hearted metaphorical address to the child in her womb. Plath is clearly in charge of the process of gestation as well as the bubbly metaphors and similes that are the poem. The mood of "Stillborn", written after three months of motherhood, is dour and uses metaphors of stillbirth for failed poems. The previous relationship of maternal and poetic creativity is doomed, and the poem relies entirely on metaphoric constructs that are imaginative, bleak and menacing.

Another wonderfully figurative passage comes from Plath's 1961 poem "Parliament Hill Fields": "Southward, over Kentish Town, an ashen smudge / Swaddles roof and tree. / It could be a snowfield or a cloudbank." [21-23]. Her imagery is beautifully delivered, precise and perfectly accurate, for that was exactly the sky above Kentish Town on the dull morning that I walked on Hampstead Heath in the Spring of 2014.

Secondly, metaphors allowed Plath to write allusively about subjects that were taboo or unsuitable for public discussion. For example, Plath wrote about a sexual encounter in "The Queen's Complaint", her sixth poem after meeting Hughes: "Her dainty aces he ramped through / And used her gentle doves with manners rude" [6-7]. Figurative language allowed her to be Confessional, to transmute such private events into public images in vital, interesting and distinctive ways. Under the cover of metaphor, Plath was able to write about "peculiar, private and taboo subjects ... I would say everything should be able to come into a poem" (Plath, Interview).

Thirdly, Owen Barfield (48-63) pointed out that metaphors were used when literal language could not adequately describe concepts and, not surprisingly, Plath resorted to metaphors to describe her feelings or their intensity that would have been rendered reductive, prolix or pejorative by literal language. Plath wrote: "And so it is with my leaning toward allegories, similes and metaphors, I suddenly find a vehicle to express a few of the many disturbing thoughts which have been with me" (UJ 75). For instance, Plath wrote "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" in July 1962 after a telephone call alerted her to Hughes's affair with Assia Wevill (Bate 188). After the call,
Plath had a violent row with Hughes, ripping the telephone from the wall (Stevenson 251). In the poem Plath personified the telephone as an instrument with tentacles [11-12], a graphic metaphor full of menace. She called the telephone "muck funnel", the source of mud-like words and instrument of illicit verbal intercourse (Van Dyne, Revising 52). The rhyme of "muck" with "fuck", originally a fourteenth century English word for sexual intercourse (Booth 99-102), brings the phrase "muck funnel" close to contemporary uses of "fuck" as an expression of infuriation or abuse. If "funnel" connotes the vagina, "muck funnel" is a metaphoric reference to Hughes and Wevill's illicit and, for Plath, grubby sexual affair. "Funnel" also signified depletion or loss for Plath (Gill 98-99): in "Parliament Hill Fields" the schoolchildren's "shrill gravelly gossip's funneled off. / Now silence after silence offers itself" [18-19]; and in "Wuthering Heights" the wind tried to "funnel my heat away" [15].

My contention is not that thoughts and feelings cannot be described in literal language, but that literal language cannot express the same passion and immediacy as metaphor. In 1873 Nietzsche (768) pointed to the power of metaphors:

Something becomes possible in the realm of these schema which could never be achieved in the realm of those sensuous first impressions, namely ... the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, definitions of borders, which now confronts the other, sensuously perceived world as something firmer, more general, more familiar, more human and hence as something regulatory and imperative.

A literal description of Plath's anger would render the content of "Words heard" prosaic, cumbersome and dull, to the extent that it could cease to be a poem. Because of the finite nature of the linguistic repertoire in naming experiences (Nietzsche 767; Ortony 49), metaphor becomes an essential vehicle for poetic expression.

The point here is that metaphor provided Plath with a mean of expressing her state of mind. Neil Friedman, Professor of English at New York University, maintained that patterns, interpretations and cognitive aspects of poetic imagery, reveal something of the poet's imagination, directions of thought, and experiences (Friedman, Imagery 560-565). Similarly, Caroline Spurgeon (200-202), formerly Professor of English Literature at London University, argued, on the basis of a ten-year study of many
thousands of Shakespeare's poetic images, that patterns of imagery inform us about poets themselves. Spurgeon asserted that a poet's unique patterns and repetitions of imagery reflected personal experiences and temperament, and analysis of the tone and atmosphere of imagery provided clues to the writer's moods and personality. I contend that Plath's emotional experiences were expressed through her imagery, especially her body metaphors, and that her figurative language provides insights into her emotional states.

3.3.7. Critical Responses to Plath's Metaphors

Plath’s employment of metaphors divided her critics. Poet John Nims (Ariel 47-48) considered Plath "more brilliant at metaphor than others popularly grouped with her as confessional poets ... almost all of the metaphors are on target ... [Plath] shows a total control of the figures she uses." Nims (Art 139) believed Plath made a "conscientious commitment to her images". Adam Kirsch (246) praised Plath's skill in using metaphor: "instead of simply reciting her history, Plath ferociously transforms it into surreal parables". Kirsch (239) applauded Plath's technique of metaphorically transforming living things into inanimate objects. Anne Stevenson recognised Plath's ability to turn everyday objects into powerful images – she was "mistress of her imagery" (210). Australian poet Peter Porter (47) commented in 1984 that Plath "sets an elaborate metaphorical machine in motion". Nancy Steiner (19-20), Plath's classmate in 1955, remarked on how metaphor allowed Plath to vent her psychological states:

In her work, ugly, distorted worlds exploded and erupted in metaphoric profusion ... Sylvia constructed images as an engineer designs a bridge – with painstaking, almost mathematical attention to every detail ... Sometimes she chose words with disquieting connotations for their shock value. Often, however, her poetry reflected the turbulent process that was taking place beneath her placid exterior. At her core, Sylvia experienced a welter of raging emotions and violent impulses.

Other critics condemned Plath's figurative language. The poet Marianne Moore disliked Plath's early work, and criticised her emblematic images of stones, skulls, snakes and bottled foetuses (Stevenson 134), imagery for which Plath later became famous. Deborah Nelson (26), Professor of English at Chicago University, asserted that
Plath set about collecting gruesome, violent and traumatic images with which to express her own personal misery. It is, of course, these very images that bring such monstrous power to Plath's poetry.

British poet Thomas Blackburn (1916-1977) wrote in 1960: "Her imagery tends to get out of hand, so that the poem becomes not a single experience but a series of intriguing 'literary gems'" (Blackburn 1016). The literary critic Helen Vendler (Crossing 48) viewed Plath as "an undeniable intellect [who] allegorises the issues before they are allowed expression ... [with] a falseness to the wellsprings of life from which metaphors are drawn." Canadian literary scholar and writer Hugh Kenner (42) felt that Plath's metaphors constituted a "stream of repulsions". Poet and academic Mary Lynn Broe (25) wrote: "the chief fault of the early poetry is metaphoric overstatement".

Christina Britzolakis was particularly severe on Plath. While admitting Plath's metaphors were vivid and ingenious, Britzolakis considered them staged, self-conscious, rhetorically overreaching, and examples of manipulative sensationalism. She found Plath "guilty of metaphoric excess ... irresponsibly exploiting the power of analogy" (Britzolakis, Ariel 108). Britzolakis (Theatre 160) thought Plath's imagery was reminiscent of the "overly luxuriant, vulgarly ornamental and exhibitionistic" poetic style of Keats, and that it expressed "rhetorical arrogance, a hubristic impulse to transform the world in one's own image" (Theatre 162).

Britzolakis has misread this aspect of Plath's work in my view. Plath's "arrogance" is the speaker's intense presence in the poetry, a feature of all Confessional poetry. Plath's metaphors were mechanisms with which to allusively present deeply personal psychological experiences, not attempts to change the world to her own image – it was not imagery of herself she wanted to change but her actual self, as her journals make clear. These criticisms of Plath's use of metaphor may be related in part to Britzolakis's dim view of metaphor in general – ironically creating her own metaphor, Britzolakis opined that "metaphor is invested with an authority that is unstable, illusionistic, and endangered. Its substitutive structure as a bid for verbal power is laid bare, foregrounding its extravagance or fictionality" (Theatre 162).

Jacqueline Rose, Plath biographer and Professor of Humanities at London University, criticised Plath for inappropriately expropriating metaphors. Rose (205-207) and others – Richard Blessing (65-67), Seamus Heaney (144), Irving Howe (Disagreement 90), Hugh Kenner (43), Marjorie Perloff (14-15), Leon Wieseltier (20) – were incensed by metaphoric allusions in Plath's 1962 poems "Daddy" and "Lady
Lazarus" to her suffering being akin to that of Jews in the Holocaust and Nazi concentration camps; they claimed these poems trivialised the Holocaust and gave Plath an agency to which she was not entitled.

3.3.8. Metaphors of the Body

Physiological connections between the body and emotions have been recognised for centuries and, not surprisingly, the living body, with all its complexity of physical and emotional components, is a fertile source of imagery. Interdependence of the physical body and mental activity is a well-accepted tenet of psychoanalytic theory. Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung (Seminars 475) believed: "The body is merely the visibility of the soul, the psyche, and the psyche is the psychological experience of the body, so it is really one and the same thing." Implicit in the expression or projection of emotion through physical behaviour is the idea that the emotion will subside, at least temporarily, once expressed, and allow the body and mind to return to a more euthymic state (Rosaldo 143). Transmuting emotion into a physical construct goes some way to destabilise the strength of the emotion and to reduce its intensity – a safety valve to some extent.

Imagery of the body ranges from religious sanctity to acts of degradation. The physical body takes us, in one form or another, from before birth until after death, and is unique to the individual it contains. The body is at once strong but also fragile, beautiful at times, ugly at others. It is vulnerable and can be injured easily. It can heal and repair itself, and recover from many disorders and injuries. The body can be despoiled both mentally and physically. Some aspects of the human body provoke fear, disgust and abjection – moral taint, death and physical decay, for example. At the same time, our relationship with our bodies is one of intimacy, whether positive or negative, joyful or sorrowful, as I have intimated in Chapter 2. In part, we are our body. All readers can relate to these characteristics. The body is, therefore, an ideal vehicle for metaphoric expression of themes that involve the physical or psychological make-up of the body, such as fragility, vulnerability, hurt, healing, and self-disgust. It is not surprising that Plath, as a Confessional poet, should enquire into such subjects figuratively and to strategically engage allusive images of the body, often injured or in pieces, to record and encode her personal experiences.

The mind/body relationship allows powerful symbolism to be centred in different parts of the body, because each body part has a differentiated relation to the
body as a whole. Symbolism of blood, for example, is quite distinct from that of the hand. Thus, individual body parts become "concentrated sites where meaning is invested and stabilised" (Hillman and Mazzio xii). Wholeness of the human body invokes organic and psychic cohesion and integration, whereas the body in bits and pieces symbolises dislocation and loss of coherence (Lacan 164). Such specificity creates "a remarkable density of implication" (Starobinski 353) in particular body parts and, I contend, reinforces for the writer continued processing of different psychological events through metaphors of the different parts of the body.

I argue that Plath's images of the body were an aperture into invisible experiences and opened avenues of significance that were not available through other means. The body provided the most profound opportunity, and was the controlling metaphor, for expression of much of the essential meaning of Plath's poetry. Plath exploited the affinity between poetry and the body.

The body itself is obviously not the same as an image of the body. It cannot be contained or restrained by language and representations. But Plath was a poet, wearing "the mad hatter's hat" ("Sorcerer" [10]) to produce a multitude of metaphors. My contention is that body imagery stood in lieu of the body for Plath. She could not, as Britzolakis suggested that she wanted to do (Theatre 162), transform the world to her own desire, but she could transform herself through imagery. She could manipulate body imagery and, with it, attempt to change her psychological positions of vulnerability, fragility, hurt and self-disgust, and thereby achieve healing and renewal, metaphorically at least. I examine how Plath did this in Chapter 5.

3.3.9. Conclusion
The understanding of metaphor in Western poetics has continued to evolve in nuance and emphasis. A successful metaphor transfers novel attributes to a concept with well-established attributes, thereby producing a new appreciation of the original concept along with the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretations. I have argued Plath was well positioned to exploit this figure of speech, which she did frequently and enthusiastically in her poetry. Her genius lay in an ability to transcribe life experiences into metaphors, and to convey and aestheticise in poetry the desperate moments of her life and the erratic path of her emotions. I contend that metaphors made enormous contributions to Plath's poetry: they powered her poetry and rendered it artistically pleasing, allowed her to externalise the quality and intensity of her emotions, and to
encode and write allusively about private and taboo subjects. I also contend that
metaphors of the body were an ideal tool with which Plath could express intimate
emotions and personal experiences. Plath did indeed have a commitment to metaphor
which, to paraphrase Cleanth Brooks, made her poetic kite fly, albeit turbulently,
through the crazy wind of her existence.
3.4. Factors of Influence in Plath's Use of the Body as a Trope

_The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects._

—-from _The Second Sex_, Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

3.4.1. Introduction
I argue in this section that Plath's cultural context, long-standing interest in the body, innate sexuality and the hypersexuality frequently associated with bipolar hypomania, the rise of feminist thought, and previous and contemporaneous feminist poetry drew her attention to the dynamic of the human body, and may have led her to view the female and male human body as a valuable resource for imagery and metaphors.

3.4.2. Cultural Influences
My first point is that the social environment in which Plath grew up was formative in her use of body imagery in her poetry. The long-held tenet of upper-middle class New England propriety of the 1940-50s was that femininity, marriage and motherhood should be the focus of women's lives in order for them to feel happy and fulfilled (Anderson, Karen 60, 177; Friedan 44). During the Second World War, traditional gender distinctions between working males and stay-at-home females were challenged and disrupted, as women entered the workforce to take the places of men sent to war (Dijkstra 291). A cultural dichotomy arose after the War. On one hand, those upholding the traditional role of woman as wife, homemaker and child-bearer were suspicious of career women and their non-dependence on men, and were against social changes leading to more liberal sexual behaviour, wider acceptance of contraception, and increased attention on sexuality (Davis and West 317; Friedan 40). Unmarried career women were seen as "dangerous, menacing man-imitators" (Van Dyne, _Revising_ 69).

On the other hand, the media and popular culture had a new and unbridled preoccupation with the female body, and women's physical attributes and appearance – women needed to exhibit vulnerable sexuality (D'Emilio and Freedman 300-325; Van Dyne _Revising_ 71). Entrepreneurs such as Hugh Hefner, who first published _Playboy_ in

According to Lois Banner (285), former Professor of History at the University of Southern California, the 1950s taste for short skirts, narrow waistlines and voluptuous breasts allowed sexual exploitation of women within an atmosphere of Victorian repression. Rather than being rebuked, sexualised women were applauded by popular culture for their extravagant sexual appeal. Female sexualisation became pervasive throughout North American contemporary literature, magazines, films, fashions and advertisements. However, it brought objectification rather than autonomy and self-realisation for many women (Davis and West 277) – the American feminist and activist Betty Friedan (29) wrote in 1963: "We have made woman a sex creature".

My assertion here is that the sexualised attention given to the evolving role of women in society increased the focus on the female body and may have contributed to alerting Plath to her physicality and sexuality; and that this constant emphasis on the body is reflected in her use of body imagery in her poetry.

### 3.4.3 Plath's Interest in the Medical Body

Plath's long-held interest in the human body is well documented in her journals and, I maintain, provided a stimulus for her to use imagery of the body in her poetry.

As a seven-year-old, Plath was involved in the care of her father, Otto, while he suffered from diabetes-related peripheral vascular disease (Wilson 30). Otto taught biology at Boston University but mistrusted doctors and misdiagnosed his own diabetes as lung cancer. Plath subsequently referenced her father's illness and death in "Electra on Azalea Path", "The Colossus" and "Daddy".

Plath enthusiastically visited the Harvard Medical School in 1951 in the company of medical students. She witnessed a vaginal birth and episiotomy (Didlake 137), and watched at close quarters dissection of corpses in the dissecting room (Wilson 8-9): "I used to dress up in a white gauze helmet and go round and see babies born and cadavers cut open. This fascinated me" (Plath, *Interview*). Plath reproduced these confronting experiences in "All the Dead Dears" and "Two Views of a Cadaver Room". Plath visited the anatomy museum at Harvard, where she observed preserved malformed human foetuses. Six of her poems ("Perseus", "The Stones", "A Life", "Stillborn", "Burning the Letters", "The Jailer") mention or allude to foetuses. The
visceral image of a preserved foetus – the abject suspended naked for all to view – is one of premature death and unfulfilled potential, and arouses revulsion yet also curiosity. The image is rendered even more powerful when contrasted with a normal foetus developing in utero, in the warmth and security of its mother's womb, as in "You're". In a 1962 interview with Peter Orr of the BBC, Plath (Interview) claimed:

My best friends when I was young were always doctors ... I much prefer doctors, midwives ... what I admire most is the person who masters an area of practical experience ... among my friends I find people who know ... how to cut somebody open and remove an organ. I'm fascinated by this mastery of the practical.

Plath was an intelligent observer and her experience of illness provided a catalogue of perspectives and insights upon which she could draw for poetic imagery of the body. In addition to mental health problems (Section 3.1.), Plath's physical illnesses included measles, tonsillitis, severe chronic sinusitis, pneumonia, a fractured fibula, an infected facial wound following her suicide attempt, a glass splinter in her left eye, and a miscarriage (Stevenson 11, 38, 81, 173; Wagner-Martin, Biography 149). She underwent the operations of tonsillectomy, appendicectomy, and repair of vaginal lacerations after sexual intercourse (Stevenson 54, 204, 206). She gave birth to two children.

Plath worked as a nurse's aide in the wards of Newton-Wellesley Hospital, and as part-time secretary in the psychiatric unit at Massachusetts General Hospital (Didlake 138). References to, and images of, hospitals appear in many poems – for example "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper", "A Life", "The Stones", "Waking in Winter", "Whitsun", "Zoo Keeper's Wife", "Face Lift", "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", "Three Women", "A Birthday Present", "Getting There" and "Death & Co."

Plath's interest in all things medical was frankly morbid at times. In April 1962, a neighbour suffered a stroke. While Hughes immediately gave assistance, Plath (UJ 668) hesitated: "I thought I would stay and wait, and then something in me said, now, you must see this, you have never seen a stroke ... So I went ... I have been waiting for this."
Plath's illnesses and her familiarity with medical environments furnished her with an extensive log of medical and body images. I contend that these experiences contributed to the ease with which she resorted to corporeal metaphors.

### 3.4.4. Plath's Interest in Her Own Body

Plath's journals record her interest in her body and physical appearance. She was very conscious of bodily sensations: "I have a body ... and I am curled up in its neat and miraculous network of muscles bones and nerves ... I am woven into a snug automatic cocoon of flesh-and-blood" (UJ 55). Like many young females, she took delight in being thin (UJ 379) and changed her hair colour in response to social fashions. Plath needed to be physically desirable (UJ 24, 38, 111) and to succeed as a sexual woman. Her journals, letters and novel *The Bell Jar* indicate her interest in female fashion. Clothes mattered to Plath (UJ 379) – while guest editor at *Mademoiselle* fashion magazine in 1953, she took part in a photo-shoot featuring fashionable couples. Plath modelled cocktail dresses and swimwear for Smith College *Varsity* magazine, and sent clippings of the event to her mother with the greeting "With love, from Betty Grable".

Plath catalogued fears of her perceived physical ugliness and being unable to attract men (UJ 23-24, 181, 306), even though she was generally regarded as beautiful (Rollyson 75). Plath was critical of what she regarded as physical imperfections: a "wen [lump] on either cheek" (UJ 66), her "puny being with it's [sic] small inadequate breasts" (UJ 98), scarred imperfect blotchy skin (UJ 328, 457), arms and legs that she believed were too long (UJ 328), a mole under her chin, her nose "podgy as a leaking sausage" (UJ 457), and her physiognomy during menstruation that was "yellow and podgy as cheese" (UJ 485). She envied sparkling eyes, long eyelashes, a tiny waist, white teeth, and "insolent ... versatile breasts, always clamoring for attention ... delightfully plump" (UJ 38).

Plath's approach to her body may appear to be self-conscious when considering the quotes I have taken from *UJ*, but the attention she gave to her body may simply have been a normal product of her time. After all, she lived in a culture of sexualised femininity with an emphasis on fashionable self-representation. My contention is that Plath was consistently aware of her body and that such awareness is in keeping with

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3 Elizabeth "Betty" Grable (1916-1973), American actress, dancer, singer, pin-up girl and celebrated sex symbol.
strategical use of the metaphorical body in her writing. Although Plath was not regarded as a political writer (Peel 16) – with the notable exception of poems such as "Daddy" and "Mary's Song" – Plath was deeply concerned with sexual politics, as we see in the poems that I discuss in Section 5.2.

3.4.5. Plath's Sexuality and the Effect of Hypomania

Plath's sexual energy, erotic fantasies, sexual excitement and frustrations, and what she described as her "potent sex drive" (UJ 111) pervade her journals:

September 1951 (aged 18 years): "I must have a passionate physical relationship with someone" (UJ 99).

May 1952 (aged 19 years): "we poor lustful humans, caged by mores, chained by circumstance, writhe and agonize with the appalling [sic] and demanding fire licking always at our loins" (UJ 104).

March 1953 (aged 20 years): "the good black tides of lust drown and bathe me into relaxed slumbrous quiesence [sic]" (UJ 177).

March 1956 (aged 23 years): "I have powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative, or they turn to destruction and waste (e.g. ... making indiscriminate [sic] love)" (UJ 232-233).

March 1958 (aged 25 years): "I began to go pleasantly erotic, feeling my body compact and sinewy, feeling like seducing a hundred men" (UJ 353).

Several critics have judged Plath as unusually sexually active within the context of her contemporary culture. Jonathan Bate (103-104), Professor of English Literature at Oxford University and an unauthorised biographer of Hughes, claimed Plath was "sexually precocious and unusually adventurous for a Fifties girl". Bate listed several affairs Plath had at Smith and Cambridge between 1950 and 1956, aged eighteen to twenty-four, before she married Hughes. Stevenson (101) described Plath as "a sexually
rapacious man-chaser" before Hughes. Plath was haunted by thoughts of boys, sex and sexual fantasies, and had a very powerful sex drive, according to Paul Alexander (89, 103), another Plath biographer. Plath's journal entries were seen as "one long erotic fidget" by biographer Diane Middlebrook (*Her Husband* 22):

in Plath the writer, lust is a stimulus to writing, and as Hughes would see, when he read her journal many years later, the men who could evoke it in February 1956 were easily interchangeable. ... She frankly appraises every man she meets for sexual compatibility.

Even writing about the body was in part a sexual act for Plath, according to Jacqueline Rose (30), who maintained Plath's relation between the body and writing "suggest(s) something in excess of normative sexuality".

Plath's biographers contribute to the "fantasia about Sylvia Plath" (*Hughes Letter*) in claiming that she was highly sexualised. Her surviving journals indicate that she frequently dated men, but there is little evidence for assertions of sexual hyperactivity. Plath's sexual behaviour must be seen in the context of her contemporary cultural norms, norms that were investigated by Alfred Kinsey and colleagues at the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University. Kinsey's renowned study, published as *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in September 1953, surveyed 5,940 white, "middle class and upper social level" female students at north-eastern American colleges between 1938 and 1949. Kinsey found that in females twenty-five years of age or younger pre-marital petting, or non-coital erotic physical contact, was almost universal (Kinsey 267), One-third had had pre-marital sexual intercourse. The average frequency of intercourse was once in three weeks in females over twenty years of age (Kinsey 285-290); and 19% of females who were married by the age of twenty-five had had six or more sexual partners (Kinsey 337). The "Kinsey Report" was met with strong responses, ranging from it being considered a valuable sociological document, to religious and moral outrage (Geddes 243). The importance of Kinsey's work for the present study is that it tells us Plath's suggested hypersexuality may have been typical of her fellow female students, and may say more about the sexual mores of her biographers than about those of Plath herself.

My argument here is that, regardless of how sexually active she was, Plath's bipolarity may have had an impact on her sexual behaviour, a possibility ignored by her
critics. We know that mood elevation, increased sensitivity and sociability, hyper-sexuality and heightened sexual intensity are characteristics of the hypomania of bipolar II disorder (APA 123-154) (Section 3.1.2.). Jamison and colleagues (Clouds 198-202) found "somewhat" or "very much" increased sexual intensity in twelve of twenty women (60%) with bipolar II disorder during periods of hypomania; eight women (40%) felt that the heightened sexuality was long lasting or relatively permanent. Increases in sociability also were recorded by fifteen of the women (75%) in the study. My contention is that Plath's cyclical hypomania is likely to have brought heightened awareness of her innate sexuality, and that such a keen sense of sexuality was a factor of influence leading to widespread references to the female and male human body in her poetry. That hypomania may have increased her sexual activity, or induced non-normative sexual behaviours, is not my contention.

3.4.6. Feminist Thought

Early feminism in North America was essentially a political movement that produced the Declaration of Women's Rights in 1848 and culminated in the achievement of female suffrage in 1920 (Norton Theory 1923). By the time Plath was an adolescent and at College (1950), feminism had waned as a cultural force. The new collective consciousness of "second wave" feminism (Firestone 15) did not emerge as a powerful social voice until the mid to late 1960s (Keller and Miller 481-482). However, mass socio-political movements begin as social undercurrents, and it is hard to imagine that the cultural environment and tertiary educational institutions in which Plath lived and worked in the late 1950s did not feel some impact of the early stirrings of feminist thought.

A theoretical manifesto for what was to become the women's movement was provided by Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking The Second Sex in 1949. Initially published in French, this feminist classic examined and criticised the status of "women's lived experience" (Rowbotham xvi) from historical, biological, literary, anthropological, psychoanalytic, political and philosophical perspectives. The Second Sex was translated into English in 1952 by Howard Parshley, an Assistant Professor of Zoology at Smith College, and first published in America a year later while Plath was an undergraduate at Smith (Van Dyne, Revising 185). Plath's journals reveal her strong interest in cultural aspects of gender, but there is no mention of de Beauvoir or her treatise.
Publisher and feminist critic Sandra Dijkstra (291-293) believed that *Second Sex* had little impact in North America in the 1950s, because it was written as a radical philosophical discourse with "French intellectual density", an approach and style not designed to reach the masses. Referring to *The Second Sex* a decade after its publication, American feminist Eleanor Flexner (vii) stated: "At the time there was almost no interest in the past history of women or their current situation ... as an issue the status of women was non-existent." It is worth noting here that Smith College produced Gloria Steinem, the feminist activist who founded in 1972 the American liberal feminist journal *Ms*. Steinem graduated from Smith in 1956, a year after Plath. Also, Betty Friedan, a 1942 Smith graduate, wrote *The Feminine Mystique* which simplified and de-radicalised the basic premises of de Beauvoir's text for a white, middle-class American audience that was more concerned with changing the image of womanhood rather than de-institutionalising it. *Mystique* exposed the "problem with no name", namely the unhappiness of women in 1950s America at being restricted to the role of housewife and mother. It was published eight days after Plath's death, but clearly resonated with issues of American women of that era as it went on to become a best-seller.

Like many women of her time, Plath was conflicted by two competing needs that her society regarded as mutually exclusive – an independent career (*UJ* 108, 452), and motherhood within a fulfilling marriage. Plath's journals present the picture a young woman struggling against the confines of a patriarchal society. Many of her poems (for example, "The Colossus", "The Rabbit Catcher", "The Bee Meeting", "The Applicant", "Daddy") reject the patriarchal tradition in exchange for greater personal freedom and, according to Rose (99), could be the work of a feminist poet or a "caricature of feminism".

Although she rebelled against patriarchal traditions and recognised the pervasive gender-based discrimination and inequality in her society, Plath (*UJ* 99) martyred herself to patriarchal dominance:

I am obligated in a way to my family and to society (damn society anyway) to follow certain absurd and traditional customs – for my own security, they tell me. I must therefore, confine the major part of my life, to one human being of the opposite sex . . . that is a necessity. ... I shall
Feminists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*House* 276), writing in 1994, expressed their disappointment with Plath's submission: "On the brink of an age in which human nature will have forgotten 'he' and 'she,' Plath seems to have acquiesced in a central male modernist imperative." However, with the release of *The Bell Jar* in the United Kingdom in 1963 and United States in 1970, together with increasing public awareness of Plath's life and poetry, Plath was adopted as an icon of the feminist movement. It seems likely that Plath's poetry was influenced to some extent by the Women's Rights movement. Many of Plath's ideas were in keeping with the principles of the yet-to-be formalised feminist movement, and may have fuelled her resentment of male domination expressed so vividly in her poetry.

### 3.4.7. Feminist Poetry and Poetry of the Body

The influence on Plath of feminist poetry and of women who wrote poetry about the body cannot be determined with certainty. However, I suggest that such writing may well have influenced Plath. The first American female poet to write from a distinctly female viewpoint was Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), who found poetic authority in her femininity (Ostriker 27). Jeanine Hensley, editor of the 1967 *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, claimed that Bradstreet's poetry, with its feminist leaning, refuted the dictum of her adopted state of Massachusetts that women were inferior to men and should be subservient to them. Bradstreet questioned her role of only being the carer of the home, her husband and his progeny. The general prejudice against women at the time (Hensley xxx) must have annoyed Bradstreet – in "In Honour of That High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory", she wrote:

Now say, have women worth? Or have they none?  
Or had they some, but with our Queen is't gone?  
Nay Masculines, you have thus taxt us long,  
But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong.  
Let such as say our Sex is void of Reason,  
Know tis a Slander now, but once was Treason.  

[100-105]
Bradstreet's favourite poetic image was the human body, perhaps because, as Adrienne Rich claimed, Bradstreet struggled as a young woman with her "carnall [sic] heart" (Rich, Bradstreet ix). Bradstreet used corporeal images more than any other imagery in her voluminous poetic writings – more than twice as often as images of death and illness, nature, and Biblical images (Stanford 133-134). It is not known if Plath ever read Bradstreet's work, but Plath was of course an avid and knowledgeable reader of poetry.

North America was almost devoid of poetry published by women for over a hundred years after Bradstreet. American female poetry of the nineteenth century focused largely on nature, nobility of platonic love, sorrow of death and consolations of Christian faith. Emily Dickinson was one of the first female poets to take note of and to resist male dominance and to question the institution of marriage (Ostriker 43). Gilbert and Gubar (Madwoman 73-74) asserted that nineteenth-century women writers secretly undermined patriarchal myths and metaphors. Dickinson was one of Plath's "ageing giantesses & poetic godmothers" (UJ 360) and had a seminal influence on her: Plath initially adopted Dickinson's playful imagery and later took up her ambivalent femininity and authoritarian voice. Dickinson often wrote allusively about the body through metaphors, as in "Poem 1377" in which she made reference to female genitalia:

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has
That lawful Orchards mocks—
How luscious lies within the Pod
The Pea that Duty locks—

As if spurred on by Dickinson's example, early twentieth-century poets started writing about the body with increasing enthusiasm and decreasing embarrassment. Poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, Muriel Rukeyser, May Swenson and Gertrude Stein wrote lesbian poetry and often used bodily references to encode lesbian themes (Garber 797; Keller and Miller 481) – Amy Lowell's 1919 poem "The Weather-Cock Points South", for example:

I put your leaves aside,
One by one:
The stiff, broad outer leaves;
The smaller ones,
Pleasant to touch, veined with purple;
The glazed inner leaves.

Another female American poet who enjoyed considerable popularity in the early twentieth century was Elinor Wylie (1885-1928), a poet renowned for her beauty, marriages and sexual relationships, and who wrote sensuous, deeply emotional poetry about the changing fortunes of love. Wylie's work included images of disguise and entrapment, indicating involvement in the feminist tradition of wanting to be free of contemporaneous societal expectations and conventions for women (Stein 444). Louise Bogan, former Poet Laureate to the U.S. Library of Congress, wrote: "Wylie brought to the feminine lyric a mature emotional richness, as well as an added brilliance of craftsmanship ... her work as a whole was far more complex than that of any feminine predecessor" (Bogan 76-77). Plath was a fan of Wylie's poetry: "I love the lyric clarity and purity of Elinor Wylie" (UJ 88), and Wylie's themes of desire for love and escape from a world that wounds a poet's vulnerable sensitivities are recognisable in Plath's poetry.

Amid the prevailing climate of political and social conservatism of the 1940-1950s, women poets began to write openly on themes that would become familiar components of feminist philosophy. The voice of this poetry contained "the promise of a whole new psychic geography" (Rich, Lies 35) – moral certainty, righteousness and denunciation, and a need to write about the female body. Maxine Kumin (Sexton xxxiii) stated in 1999: "before there was a Women's Movement [late 1960s], the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Rich and Sexton." Other poets who laid the groundwork for, or contributed to, American modernist feminist poetry were Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, Isabella Gardner, Maxine Kumin, Amy Lowell – "I am closest to Amy Lowell, in actuality, I think" (Plath, UJ 88) – Millay, Moore, Adrienne Rich, Sexton and Swenson (Keller and Miller 480-484), all of whom were mentioned in Plath's journals (UJ 322, 360, 376, 497) and, presumably, whose works she read. By her own admission, Plath was influenced by the poetry of Bishop and Moore (UJ 516) and Sexton (UJ 475, 477, 480). The extent to which other feminist poets swayed Plath to incorporate the body in her poetry is uncertain. What is clear,
however, is that, firstly, irrespective of what other female poets were writing about the body, Plath elevated body imagery to a new level, to the extent that she is rightly celebrated as the pioneer of body language in women's poetry (Britzolakis, *Theatre* 166; Ostriker 99); and secondly, Plath was a sophisticated and conscientious student of old and new literary traditions, and understood the implications of what it meant to be female within the sphere of the inchoate feminist movement (Gilbert and Gubar, *House* 272).

### 3.4.8. Conclusion

My contention in this Section is that Plath's personal, cultural and intellectual influences encouraged her to use the body metaphorically in her poetry. The extent of these putative influences is uncertain. However, the changing role of women and sexualisation of the female body alerted many women in the North American society in which Plath lived during the 1950s to their physicality and sexuality. Her journals tell us that she was well aware of the mutable nature of these social and cultural behaviours. She was deeply concerned with "the matters of this world", a point she made when reading a selection of her poetry on the BBC in 1961 (Brain 37).

Plath clearly had strong interest in the human body and, in particular, her own body. I maintain that awareness of her sensual body and sexuality was likely to have been heightened by the hypomanic component of her bipolarity. Also, Plath was exposed to the work of many poets, including feminists and females writing about the body. Plath is seen consistently as one of a group of 1950-1960s North American poets who espoused feminist principles, and attempted in her poetry to resist the conventional sexual role society would have imposed upon her. One strategy she used for this was to write about the body in her criticisms of patriarchal influences, as I argue in Chapter 5. The literature reviewed in this section shows clearly that the body was important for Plath. As it was for de Beauvoir, so the body was Plath's "grasp on the world". It gave her poetry a focus and provided an outline and a strategy for her engagement with the world.

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CHAPTER 4

COUNTING PLATH:
THREE STUDIES OF BODY IMAGERY IN PLATH'S POETRY
Chapter 4

Counting Plath: Three Studies of Body Imagery in Plath’s Poetry

Be careful of words,
even the miraculous ones.
For the miraculous we do our best,
sometimes they swarm like insects
and leave not a sting but a kiss.

—from "Words", Anne Sexton (1975)

4.1. Introduction

My preliminary reading of the 224 poems in Plath's CP (excluding the Juvenilia poems) revealed that many made reference to the body. Didlake (135), when reviewing mythological and natural imagery in Plath's poetry in 2009, wrote:

Less-well discussed is her use of poetic imagery derived from illness, from medical environments, and from anatomic pathology. The relative lack of analysis of these medical images, as a group, becomes quite conspicuous when one considers the frequency with which such images occur across the spectrum of her poetry.

Many of Plath's medical images, I found, were images of the body.

The three Research Problems stated in the thesis Introduction can be summarised as, firstly, the absence of any systematic quantitative or qualitative examination of Plath's body references and imagery; secondly, the absence of any comparative assessment of body imagery in the poetry of Plath's contemporary poets; and, thirdly, the absence of any appraisal of possible change in Plath's body imagery over the course of her writing life. The three quantitative studies presented in this chapter seek to go some way towards resolving these areas of ignorance.
4.2. Corporeal References in Plath's Poetry
This study aims to identify the extent of references to the human body and its parts in the 224 poems in Plath's CP, excluding the *Juvenilia* poems.

4.2.1. Method
For each poem, note was made of body references, anatomical terms and vernacular words in the titles, epigraphs written by Plath, and her text that contextually signified the human body, its parts and its fluids, irrespective of literal or metaphorical usage. An inclusive list of terms was drawn up, and checked against anatomical words listed for the 224 poems in *A Concordance to the Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* compiled by Richard Matovich, former librarian and Plath scholar at University of Pennsylvania. Verbs relating to functions of the body and adjectives describing nouns of the body were excluded. Vernacular or "non-anatomical" words were included if they referred to, or symbolised, the body or a body part.

4.2.2. Results
The 224 poems consisted of 7,672 lines of poetry. Two hundred and seven of the 224 poems (92%) contained one or more references to the human body. A total of 1,296 anatomical references were identified (Appendix 1), an overall average of nearly six per poem or 16.89 references per one hundred lines of poetry. Plath's vocabulary of the body consisted of 217 different words. The ten most frequently deployed anatomical terms were: "eye" (75 times), "eyes" (72), "face" (58), "head" (55), "heart" (50), "hands" (46), "body" (43), "blood" (42), "mouth" (40) and "fingers" (34).

4.2.3. Discussion
The study confirms that Plath turned to the body as a source of imagery throughout her poetry. Only seventeen of her 224 poems written between 1956 and 1963 did not contain a reference to or an image of the human body.

Most anatomical references presented little difficulty in identification. However, some words had more than one denotation, and so the context of the word was considered when deciding whether or not it was of anatomical significance. "Nails", for example, appeared three times in *CP*: "You / Who borrowed feathers for your feet, not lead, / Not nails, and a mirror to keep the shaky head / in safe perspective" ("Perseus" [12-15]); "The trees are lopped, the poodles trim, / The laborer's nails pared level" ("The
Death of Myth-Making" [6-7]); and "A knife that can be taken out / To pare nails, / To lever the dirt" ("A Secret" [21-23]). In "Perseus," "nails" has the denotation of metal spikes flattened at one end and therefore was not included in the count of anatomical terms, whereas in "Death" and "Secret" the denotation is of fingernails, and so the word was counted.

A distinction was made between parts of the body that constituted imagery signified by nouns, and parts of the body that were used as adjectives and verbs. For example, Plath used "navel" in three poems: "pretend future's shining fruit / can sprout from the navel of this present waste" ("Tale of a Tub" [39-40]); "Out of this green nest // As out of Eden's navel twist the lines / Of snaky generations:" ("Snakecharmer" [18-20]); "Navel cords, blue-red and lucent, // Shriek from my belly like arrows ..." ("The Other" [18-19]). In the first two poems, "navel" signifies the anatomical umbilicus, and so each was included in the count. "Navel" is adjectival in "Other" in that it describes "cords", meaning umbilical cords, and so "cords" was counted as the anatomical term, not "navel". Adjectives, such as "urinous" ("The stain of the tropics / still urinous on you") in "Eavesdropper" [7-8], were excluded. Verbs relating to the body (for example, "crying", "masturbating") were excluded.

Anatomical terms obviously used in reference to animals were excluded – for example, "teats" in the poem "Sow"; "teeth" ("Rats' teeth gut the city" [15]) in "Owl"; and "noses" and "hands" ("The moles look neutral as the stones. / Their corkscrew noses, their white hands / Uplifted") in "Blue Moles" [14-16].

Injuries to the body, such as a "cut", "contusion" and "wounds", were included because they were conditions of the body that contributed powerfully to body images. Bodily fluids ("blood", "sweat", "tears") were included because they are components or products of the body.

The meanings of vernacular words referring to the body were usually straightforward. For example, "afterbirth" ("Totem" [14]) is colloquial speech for the placenta, and "paps" and "tit" the breast. Other colloquialisms included were "belly", "bellies", "crap", "crotch", "innards" and "privates". "Holes" appeared nine times in CP but the word referred to the body only once, substituting for bodily orifices (ears, eyes, nostrils, mouth) in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.": "As usual there is no face. A lump of Chinese white / With seven holes thumbed in" [7-8]. Other literal or metaphorical usages of "holes" were in "Perseus" (twice), "Mushrooms", "Widow", "Three Women", "
"The Jailer", "Purdah" and "Gigolo", where the word obviously did not refer to the body.

Plath used "hole" in five poems and I deemed that it was a surrogate for a body part in only one, "The Applicant". The speaker is persuading a subordinated male to marry a disenfranchised woman, referred to as "it", by pointing out her advantageous assets:

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort. [36-39]

In the context of the poem, I interpreted "hole" to signify vagina, a word not found in CP.

Plath occasionally conjoined words in novel combinations. Words such as "blood flood" ("The Munich Mannequins" [6]), "blood-hot" and "blood-flush" ("Totem" [22 and 23]), "blood jet" ("Kindness" [18]), "bowel-pulse" ("Words heard, by accident, over the phone" [4]), "eyeholes" ("Brasilia" [3]), "eye-rings" ("The Other" [10]) and "eye-pits" ("A Birthday Present" [6]). The hyphenated words can be classed as neologisms: they are novel, are not vernacular, and do not appear in the 2003 Oxford English Reference Dictionary (OERD). Alert to their meanings and references to the body, these paired words add layers of interest and significance. For example, "blood flood" in "Mannequins" [6] refers to menstrual bleeding, an aspect of fertility. In "Totem", written a few days before Plath's suicide, "blood-hot" [22] and "blood-flush" [23] are representations of death. Each pairing was counted as a single word for the purpose of this study.

D. H. Lawrence's 1917 poem "Rabbit Snared in the Night" (Lawrence, Poems 240-242) contains "blood-jet" [43], the celebrated phrase (unhyphenated in Plath's poem) which concludes "Kindness", one of her last poems: "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it. / You hand me two children, two roses" [18-20]. These lines take a swipe at Hughes: in "Difficulties of a Bridegroom", Hughes's 1963 BBC radio play (Bate 216), a husband kills a rabbit while driving to an illicit liaison, sells the rabbit, and buys two roses for his lover. Plath's "two roses" were her children.
4.3. A Comparative, Quantitative Study of Body Imagery in the Poetry of Plath and Contemporaneous Confessional Poets

The previous study demonstrates that Plath resorted frequently and consistently to the body as a source of imagery. But was her use of the body any different from that of her contemporaries? This study compares the frequency and diversity of Plath's body references with those of her contemporary Confessional poets, and also addresses gender differences in body imagery in the poetry of this time.

4.3.1. Method

Five hundred consecutive lines of poetry from Plath and each of five female and five male contemporary North American poets were read, and the anatomical references recorded. The poets were Margaret Atwood, Maxine Kumin, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell and William D. Snodgrass, all acknowledged as belonging to the Confessional school (Perkins 411, 546-552, 588-590; Kirsch 1-152, 235-270; Norton Poetry 269).

In order to avoid comparing dissimilar works of poetry, I examined lines of poetry from collections published when poets were of similar ages. The age of each poet at the time of publication was calculated by subtracting the year of birth from the year of publication. Also, I aimed to examine poems that were published at much the same time, so that poets were subject to similar literary environments, poetic influences and cultural experiences at the time they published. Dates of publication were used because the times when many of the poems were written could not be established with certainty. Although the collections were selected, individual poems were not "cherry picked" from collections. The eleven poetry collections, published between 1959 and 1966, were:

- Margaret Atwood: The Circle Game. 1966.
- Anne Sexton: Live or Die. 1966.
Reading commenced at the beginning of each section or collection. Titles of poems were included in the line count. Five hundred consecutive lines were read from each poets' work; in most cases, readings stopped partway through a poem after five hundred lines. Colloquial words were accepted if they contextually referred to the body.

Several comparisons were made between female and male poets: age at time of publication, dates of publication, numbers of anatomical references, and numbers of terms used exclusively by either females or males. In order to say that a significant or meaningful difference existed between female and male poets for these factors, statistical tests were applied. In applying the tests, the hypothesis that there was no difference between sets of data from females and males ("null" hypothesis) was tested. To compare the non-paired female and male groups for age at publication, numbers of body terms, and exclusive use of body terms, data were submitted to the Student's unpaired t test at <www.physics.csbsju.edu/stats/t-test.html>. A mean, standard deviation (SD) and value for P were calculated for each data set at the website. To compare the years of publication of collections from female and male poets, data in ranked order were submitted to the Mann–Whitney U test at <www.socscistatistics.com/tests/mannwhitney/default2.aspx>, and a value for P was obtained. P indicates the level of significance of differences between two sets of data. A P value less than 0.05 (P < 0.05) indicated that the difference between the observations from two groups was likely to occur by chance with a frequency of less than one in twenty or 5% (Swinscow and Campbell 62). P < 0.05 was accepted in this study, as is conventional, as signifying that differences between the variables were unlikely to occur by chance and were statistically significant, thereby rejecting the null hypothesis.

4.3.2. Results

(a) Poets' ages and Years of Publication

Plath, at 30 years of age, was the second youngest poet at the time of publication of poems examined in this study (Table 1).
Table 1. Poets, their year of birth, year of publication of their collection examined in this study, and their age at the time of publication of the collection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
<th>Age at publication (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plath</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atwood</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumin</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levertov</td>
<td>1923</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexton</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mean ± 1 SD for female poets</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.3 ± 4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berryman</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginsberg</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarrell</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowell</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snodgrass</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mean ± 1 SD for male poets</td>
<td></td>
<td>42.0 ± 9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female poets were nearly nine years younger on average than male poets at time of publication, but the female–male difference just failed to reach statistical significance (females: 33.3 ± 4.2 (mean ± 1 SD) years versus males: 42.0 ± 9.0 years; \( P = 0.06 \), Student's unpaired t test). The distribution of the years of publication for females and males (1959-1966) was not significantly different (\( U = 10.5, P = 0.23 \), Mann–Whitney \( U \) test).

(b) Anatomical terms
A total of 698 anatomical terms were found in the 5,500 lines of poetry of the eleven poets (Appendices 2 and 3). Plath used 96 anatomical terms, the most of any poet (Table 2). The average number of body terms per one hundred lines of poetry was 13.3 for the six female poets and 11.9 for males, a difference that was not statistically significant (females: 13.3 ± 4.2 versus males: 11.9 ± 3.1; \( P = 0.55 \), Student's unpaired \( t \) test). When Plath was excluded from the female group, the other five female poets used 304 body terms (range 43 – 81) (males 298, range 43 – 84), and the female average was 60.8 anatomical terms or 12.2 body words per hundred lines (Table 2).

The ten anatomical words employed most frequently by the eleven poets were "eyes" (69 times), "eye" (34), "hands" (31), "hand" (28), "face" (26), "heart" (23), "hair" (21), "head" (21), "body" (21) and "mouth" (15). They are all commonly used words referring to the body. Eight of the ten words appear in the list of Plath's ten most frequently used body words (Section 4.2.2.). "Eyes" and "hand" were the only words used by all poets (Appendix 3), and "eyes" was the body word used most frequently by seven poets. The combined anatomical vocabulary of the eleven poets consisted of 169 different anatomical words.

(c) "Exclusive" Anatomical Terms
Each poet used some anatomical terms exclusively in their five hundred lines, that is, she or he was the only poet to use that particular word (Appendix 4). The number of different anatomical terms used exclusively by each poet and the poets' rank order for their use of different anatomical terms are given in Table 3.
Table 2. The number (n) of anatomical terms used by female and male poets, the rank order (R) of each poet's usage, and the number of body words per one hundred lines of poetry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female poets</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male poets</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (R)</td>
<td>Body words per hundred</td>
<td>n (R)</td>
<td>Body words per hundred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>lines</td>
<td>lines</td>
<td>lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plath</td>
<td>96 (1)</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atwood</td>
<td>43 (9=)</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Berryman</td>
<td>43 (9=)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumin</td>
<td>63 (5=)</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>Ginsberg</td>
<td>84 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levertov</td>
<td>43 (9=)</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Jarrell</td>
<td>63 (5=)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>81 (3)</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>Lowell</td>
<td>53 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexton</td>
<td>74 (4)</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>Snodgrass</td>
<td>55 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>400</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>298</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mean ± 1 SD</strong></td>
<td><strong>66.7 ± 21.2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>mean ± 1 SD</strong></td>
<td><strong>59.6 ± 15.4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. The number of different anatomical references (n) used exclusively by each poet and the poet's rank order for their use of different anatomical terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female Poets</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Male Poets</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plath</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atwood</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7=</td>
<td>Berryman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumin</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ginsberg</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levertov</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Jarrell</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lowell</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexton</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Snodgrass</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mean ± 1 SD:</strong></td>
<td><strong>11.5 ± 7.3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>mean ± 1 SD:</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.4 ± 3.0</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female poets, as a group, each used more anatomical words exclusively than their male counterparts, although the difference did not reach statistical significance (females: 11.5 ± 7.3 versus males: 5.4 ± 3.0; P = 0.12, Student's unpaired t test). Plath exclusively used twenty-one different anatomical terms or body parts, more than any other poet. The other five female poets each exclusively used a total of forty-eight terms (mean 9.6) and the males a total of twenty-seven terms (mean 5.4).

(d) "Shared" Terms
Some words were used by several poets. All six female poets contributed to the "female only" list of seventy-four different anatomical terms (Appendix 3, right-hand column, numbers marked "f"), and all male poets contributed to the total of thirty-six "male only" words (Appendix 3, right-hand column, numbers marked "m"). Thus, although female and male poets used similar numbers of anatomical words (female mean: 66.7, male mean: 59.6 – Table 2), female poets employed a considerably greater variety of body words, or greater anatomical vocabulary (that is, different anatomical terms), than their male counterparts (seventy-nine versus thirty-six).

(e) Repetition of anatomical terms
The data were analysed to determine repetition of anatomical terms. Table 4 shows, for each poet, the total number of anatomical terms, the number used once or more, and the anatomical vocabulary. The percentage of terms repeated by each poet was calculated by dividing the "Terms used more than once" by the "Anatomical vocabulary" multiplied by one hundred. Poets were then ranked in order of their percentage repetition. All poets repeated some anatomical terms. Lowell ranked first for least frequently repeating his anatomical vocabulary, only repeating 15% of words. Plath (29%) ranked fourth, equal with Rich. Overall, poets repeated approximately a third of anatomical terms.

4.3.3. Discussion
This study compares Plath's use of anatomical terms with that of a group of her contemporary poets. All poets were North American and regarded as important
Table 4. The total number of anatomical terms, the number of terms used once and more than once, the total anatomical vocabulary, the percentage of repeated terms, and the rank order of each poet for repeated anatomical terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poets</th>
<th>Total of anatomical terms</th>
<th>Terms used once</th>
<th>Terms used more than once</th>
<th>Anatomical vocabulary</th>
<th>% of repeated terms</th>
<th>% Rank order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plath</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>4=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atwood</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumin</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>6=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levertov</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>4=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexton</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>6=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (female)</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean ± 1 SD</td>
<td>63.2 ± 18.4</td>
<td>27.8 ± 10.7</td>
<td>11.8 ± 3.3</td>
<td>39.8 ± 13.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berryman</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginsberg</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarrell</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowell</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snodgrass</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (male)</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean ± 1 SD</td>
<td>59.8 ± 15.3</td>
<td>22.6 ± 8.9</td>
<td>10.8 ± 4.8</td>
<td>33.4 ± 8.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
exponents of the Confessional style in at least some of their work. They were of similar ages to Plath and their poems were published at similar times (Table 1), and so they are an appropriate group to compare with Plath. The style of poetry these poets wrote, their age, and time of publication are unlikely to account for differences in the use of body imagery in the examined poems.

In particular, the study found Plath's poetry to be highly distinctive in that, firstly, it contained anatomical terminology almost one and a half times more frequently than the poetry of her contemporaries (Table 2); secondly, Plath employed a much wider range of anatomical terms than any other poet (Table 3); thirdly, she employed conjoined words unlike any other poet except for Kumin; fourthly, she exclusively employed more different anatomical terms than any other poet (Appendix 4); and fifthly, Plath repeated anatomical terms less often than most poets (Table 4).

Differences between data from female and male poets were compared by two statistical tests. Use of statistical tests is unusual in a Creative Writing thesis. However, this chapter presents quantitative research, that is, numerical assessments of anatomical terminology. Statistical analysis allows numerical quantification which lends authority to any claim of difference or otherwise between sets of data. The Student's unpaired t-test is an appropriate statistical test with which to test the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the means of two non-paired groups when the number of samples or observations is less than thirty (Swinscow and Campbell 62-63). Similarly, the Mann–Whitney U test is an appropriate test for comparison of the rank order of data, (Swinscow and Campbell 102-108), such as the years of publication of the selected collections of poetry.

Several methodological limitations are apparent in this study. Firstly, the study is relatively small – only five hundred lines of poetry from each poet were studied. Selection of only a small part of a poet's work (five hundred lines) runs the risk of a sampling error, that is, selecting poems/lines/words that are not representative of the poet's overall work or style. The focus of the thesis, of course, is Plath's poetry, not Confessional poetry in general, and so I have judged a five hundred limit as adequate given the constraints of the thesis. Secondly, the study followed Ostriker's precedent of using a specified number of lines, rather than words, from each poet's work (Ostriker 258-259). Line length varies considerably in poetry, especially in free-form verse, and so the number of words examined for each poet was different. Thirdly, only ten poets who were leading exponents of the Confessional style when Plath wrote were compared
with Plath. Inclusion of fewer poets could have been open to the criticism that the sample size was too small and therefore the results questionable. Inclusion of more poets would have made the study cumbersome and less focused.

Fourthly, inclusion of colloquial words was necessarily subjective. Six hundred and eighty-five of the 698 terms identified in the 5,500 lines (Appendices 2 and 3) were obvious anatomical references and presented no difficulty in identification. Adjectives (for example, "blear-eyed", "one-eyed", "pot-bellied", "small-headed", "urinous") were excluded because they did not refer contextually to a body part. The colloquialisms "afterbirth", "ass", "backside", "belly", "bosom", "crotch", "crotches", "eyeholes", "eyepits", "guts", "haunches", "holes" and "lap" were accepted because, contextually, they referred to the body. "Ass", for example, a North American slang variant of "arse" (OERD 80), was used by Ginsberg four times and Berryman once (Appendix 2). "Ass" was included as a body reference because each usage referred contextually to the anus, not a donkey or stupid person as in Australian vernacular. Similarly, Sexton's use of "holes" in "Flee on Your Donkey" [73] contextually signified body orifices, and was included.

Context also determined acceptance or otherwise of words with dual denotations. For example, Plath used "mole" in "Eavesdropper": "Mole on my shoulder, / To be scratched absently, / To bleed, if it comes to that" [4-6]. Here, "mole" refers to an irritating skin lesion, part of the body. Kumin used "mole" in the first line of "Five Small Deaths in May" to refer to a small mammal, clearly not a reference to the human body. Plath's reference was included in the anatomical word count, Kumin's was not.

I have noted in Section 4.2.2. Plath's use of conjoined words, a distinctive feature of her poetry. Kumin was the only other poet to conjoin a word: "His eyepits blacken" in "Five Small Deaths in May" [5]. "Eyepits" is an obvious reference to the orbits of the eye.

In a briefly reported study of fifty lines of poetry from each of twenty female poets (including Plath) and twenty male poets, Ostriker (258-259) claimed that females made almost twice as many references to the body as males – 236 versus 127. Ostriker did not state which poems she examined or what contribution each individual poet made to the overall number of anatomical references. She did not present the overall list of anatomical terms. Her body words included references to animals (for example, "all fours", "gills", "scales", "snouts", "udders", "wishbones") and words that are difficult to interpret as relating to the body (for example, "luz-bone", "fro", "jelly", "tongue-bone").
none of which would have been accepted in the present study. Therefore, Ostriker's data makes it hard to claim that female poets use body imagery far more prolifically than male poets. The present study found a statistically non-significant trend towards female poets using more language of the body than males.

4.4. A Quantitative, Longitudinal Study of Body Imagery in Plath's Poetry

The third study seeks to resolve the question of whether Plath's body imagery changed quantitatively during the course of her poetry.

4.4.1. Method

The method was similar to that of the first study (Section 4.2.1.). Note was taken of body references, anatomical terms and vernacular words in the titles, epigraphs written by Plath, and the text of the 224 poems in CP. Body words were listed according to the year in which the poems were written as determined by Hughes (Introduction 13). Verbs and adjectives were excluded. In order to compare the number of body words present in the poetry of each year, the number of body words per one hundred lines of poetry was calculated by dividing the total body word count by the total number of lines of poetry for each year and multiplying the result by one hundred to obtain a percentage.

4.4.2. Results

Table 5 shows, for each year, the numbers of poems and poems with body words, and the percentage of poems with body words. Table 6 shows the numbers of body words, lines of poetry, and body words per hundred lines of poetry for each year. The numbers of poems with body words, body words, and body words per one hundred lines of poetry increased progressively during Plath's poetic career.

As discussed in Section 3.2.5., Plath's poetic style had changed noticeably by the end of 1959. Table 6 reveals that Plath's use of body words increased abruptly between 1959 and 1960. To explore this increase more thoroughly, the list of words was reworked to show Plath's use of anatomical terms in two periods: firstly, her early, "pre-Confessional" poetry from 1956 until late 1959; and secondly, in her poetry of a more Confessional mode ("Confessional") from late 1959 when she wrote "Poem for a Birthday" until her death in 1963 (Table 7).
Table 5. The numbers of poems and poems with body words, and the percentage of poems with body words, for each year in which Plath wrote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Poems</th>
<th>Poems with body words</th>
<th>% of poems with body words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>88.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>95.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>96.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>92.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. The numbers of poems, body words and lines of poetry, and body words per hundred lines of poetry for each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Poems</th>
<th>Body words</th>
<th>Lines of poetry</th>
<th>Body words per hundred lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>1,173</td>
<td>14.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>15.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>13.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>16.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>20.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>20.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>2,562</td>
<td>18.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>18.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>1,296</td>
<td>7,672</td>
<td>16.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7. The numbers of poems and poems with body words, percentage of poems with body words, the numbers of body words and lines of poetry, and body words per hundred lines of poetry in Plath's "pre-Confessional" and "Confessional" periods of writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of poetry</th>
<th>Poems</th>
<th>Poems with body words</th>
<th>Percentage of poems with body words</th>
<th>Number of body words</th>
<th>Number of lines</th>
<th>Body words per hundred lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Confessional</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>3,439</td>
<td>13.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confessional</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>4,233</td>
<td>19.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7 shows that 105 of 118 (88.9%) of Plath's "pre-Confessional" poems employed body words compared with 102 of 106 (96.2%) of her "Confessional" poems. These data were submitted to a Chi squared (\(X^2\)) statistical test (Swinscow and Campbell 78-94) to test the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the distribution of poems with body words between the "pre-Confessional" and "Confessional" groupings. Data were entered at the website <http://www.socscistatistics.com/tests/chisquare/Default2.aspx> as a 2x2 contingency table (Swinscow and Campbell 83). The value for \(X^2\) was calculated to be 4.494 for one degree of freedom (d.f.), and the value for \(P\) was 0.034, indicating that the difference in the distribution of poems with body words between the two groups was statistically significant and the null hypothesis could be rejected.

Plath's "pre-Confessional" poetry contained 13.75 body words per hundred lines and her "Confessional" poetry 19.44 (Table 7), a difference that was highly statistically significant (\(X^2 = 31.27, \text{d.f.} = 1; P <0.001, X^2\) test).

### 4.4.3. Discussion

The study reveals a trend of increasing references to the body in Plath's poetry during her career (Table 6). Furthermore, when her poetry is categorised as "pre-Confessional" and "Confessional" (Table 7), significant differences are found between the two periods for the number of poems containing body images and the number of anatomical references per hundred lines of poetry. These findings are new, original and have not been reported previously.

A statistical test, the Chi squared test, was used to test the distribution of independent observations (that is, poems with body words and body words per hundred lines of poetry) of the two samples ("pre-Confessional" and "Confessional" poetry). The Chi squared test is an appropriate test with which to test the null hypothesis that there is no difference between distributions of these independent variables (Swinscow and Campbell 78). The results obtained from applying the tests confirm conclusively that Plath's references to the body increased significantly during the period of her writing. As discussed in Section 4.3.3., application of a statistical test in this situation gives authority and quantification to the findings of the assessment.

I acknowledge that separation of Plath's poetry into "pre-Confessional" and "Confessional" categories is somewhat indefinite. Although her style altered markedly over the course of her career (Britzolakis, Theatre 5), Plath's poetry did not suddenly
become Confessional at the end of 1959. The transformation to greater subjectivity and evolution of Confessional characteristics occurred over time as she adopted the new emerging style of poetry first espoused by Lowell and others (Section 3.2.5.) and engaged reflexively with the modernist legacy. Yet Hughes recognised a change in Plath's poetry in November 1959 after they had been guests for two months at Yaddo, a writing retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York. There, Plath wrote "Poem for a Birthday", a sequence of seven poems written around the time of her twenty-seventh birthday, "an exercise begun in grimness, turning into a fine, new thing ... Roethke's influence, yet mine ... they seem moving, interesting ..." as Plath (UJ 521) described the sequence. Of "The Stones", the last poem in the sequence, Hughes (Notes 1970 192) wrote:

It is clearly enough the first eruption of the voice that produced Ariel ... the poem where the self, shattered in 1953 [Plath's attempted suicide], suddenly finds itself whole. When she consolidated her hold on the second phase, two years later, she dismissed everything prior to "The Stones" as Juvenilia, produced in the days before she became herself.

"The Stones" has an autobiographical basis, the speaker is positioned deeply within the poem, which is an explicit, "heart-open" and psychologically intense poem and, no doubt, qualifies as Confessional.

The results of this study associate Plath's use of body imagery with her Confessionalism, a conclusion not reported previously. I do not find this association surprising. Confessional poetry, as discussed in Section 3.2.2., is penetratively self-absorbing, and openly acknowledges a laying bare of the poet's own intensely personal and often psychologically painful experiences – it is by nature private and intimate. The body is the ideal vehicle for expression and representation of such deeply personal experiences (Section 3.3.8.). The body and psyche are intimately entwined (Jung 475). We each have a profoundly deep and unique relationship with our own body and, as I have argued in Section 3.4., Plath had acute awareness of the physical body. Her increasing use of the body as a source of imagery is, I conclude, in keeping with her growing psychological distress as expressed in her Confessional style of poetry.
4.5. Conclusion

The three studies in this chapter have shown, firstly, that nearly all (92%) of the poems in Plath's *CP* contain references to or images related to the body. Plath made 1,296 references to 217 different parts of the body, an average of nearly six per poem. Secondly, Plath's poetry was distinctive in that, compared with her contemporary female and male poets, she employed anatomical terminology much more frequently, and her poetry exhibited a much wider anatomical vocabulary. Plath also introduced novel conjoined words, reflecting her immense creativity and range of general vocabulary. Thirdly, Plath's used significantly more anatomical terminology as her poetic style matured into the Confessional mode.

These three studies have researched quantitative aspects of Plath's corporeal references in her *CP*. The findings are original, and similar studies and results are absent from the literature. The studies confirm that Plath had intense and sustained interest in the body and was at ease with carnal tropes as ways of representing and expressing personal experiences and perceptions of the world. In view of the findings of the present studies, it is surprising that, in the five and a half decades since her death, other scholars have not investigated Plath's use of body imagery. I believe these findings alone justify undertaking this thesis.

Of particular importance to this thesis is how Plath presented images of the body as linguistic vehicles for representing experiences and emotions, and what she was able to express through the choice of body imagery. The qualitative aspect of her body imagery is the subject of the next chapter.

*   *   *
CHAPTER 5

READING PLATH:
THE BODY AS METAPHOR IN PLATH’S POETRY
Chapter 5

Reading Plath: The Body as Metaphor in Plath's Poetry

The experience of reading her [Plath's] poems deeply is a frightening one: it is like waking to discover one's adult self, grown to full height, crouched in some long-forgotten childhood hiding place, one's heart pounding senselessly, all the old rejected transparent beasts and monsters crawling out of the wallpaper.

——from The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Joyce Carol Oates (1985)

5.1. Introduction

My reading of Plath's poetry revealed that there were four specific subjects in which body imagery was particularly evident: Plath's sexuality and female identity; her vulnerability to being wounded and her ability to wound others; her desire for healing and rebirth as a restored individual; and the negation of parts of her self that she found to be abject. I read Plath's poetry in this chapter to determine how she employed metaphors of the body to write about sexuality, vulnerability and wounding, a desire for healing, and negation of the abject self. These four subjects often appear concurrently in the same poems, suggesting a common origin that was never far from Plath's consciousness. Each of these four subjects has a section in this chapter. Poems are discussed in the section that is most suited to the major thrust of the poem, although the presence of a poem in one section does not mean that it does not elaborate themes pertinent to another. The poems I have chosen are mainly from Plath's later work and, I argue, exemplars of the particular ways she invoked body imagery to illustrate and express anxieties and psychological suffering.

5.2. The Body in Plath's Exploration of Female Identity

Although the parts of the body to which Plath made reference changed throughout her poetry (Section 4.4., Tables 5, 6 and 7), the epistemology revealed in these metaphors (that is, the attempt to acquire and structure self-knowledge) remained constant. Plath's
diary entries, as well as her poetry, I argue, indicate that she actively sought to achieve self-knowledge, to define her position in her society and her profession, and to come to terms with cultural mores. I have presented evidence in Sections 3.4.2. and 3.4.4. that Plath had anxieties about her body, physical attraction, promiscuity and sexual competition. Symbolism of the body and its parts are obvious metonymic and synecdochic devices which poets can engage to write allusively about physical and sexual behaviours. Metaphors in general, and body imagery in particular, can be deployed to express complex and ambivalent ideas and to convey difficult and personal experiences that a poet might not wish to name reductively. The fact that metaphors are open to multiplicities of interpretation then becomes an asset to deepen and broaden the scope of a poet's thinking (Section 3.3.).

Plath wrote of her sexual body and desires in early poems such as "Pursuit", "The Queen's Complaint", "Two Sisters of Persephone", "Spinster" and "Virgin in a Tree". "Pursuit", written two days after first meeting Hughes (Alexander 180), is one of Plath's most sexually aggressive poems. The poem responds to Hughes's "The Jaguar" (Hughes, Collected 19-20), itself a response to Rilke's "Panther" (Rilke 139).

PURSUIT

Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit.

RACINE

There is a panther stalks me down:
One day I'll have my death of him;
His greed has set the woods aflame,
He prowls more lordly than the sun.
Most soft, most suavely glides that step, [5]
Advancing always at my back;
From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc:
The hunt is on, and sprung the trap.
Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks,
Haggard through the white hot noon. [10]
Along red network of his veins
What fire runs, what craving wakes?
Insatiate, he ransacks the land
Condemned by our ancestral fault,
Crying: blood, let blood be spilt; [15]
Meat must glut his mouth's raw wound.
Keen the rending teeth and sweet
The singeing fury of his fur;
His kisses parch, each paw's a briar,
Doom consummates that appetite. [20]
In the wake of this fierce cat,
Kindled like torches for his joy,
Charred and ravened women lie,
Become his starving body's bait.

Now hills hatch menace, spawning shade; [25]
Midnight cloaks the sultry grove;
The black marauder, hauled by love
On fluent haunches, keeps my speed.
Behind snarled thickets of my eyes
Lurks the lithe one; in dreams' ambush [30]
Bright those claws that mar the flesh
And hungry, hungry, those taut thighs.
His ardor snares me, lights the trees,
And I run flaring in my skin;
What lull, what cool can lap me in [35]
When burns and brands that yellow gaze?

I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
To quench his thirst I squander blood;
He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice. [40]
His voice waylays me, spells a trance,
The gutted forest falls to ash;
Appalled by secret want, I rush
From such assault of radiance.
Entering the tower of my fears,
I shut my doors on that dark guilt,
I bolt the door, each door I bolt.

Blood quickens, gonging in my ears:

The panther's tread is on the stairs,
Coming up and up the stairs.

"Pursuit" is a passionate fantasy of erotic violation, in which the narrator is hunted by a metaphoric lithe male panther. The epigraph, a line from French playwright Jean Racine (1639-1699) translated in 1998 by Hughes (Racine 28) as "Everywhere in the woods your image hunts me", sets the tone. The narrator's body becomes "an erotic-spiritual vehicle for a masculine life-force" (Britzolakis, Theatre 78). "Heart" and "blood" work as bodily metaphors that are open to several interpretations: "I hurl my heart to halt his pace, / To quench his thirst I squander blood" [37-38] has the inference that the heart, signifier of love, and blood, signifier of lust or instinct, are hurled as weapons against her pursuer to halt him. The lines have a sacrificial tone too, since to throw one's heart, now a metaphor for her being, at her dangerous pursuer is to give her life to him. The speaker also wastes her blood, now a symbol of vitality and life, to delay or engage him temporarily, an interpretation that undermines the strategic aggression implicit in "hurl" and "squander", allowing the possibility that she can only ever succumb to the panther's desires.

"Pursuit" contains seventeen body references, more than any of Plath’s other early poems. Most body parts are used metaphorically. "Blood" appears as a metaphor for instinct, lust, or "life-fluid" (Lavers 108): "blood, let blood be spilt" [15]; "to quench his thirst I squander blood" [38]; and "blood quickens" [48]. The panther's sexual desire is expressed in metaphors of the body: "Along red network of his veins / What fires run, what craving wakes?" [11-12]; "Meat must glut his mouth's raw wound" [16]; "Become his starving body's bait" [24]; and "hungry, hungry, those taut thighs" [32]. The boundary between literal and figurative is not always clear-cut: "Advancing always at my back" [6]. Literal meanings are more obvious in "Keen the rending teeth" [17] and "claws that mar the flesh" [31].

The poem ends on a note of high sexual tension: the speaker, in her tower of fears, locks out the "dark guilt" [46] of her sexual passion and, helplessly entranced,
hears the panther coming to claim her; she half-fears, half-desires him [48]. The narrator holds an ambiguous position here, for the mood is one of horror at the prospect of violation but also of arousal and want. The poem also reveals Plath's belief in the inextricable relationship between desire and death, the "terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself" (LH 249).

The fantasy of desired violation of the body, or sacrificial rape, epitomises what is extreme in Plath's writing and what she strategically and intentionally conveys with her corporeal imagery – fantasy, importance of the body, fulfilment of womanhood, ambivalent rebellion against male domination, and violence. Plath's journals record her fantasies of rape (UJ 8, 174, 181, 563). "Pursuit" echoes a passage in UJ (74), in which the nineteen-year-old Plath described sunbathing on rocks at Marblehead Beach, Massachusetts in 1951:

> The sun seeped into every pore, satiating every querulous fiber of me into a great glowing golden peace ... I felt that I was being raped by the sun, filled full of heat from the impersonal and colossal god of nature. Warm and perverse was the body of my love under me, and the feeling of his carved flesh was like no other ... dry, hard, smooth, clean and pure.

Clearly, the ritual of sunbathing was erotic for Plath, just as she must have looked forward to a sexual encounter with "the panther" (Stevenson 76). "Rape" denotes vulnerability, unsuccessful resistance, violation and wounding. I am not suggesting that an erotic fantasy conjured up by an adolescent during the sensual heat of summer can be taken as a wish to be raped or as submission to non-consensual intercourse. Rather, I contend that such fantasies were symptomatic of the risks Plath took with tropes and metaphors allusively revealing sexual feelings, risks that several Plath critics viewed as extreme and unacceptable (Section 3.3.7.).

"Pursuit" channels the work of D. H. Lawrence, whom Plath enthusiastically admired (UJ 342; 337) – "Lawrence bodies the world in his words" (Plath, UJ 422). Middlebrook (Poetry 167) claimed Plath and fellow students at Smith adopted Lawrence's "sexual ideology". His 1928 short story "Sun" explored themes of sexuality and power, and paid homage to a woman's discovery of her sensual body: "she knew the
sun in every thread of her body ... the sun was gradually penetrating her to know her, in the cosmic carnal sense of the word" (Lawrence, Sun 250).

Plath repeatedly used the trope of sacrifice of the body as a means of transfiguration, especially in the poems of her last six months. In Plath's 1962 poem "Years", the speaker rejects the idyll of eternity in favour of the energy and eroticism of phallic pistons:

   Eternity bores me
   I never wanted it.

   What I love is
   The piston in motion——
   My soul dies before it. [9-13]

"Mary's Song" tells of sacrifice and purification by fire in a disquieting analogy of the Jewish holocaust: the speaker, once violated by fire, is purified or transfigured into a "golden child" that the world, in its evil, will destroy [21]. In "The Munich Mannequins", Plath refers to menstruation and, by extension, womanhood as a sacrifice: "The blood flood is the flood of love, // The absolute sacrifice" [6-7]. Further examples of transfiguration by sacrifice are found in "Elm" and "Brasilia."

"Pursuit" is a representative example of Plath's enquiry into her sexuality and position in a culture of ambivalence towards women and their sexuality. Imagery of the body ideally suits Plath's exploration of the sensual body, as well as the physical theme of "Pursuit" and other poems ("Vanity Fair", "Strumpet Song", "The Glutton", "The Shrike", "Sculptor") that highlight her struggle to negotiate contemporary sexual ideology. Her strategy is ambivalent: she positions herself as the vulnerable victim pursued and soon to be seduced by a potent male, and also as enjoying the drama and power of being able to attract such a mate.

Plath acknowledged her physicality by writing powerfully about subjects that became hallmarks of the Confessional style: physical intimacy, menstruation ("The Munich Mannequins"), virginity ("Virgin in a Tree"), pregnancy ("Metaphors"), miscarriage and childbirth ("Parliament Hill Fields", "Three Women"). My reading of these poems is that they were a means by which Plath found and articulated her feminine and literary authority in a patriarchal world, and with which she not only
resisted and challenged the accepted female/male gender relation of her time but also re-assigned it.

5.3. Vulnerability and Wounding of the Body

Sacrifice in Plath's poetry is closely related to notions of threat and vulnerability, subjects that Plath exploited in recurring metaphors of physical and psychological fragmentation and disintegration. Vulnerability and wounding, in their many guises, are harbingers of death, and are present from beginning to end in Plath's work. In this section, I examine poems that express Plath's vulnerability and ferocity in metaphorically wounding herself and others.

The actual constructs of Plath's metaphors of harm were based on history, mythology, and her experiences. Her metaphorical attacks on, and uses of, the body are violent and at times frankly monstrous. The vulnerable body falls prey to a host of enemies in her poetry: bees ("Stings", "The Swarm"), birds ("The Jailer"), swans ("Three Women"), vampires ("Daddy"), bats ("Lesbos"), and worms ("Lady Lazarus"). Living flesh is cut by knives ("The Swarm", "A Secret", "The Jailer", "A Birthday Present", "Cut"), a surgeon's scalpel ("The Surgeon at 2 a.m.") and axes ("Words"). The body undergoes surgery ("Face Lift", "Elm"), parts are amputated ("Snakecharmer", "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", "Daddy", "Thalidomide"), and throats ("Waking in Winter", "Lesbos") and necks ("Little Fugue") are cut. Stitches reveal that body parts have been excised ("Face Lift", "The Stones", "The Applicant").


Flesh is discoloured and tattooed ("The Courage of Shutting-Up"), gnawed ("Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest"), worn away ("Crystal Gazer"), melted and peeled from the body ("Face Lift", "Eavesdropper"), and struck by foreign bodies ("The Eye-mote"). The body suffers sickness ("Fever 103°") and the teratogenic deformity of phocomelia ("Thalidomide"). It is pricked by hooks and doctors' needles ("Tulips", "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", "The Courage of Shutting-Up"), given drugs ("Insomniac", "Face
Lift", "The Jailer", "Cut"), incarcerated ("In Plaster") and burnt by acid ("Elm"). Eel tentacles ("Medusa") and umbilical cords ("Maenad", "Medusa") stifle and suffocate the body. Veils and curtains obliterate the body, which, like Isadora Duncan,\footnote{Isadora Duncan (1877-1927): American dancer who was accidentally strangled when her scarf became entangled in the spokes of a wheel of her moving car.} is also strangled by its own scarf ("Fever 103°").

It was with this torrent of violent imagery so consistently and monstrously present in her poetry that Plath represented her personal vulnerability and self-contempt, the wounding of herself, and her animosity and anger towards Hughes, her parents and acquaintances. Plath at best was ambivalent about her own body. Although she cared greatly about her appearance and dressed fashionably well, she was often dissatisfied with her body (Section 3.4.4) and she engaged in self-harm (Section 3.1.2.). She regarded the functions and malfunctions of her body with both hypochondriacal fear and fascination (Stade 83). Van Dyne (Revising 71) maintained that Plath's interest in bodily perfection was a mask for her emotional or intellectual insecurity, the body becoming the outward representation of the inner self.

Plath's negativity towards Hughes is captured in poems written both before and after their separation in October 1962 – "The Rabbit Catcher", "Event", "Words heard, by accident, over the phone", "The Courage of Shutting-Up", "Daddy", "The Jailer", "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Kindness".

"The Rabbit Catcher", written in May 1962 after Plath and Hughes came across rabbit snares during an acrimonious cliff top walk (Stevenson 244; Hughes, Birthday Letters 144-146), is an allegory of victimisation and rebellion within a "creative marriage". Its trajectory is very similar to D. H. Lawrence's "Rabbit Snared in the Night" (Lawrence, Poems 240-242). Plath's poem's subtlety and allusiveness exemplify her poetic brilliance. The poem expresses anger towards Hughes and his love of the countryside, specifically "the sanctity of a trapline ... my heritage" (Hughes, Birthday Letters 145).

THE RABBIT CATCHER

It was a place of force—

The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,

Tearing off my voice, and the sea
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
Unreeling in it, spreading like oil. [5]

I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
Its black spikes,
The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
And were extravagant, like torture. [10]

There was only one place to get to.
Simmering, perfumed,
The paths narrowed into the hollow.
And the snares almost effaced themselves—
Zeros, shutting on nothing. [15]

Set close, like birth pangs.
The absence of shrieks
Made a hole in the hot day, a vacancy.
The glassy light was a clear wall,
The thickets quiet. [20]

I felt a still busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him. [25]

And we, too, had a relationship—
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also. [30]
Plath metaphorically equated the landscape and rabbit traps with the confines of her romantic and literary relationship with Hughes. She positioned Hughes as the Lawrentian trapper, and herself as his prey, in parallel with "Pursuit". The traps were for Plath terrifying symbols of "an inevitable and irresistible finality" (Stevenson 245). In a somewhat speculative analysis, Rose (135-143) suggested that the poem's key themes were lesbian desire [6-16] and male sexual sadism [17-25], an evaluation that Hughes vehemently rejected (Bate 440-441).

Plath's realisation of Hughes's emotionally stifling, and, by this time, professionally limiting, influence again places her as a victim, expressed through an image of the hand: "I felt a still busyness, an intent. / I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt, / Ringing the white china" [21-23]. The metaphor positions an obstacle between life and victim, and indicates passivity and submission rather than self-pity, the speaker reduced to a white china tea mug. The constraining hands, the instruments of Hughes's writing, are "dull, blunt" [22]. The metaphor in the context of this poem is an acknowledgement that Plath's time as Hughes's obedient neophyte was over. Other metaphors of strangulation appear in "Maenad", "Medusa" and "Fever 1030".

The psychological complexity of "The Rabbit Catcher" invokes the intricate nature of relationships. The past tense [26] and images of closure admit to the deterioration of Plath's marriage and poetic creativity [27-30], the two being metaphors for each other (Britzolakis, Theatre 29). The poem highlights the difficulty of the two poets working together, Hughes the more successful at that time and acting as Plath's mentor and critic – "The glassy light was a clear wall" [19]. Subdued anger and resentment accompany the sense of entrapment. The relationship has failed, yet the speaker and male protagonist are bound together. Hughes's later affair with Assia Wevill was perhaps the crisis that provided Plath with a legitimate way out of the union.

"Event", written the same day as "Rabbit Catcher", is one of Plath's lesser-known poems. It continues the theme of vulnerability and metaphorical wounding. The poem is more lenient on Hughes than "Rabbit Catcher" in that Plath acknowledged some responsibility for their estrangement [14-17].

EVENT

How the elements solidify! —
The moonlight, that chalk cliff
In whose rift we lie

Back to back. I hear an owl cry
From its cold indigo.
Intolerable vowels enter my heart.

The child in the white crib revolves and sighs,
Opens its mouth now, demanding.
His little face is carved in pained, red wood.

Then there are the stars—ineradicable, hard.
One touch: it burns and sickens.
I cannot see your eyes.

Where apple bloom icles the night
I walk in a ring,
A groove of old faults, deep and bitter.

Love cannot come here.
A black gap discloses itself.
On the opposite lip

A small white soul is waving, a small white maggot.
My limbs, also, have left me.
Who has dismembered us?

The dark is melting. We touch like cripples.

Metaphors of the body carry the threat of the dissolving relationship in "Event". As the narrator lies awake under the dead weight of moonlight, she thinks the unthinkable: "Intolerable vowels enter my heart" [6] – perhaps the pain of love's destruction, or hate for her co-inhabitant. She sees him as a demanding child, carved in a gesture of pain in a constricting, lifeless white crib, his face emotionless [7-9]. "I
cannot see your eyes" [12] is full of latent implications. For Plath, the eyes were a key to equanimity (Section 5.4): if the speaker cannot see the eyes of her partner, she cannot see into him, or know the extent of the estrangement or threat, a most unsettling situation.

The poem ends with images of emotional paralysis – the body maimed and fragmented. The narrator, whose limbs, or supports, have been removed [20], asks "Who has dismembered us? // The dark is melting. We touch like cripples" [21-22]. The metaphor "The dark is melting" [22] is intriguing: was it simply a reference to the warming effect of dawn, or was the narrator becoming more aware of her own position with regard to her partner? The reader keenly feels the emotional pain and psychic hurt of the failing relationship through these body images.

Dismemberment as a representation of emotional loss and hurt led to British psychiatrist Harold Searles postulating, in 1965, that emotions and figurative mental concepts could be projected onto body parts and experienced as actual physical symptoms and sensations. Searles (560-583) developed the concept of "somatisation" after observing schizophrenic patients who could not distinguish between actual ("concrete") and mental ("metaphorical") events. One of Searles's patients experienced strongly conflicting emotions as physical dismemberment or being "torn apart" (Searles 582-583).

I am not suggesting that Plath produced physical symptoms as projections of her mental state. Rather, she metaphorically substituted the body for psychological affect in her poetry. Wounds to the body became representations of psychic injury and suffering. Imagery of the damaged and dismembered body adds intensity and tells of the depth and extent of her hurt. That injury is almost constantly present in her poetry heightens the drama and impact of her work. Physical violence is repulsive to most people and produces a somatic response and sense of crisis. So too with Plath's poetry. We see a poet in crisis, struggling to assert her identity as a poet and wife through the cloud of fluctuating moods. The crisis is so extreme that Plath represents it as bodily mutilation. Repeated inclusion of the wounded body throughout her work suggests the crisis was on-going, and that healing and reconciliation within herself were not achieved, a theme I take up in Section 5.4.

The full force of Plath's capacity to metaphorically wound is revealed in her most aggressive, and controversial, poem "Daddy", written on 12 October 1962, the day Plath
learned Hughes had agreed to a divorce (Axelrod, *Wound* 52). Plath's relationship with her father, the main protagonist, shapes a narrative of victimisation and patricidal revenge through various configurations of anger, antagonism and rejection. When Plath first read the poem to Alvarez, he thought it "not so much poetry as assault and battery" (*Savage* 32). Ostriker (140) referred to the poem as "the earliest and most famous of female vengeance poems". The poem is a sequel to the kinder 1956 "Letter to a Purist".

DADDY

You do not do, you do not do
Anymore, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. [5]

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal [10]

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off the beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du. [15]

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend [20]

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw. [25]

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene [30]

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may be a Jew. [35]

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew. [40]

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—— [45]

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you. [50]
You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.
But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look
And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.
If I've killed a man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.
There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. [80]

"Daddy" is an attack on the symbolic position of Otto Plath in his daughter's life rather than on the man himself. It is also a brutal assault on paternal power and the quasi-paternal authority of Hughes, whom Plath viewed as a father substitute (LH 289; UJ 381, 447), and the male assumption of an entitlement to be in charge of her. Her ambivalence towards Otto and Hughes, who are interchanged at various points, is evident as the poem veers between love and hate, revenge and regret.

The poem has been analysed extensively from poetic, historical, psychoanalytic, political and feminist perspectives by poets and Plath scholars (Axelrod, Poetry and Wound; Richard Blessing; Britzolakis, Ariel and Theatre; Carol Ferrier; A. R. Jones; J. D. McClatchy; Middlebrook, Poetry; Ostriker; Rose; Murray Schwartz and Christopher Bollas). My interest here is to examine Plath's language of the body.

An astounding array of metonymic body parts (foot, toe, head, tongue, jaw, mustache, eye, face, chin, bones, heart) is employed to establish the poem's changing tones of love, rage and anguish. Plath's preparedness to exploit a monstrously fragmented body conveys menacing fatalism. Her overreaching use of Nazi/Jew metaphors, for which she has been roundly criticised (Britzolakis, Theatre 187), reveals her willingness to ignore the widespread view that the holocaust is beyond representation and an inappropriate source for metaphor (Rose 205-207). Her disregard for convention may have partly motivated criticisms of the poem.

Figurative representations of Plath and Otto are inseparable (Rose 213), and so the poem expresses Plath's hatred of an abject self, as well as her father and the wounding and destruction of herself. Mutilation of Otto corresponds with Plath's own transformation into a poor white foot [3-4], a potential suicide [12-14], student [25, 51], Jew [32-35, 40], gypsy [38], mystic [39], and broken-hearted child [56]. Plath acknowledged her psychic injury and less than totally successful recovery in referring metaphorically to her attempted suicide of August 1953: "they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue" [61-62].

Plath exemplified the connection between her physical and emotional vulnerability in "Cut", written in October 1962 during a frenzied two-month period in which she wrote
forty poems. The suppressed hysteria and minimal coherence between objectivity and surrealism are barely contained by the poem's pace and wit.

CUT

What a thrill——
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.
Your turkey wattle
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.
I step on it,
Clutching my bottle
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.

Whose side are they on?
O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill
The thin
Papery feeling.
Saboteur,
Kamikaze man—

The stain on your
Gauze Ku Klux Klan
Babushka
Darkens and tarnishes and when

The balled
Pulp of your heart
Confronts its small
Mill of silence

How you jump—
Trepanned veteran,
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump.

Through rapid-fire sequences of images of violence and bleeding, Plath transforms this domestic accident into a history of conflicts in her native North America. A sense of self-loathing, alienation and displacement from the body are apparent from start to finish. "What a thrill——" [1] positions the narrator as a spectator who remotely watches, without sympathy, her thumb bleed, as if being entertained. The narrator is depersonalised from the pain and violence of the incident by the poetic device of apostrophe and repeated rhetorical addresses to the thumb. Plath curiously implied that the cut was deliberate with the metaphor "the Indian's axed your scalp" [10], as if it were an act of revenge on the body for previous violations, a wound of experience, its own little suicide. The disparaging "Dirty girl" [39] is consistent with the cut being an episode of self-harm. The cut does not register as physically or psychically painful – the narrator clutches a "bottle / Of pink fizz" [15-16] and has "taken a pill to kill // The thin / papery feeling" [24-26] to achieve psychological detachment. The
darkening bloodstain on the dressing [29-36] evokes revulsion and self-sabotage, alienating the speaker from female blood, a metaphor used frequently by Plath for the female body and identity and the self. Similarly, transmuting the thumb from a cook’s digit to numerous male aggressors and back to the injured female body [38-40] confirms the narrator's dissociation from the body.

I read the poem as a metaphor for psychic injury expressed through florid symbolism of the body. Metaphors of bleeding [8, 19-20] and for the bandaged, lacerated thumb [9, 23, 27, 28] are vivid and extreme, and punishing for squeamish readers. But Plath has a point to make. The distraught, excitable and possibly hypomaniac narrator admits she is ill [23], as Plath often did in her journals (Section 3.1.). She tells readers that she is not afraid of physical injury or death, be it self-inflicted or otherwise. The poem suggests an arrangement has been reached between the mind and the body – an acceptance of, and interchange between, psychic agony and the wounded body. In retrospect, of course, it is easy to read the poem as a warning of her later suicide.

The metaphoric body in Plath's poetry is almost constantly assaulted with menace and urgency. Imagery of the violated, fragmented body brings a monstrous otherworldliness to her poems. Even her more positive and affirming poems have spikes of threat and malevolence that range from slight hazard to open peril. We saw it in "Pursuit". "Yaddo: The Grand Manor" (1959) has the gentle, soft blur of wood smoke filtering into clear air, wholesome garden vegetables cooking in the kitchen, and the comfort of wood stoves; then suddenly, a wasp nonchalantly "crawls / Over windfalls to sip cider-juice" [9-10]. Threat and vulnerability intrude into the beauty of the natural world in "Blackberrying" (1961). The sensuous pleasure of picking blackberries is subverted when blackberry juice runs over the narrator's fingers, though she "had not asked for such a blood sisterhood" [8]. A blackberry bush, "fat with blue-red juices" [7] transforms into a "bush of flies" [15]. The narrator walks on "green and sweet" hills [22], only for the wind to slap "its phantom laundry in my face" [21]. The sound of the sea accosts the narrator ominously: "a din like silversmiths / beating and beating at an intractable metal" [26-27]. Hostility and hurt abound in these natural scenes. The interaction of Plath's poetry with the natural world is beautifully physical but constantly threatened by subversive and covert violence.
From my reading of these poems, I argue that Plath employed corporeal images as proxies for her psychological vulnerability and sense of injury, and to demonstrate the intensity of the anger she directed at herself and others. Plath explicated the relationship between her poetic authority and the body. These unsettling images gave an authority to her poetry that less vivid imagery could not. There is little balance in her poetry, I find, between retribution and justified anger, between blaming others and seeing her own role in the demise of relationships. Plath makes it clear in these poems that she is the victim; her anger is retaliatory, as if compensating for passivity. Even her humour is defiant, if at times self-deprecating. Plath was prepared to be extreme in her writing and to disregard conventional limitations.

Alvarez (Savage 36) recognised the origin of Plath's brutal bodily images in her poetry of late 1962:

Finding herself alone again now, whatever the pretence of indifference, all the anguish she had experienced at her father's death was reactivated: despite herself, she felt abandoned, injured, enraged, and bereaved as purely and defencelessly as she had as a child twenty years before. As a result, the pain that had built up steadily inside her all that time came flooding out. There was no need to discuss motives because the poems did that for her.

Alvarez saw that Plath's late poetry was symptomatic of her need to express her mental anguish. I argue that Plath's figurative language of the wounded, fragmented body allowed her to express existential fears that stemmed not only from intrinsic psychological problems, but also from extrinsic social and personal pressures, conflicts and betrayals.

5.4. The Body as Metaphors for Restoration and Healing

At the same time as metaphorically lashing out at her own body and those of others, Plath also sought ways to ameliorate and transform her hurt and anguish through the metaphor of the healing body. At least until her last poem "Edge", Plath's poetry contains undertones of resistance to pessimism and despair, as if she was trying to rid herself of what she considered abject and to restore herself. Hughes described the central experience of Plath's poetry as "shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it
together again or finding a new one" (qtd. in Kirkham 278). Throughout much of her poetry, Plath adopted the literal capacity of the body for healing as a strategy of metaphoric containment, restoration and healing.


Rebuilding and restoration are prominent themes of Plath's 1959 "The Colossus" and "The Stones". "Colossus" is often read as a narrative of objectification (Bundtzen 41; Gill 93-97; Kroll 82-84), but I argue that it is also a narrative of restitution (Section 3.1.6.). The poem is a complex allegory that examines not only Plath's relationships with her deceased father – the colossus – and patriarchal conventions (Axelrod, *Wound* 47), but also her need to heal herself.

**THE COLOSSUS**

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard. [5]

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser. [10]

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes. [15]

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered [20]

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
of your left ear, out of the wind, [25]

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing. [30]

Plath associates piecing together the fragmented body parts of the colossus with restoring her paternal relationship and, by inference, her own disintegrated personality (Kirkham 289). Repairing, or healing, the fragmented father/statue/speaker is introduced as if to appease guilt or psychological unease. The notion of healing is important for the speaker: in lamenting and letting go of the dead father, she can recover
her own identity, ameliorate her emotional loss, and remake herself (Gill 94), a theme also present in Plath's later poem "Daddy".

The poem encodes for female survival: the speaker, who has come to represent the shattered colossus, takes over, sees the sun rise from the colossus [27], and gets on with life. I read this short, powerful poem as a narrative in which the narrator confronts a difficult psychological issue and attempts to remove its inherent threat. The poem is not just a rhetoric of mourning, as suggested by Axelrod (Poetry 84) and Britzolakis (Theatre 61-65), but also an attempt at restoration. Yet the speaker is well aware of the hopelessness of the task: the colossus's body parts – lips, mouth, throat, brow, skull-plates, eyes, bones, hair, ear, tongue – are scattered across a melancholic landscape. She positions herself as crawling "like an ant in mourning" [12] as she tries to repair the giant stone statue. The healing process seems doomed to failure [1-2, 8-10, 11-15] but is nevertheless attempted.

"The Stones" (1959) is a moving meditation on Plath's attempted suicide and subsequent treatment in the McLean Hospital, Massachusetts, in 1953. Lois Ames (286), a friend of Plath, described this time as "her symbolic death, and numb shock – then the painful agony of slow rebirth and psychic regeneration." Plath (UJ 520) intended the poem "to be a dwelling on madhouse ... vivid and disjointed. An adventure. Never over. Developing. Rebirth. Despair."

THE STONES

This is the city where men are mended.
I lie on a great anvil.
The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll
When I fell out of the light. I entered [5]
The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.

The mother of pestles diminished me.
I became a still pebble.
The stones of the belly were peaceable,
The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing. [10]
Only the mouth-hole piped out,
Importunate cricket

In a quarry of silences.
The people of the city heard it.
They hunted the stones, taciturn and separate, [15]
The mouth-hole crying their locations.
Drunk as a foetus
I suck at the paps of darkness.

The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss my lichens away.
The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry [20]
Open one stone eye.

This is the after-hell: I see the light.
A wind unstoppers the chamber
Of the ear, old worrier.

Water mollifies the flint lip, [25]
And daylight lays its sameness on the wall.
The grafters are cheerful,

Heating the pincers, hoisting the delicate hammers.
A current agitates the wires
Volt upon volt. Catgut stitches my fissures. [30]

A workman walks by carrying a pink torso.
The storeroom is full of hearts.
This is the city of spare parts.

My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber.
Here they can doctor heads, or any limb. [35]
On Fridays the little children come
To trade their hooks for hands.
Dead men leave eyes for others.
Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse. [40]
The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be as good as new. [45]

Plath represents the injured self through images of eighteen different body parts. The body has become a series of detached objects and waste; all that is left is a lifeless "pink torso" [31]. No longer components of a meaningful whole, abject body parts diminish the speaker to almost nothing and give the poem a sense of unspecified hopelessness in the very location where healing is supposed to occur. I read these images as metaphors for fragmentation of the self.

However, the poem also presents the possibility of healing, of rebuilding and fitting the body and psyche back together. When introducing the poem on BBC radio, Plath (Living Poet 1961) said of the speaker: "Her nightmare vision of waking in a modern hospital gradually softens, as she recovers, and accepts the frightening, yet new, ties of love which will heal her and return her, whole again, to the world." Hughes (Notes 1970 192) was similarly optimistic: "It is the poem where the self, shattered in 1953, suddenly finds itself whole." Plath employs resourceful images of medical and nursing care [1, 19, 39], psychotherapy [20-24], ECT [27-30], and degrees of recovery [40-45]. Metaphoric depictions of healing are made personal and graphic by the first-person voice. Plath's rhyme scheme – a terza rima variation in which end words of the second and third lines of each tercet are predominantly partial rhymes – adds an impression of detachment as well as a lyrical, song-like quality that does not disturb the poem's melancholic feel.
The poem contains three phrases that I contend are ingenious metaphors relating to the poem's theme of healing. Firstly, Plath referred to the surgical suture material catgut: "Catgut stitches my fissures" [30]. The significance of "catgut" lies in its temporary nature: it is a bio-degradable, absorbable suture with a holding strength of one to three weeks, enough time for healing of most soft-tissue wounds (Francis, *Techniques* 32), but not for recovery from serious psychological injury. It is speculation as to whether Plath knew about the short-lived character of catgut, but she may have, given her extensive medical and surgical misadventures (Section 3.4.3.). "Fissures" has several denotations (breaks, cracks, splits, crevices); it is an unusual word to use when "wounds" or "lacerations" would have been appropriate. Of note is the absence of any mention in the poem at the time of physical wounds that required stitching. Depressions between convolutions of the brain's surface are called "fissures" (*Gray's Anatomy* 1068) and, if employed in this sense, the word suggests that the speaker is not referring to a physical injury.

Juxtaposition of "Catgut stitches my fissures" with reference to ECT in lines 27-30 is consistent with Plath realising the psychological therapy that "held her together" – the psychological equivalent of sutures holding tissues together – was not adequate for healing her psychic wounds, as it subsequently proved to be. This reading is congruent with the poem's concluding five lines that, although without the forlorn detachment of earlier stanzas, are far from optimistic.

In what I argue is a second metaphor of healing, Plath alluded to organ transplantation in stating that disordered body parts could be exchanged for functioning parts [33-38]. Taken literally, line 38 ("Dead men leave eyes for others") is a reference to post-mortem corneal donation for transplantation, an accepted clinical practice in 1959 for restoring sight in patients with corneal scarring (Bollinger 339). Interpreted metaphorically, the line takes on much greater significance. "Eye" and "eyes" appeared 147 times in the 224 poems in *CP*, more than any other body structure (Appendix 1). The eye was clearly an important symbol for Plath, as it was for the Boston poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). Emerson believed that the natural world could and should be incorporated into the self – the more faithful a poet is to nature, the better is her or his art (*Norton Theory* 616). When Emerson (16) wrote in 1883: "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God", he was asserting that man could be unified with God in nature. The organ through which such transactions pass
was the eye: "The eye allows nature to act as a healer: there is no calamity which nature cannot repair, so long as the eyes are left intact ... [the eye] is the best of artists" (Emerson, qtd. in Kendall 37).

According to Anne Stevenson (4), Plath's family was "steeped in Emersonian ideals". Plath herself would have been aware of Emerson's philosophy of the dynamic interchange between the natural world and the perceiver (Kendall 25), to the extent that her poetry expressed a "commerce of imagery between landscapes and mindscapes" (Kendall 36). For Plath, the eyes "channel the threat of the outside world ... the eyes' destruction is the destruction of the individual" (Kendall 37).

When line 38 is read metaphorically, the dead leave their eyes to restore sight in the blind who are then able to overcome any calamity with nature's aid, according to Emerson's, and perhaps Plath's, belief. Death, a prerequisite for corneal donation, then becomes not just destructive and negating, but a positive and restorative event, consistent with Plath's often-expressed theme of death leading to rebirth of an individual as whole and healed. An alternative interpretation of the metaphor has Plath realising that at some time she would be counted among the dead; the poems she would leave behind would be the "eyes" through which she had seen the world, the gift of insight she bequeathed to those who did not have her particular outlook on, or experience of, the world.

A third metaphor lies in the speaker saying: "My mendings itch" [44], a metaphor for healing. Plath's "mendings" are her wounds, but she had no major physical wounds related to her suicide attempt, only a small facial nick. "Mendings" can only refer to what she perceived as her psychological or emotional wounds. Taken literally, the phrase tells of the sensation of itchiness often felt in healing wounds of the body, but itchy, inflamed wounds are not fully healed wounds (Francis, Healing 20). Plath acknowledged in the previously quoted introduction to "The Stones" that healing was not complete: " ... ties of love which will (my italics) heal her ... ". Although I read the poem as a narrative of restitution and quest (Section 3.1.6.), where the speaker believes she will be reborn as healed, she is still some way from being whole. The tone of the poem, anticipated in the title, is detached and emotionally flat, consistent with on-going depression and after-effects of ECT. The poem concludes [45] with a less than convincing prediction.
Plath's theme of reconstruction of the self is most evident in "Face Lift", a poem inspired by the face-lift operation in 1960 of Dido Merwin, wife of the poet William Merwin. Dido and Plath had an ambivalent relationship at best (Stevenson 193, 206, 217; Merwin 330). According to Hughes (Notes 1981 291), the poem was "the experience of an acquaintance, requisitioned for the poet's myth of self-renewal". The poem's major metaphor is cosmetic surgery, the face a synecdoche for the whole body.

**FACE LIFT**

You bring me good news from the clinic,
Whipping off your silk scarf, exhibiting the tight white
Mummy-cloths, smiling: I'm all right.
When I was nine, a lime-green anesthetist
Fed me banana gas through a frog-mask. The nauseous vault
Boomed with bad dreams and the Jovian voices of surgeons.
Then mother swam up, holding a tin basin.
O I was sick.

They've changed all that. Traveling
Nude as Cleopatra in my well-boiled hospital shift.
Fizzy with sedatives and unusually humorous,
I roll to an anteroom where a kind man
Fists my fingers for me. He makes me feel something precious
Is leaking from the finger-vents. At the count of two
Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard . . .
I don't know a thing.

For five days I lie in secret,
Tapped like a cask, the years draining into my pillow.
Even my best friend thinks I am in the country.
Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper.
When I grin, the stitches tauten. I grow backward. I'm twenty,
Broody and in long skirts on my first husband's sofa, my fingers
Buried in the lambswool of the dead poodle;
I hadn't a cat yet.

Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror—
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg.
They've trapped her in some laboratory jar.
Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty years,
Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair.
Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,
Pink and smooth as a baby.

Presented in the voice of a woman who has undergone aesthetic surgery, "Face Lift" was written a few days after Plath's 1961 miscarriage (Stevenson 206), a time of bodily and psychological vulnerability (Van Dyne, Revising 88). Plath's theme of death and rebirth (Melander 104-112; Rosenblatt 23-26) pervades the poem. The speaker dissociates herself from her old abject body [25], and loathing and a wish for death are projected onto the former self [29]. To Caroline Hall (78), formerly Professor of English at Penn State University, this was not just remodelling of the self but rather negation of the self, and "sounds very much like suicide."

Although smug about her reconstructed body, the speaker has almost parodic awareness of the problematic return to an earlier, more attractive physical form [21], suggesting insecurity or doubt about the improvement. Only the speaker's face has been changed and it will grow old again, yet the speaker does not admit that her makeover has been a pyrrhic victory. As in "Colossus" and "Stones", "Face Lift" presents an attempt at metaphoric healing. However, self-wounding and self-negation obliterate the old self and take over to the extent that there is little chance of successful restoration. Although the last line indicates the reborn persona has triumphed over the old, the transformation is not into a mature, functioning adult, but into unrealistic innocence: "Pink and smooth as a baby" [32]. Renewal has not been achieved.

Death and the metaphoric struggle for rebirth as a renewed, whole individual continue in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", a poem written seven months after Plath's appendicectomy at St Pancras Hospital, London, in September 1961. Plath described the poem as "night thoughts of a tired surgeon" (Context 64). The title sets the poem in the middle of the
night, immediately provoking anxieties associated with the dark, as well as validating the surgeon's dreamlike observations and actions. The surgeon represents an integral part of the narrator.

THE SURGEON AT 2 a.m.

The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven. The microbes cannot survive it. They are departing in their transparent garments, turned aside from the scalpels and the rubber hands. The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful.

The body under it is in my hands. As usual there is no face. A lump of Chinese white with seven holes thumbed in. The soul is another light. I have not seen it; it does not fly up. Tonight it has receded like a ship's light.

It is a garden I have to do with—tubers and fruits oozing their jammy substances, a mat of roots. My assistants hook them back. Stenches and colors assail me. This is the lung-tree.

These orchids are splendid. They spot and coil like snakes. The heart is a red-bell-bloom, in distress. I am so small in comparison to these organs!

I worm and hack in a purple wilderness.

The blood is a sunset. I admire it. I am up to my elbows in it, red and squeaking. Still it seeps up, it is not exhausted. So magical! A hot spring I must seal off and let fill.

The intricate, blue piping under this pale marble.
How I admire the Romans—
Aqueducts, the Baths of Caracalla, the eagle nose!
The body is a Roman thing.
It has shut its mouth on the stone pill of repose. [30]

It is a statue the orderlies are wheeling off.
I have perfected it.
I am left with an arm or a leg,
A set of teeth, or stones
To rattle in a bottle and take home, [35]
And tissue in slices—a pathological salami.
Tonight the parts are entombed in an icebox.
Tomorrow they will swim
In vinegar like saints' relics.
Tomorrow the patient will have a clean, pink plastic limb. [40]

Over one bed in the ward, a small blue light
Announces a new soul. The bed is blue.
Tonight, for this person, blue is a beautiful color.
The angels of morphia have borne him up.
He floats an inch from the ceiling, [45]
Smelling the dawn drafts.
I walk among sleepers in gauze sarcophagi.
The red night lights are flat moons. They are dull with blood.
I am the sun, in my white coat,
Gray faces, shuttered by drugs, follow me like flowers. [50]

The poem's structure is interesting. The curtness of the shorter lines emphasises their content. Exclamation marks, which Plath employed widely in her 1961-62 poems, highlight moments of excitement (Kendall 192). The imagery is complex: the natural world is blended with the body [11-16, 21, 46]. A profusion of colours (white, red, blue, purple, pink, gray [sic]) adds vividness and sensuality to the operating scene and dimly lit hospital wards, as if denying the impersonality and dreariness of United Kingdom National Health Service hospitals in the 1960s. Religious imagery (heaven, soul, saints'
relics, angels) adds to the textural layering and contrasts with the depicted corporeal mutilations. Plath referred to St Pancras Hospital as "a religious establishment [where] great cleansings take place" (UJ 599), as if she viewed her appendicectomy as a form sacrifice or purging of personal history that would lead to emergence as a healed individual.

I read Plath's images of dismemberment, death, and rebirth as symbolic of a need to construct a new persona. The poem is filled with objectified and isolated body parts [4, 7, 17, 19, 33-40]; this imagery of detachment of mind from body is evident in other poems ("Colossus", "Stones", "Cut"). Plath's use of colour allows death to permeate "Surgeon": "The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven" [1], white being the absence of colour and symbolic of death (Lavers 109); "Tonight, for this person, blue is a beautiful color" [43], blue being the "hue of heaven" (Scheerer 473). The surgeon, as the narrator's alter ego, is oblivious to death [8-10] – his interest is in re-creating perfect temporal bodies [31-32]. In the poem (as in life) the surgeon mutilates (operates on) the body in order to achieve refiguration (restoration of health). The surgeon is the physical projection of the narrator's desire to be healed, the projection of the instrument of rebirth, no matter what degree of violence is required to achieve it (Kendall 106).

The surgeon's manipulations in the operating theatre are transformative but do not signal recovery. The biological is replaced by the inert and mechanical: a denture is provided [34], an amputated limb replaced with a prosthesis [40]. The body is a reified, lifeless statue [29, 31]. Life becomes preserved and reduced [37-39]. A dying man smells the "dawn drafts" [46] of life after death, but he is under the effects of morphia. Images of disillusionment, of life becoming rigid and less vibrant, are stark against the contrastingly bright operating theatre lights. Inanimate objects (scalpels, rubber hands, surgical drapes) acquire ominous potentials by juxtaposition with the living. Patients have no subsequent vitality after their monstrous operations and are depersonalised [7-8, 19, 29, 31, 40, 50]. The monstrous operation echoes the ECT treatments and amputations of "Stones". Menace and threat accompany the surgeon as he walks among sleeping patients in the post-operative ward in the dead of night. There is no sense of cure here.

I have referred to the surgeon as male in this reading, as have Britzolakis (Theatre 72, 209), Kendall (106), Rose (134) and Scheerer (473-475). Professor Heather Clark (200) from the University of New York, suggested that Path's surgeon may have
been female, on the basis of symbols such as flowers, blood and the colour red, which Plath usually associated with the female gender. Although female surgeons were rare in the 1960s, a female lead figure would strengthen Plath's identification with a character who has power to heal. Plath as the surgeon is reborn as all-powerful in a world that is clean, ordered and free of pain. The omnipotent healer has sorted out all the ills of the sick and dying with a scalpel (perhaps an allusion to Plath's teenage self-cutting and literal reference to her earlier appendicectomy), and with drugs (an allusion to her 1953 drug overdose). Interestingly, Hughes's 1970 poem "Lovesong" (*Collected* 255) portrayed him as the male victim of a female surgeon [32].

Themes of recuperation and healing are expressed in "Three Women" (1962), in which three very different women in a maternity hospital reflect on their bodies, pregnancies, and their male-dominated, restricted lives. The third voice, an unmarried student, forced to give up her baby for adoption and facing a bleak future, declares: "I had an old wound once, but it is healing" [306]; significantly, the wound, although old, still has not healed. Later, the second voice, an articulate wife and secretary, who has already experienced death (a likely reference to Plath's attempted suicide), has miscarried (as did Plath); unlike the third voice, her suffering dissipates like smoke in the fresh spring air [354-358], leaving a sense of calmness and renewal that Plath must have desired.

In this section, I have read a number of poems as narratives of restitution and quest (Section 3.1.6.) – the speaker desires to be free of illness which is perceived as a part of a journey eventually providing some benefit for the sufferer. Plath's images of healing create a literary double, a wounded self on the way to being healed alongside her real self. Axelrod (*Wound* 201) believed that the figure of the double virtually took over Plath's actual existence. O striker (12) remarked: "the mask had grown into the flesh". The refiguration presented in metaphors and images of healing was initially hopeful but was never achieved with conviction; in no poem was the speaker returned "whole again, to the world" (Plath, *Spoken Word* 1961). The colossus, a symbol of either Otto or Sylvia, cannot be mended. The speaker in "Stones" has to wait to see if she will be "as good as new" [45]. After a face-lift, the speaker is refigured as a baby, not an adult. Plath identified with the authority of the surgeon, but his job is to heal others, not himself. Plath's poems expressed the hope of being made whole again, but it was not
fulfilled; they tell us that the abject parts of her psyche could not be healed, only eradicated by self-negation.

5.5. Abjection and Negation of the Body

Many critics, scholars and readers have commented on the extensive imagery of negation and death in Plath's poetry. Hugh Kenner (42), Professor of Humanities at Johns Hopkins University, wrote of Plath's poetry: "Naked negation spilling down the sides of improvised vessels, that is the formal drama of poem after poem ... negation repudiates other persons, the poet's own body, the entire created universe." British poet and literary academic Barbara Hardy (61) wrote that Plath's poetry "rejects instead of accepting, despairs instead of glorying, turns its face with steady consistency toward death, not life." Annette Lavers, formerly of University College London, wrote: "There is indeed in the world of Sylvia Plath ... an intuition of a kinship between poetry and death; yet this intimacy with death never gives rise to positive, fundamentally religious feelings ... death always appears as a terrifying conclusion" (Lavers 104). Aurelia Plath (217) also recognised explicit negation in her daughter's poetry: "in her writing the toll of the death bell frightened me". Plath herself wrote in October 1957: "my demon of negation will tempt me day by day" (UJ 620).

Reading Plath, we see not only the body under attack but also the mask of the body falling away to reveal her psychological suffering. The metaphoric, wounded exterior yields up the abominable interior, as the boundary between outside and inside becomes more and more uncertain. Plath's late poetry suggests that death and the abject were what her being had become. I interpret Plath's repeated, ever present images of negation and death as Plath metaphorically trying to rid herself of aspects of her life that she found abject: her depression, self-loathing and guilt (Section 3.1.2.); lack of creativity and inability to write when depressed (Section 3.1.4.); and at times, surprisingly, writing itself (Section 3.2.7.). I see this imagery as going beyond acceptance of the abject – Plath has failed to metaphorically heal her wounded self, as I argued in Section 5.4., and all she has left is to attempt to negate the abject within poetic representation.

The writings on abjection in literature by French psychoanalyst and critic Julia Kristeva provide some insight, I believe, into Plath's poetry of negation. In Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection, Kristeva relied heavily on theories of the unconscious mind and the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. She theorised that what one finds
Abject has the quality of repugnance, of being opposed to the self, "something rejected from which one does not part" (Kristeva 2-4). Abjection, or the process of rejecting that which one finds abject, disturbs the subject's identity, system and order – it is "a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, ... a friend who stabs you" (Kristeva 4). Facing the abject is fearful and traumatic. Jung (133) maintained that continued intrusions of the abject into the conscious mind were unwelcome and were therefore repressed. After examining literary texts of Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Kristeva 18-20), Marcel Proust (Kristeva 20-22), James Joyce (Kristeva 22-23), Jorge Luis Borges (Kristeva 23-25), Antonin Artaud (Kristeva 25-26) and Louis-Ferdinand Céline (Kristeva 133-139), Kristeva concluded that they exemplified sublimation or repression of the abject. She proposed that when repression was no longer able to displace the horror of abjection, a significant existential threat arose that was evident in these texts: "At the level of downfall in subject and object, the abject is the equivalent of death. And writing, which allows one to recover, is equal to a resurrection" (Kristeva 26). Kenner, Hardy, Lavers and Aurelia Plath were clearly alert to the existential threats that abound in Plath's poetry.

Kristeva (12-14) postulated that abjection confronts us at a very young age, when a child first starts to separate from the maternal figure and exist as a separate entity. This occurs at the same time as the child starts to develop language. Language, Kristeva theorised, represents the child's identity and, like that identity, is threatened by the psychological separation. Language, oral or written, becomes linked to abjection because autonomy of language allows the child to become autonomous and separate successfully from the maternal entity, thereby overcoming the abject. Thus, writing is an antidote to the abject, a way of "displacing abjection" (Kristeva 13) but not eliminating it altogether.

Jacqueline Rose (34) took up Kristeva's idea of writing as resurrection by suggesting that Plath laid out a "psychic economy of writing" to produce a literature, "a set of figures", through which she unconsciously represented herself and her psychic turmoil. For Kristeva (38) the writer "is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorising in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead [s]he comes to life again in signs", a description that could be applied to Plath.

Kristeva's theory supports the contention that writing was of vital importance to Plath (Section 3.2.6.), and that without writing, the existential threat of abject components of Plath's life became overwhelming. Although poetry was Plath's
lifeblood, at times she was detached from it – poems such as "Snakecharmer" (1957) and "Words" (February 1963) reveal this ambivalence. These are poems of disenchantment, separation and negation, of times when Plath faced the abject of loss of her creative drive. They reveal Plath's doubts about the supportive and restorative powers of literary writing. Plath's recurrent estrangement from poetry is evident in her last poems and coincided with her suicide.

In this section, I examine poems in which Plath metaphorically negated the abject components of her life. The ekphrastic "Snakecharmer" was inspired by the 1907 eponymous painting of French post-impressionist Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) (Figure 1). Plath described the painting as "a green-leaved world" (*UJ* 347), "a green & moony-mood-piece" (*UJ* 359).

**SNAKECHARMER**

As the gods began one world, and man another,
So the snakecharmer begins a snaky sphere

Pipes water green until green waters waver
With reedy lengths and necks and undulatings. [5]
And as his notes twine green, the green river

Shapes its image around his songs.
He pipes a place to stand on, but no rocks,
No floor: a wave of flickering grass tongues

Support his foot. He pipes a world of snakes, [10]
Of sways and coilings, from the snake-rooted bottom
Of his mind. And now nothing but snakes

Is visible. The snake-scales have become
Leaf, become eyelid; snake-bodies, bough, breast
Of tree and human. And he within this sakedom [15]
Rules the writhings which make manifest
His snakehood and his might with pliant tunes
From his thin pipe. Out of this green nest

As out of Eden's navel twist the lines
Of snaky generations: Let there be snakes! [20]
And snakes there were, are, will be—till yawns

Consume this piper and he tires of music
And pipes the world back to the simple fabric
Of snake-warp, snake-weft. Pipes the cloth of snakes

To a melting of green waters, till no snake [25]
Shows its head, and those green waters back to
Water, to green, to nothing like a snake.
Puts up his pipe, and lids his moony eye.

The poem is dark and brooding, as is Rousseau's painting. Two related subtexts are present: an allegory for poetry, and the apparition of Otto Plath as a controlling, creative/destructive power. "Foot" [10], as opposed to "feet", directs us to Otto, who required a mid-thigh amputation shortly before he died (Stevenson 10). Also, the singular form "foot" evokes the notion that poetry is tenuous and half-hearted in its provision of support for the speaker, in parallel with Plath's perception of her father's emotional support. The poem praises artistic creativity that is allusive and "snake-rooted" [11] but concedes that creativity is unreliable and transitory – "more analogous to lovemaking than to the birth of a child" (Axelrod, Wound 42). As much as poetry was for Plath "a new way of being happy" (Plath, Johnny Panic 21), and therefore a means of self-preservation, "Snakecharmer" informs us that Plath recognised the sustenance provided by poetry was temporary.

Plath's choice of the snake as the dominant motif for this highly imagistic poem is apt. For millennia, snakes have been ascribed allegorical functions and mythic properties (Vogt 1). Emergence of healthy snakes from casts of shed skin led to their
Figure 1. "Snakecharmer", Henri Rousseau (1907)
association with transformation, rebirth and healing (Briffault 643-648; Jobes 154), all frequent themes for Plath. Christianity imputes a metaphorical dual nature to serpents: they are evil, chthonic and agents of death, but also symbols of omnipotent beneficence and wisdom (Holy Bible Genesis 3:1-24, Exodus 7:10-13, Numbers 21:5-9, John 3:14-15). This duality fits with Plath's desire for death and subsequent rebirth, as well as her confrontation with the abject and her sense of guilt which she held about her father's death (UJ 121, 432, 447, 476). Symbolism of the snake informs us that beneath an apparently calm exterior lay the abject existential poison of Plath's despair and anger that could strike at any time.

By the time Plath wrote "Words", ten days before her death, her alienation from writing appears complete. "Words" provides a commentary on the language and process of poetry. Language has escaped from the speaker's control and undercut her authority; she is mastered and subdued by her own creations, a trope used widely in literary and cinematic works of horror.

WORDS

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes traveling
Off from center like horses.

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.
Years later I
Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,  
The indefatigable hoof-taps.  
While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life. 

The poem's imagery is intimidating, full of fatalism and disappointment. The will to achieve linguistic power through language and words is presented as ultimately futile (Britzolakis, Theatre 183). "Words" signals the negation of Plath's creative gift. When her sense of imaginative fulfilment was lost, so was her sense of selfhood (Axelrod, Wound 210). With the failure of language to repress or displace the abject, existential fear arises until it finds its only "stable object – death" (Kristeva 23). The poem exposes that existential crisis – the speaker can no longer draw on writing for support to get her from "the bottom of the pool" [19]. Yet there is a paradox here. Plath's estrangement from poetry and her apparent loss of faith in her creative ability came at a time when, arguably, she was writing, or had just written, her best poetry (Kirsch 237), as I discuss in Chapter 6.

Negation of the abject is the theme of Plath's 1960 poem "The Hanging Man". Plath was hospitalised for depression just before her attempted suicide, a time "when she succumbed to her first creative dry spell in the summer of 1953, [which] she saw as a living death and attempted to end her existence" (Rollyson 13). She was treated with psychotherapy and ECT. "The Hanging Man" projects her hospital experience and post-ECT mood onto the image of "The Hanged Man" tarot card (Figure 2). Plath described the hospitalisation as "an eternity of hell", "misery" and a "mental vacuum" (qtd. in Stevenson 45). The poem is one of several ("Who", "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond", "Witch Burning", "The Stones") that recall Plath's ECT, and reveals that Plath had not given up the idea of suicide.

The tarot card shows a man hanged upside down from a tree by one ankle. The image evokes the martyrdom of St Peter, who was crucified upside down, and is open to several interpretations: sacrifice, prudence, duty, vanity, the relationship between the
Figure 2. The Hanged Man Tarot card
Divine and the Universe, and the "sacred mystery of death and glorious resurrection" (Waite 46). The card's association with death and resurrection would have been known to Plath, who was well versed in Western Tarot (Kurtzman 286-295).

THE HANGING MAN

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree. [5]
If he were I, he would do what I did.

Plath's poem is entitled "The Hanging Man", not "The Hanged Man" as on the card, as if the man in the poem is in a state of perpetual presence – in a state of the bardot, suspended between life and rebirth. The description of ECT is violent and monstrous. "Bald" and "white" were symbols of death for Plath (Lavers 109, 112). That the speaker's abject boredom and depression render her helpless [5] recalls Plath's summer of 1953. The hanged man's face expresses boredom or "deep entrancement" (Waite 46). The speaker claims the hanging man would also attempt suicide to overcome boredom if he were her, as if trying to justify Plath's suicide attempt. The poem suggests ECT was given not as therapy but as punishment for "what I did" [6], the abject nightmare of Plath's attempted suicide. Negation of memory associated with ECT is expressed in the obscure simile of a "lizard's eyelid" [3]. What is clear in the poem is that suicide, or self-negation, is still very much on Plath's mind seven years after her attempted suicide, and that she is sympathetic to it.

Plath presents herself as a target for annihilation in the grim humour of "A Birthday Present". This long poem, written four weeks before her thirtieth birthday (Plath, CP 208), is itself a metaphor for death.
A BIRTHDAY PRESENT

What is this, behind this veil, is it beautiful?
It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?

I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want.
When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking

'Is this the one I am to appear for,
Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?

Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,
Adhering to rule, to rules, to rules.

Is this the one for the annunciation?
My god, what a laugh!' [10]

But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.
I would not mind if it was bones, or a pearl button.

I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.
After all I am alive only by accident.

I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.
Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,

The diaphanous satins of a January window
White as babies' bedding and glittering with death breath. O ivory!

It must be a tusk there, a ghost-column.
Can you not see I do not mind what it is. [20]

Can you not give it to me?
Do not be ashamed—I do not mind if it is small.
Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.
Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,

The glaze, the mirrory variety of it. [25]
Let us eat our last supper at it, like a hospital plate.

I know why you will not give it to me,
You are terrified

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,
Bossed, brazen, an antique shield, [30]

A marvel to your great-grandchildren.
Do not be afraid, it is not so.

I will only take it and go aside quietly.
You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,

No falling ribbons, no scream at the end. [35]
I do not think you credit me with this discretion.

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.
To you they are only transparencies, clear air.

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.
Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide. [40]

Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,
Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million

Probable motes that tick the years off my life.
You are silver-suited for the occasion. O adding machine——
Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole? Must you stamp each piece in purple,

Must you kill what you can?
There is this one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me.

It stands at my window, as big as the sky.
It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center

Where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history.
Let it not come by mail, finger by finger.

Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty
By time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it.

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.
If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side.

Plath's first-person voice emphasises awareness of the respective positions of the narrator and the unnamed addressee. Internal rhymes add ironic humour: "cooking / looking" [3]; "present / accident" [13/14]; "shriek / antique" [29/30]; and "slide / side" [62]. The narrator converses, almost jousts, with a personified, mysterious birthday present. Death is watching her, sizing up her physical body by which he identifies her as his victim – her "black eye-pits and a scar" [6] are respective references to Hughes's physical assaults (UJ 392, 552; Rollyson 155) and Plath's facial scar. The speaker is
clearly vulnerable but not in the least concerned by the prospect of death [56-57], except that death has to be swift [52-53, 60-62] so that her suffering is not prolonged. The poem predicts the manner of Plath's suicide four months later [39-43]: deadly gas [40] fills the speaker's veins with the multitude of errors ("motes" [43]) made during her life, another reference to Plath's longstanding sense of guilt (UJ 121, 432, 447, 476). The speaker's death can therefore be justified.

Plath wrote about negating the abject self as a way of achieving perfection in several poems, often using body imagery. In "Medallion" (1959), "The yardsman's / flung brick perfected his laugh" [26-27] when he killed a snake. Vomiting, or getting rid of an abject bodily fluid (Rozin 757-776), negates the contemptible mother figure in "Face Lift" [7-8]; death of the dewlapped lady allows the speaker to be reborn in innocence [25-32]. The surgeon perfected a statue, not a living being, in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." [31-32]. The aborted foetus in "Three Women" is perfected in death: "The face of the dead one that could only be perfect / In its easy peace" [80-81]. The speaker in "Fever 103" sees her dead but perfect body ascending to paradise [45-49]. A woman, fearful of pregnancy in "The Fearful", claims: "She would rather be dead than fat, / Dead and perfect, like Nefertit" [13-14].

In all the above examples, Plath removes the abject parts of life by death, and thereby associates death with perfection, as she stated so famously and explicitly in "Edge". "Edge" is one of two poems written six days before Plath's death, and is the last in CP. The poem depicts the corpses of a poet/mother and her children in an eerie, wounded landscape, presided over by an impersonal moon.

**EDGE**

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

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

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

The title leads the reader to the edge of the abyss, to the very boundary of existence. Another nine of Plath's last twelve poems also have single word titles and share the cold, intense, distracted character of "Edge". Lineation is economical and pared down, thereby emphasising meaning. Run-on lines give a sense of urgency, that the poem had to be written. Plath's technical brilliance is evident in rhymes and half rhymes: "perfected" / "dead" [1-2]; "flows in the scrolls" [5]; "toga" / "over" [5,8]; "rose close" / "odors" [14, 15]; "sweet" / "deep" [16]; "moon" / "hood" [17,18]. The mood is exhausted and resigned, absolute and indicative of death, as if the poem is being read posthumously (Alvarez, Plath 67). The toga, serpent, milk, moon and bone are all white and are references to death (Lavers 109).
Arguably, "Edge" is the most monstrous of Plath's poems. Despair and negation are rampant. Poetry, "the scrolls of her toga" [5], has become an illusion, repeating the theme of "Snakecharmer" and "Words". Yet "Edge" goes beyond the detachment of these two poems by describing its own negation. "Each dead child" [9] exposes Plath's abject view of her own poems, which she also represented as dead infants in "Stillborn". Each child/poem is "coiled, a white serpent" [9], a deadly enemy capable of instilling fear and causing harm, as in "Snakecharmer".

Plath used artistic creativity and childbirth as metaphors for each other in several poems ("Stillborn", "Barren Woman", "Childless Woman"). In "Edge", the speaker rescinds the poems and returns the abject products of creativity to her maternal body [12-16], thereby also identifying herself as abject. Facing the abject is terrifying and traumatic because it raises existential anxieties of ultimately becoming "waste", that is, dying (Nussbaum 32), and, according to Kristeva (54-55), death is paradoxically a protection for someone confronting the abject – "abjection is edged with murder" (Kristeva 150).

The disturbing image of the dead woman's "smile of accomplishment" [3] resembles the smile in "Paralytic" that appears only after all human "wants and desires" [38] have been shed and a life's work has been completed. The woman's death in "Edge" has been read as a self-sacrificing act of revenge against a world that controlled and rejected her, an act of deliberate composure, a "work well done" (Howe, Dissent 14). Plath had a vision for herself: "I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God.' " (LH 40). She wanted to be the perfect poet, the perfect wife, the perfect mother. The woman in "Edge" is killed by the "powers of horror" – as much by the abjection of her own failed dream of perfection as by the abject denial of that dream by others. Cessation of Plath's textual voice was followed by suicide (Axelrod, Wound 102). Once her voice had been silenced by death, her "perfection" could not be changed – the meaning and achievement of her life, her poetry, was fixed forever.

Plath's images of death and mutilation of the body usually encode a wish for transcendence and rebirth as the true, healed self (Section 5.4.). In contradiction to Plath scholar Judith Kroll (129), I do not find any desire for restoration in "Edge", either overtly or covertly. The sense of renewal or recovery associated with images of wounding or death in poems discussed in Sections 5.3. and 5.4. is absent. The struggle of the inner self to surface has ended. Nothing in "Edge" suggests the resurrection


arising in "Lady Lazarus", for example. The poem, tragically, sits well as Plath's last. Indeed, Seamus Heaney (144) considered that the poem was: "a suicide note, to put it extremely. An act of catharsis and defence, maybe, or maybe an act of preparation."

5.6. Conclusion
What do these monstrous bodily images of wounding and negation bring to our understanding of Plath's poetry? Plath's metaphors of the body gave her work a gruesome authority. She had such control of her writing that she was able represent self-harm and suicide, perhaps the most personal acts that can be undertaken, in images of the physical body. These are not random or chaotic acts of violence that she described, but cleverly constructed metaphors and images. While the images themselves may be off-putting, their structure, appropriateness and form confirm Plath as an expert in the use of such tropes. Plath's strategy was to use forceful language to construct vivid and confronting imagery in order to leave the reader in no doubt about her voracity for her craft.

I have examined poems in this chapter to argue that Plath's body imagery was symptomatic and strategic. Tropes of the body were symptomatic of her needs to, firstly, understand and resolve conflicts of identity and sexuality, and to exhibit an energised femininity; secondly, express frustration and anger at herself and those close to her, and take revenge upon and criticise others; thirdly, be restored to psychological health; and fourthly, eliminate her abject mental anguish. Plath's biography indicates that she was sexual, at times extremely angry, and had the capacity for self-harm. The body that Plath employed so diligently in her poetry rippled with sexual energy, violence and psychic anguish, and, as Britzolakis (Theatre 158) pointed out, was distinctly female and embodied. I argue that Plath employed the physical body as a metaphor for her psychological self, in just the manner that Roman Jakobson (1152-1156) proposed in 1956 (Section 3.3).

Plath's use of the metaphorical body was strategic in that the body was an ideal instrument with which to understand and articulate her situation and her goals. Plath's strategy was to consistently exploit the body as metaphor so as to construct a meaningful self-presence in conflicts with herself and others, and to create the illusion that she was at least able to limit her psychological anguish, if not ameliorate it. She chose to exploit imagery of the body for both its disruptive and restorative potential. However, the body and the meaning it held became increasingly problematic. The
poems examined here demonstrate the reality of Plath's situation – that bodily autonomy became inextricably linked with poetic autonomy. As her poetic autonomy and self-esteem became lost in depression and hopelessness, so her figurative body – and in the end her literal body – became the target of her anger and frustration.

Plath's recurrent metaphors of physical wounding, looking for ways of healing the body, and ridding herself of what she found abject, tie her poems together and evoke a gripping picture of a poet desperate to change her reality, to reconstruct herself. What makes the content of these poems so compelling and uncomfortable – even frightening, as Joyce Carol Oates (34) says in the epigraph to this chapter – is the apparent destructiveness to herself and others. Plath comes to us through her poetic imagery as merciless and threatening, locked in images of the fragmented body that are violent and horrific. Plath achieves this because her use of corporeal metaphors allows us to understand the relatively abstract nature of her psychological anguish in ways that are structured and with which we are able to identify quite readily. Also, her body imagery has such an immense range and variability that readers are given licence to freely construct whatever they find fearful and monstrous. Her metaphors of the body present such potent and rich images that they are not simply superimposed on the poem, they become the poem.

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CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

*My house of days and masks is rich enough so that I might and must spend years fishing, hauling up the pearl-eyed, horny, scaled and sea-bearded monsters sunk long, long in the sargasso of my imagination.*


6.1. Discussion

To enquire into the poetic terrain of Plath requires engagement with both her work and her life. The place of biography can be problematic in the interpretation of poetry in general, but particularly in the case of Plath whose life and death, in addition to her intensely personal poetry, have attracted so much attention. The relationship between a poet and her/his work has long been of considerable interest. Before the sixteenth century, anonymous texts were the norm. The English poet John Dryden (1631-1700) (xiii) diminished the role of the poet in his 1697 translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* by admitting in the Preface that he made additions to the original text: "I have presumed farther in some places, and added somewhat of my own where I thought my author was deficient, and had not given his thoughts their true lustre ... It was also necessary to restore the sense of Chaucer." (Dryden xiii). Even today the importance of the author varies from field to field (*Norton Theory* 1470).

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) put forward the ideas of the emerging movement of New Criticism in his radical 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in which he made a plea to poets to remove themselves from their work by practising the ideal of the impersonal aesthetic, so that a poem became a "self-referential unit" (Warley 939). Eliot (960-961) demanded that attention be shifted away from the poet towards the poem:

... the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. ... [poetry is] not
the expression of personality but an escape from personality ... The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.

Ironically, Eliot's demand preceded the rise of Confessional poetry.

In a similar vein, the French literary theorist Roland Barthes, in his 1968 post-structuralist essay "The Death of the Author", argued that the most beneficial reading of texts required removal of literary works from their immediate contexts and suspension of all preconceived ideas about their authors. Barthes (1323) asserted a radical independence for literary texts: "It is language which speaks, not the author; to write is ... to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'." For Barthes (1325): "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing." The corollary of death of the author is "birth of the reader" (Barthes 1326), who has to take on a contributory role to establish meaning within, and interpretation of, the liberated text. Barthes was correct in saying that undeclared or absent authorship results in refusal "to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text" (1325), but at what cost? The concept of authorship is a complex topic that has an extensive philosophical, cultural and critical history, and is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, to de-author a work, to my mind and to the argument of this thesis, means de-contextualising it and, in poetry, loss of context inevitably results in reduced understanding at some level, reduced resonance, and loss of meaning and aesthetic pleasure experienced by readers.

As I have argued in Section 3.3., context is important for interpretation of metaphors, which are, as I. A. Richards (63) claimed, "transaction[s] between contexts". Eagleton (108-114) also pointed out the importance of contextual and other clues in understanding metaphors in poetry. The New Historicism movement of the mid-twentieth century argued that poetry should not be insulated from context, especially its historical context, but rather that the individualities of the poem and poet should be seen as components of a moment in history (Warley 939). The point has been particularly well made by Robin Peel in regard to the influence on Plath's writing of Cold War politics and the alienation brought about by her "transatlantic shuttling" (Peel 15, 69). Tracy Brain also wrote about the impact of historical context and Plath's "straddling the Atlantic" (Brain 45-74). Space does not allow an historical reading of Plath's poetry in
this thesis. However, historicism is pertinent to much of Plath's poetry as it foregrounds contexts in which we see her struggling against social, moral and patriarchal attitudes prevalent in the culture of the north-eastern United States of America in the 1950s (Sections 3.4.2., 3.4.5. and 5.2.).

The French writer, philosopher and literary theorist Michel Foucault (1926-1984) took a more liberal stance than Barthes and held that "the subject [author] should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered ... to seize its functions ... its systems of dependencies" (Foucault 1489). The author, he wrote (1484) "explains the presence of certain events within a text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications (and this through the author's biography or by reference to his particular point of view, ... by delineating his fundamental objectives)." I argue that this is very much the case with Plath.

There can be few better examples of entanglement of text with biography than Plath's poetry. Many critics (Alexander; Alvarez, Savage; Axelrod, Poetry and Wound; Britzolakis, Theatre; Rose; Stevenson; Van Dyne, Biography; Wagner-Martin, Biography) have paid great attention to Plath's biography in order to interpret and seek deeper meanings in her poetry, and Plath's cultural legacy remains difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle from her life and death (Britzolakis, Ariel 121). Although Plath's poetry stands as a remarkable aesthetic achievement, the penalty for removing her from her poetry is some loss of knowledge and richness in understanding the poetry. As critic Charles Newman wrote in The Art of Sylvia Plath (32) in 1970: "biographical details are not essential to the poetry's life, of course – but they will repay the unborn scholar who will inevitably rediscover them, for they show us how organic a vision this poet developed." When a text has little aesthetic value for us, it is because we cannot find meaning, self-reference or context in what the work signifies; or, as American critic and poet Donald Kuspit (192) said, we find "little or no trace of our world in it". When that is the case, the reader cannot take up that contributory role required by Barthes. Biography, especially Plath's, opens the poet's world to the reader and allows her/him to relate a little more closely to the poet. I contend that an adequate reading of Plath must take account of her life to some extent.

In order for this thesis to make its particular contribution to readings of Plath's poetry, my focus has been on her poetry rather than her life and death; that is, I have endeavoured to examine the poetry for its own sake, but through an awareness of what is known of Plath's life experiences. To concentrate on her biography runs the risk of
misreading her work as a mere record of her life. Purely biographical readings of Plath are reductionist in their scope in that they limit her agency as a woman and as a poet; her ingenious and powerful imagery becomes swamped by speculative conclusions. In addition, biographical readings collude in an attitude that the life is more interesting in the end than the poetry.

One cannot escape from Plath's biography, including her psychological pathology that Jacqueline Rose (3) has suggested we avoid. In examining aspects of Plath's life I have attempted to contextualise the bigger patterns of disorder, conflict and influences that I believe are relevant to her poetry. I have argued that Plath suffered from bipolar II disorder (Section 3.1.) which prevented her from writing at times, yet gave her unusual energy and drive at other times. Her disorder darkly coloured many of her poems, but also promoted and fuelled her creativity and ingenuity and heightened her awareness of the physical and sexual body, thereby facilitating its frequent appearance throughout her poetry. Also, I contend that Plath's literary education included an understanding of the crucial role of imagery and metaphor in poetry, and facilitated their use in her writing (Section 3.3.). I contend that Plath's interest in the body and reading of female poetry of the body gave her the confidence to write about the body with greater ease than would have otherwise been the case (Section 3.4.).

I am not saying here that Plath's poetry, especially her emotionally taut later poetry, was symptomatic of her illness, a cyclical condition within periods of euthymia. Plath had other wounds that she needed to express and resolve apart from her psychological condition – her parental relationships; the consequences of her attempted suicide; ambivalence and conflict over her career, sexual relationships and motherhood; her fluctuating fortunes as a writer and poet; and the broken relationship with Hughes, and her ensuing anger. I believe it would be incorrect to claim that her relentless, albeit intermittent, depression and hypomania fashioned or wrote the words of her poetry. Rather, I maintain that the monsters of violence and anger so blatant in her later poetry especially, together with the dramatic change in her poetic style, were responses to changes in her personal circumstances.

What, then, is the place of biography in a study of Plath's poetry? It cannot be simply dismissed, but rather should be repositioned alongside "more encompassing narratives", as Van Dyne (Biography 17) has suggested. Plath's biography suggests that she, like other Confessional poets, was moved to write because to be in possession of
her poetry was to be in possession and control of her life. She used poetry as an empowering fiction – with the body as metaphor.

Plath's methods of self-representation in her poetry (as well as her journals and letters) suggest that she regarded her life as a text she could invent and rewrite (Van Dyne, Biography 5). We see this in her thinly veiled sexual desire in poems such as "Pursuit"; her aggression and anger at her father and Hughes in "The Colossus" and "Daddy"; her transformative power in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m."; her need for healing in "The Stones" and "Three Women"; and her desire for rebirth as innocent and flawless in "Face Lift". As a poet, Plath created these narratives that I have referred to as "narratives of illness" (Section 3.1.6.), in the sense of being psychologically wounded. The variety of self-representations in the narratives of her poetry is symptomatic of her need to express and expunge the horrors and abject wounds of her life. I have argued in Section 5.4. that Plath wrote poems with metaphors of restoration and healing, as if she could rewrite her life as healed and uninjured – she was unable to change her abject real life but had complete control over imaginative and metaphorical life in poetry.

Manipulation of the body in her poetry was a surrogate for controlling and changing her real life. Plath's poetic narratives were interpretations of her life – they were the "stuff of her life" (Section 3.2.6.). Her dependence on writing and her ability to write got her through abject moments of her life and, once free of the choking domesticity of life with Hughes (LH 466; Axelrod, Wounds 191), Plath was able to write prolifically and brilliantly in the last few weeks of her life. As Rose (36) pointed out, for Plath writing was what "stopped the rot" and was counter to "morbidity or potential death". Once she lost faith in writing, as we see in "Snakecharmer" and "Words" (Section 5.5.), her life was at risk.

In her Foreword to the restored edition of Ariel, Frieda Hughes (xvii) expressed regret about the repeated, incessant process of interpretation of her mother's poetry: "I saw poems ... dissected over and over, the moment that my mother wrote them being applied to her whole life, to her whole person, as if they were the sum of her experience." Frieda Hughes (xx) believed that her mother's poems, particularly her later poems, harnessing as they did "her own inner forces", speak for themselves. Indeed they do, but they go beyond this. Plath's poetry narrates stories and situations and identities that ask readers to enquire more deeply. Inevitably, the poems are open to interpretations that Frieda Hughes saw (interpreted) as attacks on the now unchangeable text of her mother's work.
Plath's particular geographies of grief, despair, loss and negation are of course evident in her biography. More importantly, from the point of view of Plath's artistic achievement and poetic legacy, these same geographies are vividly and dramatically present in allusive forms in her poetry. These empowered statements within her poetry are symptomatic of Plath's agency as both woman and poet. Expression of her self was realised through the strategic codes of her concentrated poetic style and imagery. The particular strategy examined in the current work is the extent and function of her body imagery. It is because Plath's poetry was driven by such wide-ranging use of imagery and metaphor that her work has been subjected to extensive interpretation.

I argued in Section 3.3. that metaphor was an important poetic tool for Plath. Her search, successful in my view, for accurate and imaginative metaphors with which to articulate her experiences and desires, fashioned poetic tensions within her writing. Plath's drive was to encode the experience of her inner reality in highly original linguistic structures. Her strategy was to use the human body as one of many vehicles for this expression. Plath's poetry explored the paradoxical and at times ironic relation between the physical and the psychological. An uncertain and negating "grain of the throat" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 66) produced poetry that was an anagram of the body, preserving it, trying to heal it, while at the same time deleting and negating it. Barthes' lines (*Pleasure* 66-67) "language lined with flesh ... a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, ... of language" well summarise Plath's exploitation of the language of the body, a language that provided her with "a place to stand on" ("Snakecharmer" [8]). In writing about her psychological experiences through metaphors of the body, there was, as poet and critic Peter Dale (68) pointed out, a sense of Federico García Lorca's *duende* (Lorca 48-62) in all of Plath's poetry – a melancholy, a dark inevitability, a fatality.

The human body offers experiences of the sacred and the profane, the apparent paradox of which is brought about by the beauty of the living body on the one hand, and anxieties provoked by the diseased or injured body or corpse on the other. We see in Plath's poetry plenty of the body as profane and monstrous – the body dismembered and in pieces, dissected corpses, stillborn infants, preserved foetuses, pickled tissues, and attempts to renovate the ageing body. What is not seen in Plath's body imagery is the sanctity of the body. The body is infrequently presented whole but nearly always in parts, the feminine body is limited to menstruation, sexual love is replaced by animalism, and pregnancy is reduced to a series of quaint metaphors. The significance
of these representations, according to Lacan (164), is that wholeness of the human body invokes organic and psychic cohesion and integration, whereas the body in pieces symbolises dislocation and loss of coherence.

Lacan’s supposition has received support from psychiatrists Linda McMullen and John Conway who, at the University of Saskatchewan (61-71), analysed nearly four thousand "metaphors of the self" used by thirteen patients when referring to themselves during psychotherapy for depression, anxiety or personality disorders. McMullen and Conway found that the commonest ways patients represented the self was as "fragmented" or "whole". Regarding the self as fragmented or in pieces was associated with subjective distress and a desire to be healed or "to be put together" (62), and persisted in all patients who had unsuccessful outcomes. Conversely, patients with successful outcomes had a sense of being significantly injured but substantially still intact, and that during therapy a sense of healing and transformation or rebirth occurred. In her seminal work *Metaphor and Meaning in Psychotherapy*, Ellen Siegelman, a Professor of Medical Psychology, stated: "[metaphors] not only reflect past experience but also become filters that regulate how we see our present experience and how we project our future" (Siegelman 65). If we accept this supposition, then Plath's images of the injured or destroyed body become representations of her emotional and psychological turmoil and her abject experience of herself and the world. Further, they are the heralds of an inescapably dark and bleak future – the "rich masks" of frightening monsters released from "the sargasso" [floating clumps of seaweed] of the poet's imagination (*UJ* 337).

The research recorded in this thesis has several limitations. Because this is a Creative Writing thesis, containing both research and creative writing, the Dissertation and Creative Component are each limited to 40,000 words, thus restricting the scope of each part. A longer Dissertation would have provided commensurately greater room for more extensive research. The constraint of space resulted in exclusion from the research of the fifty *Juvenilia* poems included in *CP*, thereby presenting an incomplete and perhaps distorted picture of Plath's use of body imagery throughout her poetic career. The limitations of the three quantitative studies are discussed in Chapter 4. Restrictions of space also meant that a relatively small number of poems – fourteen in all – could be examined in depth in Chapter 5. My bias in that chapter was to critique mainly Plath's later poems – only three of the fourteen were from her "pre-Confessional" period. Body
imagery was more prevalent in these later poems (Section 4.4.). Similarly, there was no room for examination of the semiotics of particular anatomical words that Plath used metaphorically, as had been my original intention.

As discussed above, any research into Plath's poetry inevitably lies in the long shadow of her biography. A tendency to stray too far into a biographical reading, or even a psychoanalytic reading, distracts attention away from her poetry and limits the space available for consideration of her text. Most would acknowledge that Plath's biography is tragic and has brought her to the attention of voyeuristic audiences. Her psychological disorder encourages a psychoanalytic reading of her work, which I have resisted. I have endeavoured to ground my research in her written words.

A further limitation of this thesis is the absence of any study of Plath's original papers and drafts, now housed at Smith College and Indiana University. Plath reworked her poems extensively, as Ariel: The Restored Edition and Van Dyne's Revising Life demonstrated. Study of Plath's early drafts and revisions of poems would have shown how Plath's poetry evolved and possibly given different insights into the contextual significance of her work, but would have greatly increased the scope and length of the thesis. Whether study of these manuscripts would have shed light on Plath's use of imagery of the body is speculative.

Lastly, some may perceive my approach to the work as a limitation in itself. I have read Plath's poetry through the eyes of a surgeon and poet, and not from the standpoint of a literary theorist. This is a limitation in one sense, but I prefer to see my approach as fresh and novel, and enabling Plath's work to be researched by a clinician with specific insights and much practical experience of the human body, its variability, its innumerable conditions and some of its surgical treatments. Presentation of the personal essay before the critical work is an attempt to provide a relevant and biographical context for my discussion of Plath's poetry in the dissertation.

That Plath's poetry could be open to a new and challenging interpretation more than fifty years after her death is an exciting and opportune situation that provided the impetus for this thesis. It suggests that there are other spheres of enquiry yet to be entered. As mentioned, I did not examine Plath's Juvenilia or several hundred other poems composed before 1956 (Hughes, Juvenilia 339). It would be of great interest to examine the body imagery in these poems and compare it with that of Plath's later
poems in order to plot more completely the progress of her metaphoric use of the body. Similarly, an examination of imagery in her prose would also be of interest.

The semiotics of the body is a vast area of scholarship, encompassing literature, art, design, film and photography. Study of the symbolism of individual body parts in Plath's poetry was not undertaken for reasons of space, yet it would provide new layers of insight into Plath's work and thinking. Did specific body parts take on consistent thematic significance for Plath? With "eyes", almost certainly (Section 5.4), but what of other frequently employed body parts, such as the heart, hand, mouth or fingers?

Quantitative study of body imagery in the poetry of ten of Plath's contemporary Confessional poets (Section 4.3.) showed that these poets also employed body imagery with considerable frequency, although much less than Plath. No comprehensive or systematic study of their body imagery has been undertaken. The current investigation provides a template for study of body imagery of these, and indeed other, poets. The body has always attracted the attention of poets (Section 3.4.7.); comprehensive quantitative and qualitative study of body imagery in different genres and styles of poetry is lacking but would be of great interest.

6.2. Conclusion

Any attempt to analyse Plath's poetry has to acknowledge the outstanding aesthetic merit of her work. She produced an abundant stream of poetic encounters structured around a framework of increasingly violent body imagery. The power that resides in her poetry, particularly in her strongest work – the poetry of her last year – is a poetry of the geography of grief and suffering. Plath's poetry was, to use Lord Byron's phrase, "the expression of excited passion" (Byron 146). In scope, her work was focused; in execution, masterful; and in enunciation, monstrous. Plath's art was the art of survival, of psychological conflict and attempted resolution and, in the end, of negation. Imagery of the body took centre stage in this strategy for survival, renewal and death. Her poetry traced a path in language of the body across her increasingly abject world to a world "dry and riderless" ("Words" [16]), a world without language.

This dissertation has quantified Plath's use of imagery of the body and has shown that it was extensive. The research revealed that Plath referred to the body more frequently and in more distinctive ways than her contemporary North American Confessional poets, and that her use of body imagery increased as her poetry matured into a Confessional style. The work has revealed how the monsters within Plath's body
imagery brought force, menace and vividness to her poetry, and how such imagery assisted her to express and write allusively about powerful emotions and subjects that were intensely personal.

Plath's images of the body were literary devices that provided some coherence in her world and a means of re-shaping it. Unable to change her real life, she manipulated her metaphorical physical world. I have argued that Plath's employment of body imagery was both symptomatic and strategic. I see it as being symptomatic in that through body imagery Plath fulfilled her need to express her female identity and physicality, her anger and resentment, and the anxiety of trying to manage psychological suffering. As a strategy, the symbolic body provided an ideal target for the violence she expressed towards herself and others, for representation of her desire for healing and transformation, and for excision and negation of the detestable parts of her life.

Some time after Plath died, Theodore Roethke (178) wrote: "A poem that is the shape of the psyche itself; in times of great stress, that's what I wanted to write". That, I believe, was the very poetry that Plath did write, expressing and communicating her deepest emotions through and with the aid of imagery of the body. Regrettably, as Federico García Lorca (58) said in 1933: "In poetry this struggle for expression and communication is sometimes fatal".

* * *

* * *

* * *
BIBLIOGRAPHY
Bibliography


Searles, Harold. "The Differentiation Between Concrete and Metaphorical Thinking in the Recovering Schizophrenic Patient." Collected Papers on Schizophrenia


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APPENDICES
APPENDIX 1 – Anatomical Terms in the 224 poems of Plath's *Collected Poems* in Order of Frequency of Occurrence.

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**TOTAL NUMBER OF ANATOMICAL TERMS = 1,296**

**TOTAL NUMBER OF DIFFERENT ANATOMICAL TERMS = 217**
### APPENDIX 2 – Anatomical Terms in Poems by Plath and Ten Contemporary Confessional Poets

Titles of poems, number of lines studied in each poem, each anatomical term, number of anatomical terms in each poem (in parentheses), and total number of anatomical terms are shown for each poet. Number of lines read from the first or last poem required to make up five hundred lines for that poet is indicated by *.

### SYLVIA PLATH


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</table>
Appendix 2 – Sylvia Plath (continued)

"Paralytic"
41 lines  
41 lines  (11)
fingers, tongue, lung, eyes, breast, mouth, lips, eyes, nose, ears, back.

"Gigolo"
33 lines  
33 lines  (6)
nose, breasts, mouth, mouth, joints, eye.

"Mystic"
32 lines  
32 lines  (6)
wombs, toe, finger, faces, humpback, heart.

"Kindness"
21 lines  
21 lines  (1)
blood jet.

"Words"
21 lines  
21 lines  (2)
tears, skull.

"Contusion"
13 lines  
13 lines  (3)
contusion, body, heart.

"Balloons"
31 lines  
31 lines  (2)
heart, fist.

"Edge"
21 lines  
21 lines  (5)
body, feet, body, throats, bone.

Number of anatomical terms: 96

MARGARET ATWOOD


"This is a Photograph of Me"
left-hand.
28 lines  (1)

"After the Flood, We"
34 lines  (5)
bones, hands, legs, shoulder, faces.

"The City Planners"
39 lines  (2)
bruise, faces.

"The Circle Game"
296 lines  (29)
hand, hand, arm, arm, bodies, feet, faces, eyes, arm, arm, head, shoulder, face, toe, body, face, body, wart, forefinger, skin, body, eyes, feet, nose,
Appendix 2 – Margaret Atwood (continued)

neck, arm, arm, bones, bones.

"Journey to the Interior" 46 lines (3)
eyes, hand, head

"Some objects of wood and stone" 57 lines (3)
faces, back, heads,

Number of anatomical terms: 43

MAXINE KUMIN


"In the Upper Pasture" 20 lines (1)
beard.

"Five Small Deaths in May" 38 lines (8)
nose, hand, eyepits, legs, face, rib, leg, hair.

"The Grace of Geldings in Ripe Pastures" 17 lines (0)

"The Cows of Holland" 20 lines (4)
heads, eyes, eyes, irises.

"A New England Gardener Gets Personal" 25 lines (2)
hips, torso.

"The Food Chain" 21 lines (2)
wrist, mouth.

"Night, The Paddock, Some Dreams" 37 lines (8)
leg, neck, backbone, ear, eyelids, heads, ribs, bones.

"Country House" 52 lines (6)
hairlines, face, eye, tongue, hands, rib cage.

"Notes on a Blizzard" 55 lines (6)
feet, eyes, backside, barefoot, head, eye.
Appendix 2 – Maxine Kumin (continued)

"The Paris Poem" 64 lines (7)
barefoot, head, teeth, tongues, head, crotches, heads.

"History Lesson" 48 lines (6)
fingers, eyes, eyelashes, wristbones, legs, hands.

"Despair" 15 lines (6)
knees, hands, thighs, nose, eyes, ribs.

"Lake Buena Vista, Florida" 18 lines (0)

"Remembering Pearl Harbor at the Tutankhamen Exhibit" 41 lines (4)
beard, back, heart, intestines.

"The Waiting Game" 27 lines (3)
hand, eyes, hand.

"Mother Rosarine" 2 lines (0)

Number of anatomical terms: 63

DENISE LEVERTOV


"With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads" 30 lines (7)
eyes, heads, eyes, heads, arms, eyes, heads.

"The Departure" 12 lines (0)

"The Five-Day Rain" 13 lines (0)

"The Dead Butterfly" 14 lines (0)

"The Lost Black-and-White Cat" 14 lines (0)

"The Lagoon" 17 lines (0)

"Pleasures" 25 lines (4)
bones, heart, palm, hand.
### Appendix 2 – Denise Levertov (continued)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem Title</th>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Anatomical Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;To the Snake&quot;</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>neck, throat, shoulders, ears.</td>
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<td>&quot;Obsessions&quot;</td>
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<td>hands, hands.</td>
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<td>&quot;The Offender&quot;</td>
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<td>eye, eye, pupil, eye.</td>
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<td>&quot;Seems Like We Must Be Somewhere Else&quot;</td>
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<td>eyes, eyes, hands, hands.</td>
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<td>&quot;A Letter&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;The Take Off&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Girlhood of Jane Harrison&quot;</td>
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<td>tongue.</td>
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<td>&quot;February Evening in New York&quot;</td>
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<td>iris, heads, bodies, heels.</td>
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<td>&quot;The Dead&quot;</td>
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<td>faces, jaws, limbs.</td>
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<td>&quot;Terror&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;A Common Ground&quot;</td>
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<td>ears.</td>
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</table>

**Number of anatomical terms:** 43
ADRIENNE RICH


"At Majority" 26 lines (4)
face, face, eye, brow.

"From Morning-Glory to Petersburg" 27 lines (3)
eye, arm's, hands.

"Rural Reflections" 17 lines (2)
feet, eye.

"The Knight" 25 lines (7)
soles, feet, palms, eye, flesh, nerves, chest.

"The Loser" 40 lines (6)
cheek, lips, eyes, face, body, head.

"The Absent-Minded are Always to Blame" 17 lines (3)
back, eyes, eyes.

"Euryclea's Tale" 17 lines (5)
blood, eyes, eyeball, flanks, hair.

"September 21" 13 lines (0)

"After a Sentence in 'Malte Laurids Brigg'" 17 lines (4)
eye, lungs, skins, eye.

"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" 123 lines (16)
hair, skin, arm, thumbnail, hand, eyes, breasts, back, legs, hair, cheek, knees, eye, eyes, bosom, breasted.

"Passing On" 16 lines (1)
head.

"The Raven" 17 lines (4)
nerve-ends, head, teeth, sweat.

"Merely to Know" 39 lines (5)
nerve, lungs, hair, eyes, eye.
Appendix 2 – Adrienne Rich (continued)

"Antinoüs: The Diaries" 34 lines (14)
body's, teeth, heads, hair, napes, necks, throat, 
shin, hand, arm, stomach, eyes, hands, mouths.

"Juvenilia" 18 lines (5)
hands, neck, blood, head, spines.

"Double Monologue" 46 lines (1)
faces.

"A Woman Mourned
by Daughters" 8 lines* (1)
tear

Number of anatomical terms: 81

ANNE SEXTON


"And One for my Dame" 49 lines (7)
heart, heart, veins, heart, neck, back, half-blood.

"The Sun" 29 lines (6)
shoulder, shoulder, foreheads, skin, eye, mouth.

"Flee on Your Donkey" 242 lines (30)
knees, hand, heart, teeth, faces, jaw, holes, blood, 
feet, hands, genes, eyes, eyes, eyes, forehead, hands, 
head, teeth, eye, guts, fingers, eyelid, face, finger, 
skull, stomach, brains, hearts, buttocks, mouth.

"Three Green Windows" 40 lines (4)
skins, skin, blood, hands.

"Somewhere in Africa" 31 lines (11)
arm, throat, backbone, pores, body, eyes, hand, 
waist, breasts, limbs, bones.

"Imitations of Drowning" 57 lines (6)
arm, mouth, tongue, nose, lungs, urine.
Appendix 2 – Anne Sexton (continued)

"Mother and Jack in the Rain"
49 lines (10)
bone, hand, finger, eyeball, knees, heart, teeth, body, body, bones.

"Consorting with Angels"
2 lines* (0)

Number of anatomical terms: 74

JOHN BERRYMAN

Note: The numeric titles of Berryman's poems are not included in the line count.

"1."
18 lines (0)

"2. Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance"
19 lines (0)

"3. A Stimulant for an old Beast"
19 lines (1)
chests.

"4."
18 lines (5)
body, feet, eyes, hair, eyes.

"5."
18 lines (1)
fingernail.

"6. A Capital at Wells"
19 lines (1)
hearts.

"7. 'The Prisoner of Shark Island' with Paul Muni"
19 lines (0)

"8."
18 lines (7)
teeth, hair, eyes, thumbs, ears, hand, crotch.

"9."
18 lines (1)
brain.

"10."
18 lines (2)
heart, chest.

"11."
18 lines (3)
knees, bodies, limbs.

"12. Sabbath"
19 lines (1)
eye.
Appendix 2 – John Berryman (continued)

"13."
hair, head.
18 lines   (2)

"14."
18 lines   (0)

"15."
ass.
18 lines   (1)

"16."
18 lines   (0)

"17."
ears, teeth, tears, arms.
18 lines   (4)

"18. A Strut for Roethke"
throat, head, head.
23 lines   (3)

"19."
hands.
18 lines   (1)

"20. The Secret of Wisdom
19 lines   (0)

"21."
faces, eyes, eyes, heart.
18 lines   (4)

"22. Of 1826"
mouth, eyes.
19 lines   (2)

"23. The Lay of Ike"
19 lines   (0)

"24."
eyes.
19 lines   (1)

"25."
hand.
18 lines   (1)

"26."
19 lines   (0)

"27."
heart, ears.
17 lines* (2)

Number of anatomical terms: 43

ALLEN GINSBERG

Appendix 2 – Allen Ginsberg (continued)

"Mescaline"
78 lines (14)
skull, hair, skull, hand, head, eye, ass, hair, belly, ass, ears, ears, face, face.

"Lysergic Acid"
132 lines (28)
eyed, skeletons, eyed, skulls, skull, breast, stomach, face, hair, blood, eyes, eyes, Eye, body, stomach, mouth, bones, belly, eye, eye, Eye, eye, eye, eyes, corpse, head, belly, lips.

"Mandala"
9 lines (2)
bodies, eyes.

"I Beg You Come Back & Be Cheerful"
87 lines (7)
shoulder, mustaches, beard, finger, brain, ass, eyes.

"Psalm IV"
21 lines (10)
face, lap, ear, eyes, face, brain, bone, body, ear, arms.

"To an Old Poet in Peru"
38 lines (7)
face, beard, hair, feet, eyes, cheek, ass.

"Die Greatly In Thy Solitude"
14 lines (0)

"The Dazzling Intelligence"
27 lines (1)
cheek.

"Aether"
94 lines* (15)
hand, bloody, mouth, eardrums, eares [sic], teardrop, eye, hair, crosslegged, beard, foot, eyebrows, head, tongue, ears.

**Number of anatomical terms:** 84

RANDAL JARRELL


"Next Day"
64 lines (12)
eyes, mouth, eyes, flesh, flesh, palm, face, eyes, face, body, face, body.
Appendix 2 – Randal Jarrell (continued)

"The Mockingbird" 24 lines (0)
"In Montecito" 23 lines (7)
breasts, lips, breasts, hair, buttocks, lips, breasts.
"Thinking of the Lost World" 89 lines (12)
eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, face, body, beard, hand, nails, hand, hand, hands.
"Children's Arms" 154 lines (13)
arms, hands, arms, arm, heart, hands, hands, shoulders, hands, hair, noses, eyes, noses.
"A Night with Lions." 28 lines (1)
skin.
"A Street Off Sunset" 118 lines* (18)
palms, insteps, chest, hands, mouth, tooth, arms, arms, arms, flesh, face, ears, nose, face, neck, body, eyes.

Number of anatomical terms: 63

ROBERT LOWELL


"Beyond the Alps" 43 lines (6)
hand, skull, heels, thigh, eye, brain.
"The Banker's Daughter" 47 lines (9)
heel, knees, groin, backbone, eyes, nerve, fingers, palm, blood.
"Inauguration Day: January 1953" 15 lines (1)
heart.
"A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" 25 lines (4)
eye, hands, arteries, heart.
"Ford Madox Ford" 46 lines (4)
heart, eyes, mouth, foot.
Appendix 2 – Robert Lowell (continued)

"For George Santayana" heads, hand, bile. 36 lines (3)

"To Delmore Schwartz" thumb, toenails, eyelids, eyed, eyes, flesh, lips, hemorrhages. 41 lines (8)

"Words for Hart Crane" mouths, heart. 15 lines (2)

"My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" hands, hands, legs, face, nerves, eye, nose, fingernail, arm, necks, moles, hair, hands. 154 lines (13)

"Dunbarton" bones, fingers. 61 lines (2)

"Grandparents" throat. 18 lines* (1)

Number of anatomical terms: 53

W. D. SNODGRASS


"Ten Days Leave" eyelids, nerve, eyes, hand. 31 lines (4)

"Returned to Frisco, 1946" shouldered. 29 lines (1)

"μητς ..... ουτις" fist, eye's, hand, face. 15 lines (4)

"At the Park Dance" eyes, arms, eyes, fingers. 25 lines (4)

"Orpheus" lips, head, feet, head, head, jaws, faces, hair, eyes, ear, eye's, eyelids, back, flesh, hands. 92 lines (15)

"Papageno" mouth, hands, rib cage, heart, hair, hand. 19 lines (6)
Appendix 2 – W. D. Snodgrass (continued)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Anatomical Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Marsh&quot;</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>belly, heart.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;September in the Park&quot;</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>face, face, hand, breast.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;The Operation&quot;</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>stomach, groin, hair, body, faces.</td>
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<td>&quot;Riddle&quot;</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>hands.</td>
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<td>&quot;Winter Bouquet&quot;</td>
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<td>hands, vaginal, arms, eyes.</td>
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<td>&quot;Song&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Song&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Seeing You Have ...&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Home Town&quot;</td>
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<td>feet, eyes, hand.</td>
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<td>&quot;A Cardinal&quot;</td>
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**Number of anatomical terms:** 55

**TOTAL LINES EXAMINED:** 5,500

**TOTAL NUMBER OF ANATOMICAL TERMS:** 698
APPENDIX 3 – Anatomical Terms in Poems by Plath and Ten Contemporary Confessional Poets. A list of the anatomical words identified in five hundred lines of poetry by Sylvia Plath (SP), Margaret Atwood (MA), Maxine Kumin (MK), Denise Levertov (DL), Adrienne Rich (AR), Anne Sexton (AS), John Berryman (JB), Allen Ginsberg (AG), Randall Jarrell (RJ), Robert Lowell (RL), and W. D. Snodgrass (WS), and the total number of times each word was used by each poet. In the column on the far right, 'f' signifies that the word was used only by female poets; 'm' signifies that the word was used only male poets.

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APPENDIX 4 – Different Anatomical Terms Used Exclusively by Each Poet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Number of Different Terms</th>
<th>Anatomical Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plath</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>abortions, afterbirth, blood-flood, blood-flush, blood-hot, blood jet, cells (2), contusion, corpses, elbows, eyeholes, haunches, humpback, joints, lung, mole, throats, toes, torsos, womb (2), wombs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atwood</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>bruise, forefinger, left-hand, wart.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kumin</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>backside, barefoot (2), crotches, eyelashes, eyepits, hairlines, hips, intestines, irises, leg (2), rib, ribs (2), thighs, tongues, torso, wristbones, wrists.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Levertov</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>iris, pupil.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>body's, bosom, breasted, brow, flanks, napes, nerve-ends, shin, soles, spines, sweat, tear, thumbnail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexton</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>brains, eyelid, forehead, foreheads, genes, guts, half-blood, holes, jaw, pores, urine, veins.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berryman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>chests, crotch, thumbs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ginsberg</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>bloody, corpse, cross-legged, eardrums, eyebrows, lap, mustaches, skeletons, skulls, teardrop.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jarrell</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>insteps, nails, tooth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lowell</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>arteries, bile, heel, hemorrhages, moles, thigh, toenails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snodgrass</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>bloodless, shouldered, vaginal, wounds.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* * *
CHAPTER 7

POETRY

Wiping the Glass a Little Clearer
Chapter 7

Poetry

Wiping the Glass a Little Clearer

Oh, if only I could leave just a line or two behind me to say that I too have lived and loved and rejoiced, that I've known youth and spring ... that there's a far away land by the shores of the ocean where I still live and love and wait for something even now.

—from "An Unknown Friend", Ivan Bunin (1923)

7.1. Bridging Statement

The title of the chapter is taken from my poem "The light at dusk". The poems presented here were written concurrently with the Dissertation. My poetry thematically supports the critical work, and adopts and responds to the themes of Plath's poetry examined in the Dissertation. My poems interrogate the dialectic of unity and separation, and include the unified and disassembled body in their imagery and as subjects, as did Plath's poetry. They are influenced by the tone and subjectivity of Plath's poetry.

My poems follow in the Confessional style that Plath adopted in late 1959. The poems presented here are personal, often deeply so, and many are drawn from autobiographical events, about which I have felt compelled to write. By writing in a Confessional mode, I feel I have been able, in some minor way, to have better insight into Plath herself. Through the layering of feeling and mood, these poems explore themes found in Plath's poetry – journey, relationships, loss, death and love. Some of the poems are informed by my life and work as a surgeon and by periods of time that I spent in Nepal between 2006-2017.

Much of Plath's poetry, especially her later poetry, was written as free verse, and this is the form I have chosen for most of my poems. Charles Olson quoted the poet Robert Creeley as saying: "Form is never more than an extension of content" (qtd. in Olson, Projective / Verse 1054). Levertov (Notes 1085) altered Creeley's statement when
she later wrote: "[poetic] form is never more than a revelation of content", a view with which I concur. The content of a poem, I believe, is a presentation of the poet's distinctive and inner experiences. Few poets exemplify this as well as Plath, as I have sought to demonstrate in the dissertation. A poem's content should be allowed to determine the poem's form. Free verse is especially appropriate for poetry of the Confessional style, where recalled experiences are distinct units of awareness, each with its own duration and depth. My aim is to have poetic structure in harmony with the intrinsic nature of the expressed experience, rather than restricted to pre-formatted stylistic sets of relations between words and lines.

I have included three poems located in Nepal, where I wrote my first poems. Living and working in that country was a formative time in my poetic life. These poems express the same themes as the rest of the collection, and were written after the thesis was commenced. Plath, too, wrote poems about places that were not her native territory, notably "On Deck", "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" and "Berck-Plage".

Notes on the poems (Section 7.3.) are presented after the poems rather than as footnotes to each poem, so as not to distract the reader unnecessarily. Some of the poems have been published, as indicated in the Acknowledgements (Section 7.4.).

**Bibliography**


*
7.2. The Poems

Muses

They sat on rocks
as sirens,
salt rings on their fingers,
an ocean tugging
lapping their feet.

They swam beneath a flood tide,
coming in
then always going away,
fearing the touch of oneness,
the ebb and flow of the body.

Their kisses were glass,
pleasure just the tragic part
of happiness,
their tears a necklace,
the road was their mirror.

Every breath
was a suicide,
a bullet in the neck,
systole and diastole
simply omens of the heart.

I tried to write their poetry,
to make incisions into meaning,
explore the spleen,
expose their layered flesh and tenderloin,
the clefts between our feelings.
A desk clock ticked off heart beats
as empty pages spread like stains,
words became water,
a black swan skipping,
love letters written in pencil.

I wrote the lines of their faces,
their puff and undertow,
thoughts coiled in language
obscure, even obsolete,
creeping out of wounds.

now silence has erased
the phonemes from my nights,
replaced them with open spaces,
gaps they gave
in exchange for leaving.
Saturday night with Hwang Tong Gyu

The hall was dark, except for a lamp on the table around which nine participants sat, waiting for the poet from Korea. A small bowl of strawberries had been placed on the table. Someone took a strawberry, bit into it close to the epaulette of small green leaves beneath which the fruit was white and hard, as if starved of softness from the sun. The old poet, dressed in a black kimono, shuffled to the table, moved the lamp towards his page of hieroglyphs. He spoke no English. He asked for silence through an interpreter, then read a long poem in Korean about wind burial—a tradition of leaving a corpse on an elevated bed in the open, allowing it to disappear through exposure to wind and elements. The poet said he wished that he too might be buried in the wind after his death. He bowed and looked down at the table. The participants listened to the interpreter's reading. When the reading finished, the hall fell silent, except for the sound of the wind outside.
Reading Lorca on a wet afternoon

You waltz briskly into consciousness—
a room of four white walls and silence.
I see you—thin-waisted, black hair and eyes,
dim against the dull sky
of a high window,
viewless unless we care to look down on the city.
Rain runs down the glass, sluices the cauld
of late afternoon.
The day is drowning.
This is the dangerous hour
when pale tides of celadon light
cut down the sky.

You seat yourself comfortably in an armchair,
take a book from your pocket.
You read it like an open palm.
It is burdened with blood stars—
full of regret,
full of desire,
full of cries and cold hands
hungry for air and sunlight.

You reach out,
take a world from your labyrinth.
The bells of Córdoba begin to ring from yellow towers
in the early hours,
usurp rays of sunlight,
flower over the dry earth.
There are guitars, their strings
sobbing across fret boards,
long strings vibrating
and burning into the sinews of music.
The keel of the moon
silvers the wind in the orange groves.
Only you can hear the young girls sing
as black snow falls
on the bare hills of your Calvary.
You have known a hundred lovers
—they will sleep forever
beneath green olive trees.
Those hundred horsemen, uncertain of their road,
will taste the crumbs of death.
You have taken a blade from a plough
and with your hand scratched a line
across this recumbent land.
The bells cease their call.

Your grand epidemic fills the void
that for many years I found so soothing.
I am determined to take leave of you
but cannot.
Soon, you will be gone, back to Andalucía,
and I shall be left
to sift your lines alone.

Ah, but look!
Along the road comes a clown
wearing orange blossoms, his face
a worn pock-marked half-moon,
pain plangent behind his smile.

Quickly now, you say,
the wound of time has caught us,
have you anything to say,
were you and I ready to meet?
Yes, I say, but it is not you I have met.
It is the violet voice of _duende_,
of deep song reflected in clear pools,
and air smelling of lemons after rain,
a self I had not met before.
The Sadhu

He is the ever-walker, a journeyman of landscapes, treading paths that rise and fall under sun-strikes and rags of moonlight. His feet are calloused by stones and rocks of the high Himalaya and stretching impossibility of the vast Gangetic plain. He knows the topography of solitude and the geography of desolation, and shuns snow lines and monsoon times. A bed-roll and silvered bowl are carried in a sack on the beak of his shoulder, his frame frail beneath taut leathered skin and saffron robe. He measures the arithmetic of empty skies, calculates gain by the sum of stars, and lives with the cost of vows cast in mantras and scriptures practised for millennia. He pays no homage to fathers or wives, but to deities like Shiva, the bull-mounted Mahadev of countless incarnations who roams the earth with the power of thunderbolts. He sleeps in the silence of charnel grounds in the thin air of mountains, beyond squalls of luxury. He circumambulates the sacred mountains of Kailash and Manaslu, washes his body in the icy lakes of Manasarowar and Rakshastal, to be cleansed by those crystalline waters. After the summer rains, he walks from Tamil Nadu to Kathmandu for the Shiva Raatri festival. Painted with fragrant paste and fumigated by juniper, there he waits for gifts of rice and dhal. He breathes the haze of hemp and smoke of corpses burning on the Ghats amid chants and drones, bells and clatter. He sees mysteries and grace beyond the narrow path of the present, joins the prayers of god-men beneath a transparent sky. Soon, he will pick up his staff and, alongside his million gods, journey on never-to-endingly.
You start out alone on that long walk home, across fields and heath, away from the town and church with its lych-gate in the lee of a cypress, the toll of the Angelus falling to the path you half believe has been set for you, as if you are simply walking along it, but not only walking, doing the work, touching, interrogating the frankness of the land, passing the chase of two landscapes, across a breast of the earth with its threads of gold, as you dare the jaws of wind and storm, rain spilling down your face in rills like tears too sharp to quell before the winter sky clears briefly, the clouds becoming buoyant but light fading as the sun lowers itself, eases itself down quietly and folds blindly behind a grey time-line, the penumbral dimness gathering, closing over the bare land, the very edge of nature coming towards you in the gloam, the broad night soon to sweep clean across the skin of the earth, the moon hiding, wrapped in a shroud of remnant cloud, and you walking, still walking, still crossing open ground.
Notes written on a ferry while crossing Malacca Strait

We are ushered below deck into the belly of a boat, its rows of blue vinyl seats offer nothing but facility. The hull's riveted inner walls are ship-lapped, shiny with blue and white belts of paint that barely cover bites of salt-rust. Above us squared-off portholes look out to the Georgetown dock. The emergency windows are frosted, corroded with sea-salt. Life jackets hang bored in racks with a *fuck-you-don’t-look-at-me-save-yourself* kind of look.

The cabin fills—backpackers from England, girls from Sweden, a tall black man twitching in Bose headphones, workers going home, Arab families.

We are set adrift from Swettenham Pier. The engines raise their voice, push us through the harbour wash. They know where we’re going. Up forward in the cabin, a subtitled movie starts on a silent screen.

Out in the open flow we pick up speed,
labour across the old blue-green sea
rough and wrinkled under a grey face of sky.

Decibels rattle the cabin, rattle
the little Arab children,
their fathers stretched out
asleep on the blue vinyl,
cramping others,
Mothers, niqaabed and gloved in black,
chatter and dart eyes at each other.
Young boys screech and scream and kick,
hold on tight to their chips, chocolate,
Facebook devices.

There are shootings and car chases
on the silent screen.
You have fallen asleep on my shoulder.

Spumante spray washes the windows
as we pitch and roll
towards Langkawi town.
Black plastic sick bags
swing from a nail on the water-closet door.
A nameless granite plug skirted by pea-green mangroves
towers from the sea
then sinks from view.
On the silent screen a man with a goatee
is stabbed through the hand with a corkscrew.

You wake, surprised to see the white-capped ocean
still going on.

The atonal drone of the ferry falls.
A jetty appears,
its lighthouse a pagoda.
The wind stays out on the blue sea
and the water becomes a silk of aqua.
Crewmen shout in a language unknown to us.
The camp stirs, children jump up,
luggage crowds the exit.
The town looks lazy in the fragile afternoon,
slips an eye over the new arrivals,
doesn't seem to care.
The pier is awash with taxi-drivers,
all with the best price
for wherever we want to go.
Their yellow shirts swarm and buzz around.

We bump the dock,
doors open.
The air is rich with the smell of Asia.
Waiting at the hatchway, I glance back at the screen—
the man with the goatee has been shot, dies slowly,
the corkscrew still through his hand.
Shearwaters returning

It starts during the cocktail hour.
We sit around like voyeurs,
popes in mufti, sipping slowly,
while they slip down the side of the sky,
a dependable benediction
for the last of the failing day.

They come in a flurry, a convocation
scissoring the sky
calligraphic and tonal in omega grey.
Their numbers skim a line of shallow surf
as they sum up the safety of the ailing light.

They swoop in low and silent
across the horizontal gaze of a drowning sun,
arrowed wings swept back from bullet-bodies.
They roll and glide
over the sea's champagne edge,
wing-tips skudding the waves,
their bellies full of blue-black mackerel and silver yellowtail—
supper for their young.

They rise and arc, loop and soar
on a tenor of wind,
litter a blank page of firmament
like a ballet in chaos.
Strung out over a scarp, they cramp the shoreline
beneath an open sky,
knowing in the twilight
the certitude of home.
Ordained by the dusk,
they circle and find their sentry holes
among grasses and tussocks and scrubby bush
on high-rise collared dunes
and faces of sea-washed bluffs.
Pulsating wings are set for rest,
glad to be journeyed, travelled,
glad to be returned,
glad to hold an aftertaste of sea.
Coming home: a semi-cento

I have walked across plateaus and high plains
dry river beds and ageless rocks
through the Himalayas as a Sadhu would
then down from the cold into valleys of gold
— I have found the warm caves in the woods.

I have knelt at the feet of high priestesses
cleansed the blood of a thousand men
read the philosophies as seekers should
and written words no longer heard
— I have found the warm caves in the woods.

I have made my home in a shepherd's body
tamed a wolf and its rampant heart
I have been to the rivers where the Buddha stood
washed my feet where the waters meet
— I have found the warm caves in the woods.

I have come to you on a midnight train
made my confession in a tinker's hut
dwelt in a forest where I understood
the lives of trees and their falling leaves
— I have found a warm cave in the woods.
The light at dusk

*To have come so far is excellent, but it is not enough if one stops there.*

— Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1782)

On a late autumnal afternoon your calm captures me.
My hands, open and wanting, hold your book, an unsealed depth of knowing providence. I cannot resist your lines, their layered steps and reverence. With no company but your own, you walked beside the yew and spruce, through lemon-clad fields and meadows of blue forget-me-nots, passed asphodels edging a mirrored lake. A yoke lifted in your solitude, the world no longer opaque, your heart softened, your steps more certain.

You saw *serenity, tranquillity, peace and even happiness*. Did you write these words for yourself or for those you knew would follow, those with the same grained and knotted problems of our singular domain? In this thin crepuscular hour, centuries later, I see that excellence, its reach through time. I shall not stop.
I thank you, for you have held a light and wiped the glass a little clearer.
Monk, walking

Step through the mist and rills, across
black ribs of rocks and rough moraines,
wake the granular dawn and its mineral air.

Walk all day through spindrifts and landscapes
beneath an end-of-worldliness sky—
if only that blue could stay forever.

Breathe the fragrance of solitude,
rest in the icy rones of couloirs,
drink meltwater from the pure lands.

Rise to a narrow ridge of mountains
in the light of numinous snow lands,
reborn as if nothing has happened.

Have no fear of evening as it grips
the land with its gloved hand and pinpoints
stars strapped to the dark carpet of heaven.

Pass along to the last line of light. A pebble
in your shoe. Your heart remembers. You turn,
and from the veiled edge of paradise you call to me.
Monsoon

Sometimes,
awful things have their own kind of beauty.
—Henri Cole (2010)

Adequate anaesthesia is obtained and she is placed
in a supine position, her body then draped in the usual
sterile manner. An elliptical incision is made
and a red tear trickles from the eye of the Buddha.

The dissection continues sharply down to the pectoral
muscle, perforating vessels ligated and divided,
the loose areolar tissue giving way freely. Later,
awakening slowly, she remembers her suckling child,
a man and the cup of his hand, his lips, the thrill
through her body. She murmurs about singularity,
the foolishness of beauty and the fragrance of solitude,
of heavy rains and specific points in time.
Cunts in conversation

*Do Not Touch* barks the sign, stark as a petty seizure—
*Do Not Feel* is what it means.
Here they are, splayed and laid out for you,
life-sized and rooted to the wall,
plaster-cast and spayed, one hundred and forty-six strong.

Not the captive parts of women free or keen to be freed.

Not the lips of sexuality, of fortune or release.

Not the hooded prow of ecstasy waiting for a hand or tongue
or other.

Not the guardians of an inner sanctum, sacred spirit, or essence.

Not the private, the secret, the only true confessional.

Not the major and the minor, the opus and the aching.

Not the joy of desire, the spasm of love.

Not the grand canals of want, of love, of birth.

No, none of that. Just *Cunts*, coming soon to a cork-board wall
or back alley near you.
Gawk at the winged flaps between truncated thighs,
the would-be tenderloins of felicity.
Raw pudenda gripped by limy putty and whitewash.
Some fluffed and ruffed like Elizabethan Royals,
others bare as beggars.
Clams shucked on the beach of an ebony wall.
Gone are the dark webs
from across the loosened thighs.
The beat of wings is not far off
and hangs above the staggered girls.
Matt, stark, white, half-open, half-closed,
lips a'slip,
all chatting amongst themselves.

Is this the enlightenment, the great unveiling,
or a would-be cure for the carnal habit?
A Conversation?

It's tailor's lust in clay clothes,
sartorial sex in birthday suits,
a twat
swollen with voyeurism,
an indifferent peek by the beak,
cheap chat
with all the glamour of an empty condom.
**The body perfected**

*I shall never get you together entirely*

*Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.*

—Sylvia Plath (1959)

Here is your body, airless and culled,
the fault line of your life. You lie in the quiet light
of morning on a dissector's tin table, stiff-hearted,
cold, without mercy or care, waiting to reveal
the parts and pieces of a body already fragmented——
your body lioned red by gas, martyred.

Your hands are still now, blue and parched
by London's sleet and snow. They are
filched and folded, one upon the other,
with neither view nor landscape nor prayer between them.
They once pushed back children to the falling sky——
hands of a ghost-mother.

Fingers, stiff as twigs, have let go their angst.
One by one their grip has loosened, slipped
out of gloves and into the shallows.
The pen you held is dry and closed, the night flower
gone, not waiting for the spring thaw——
fingers that shaped shadows.

Your nails, half-mooned and hooded, are the beaks
of weasels that flicked the glass of uncertainty.
These talons smiled once, then clawed
at the cackle of your smirched love,
pecked the eyes from the cage of his skull——
nails driven into a body flawed.
The feet that came so far lie tagged and tied at the toes under your shroud. They used to march flint-like along box-edged streets, echoing grief shed from a soul. The mist, cold as thought, covered the pate of Primrose Hill where you will forever walk on England's pleasant pasture—feet that can no longer grow old.

Your breasts were succour for two roses, two children pleated and teased from your leathered body. The wolves of the world still suck at them. Now empty as winter trees, their white sap dried and starched, we still grasp at the words they expressed—breasts of a snow poem.

The gift of alchemy was in your womb, where seminal lines seeded and grew in clean blood blooms of struggle and centricity. Motherhood was a night-storm swollen with disaster and the silken thread of a lost half-child—a womb of duplicity.

The spleen's tempered red and white pulp was cleft by the catch of witch-words sprung from the earpiece of a falling world. They cried release, release. The artillery was quiet behind your shuttered mouth, a flayed sky needled the line, tattooed the ache—a spleen you could not appease.

You let children hang from your neck where lovers smelt musk and anger and fire. Your neck wore the noose of a dozen lead sinkers, the lace of a dozen white lilies, a pall of veins and stains of itinerant thoughts, desires and dreams—the neck of a tinker.
Look at your veins, muted as blue rain,
their soft currents just sleeping ribbons, still
reeking of blood-lust, of tarnished vengeance.
They lie flat now beneath marbled skin, filled with invisibles
that leave nothing to return to the heart——
veins of inconsequence.

Ears that once picked up the ticking of clocks
or the rhyme and rhythm of a pocket watch
are closed forever. Time is no longer a whisper.
You cannot hear the sound of the hours behind
your veil as you wait at the lych-gate——
ears of an eavesdropper.

And your lips, bloodless, thin, dry as a Puritan,
offer no cry or curse, no quest for mercy
for the sin you made, the lost breath of certainty.
Gone are the kisses that once lingered in tones,
in sunlight and touches of angel silence——
lips once sweet with divinity.

The shuttered eyes you have left for others
are the eyes of accomplishment. Now they gaze,
dull as gritstone, across a street of dismay,
along the lines of terraced faces in Fitzroy Road
without gleam or lustre beyond the foggy pall——
eyes of enlightenment shrouded in grey.

Here is your body, fragmented, abjected,
stolen from under you, put out with the cat.
Bread on the table, milk in glasses in the usual way.
The words had run out, the lines all filled,
so your body yielded, wearing its rogue smile,
departed, perfected, as if it were today.
Two views of an operating room

i.
They drag her from the pull of an ocean, the surf surprised at what it has done. Paramedics at the beach, sand on their blue rubber gloves, empty her lungs, pump her chest, needle her half-barnacled heart to start it again. Her brain sleeps through an hour of down-time, swells, squeezes through the foramen of an hour-glass, slips away.

A corpse with a pulse, they bring her to an operating room. A flat oily smell lifts from her skin like heat haze. Teams and their players assemble around the operative field, knifing small egos in the hollow hours before dawn. They take out bits and pieces—a heart now perky with inotropes, the lungs’ surfactant recovered, the liver maudlin and slippery, the kidneys ho-hum. They flush them, wash them, bag and ice them, scatter them across country.

ii.
The city is irritable, the evening traffic not yet settled. A courier delivers an esky, gives it to the blue-clad nurse at the operating room door. A tenderfoot boy arrives on a trolley, his mouth metallic, tongue dry, breath fetid, blood weak. He gives his name to the nurse, his body to the surgeons. His mind floats in white light.

The kidney sits naked, grey in its ice-pool dish, bean-shaped, waiting for its moment. Surgeons toil—a wound, the crack and smoulder of cautery, stitch and sew, vein to vein, artery to artery, over and over like palisades of ampersands. The clamps come off, pulses rise, blood swells the organ, pink, tumescent,
at home again but in an unknown, almost tissue-matched body.
The boy wakes to a piss-yellow dawn. The surgeons leave,
their hands *steeped in sweat and in smoke, smelling of lilies and urine.*
Melancolye impostume

*A canker is a melancolye impostume, eatynge partes of the bodye*

—*Salerne's Regim X*, Thomas Paynell (1528)

A fleshy stone, a plum, resides beneath my bladder.
It has a crooked foetus, alive within its own time and space,
an unholy granite fixed within my prostate gland.

Cell by cell, it squeezes out its own specific antigen,
a grim excessive protein, signifier of things to come.
My tumour takes its long capricious stroll along

tiny passages and larger carriageways better used
for semen and ejaculates. It goes about my body
not thinking of conditions or consequences, so set

is it upon a fractured notion of simply wanting more.
It never sleeps. This craggy rock is an avant-garde
conception, inept, capricious, a final metamorphosis

withering my body, blocking up my flow, facing down
its own awkward suicide. Elders from older days
thought disease was love transformed. To them,

this cull's a crime of sickly passion, retribution
for misplaced hungers of the past. Tonight, as I lie
prostrate in my bed and drift to restless sleep,

Death may be closer than I could ever know
and my momentary stay almost eaten away,
my hungry *melancolye impostume* consuming to the end.
Poem for a birthday

Today is your birthday, Mother.
But you will not know even if I tell you.
Your ninety-two-year-old brain
has been shot by nature's twelve gauge,
amyloid scattered like lead pellets
through the glia of your mind.

I'll phone you later today
to get closer to you
from twelve hundred kilometres away,
and shout into your waxy ear
plugged by a hearing aid
as worn and flat as its lithium heart.

You won't know who is calling
or even how to hold the cordless phone.
You will not wonder why a vase of yellow flowers
sits pert on your bedside table
awaiting the nudge of your elbow,
or why a petal or two will drop long into next week.

Nor why this stranger, who calls himself
your son, is asking how you are
and wishing you well, sending you his love
on your thirty three thousand six hundred and third day
which, for all you know,
could be your first.
Graduation

Suits of black, grey or navy blue sit in rows.
Whiteness and colours are gone from the dresses,

passed on to flowers filling Greek vases,
lilies standing tall. Vivaldi, soft against the ceiling,

was chosen for the season. Muffled undertones
are memories caught by handkerchiefs,

the facts not fully in. A stranger, brighter
than her buttonhole, reads her daily script,

strikes a happy chord no one really hears,
pushes a barrow whose weight she doesn't know.

I stand and speak, leave my heart out
in the rain, my father in a box.
The dead

They lie apart from us on tables, beneath scalded sheets and suture lines of havoc. On cordite starless nights they stir and wake, bequeath us feelings and stories of failings and trench warfare, of how we left them, let them bleed while they were mute and helpless, anaesthetised for the parting. They go about their shackled lives in narrow houses, mostly quiet, vacant, travelling light, ghosting among us as they wish. They come and go through our days and nights like lost lovers, sometimes so blithely there, sometimes nagging our souls, patrolling the hours with gunshot eyes above vented masks, feet tangled in ropes and memories but walking by themselves. Their lips are bloodless and taut, their parched mouths say naught. They have no friend to warm their bed, no one to bid good night. Solitary as the midnight surgeon, their alabaster bodies lie faint and frozen, their faces etched blue and crying for what God has abandoned. They are as hollow as thought these marmoreal dead—they have no currency, no latitude. They soak up our pity and disguise their feint in a flam of hurt. They yield up no right of reply and do not seem to care.

It is we that they have cut and opened up, we who wander the churchyard under pockmarked moons, mourn last year's leaves and shelter with the moss in lych-gates. These dead are not the damned, for it is they, not we, who have escaped the drift of time. They cannot die again.
Pith and husk

We came long ago with youth and trepidation,
a white-smocked flock of awed impatient questioners.
But there was nothing to fear from these volunteers
laid in lines on Anatomy's steel tables, like soldiers on parade,
for they were here to serve on our side, to help us learn
the body's ins and outs, its form and constitution.

We were startled for a while when the canvas sheet
was peeled back and we saw our first deceased,
the dear departed, embalmed and silvered,
waiting for our touch. We took their salutation,
wondered who they were, thought about their lives and loves,
their joys and daily grind, what made them come
so far for us, beyond the call of grace and pride.

They put their trust in us to go about their bodies
so we paid them due respect, but to whom we were not sure—
we never knew their names, though we came to know them well.
We recognised our privileged place
and gave appreciation for their presence, for their gift,
for their wish that even after death they would have a role to play.

We marvelled at their husks of leathered skin,
a textured shadow covering their core,
hands that once held hopes and dreams
perhaps no different from our own,
eyes that had seen beyond the needs of self,
feet that had walked the path where we are yet to go.

In that room of light and learning they let us bring to life
their fabric, form and frame. They gave themselves
to science, so that we could learn the body's inner order,
its essence, gist and wonder,
the line of this, the course of that,
the relation of parts to the whole.
For them there was no pain beneath the knife,
no grief or secret exposed by our dissecting fingers,
no life beyond that we could ever disrupt.

From them we learnt the substance of the body
and nature of its flesh,
but more than that, we learnt the legacy of giving.
We learnt that hysteria doesn't come from the womb,
that the spleen is more than an organ of wrath,
and the gut has nothing to do with valour.
We learnt that hearts have strings called chordae,
that theirs were safe and could not be tugged
by love or loss or feelings, which seem to last forever
long after the body has turned to ash.

And what value did we gain from their donation?
They did not ask, and we can hardly measure.
I took that learning to clinics and operating rooms
where the sick exposed the malice of disease
and the innuendo of what we call 'pathology',
that carnal consequence of time.
Thanks to these silent teachers I had the blueprint
of human structure, the map of where to cut
and where to not, and where to place a stitch, insert a suture.
I could find the fossae and folds and planes in tissues,
and so repair the bodywork while keeping the engine running.

So years after they left the Anatomy room
our philanthropic strangers still made their contribution
to the healing and care of others they could never meet.
And did we know this corps of willing corpses?
Yes, we knew them well.
They were those who gave and didn't count the score,
who wanted life and health for others
and thus held back their final place of rest.
They were the roots that spread and swell
to let the tree above ripen and bloom,
like magnolia in the first flush of spring.
We give thanks to them now and acknowledge them here.
Their memory and spirit are with us still,
for the pith remains long after the husk has gone.
Ice on the mountain slopes was melting into rapids
that tumbled across grey moraine in the coombe below.
Fiery yellow spring flowers flouted the lower meadows,
the sky was chill and clear
but for a diacritic of cloud above the village.

The old Ghurkha's woven Dhaka topi sat squint
on his head. He wore a black nylon anorak
that a Sherpa boy had given him
in exchange for a long-retired kukri.
Medallions of lapis lazuli hung around his craggy neck.

He sat on a low stone dyke
smoking a long finger of ganja
picked from the side of the path.
He heard the whip-crack of an avalanche
and turned toward the bifid peaks of Manaslu.

He put two hands
to his one cataracted eye
as if to look through a telescope.
He saw snow cascading into a mouth in the ground,
and he knew.

'Look at me,' he called across the valley
to the massif, 'I'll tell you a secret—
Death does not fling us into nothingness,
it turns us into pestering souls needing attention.'
He laughed, and the earth opened beneath him.
For those who came home after the guns went quiet

Awake for hours
hunted by memory—
his 4 a.m. report.

The killing fields
are like lovers lost—
they never really leave.

From deepening blue
to omega grey—
an armistice waves and beckons.

A muzzled kiss,
alone at dawn—
a single report rings out.

The echo fades.
There's more blood on the earth—
another grave is filled.

His pistol said
what his voice could not—
man down, man down.
Those left behind

i.
A soldier, already half undone, ashen and cold
as lost religion, lies on a table as for crucifixion.
A surgeon leans over him beneath acetylene lights,
his voice clipped and fraught, hands busy in the belly.
He scarcely makes out anything in that blood-sunset,
in the hiss and spit of freeform blood breaching the air.
He is alive with the violence of fright at what one man
can do to another. His gown and gloves hide nothing.
Strings and ties cannot hold the soldier together.

The surgeon hands the soldier's parents a hero's tale for an
heirloom. His life was short, their remembering will be long.

ii.
Two soldiers kneel in the chill of a chapel for prayer and
remembrance in Angelo Morbelli's tale of those left behind.
They are bathed by the bare light of God. Their hands
rest on coffin-lid pews in a sea of silence. The face of one
is in his hands. The other—upright, head bowed.
They're too old to go to war again. Both, in army-issue
greatcoats and caps, know the indiscriminate slap
of the hand of slaughter. They pray for their sons
and comrades, pray they'll not need to see the surgeon.

Desolation, sealed in paint, has not spared these two men,
already mourning those in the field, not home at Christmas.
Miranda Ann

*i.m. Miranda Ann Barnych*  (27.1.1980 – 21.11.1997)

Beside the path up from the beach, beneath the theatre of a spring sky, your bleached photograph still smiles beside the rough cruciated driftwood and sea shells stacked there to remember you. Beneath your shrine of melaleuca, rest a white ball, yellow ribbons, a leg rope and plastic flowers aloof as the moon—all objects of a kingdom where promise and excursion were lost. Below at the beach, the sea, that great lake of memory, still feels its weight. Billowed and crested, waves beat and teem in white shards on the guilt-black basalt rocks as if in remorse for your fatal day. A seal-pup, playful and innocent, roams the shallows where currents tear the sea grass. Sand whips up the beach on a southwest wind, grey gulls and gannets work alternate shifts dawn through to dawn, hold silent wakes on the tidal sands and wade the scrim of rock pools.

Was it just a moment against chance, the blink of an eye on the face of fancy that brought you here, then took you away, let you slip out on that twilight tide? Our loss and your absence still haunt the beach that grieves for the beat of your young heart. The sea's rendition is beyond our blue mood. You lived in your own moment, rocked a short journey before changing form, before losing your blond heat.
in the hiss and bubble of the undertow.
The smell of your hair and light sea-sweat
still lingers here, left over from the heady days,
the salt having gone from everything now.
Four in the morning

i.m. Leonard Cohen (21.9.1934 – 7.11.2016)

When they told us, you had been
in the frozen earth of Shaar Hashomayim
for days,
beside your father, mother,
your name scratched in stone
by a fingernail of time.

My lover—my girlfriend, an old poet once called her—
wrote a poem for you.
She wrote about four whales
we saw that afternoon from the house at the beach,
three, four hundred metres beyond the surf.
They leapt from the ocean
into the early summer salt air
searching for you,
their bifid tails beating the water
as if to assuage their grief.

The sunset sky, golden as the gift of your voice,
was crossed by two vapour trails—
strings from your guitar.
As the sun passed to another world
we saw the black silhouette of Pyramid Rock—
the tip of your Fedora.
At dusk, when the shearwaters
came in low across the folds
of water, silent, not able to speak your name
in the gloom,
we drank to you,
sang your songs,
standing before the slow pulse
of a future without you.

Back in the city, the claxon and rumble
of the first train are still
an hour away.
I watch by the window.
The needlepoint of stars is lost on the far side
of clouds that pack the black sky.
Thunder rolls over the miles
and the burnt land pulls down rain.
Night pays its tribute with the wail of an ambulance,
the tear of a hoon car ripping up the veins of a freeway,
a truck whining through a synchromesh of gears.

My eyes, drowsy as a Sunday synagogue,
cannot find the blindness of sleep,
my ears no longer hear their Hallelujah.
Sis

You wrote that note, sis, like you did, that note, a sigh, a cry, left in a drawer, that note about a part of you we never knew, you lying on your bed against the wall, lying on the bed, arms open, red from your arms on the wall, face speckled like the wall, and rain falling soft outside, light fading at the window, rain falling on the window, running down, like red from your arms, pooling on the carpet, warm for a while, then cooling, like it did, sis, like you, ebbing away on the bed, without a sigh, not a cry, just a note, a cry, like it was just a day, another day, like it was, sis, your fingers cold, white, you on your bed against the wall, carpet knife on the floor, your hand open, arms open, running as they did, you whispering silent, your mouth moving without a sound, you in your room, sis, upstairs, cold, you upstairs and me downstairs, downstairs with mum, listening to rain soft on the window and hearing your silence, like it was wrong, like it was, sis, and us running up the stairs, seeing red on the wall by the stairs, and wondering, wondering what it could be, as you lay there, like you did, sis, cold, white, speckled, not sighing, and us wondering why, wondering how, how it could be true, like it was, and us not knowing the note in your drawer, not knowing what you wrote, and rain still soft on the window, telling us it was true, us not hearing a sigh, your cry, that part of you we never knew, and rain running down and light fading at the window, the light fading, saying it was wrong, like it was wrong, like it was, sis.
I have read that mourning, by its gradual toil, its indescribable burden, slowly erases pain. I do not believe, cannot believe, that proposition. For me, time only dilutes the emotion of loss, does not erase it. I no longer weep for what is motionless, for what is held in distant murmurs beyond the hills of storms. What I have lost is not the abundance of a past, but a being. Not a being, a quality of being. Not the indispensable but the irreplaceable— plays of sunlight, individual flames of a fire. What remains is absolute, unqualifiable, rods of rain or ice that trail from clouds, never reach the ground, never heal the breach between heaven and earth, never find the edge of certainty.
**Grace, briefly**

It was guarding the gate,
basking in brown grass,
coiled and shy under an open sky,
black eyes wide.
Our sweat grew fast and prickly
with the hot north breeze.

Then we killed it——
a brick dropped from behind the high wall
broke its spine, the blade of a quick spade
severing its copper head.
The body lay writhing and knotted
as our thoughts,
the gate ours again.

Around the table that night we talked
and laughed, all pleased, so pleased
that with only brick and spade
we had beaten it, broken our fear,
our vision of death,
and we were all so glad.

In the night my thoughts glided
down a grey shale, slid into sharp dreams
that themselves would not die.
I saw Muchalinda rise out of the great lake
at Mahabodhi, bifid tongue flicking,
whipping the air as it gave refuge
to the silent seated Bhagavan,
the Apprehender of a world
that was pure, strewn with flowers,
anointed with perfume,
adorned by sun and moon.

In that paradise I had no care for death,
no fear of the näga,
not the sting of its bite, nor the ice
in its spine, only lust for the feel
of its soft reticulated belly.

Death comes in many skins——
like a snake in scorched grass, lying there,
waiting for murder on a glorious summer day.
Dogs dancing on their hind legs

I resign, the city seems to say with something of a grey cloud's sobriety and stillness. In this littoral without a garden, a citadel lurks in the spell of history, pale in the semi-transparent light of winter. Palaces from the gala days are draped in faded creams and pinks—camphoric old ladies holding up skirts and dabbling barnacled feet in the lap-lapping Grand Canal.

Cathedrals and basilicas, once palazzi for their own, are cold and bereft now, left over from the transubstantiation days, but still hung with Tintoretto's and Bellini's—sepia'd fortunes on north walls. Yellowed crucifixes safeguard offertory boxes in side chapels, the confessionals empty, the penitents lost to new salvations, their sins largely forgotten or washed away by the aqua alta.

Crescent bridges, heavy with selfie-seeking narcissists, straddle the streets of the grey-green Styx, the kitsch of gondoliers keeping shimmer afloat amid moans from out- and in-board motors. This hulk of a city, once a galleon fully-rigged and ruling, has sailed into its own navel, hit square in the Plimsoll line, holed amidships just above the water mark and listing somewhere to port.

The domain of Doges has cast aside an ageing woman it no longer desires. The good burghers have pinched the lira from between the bricks. Carmelites, Dominicans and Jesuits have all fled, by God—packed up their sanctuaries of art, their plaster and whitewash. Frescoes have been exchanged for tags and chary thoughts of Noah's Ark, the Ponte dei Pugni pugilists supplanted by one-punch-drunks.

There are no birds in this watery town, only great lugs of gulls with blemished white belly feathers and dotted black unders. These buzzards, they hang around the minor quays, squabble and squawk over garbage bags left high and weighted for morning barges. They do not major out to open waters where would-be waves are murmuring, yielding up stains of sea-lick and stories of wet Romantics.
Only between plots in the cimitero are there trees and winter flowers. Headstones watch the south wind breaking roses, and salute each other with all the posthumous smiles and grace that granite can muster. Androgynous black-haired boys tout those same red roses to couples spent from gondoliering in back canals, where Spring, bare and bright as a virgin wrapped in desire, will feint without a leaf to gloss.

I too have pressed words and phrases—phrases of love, phases of the moon—between pages of Pound’s *Cantos*. Today I saw a leaf fall on his grave on the island of San Michele across the cold waters of the blue lagoon. I could believe in the beauty of Venice with its thin smile set in washed stone and its fabric woven from reminiscence, if only to quieten the nights and soothe the claustral pulse.

My sense of self is assailed without and within—chaos and melancholy outside, a mixture of thoughts and rort inside reflecting their own reflections. The body alone hears waves passing along the Canal, washing at weeds on the steps of churches, lathering across the wide-eyed wasteland of this beautiful sinking city, waves breaking and breaking, dogs barking, far away barking and barking.

The whisper of Venice is here in a strongbox holed by time, rendered precious by memory, bathing the aisles of lonely chiese, wearing latticed lace from crayoned houses on the island Burano, peering through scarlet glass from sullen Murano. Hour-bells ring out soft from the campanile, palazzi settle back in the watery dusk, and the dogs, now up on their hind legs, are dancing.
Iris

I remember your irises as perfect circles
the colour of robin's eggs,
eyes as full as the wash of a blue sky
eexcept for one wedge-tailed speckled fleck.

They looked out onto the world, guarded
a gateway, peepholes where love was drawn in.
The glow of your eyes lay in sunlight, paid homage
to what would become our golden years.

A four-day flower rests in my hand,
the stem and tuberous roots gone.
Three petals of white, yellow and blue
shaped as a smile, as sunshine or young lovers.

They are stirred by a breeze, the kiss of memory.
The petals will crinkle, shrivel and brown,
they will fall to earth and a world will empty
and shatter on the ground like a glass eye.
Your photograph

You are looking up, smiling at the clean sky,
blue-eyed, freckled under a foreign sun.
I wait for you to come alive, to bring back
the slip of fingers and lips, the smell of your skin
and blond hair, your light cry of joy.
I hold you, but you fall back into my secret place—
a box full of empty time, a shelter for what has been.
These are the dog days now, lived in shuttered silence.

Outside, a south wind blows hard off the sea,
a storm swings in with the slam of a barn door
and rain gutters from the sky.
Today is made of yesterday, and that's it.

The earth will ease back into itself once more,
the mist will grow heavy again,
stones of memory will come to rest.
Go now, take our fracture but nothing more.
In the days before poetry and prose

Let’s go back, way way back to those early days.
To Barclay Street, where evenings were stretched
by daylight saving and fragments of Foreigner’s
*I want to know what love is,* and no thought of autumn
as the radio played *Boys of Summer* and *Summer of 69."
Champagne on hot afternoons in the back yard at Northcote,
rum and coke at the 'G the night we won the World Cup,
walking by the Yarra, dreaming of L.A. and Kauk
and life together. Holden Street, Punt Road, Highett Street,
climbing in through a window after midnight,
falling asleep 'til just before dawn. Christmas phone calls,
Cup Day parties, Intensive Care and Catholic guilt—
in the days before poetry and prose.

Royal Parade, Grattan Street, meeting at a bar
that wasn't there. Gatehouse Street, phoning your house-mate
to bring champagne up to the bedroom.
*Everything But the Girl, The Division Bell.*
Park Street, Leithead Street, Saturday rounds
before coffee and doughnuts on the bed.
Watching Eagles and Hawks on that last Saturday
in September, swimming at half-past nine on a hot summer night,
going up the Woolamai cliffs, walking by the sea,
a lobster lunch at the Killy, exhausted after nights away,
and holding your hand as you slept on the long drive home—
in the days before poetry and prose.

Victoria Parade, Fitzroy Lane, Wellington Parade,
Harry’s Bar, beating Essendon in a purple patch.
Whittens Lane, conversations and head in the car,
fried chicken on the front seat and realising you were human
after all, that silence in front of the fire, writing at 5 a.m.
the day you left, then your phone call from London—
in the days before poetry and prose.

Elgin Street, Arnold Street, Cruickshank Street,
days and nights lost in red wine and solitude and meditation.
Going out along Mickleham Road in the car that first time
to meet the Buddha, and coming back feeling wondrous
and all lit up, never wanting to get away
from that sense of everlasting life.
Beach Road, the Stokehouse, the beach at Port Melbourne
before going back to work,
hot air ballooning in the Yarra Valley at dawn while still
a little drunk, Joe Cocker at the Palladium and you dancing in the aisle,
Noumea and kisses with promise in them——
in the days before poetry and prose.

Coming back to Nicholson Street, Royal Lane, the tennis courts,
trams squealing at sunrise, spring mornings
walking the Carlton Gardens, Lygon Street on long summer nights,
a New Year's Eve too hot to breathe. And other promises too.
Kathmandu and the mountains, the Mala, Dwarika hotel,
Lazimpat, Maharagunj, Tinchuli, the kora at Bodha.
Tibet, washing in the holy lake of Manasarowar,
a kora around Kailash.
And in between the conversations and laughter and dreaming,
there were silences and tears,
silences and tears——
way way back, in the days before poetry and prose.
Her

I started building the south-side deck
before the day was awake. Dawn
arose along a rim of sky,
the mirrored twin of an earlier sunset,
not the still, blue eternal hour
but a saffron spill above the burnt faces
of the humpbacked Bass hills
before stealing into a late-summer morning.

Salt mist, sprung from early surf,
hung in the air for a short while,
muffled the shatter of waves breaking as crystal
beneath the cliff of Crazy Birds beach.
Two Superb Blue Wrens
came to the fence, chirped like siblings,
contemplated the red bottle-brush
and sweetness of yellow honeysuckle, then pirouetted away.

I broke open the numbness of the earth, two-dozen holes in lines.
Clay and soil, hard against my fork and spade,
built up in rows like chortens.
I set stumps in concrete, drilled and bolted joists,
cut tanned Merbau.
Beside the drill and decking screws
lay my father's handsaw, its blade pitted
and rusty, the handle still shiny
from the grip of his hand
that taught me to cross-cut and rip,
his voice stentorian and secure even now,
still steady over my shoulder.
I worked all day, alone, except for the sun
that arced above, nudging
the narrow shadow of the house and scorching my back
with a violence.

I sat on a joist to rest, lifted my bidon to drink.
For an instant I saw her face
in the last tuft of pink sun-cloud
before the sky rushed on and took her,
whisked her away in its skub,
away from yesterday's promises,
today's conscience.
I thought of what had been,
all that we had done,
our lives bartered away for blithe sunlight,
times long stripped away but never quite
forgotten, surfacing here in a mackerel-sky
between ragged cries of cloth gulls,
scattered above white caps far out to sea.

Then the sun fell down, tired,
gentled, orange,
half in another day, another world
that I could neither touch nor reach,
half resting for a moment
on an ocean
flickering with the colour of blood beneath skin.

I walked on what was left of the beach
in remnant slips of light,
the sand shiny with glitter and slip,
shadows coming to meet me.
The sea was nitric and livid,
tide all but full, its high water mark
just above the drowned sands.

In that moment
I could not read the water
nor the sky so recently ransacked by her.
The wind was level
and I faced into it,
my eyes rheumy with longing.
It told me a truth
as its hand gagged my breath,
would not let me speak.
Sunset had given up its last,
night was falling into place
and the sea, aching to rest,
unloosed once again
my empty bones from its great abeyance.
Whenever I talked about love

Whenever I talked about love, she looked away, as if having prayer-flavoured thoughts, or listening to faraway music or voices that gave her a dream-like detachment. I would break off. After a silence, she would say 'Go on, I am listening to you.' But it seemed that deep down she was reaching into a profound reserve that distracted her, prevented her from truly giving herself to love, even talking about it. Was I being reproached for having done something so frivolous as to fall in love, to have loved her in an unpremeditated way? Had she found someone else? There is nothing more remote than a woman involved in a new love affair. Is this what death is? I asked myself, for silence in dreams is death. She held a gun of suffering to my head, her mood its trigger. I would resume talking, pouring words into muteness, hollow concoctions that sought whatever meaning they could muster, but in the end just drifted away like a fret of fog over the flint-flaked sea of an English winter's afternoon. Everything I said was said for nothing, night illuminating night. But who does not speak of love before dying, if only to deny with his last word its dark interior?
Leaving Kathmandu

Weak afternoon sunlight filtered through the high windows of the departure hall, caught prismatic motes drifting above the clamour, and settled on her face. Unsure how to act out this final scene, we flailed about like puppets, suspended at the finger tips, hooked in the back, looking to close the curtain on a tired plot. Her thin dry lips parted as if to smile, a brave show for the leaving. I responded in kind. Under cover of whispered tenderness, our words became the lies and deceits of departure. At the very last it was all so sudden—a hurried pale kiss on the cheek, a slight gripping of hands, a travesty of an embrace, the woman in my arms but not within reach—like a half-goodbye from a camphoric old aunt.

The B777-308 banked low over the city, turned south-east. Monuments and landmarks of the last five months of our lives were splayed beneath me—the massive whitewashed Stupa, Narayanhiti Palace secluded and secret behind its high walls, Swayambhunath Monkey temple meditating on its green hill, and smoke rising from pyres at the ghats on mud flats by the brown Bagmati at Pashupatinath, a sign of other leavings. I saw her body, her form, laid out before me, all too soon lost in the mist that shrouds the Valley on autumnal afternoons. How untruthful our togetherness, our pickpocket love, had been, for in parting I had discovered its paradox—wanting something that felt permanent but which didn't last too long.

There must have been a trace of her perfume on my shirt or maybe my skin, for there, reclined in my window seat ten kilometres above the earth, nursing a large gin and tonic, whenever I turned my head she came to me in the faintest scent. So too the turmoil and uncertainty of that last morning, jostling
past tumbled houses, along choked streets and alleys in the forgotten part of the city to reach her room, where we hoped for one last chance of an intimacy that had never been ours. Her creaky single bed, the yak-wool rug hung from the door frame, noise coming up from the street—the cockroach appeal of the place—made us more needy but no more accessible to each other. Once again, we only stumbled into sex.

I remember every moment of that flight from Kathmandu—the map of her body beneath me, being lost in her perfume once more, the heady flood of long-haul Beefeater reflection. Even so soon after leaving, the morning's physical posturing and her leaving the bed with tears in her soft Newari voice, felt like honey smeared on a razor's edge, like returning to the chaos of a crime scene—a mixture of excitement and confusion, the polarity unsettling. And outside my steel cocoon the snow-covered peaks of the vast Himalayas, bathed in the carmine-orange of early sunset, drifted past the wing-tip like a flake of the life I had just forsaken, split somewhere between paradise and a green lime on ice.
Beginning with the outside

don't go back to the fishing fields
don't burn down the houses, not the half-built houses
don't go near the whippletrees

forget the graveyard and its mea culpa
forget the whores and their bare bones picked clean by time
forget the names and palettes of faces

leave the dead in their rented houses
leave shadows alone if they cannot bear the glance of light
leave her sex on your ringed fingers

remember the loons on the lake in Ontario
remember her hands, the nape of her neck, the map of her body
remember the days when you held your children
A man leaves his wife who has cancer.
Before he goes he paints their house
for soon it will be sold. He makes over
the garden, empties the shed, clears the yard.
He cleans his car inside and out,
gives it polish, then leaves it for his wife.
He goes to his lover and lives with her,
for she too has cancer.

Hope is a mountain of solstitial opposites—
it knows the affirmation of never-to-vanish sunlight
and the indifference of polar nights.
The geometry of hope is exquisite—
random, chaotic, recurring parts of a whole,
a snow flake lodged on an eyelash.

**Fractal**
Another wicket

Cricket was on the car radio.
A wicket had just fallen
in some green field up north
and the country had gone silent.

I pulled into the drive, the grass
unkempt, long, bleached. The key
was still beneath the stone pot
fourth from the left on the crazy paving.

I opened up the house, let out
its limpet breath, let in the fresh taste
of sea breeze and tang of the surf
as it drummed on the nearby beach.

Cobwebs draped kitchen corners,
dead flies lined the sills. With one ear
on the cricket I emptied the car,
put away the wine and shopping.

In the bedroom I opened the wardrobe,
empty except for a short blue dress,
the one I bought her in Paris last year,
and another wicket fell.
After

I climb the long stairs
to the top floor, enter the room
that used to be your study.
There is an echo
I haven't heard before.

Furniture, books, pictures
are gone. Welts of the feet
of your high-backed office chair
are still imprisoned
in the carpet's nap.

Your red cardigan is hanging
in the wardrobe, as if it's come to visit.
Empty wire hangers
tangle out of tune, missing
the touch of garments.

My fingers merge into the red wool
still shaped to your outline,
heavy with your scent,
the flux of your body.
On the collar, a dyed hair.

In the left pocket a cinema ticket
for a film I didn't know you'd seen
the week before you left.
In the right, two crumpled tissues
as you left them, mascara-stained.
I close the wardrobe door
on the red cardigan,
run back through the footage
of our recent piebald life,
the hangers jangling faintly.
One morning in October

It is someone else’s now, they bought it
last year. The whole house is theirs,
a home for them
and a young girl and two boys.

That garden, how familiar it is.

I laid the paving-stones at the far end
near the bluestone wall, outside the kitchen
and a room I used as a study.
The path sloped down by the shed door,
inviting a small puddle to stay
long after rain.

The dining room doors opened onto
a patio beneath an over-hang that I stripped of corrugated-iron
and replaced with Laser-lite.
Near the doors stood a wrought-iron
table and two chairs painted racing-green,
where we sat for hours
on hot summer chardonnay-nights
picking each other's lives apart.

Beside the pink brick wall, a circular flower-bed
that had been a well a hundred years ago.
I cemented over the small plot, for the sun
only touched it in winter
and nothing ever grew.

Close by, the fold-down washing line.
I sank its steel posts that Saturday
you were in hospital
having a cancer taken out.

Later, one morning in October
at eleven o'clock
we separated.
We could meet again,
after two weeks, you said.

But those two weeks became forever.
The sickness of the oyster is the pearl

For all my days I wanted more than a woman. I needed a lodestar to light the night sky, to show me the wrong and the right, to guide me home, a woman to tear me apart, tame those perilous blood-soaked nights, to be a true whore, the only whore, the real darling in the eye of time.

There were days of omens and warnings—grit in the eye, sweat on the palm, the edge of not knowing. Walking over glass with such surefootedness was balm for our vanity. O, the malignant tumour of passive love! We became patrons of sorrows, white scars on a beach. When the light began to fade, I thought it could be rekindled by flame.

But no. Love, that wonderfully luxuriant plant—unclassifiable, inedible—dropped its petals of mysticism after the summer scorch and revealed its stalk of subtle cupidity. It is the law of triste that the right love always comes along too soon or too late. Surely, that truth is crueller than anything except the ambush of memory.

We were living a posthumous life behind the Maginot Line of love, just drawing out time with different combinations of the same old thing—your blood cool, my pulse steady, our collective blood pressure falling
and falling, relics of sensations
not even visible, barely palpable.

Then circumstance scattered the chess pieces,
an invisible hand overturned the board.
An Indian summer burst from an autumnal body
fulfilling a promise so long held out to me—
the vertiginous pleasure of losing an old self,
growing a new one and releasing it from the shadows.
O, to love in such an unreckoned way once more!

Have I truly changed, or simply mislaid myself,
or just bought a new mask for the Carnevale?
Why so often do we wound those we love the most,
as if from a wound beauty could arise?
Such is the polarity, the paradox, of love.

Now guilt deepens with the dusk, hurries away
to its own lamp-lit complement—punishment.
Only there does appeasement lie. Under the crush
of the moon and self-reproach, I exchange glances
with the stars and busy myself with the drinks.
What is the colour of guilt?

Not the gold of adultery,
the blond girls in their tight skirts and blouses,
cross-legged, inviting you home
to their vodka houses.

Not the silver of doubt,
that mercurial bead never sure
where to rest, what to do—sometimes should,
sometimes shouldn't, but never certain.

Not the bronze of regret,
the cannot changes, the I-would-if-I-could-but-I-can't changes
of iron draped in sweat.

A red-raw sky demands an end to this.
The day sinks its orange globe hard into a sea
pounded by its own stones, and pleads
for a new day. Enough, it bleeds.
The grip of love

She said 'I'm not sorry
for loving you the way I do.
Either be mine and mine alone
or go, go to her.
I cannot live with two of you.'

I couldn't live without you, like air or opium—
that is what I remember.
Smoke from the fire gathered like problems,
life was smothered though not fatally,
the fire itself reduced to embers.

Love is a curious mastery—
it seeks to catch us in its net,
to stifle reason, never let us go.
She sort to clench it in both hands,
compress it, never let it feel the air.
When love became marrowless bone

I waded through warm shallows,
across the sands of Malabou Bay, north New Caledonia,
then dived into deep water.
A banded sea krait undulated past
beneath the aqua-blue carapace.
Much of the coral was dead—cathedrals of the sea
turned grey, brown, white as the moon,
reduced to small sad clumps of marrowless bone.

Some brain coral was alive, regenerating. Silver-blue fish
nibbled at it. A blue-green clam opened and closed
its wavy eye like a ventricle.
I swam amongst translucent fish,
over sea cucumbers and green weed,
around pylons of a derelict pier.
That was the day a court approved the orders,
when what had been love became marrowless bone.
We had hoped for something grander

For now, memory and the present
terrify each other. They couple
in front of us, feel the other's
vague finger pointing to a stranger life,
taking tiny slices
from a pock-marked moon.

We have to listen to the call of felicity
telling us we are beginners
in our lives once more,
telling us to forsake the old ways,
to touch again,
to hear the new heart's beating.

If I see you on a street, in a café,
with a lover, I will not look away.
I will not throw down the fragments
of circumstance, of what it once meant
to love you, for sometimes
awful things have their own kind of love.
Darling, she wrote,
how is your life with that other?
Better, is it? Easier, I hope,
without the spike of my needling.

How is your life with a sexier
woman? With her tight body?
Are you bored by her breasts yet,
the cancerous one and the other?

Have you escaped from the cage
you claimed I put you in, or just exchanged it
for another made of glass?
My love, what was it I did to you?

Is her breakfast delicious,
are you full but not satisfied?
Or do you sleep 'til noon?
And her dinners of vegetables, choice but slight?

And how do you sleep now? Of what do you
dream? Do you wake with the night mice,
search for her hand, her breast,
as you once did mine, with my name on your lips?

Have you found your soul mate, poor man?
Another one, only the second is she
of your lifetime? How lucky you are, my man!
Most don't even find one.
What is it like to live with a thief?
Has she confessed yet? Do police keep calling?
How do you live with her morals,
you who have been to Kailas?

How is your poetry?
You have your own poetess now.
Year upon year you used to write
me lines, whole poems, then you sent them all to her.

Tell me—are you happy now?
No? Do you think of me, do you remember us?
How is your life, dear one?
As hard as mine with my new man?
A small bird awakes
from an alcove of closeness.
Nascent and trembling
it rises from your hand,
soars never-to-ceasingly
in an arc swift and looping.
It swoops to entangle
a blank page,
fashions a pageant free
of anxiety
in the horizontal stare of the sun.

You send me your words
parallel and phrased.
They seep deeply into me
searching like a tongue
nesting within thoughts,
poised as if from my own body.
They silence the relics of lyrics
left by others, shift
and flow on nodal floods.
There is only distance between us.

I sense your words,
your language and sex.
I must touch you,
your left hand, your pen.
Poetry, in winter, in a country town

The mines are mostly closed, the shafts overgrown,
our tutor said, so be careful where you venture.
Then, at about ten, the group settled and poetry started—
a talk, some readings, exercises, workshopping.

We arrived after dark at a rented cottage on the edge of town.
I unzipped your dress, you undid my belt, winter
wrapped its cold coat around us. In the morning, two
books of poetry and our underwear lay on the kitchen floor.

On the long drive back, I looked at the side of your face
while you slept, as I had done for the last three mornings,
hungry as a fox cub waiting for you to wake. A pale
sun ventured through the windscreen, played across
the scarf around your neck. And all I could think was
what would it be like to grow old with you?
The inadequacy of verse

Vertical blinds slice the early light into shards, diagonal darts that shape the horizontal slats of the wardrobe into a panoply of pattern.
We have spent the night together, tied and cuffed to each other, joined at the hip as if only to be separated by a surgeon's blade. You have made tea for me, I still sleepy, lazy after love, the bed in ruins. I drink the tea, hot and strong. The warm morning, not yet fully awake, will find us soon, naked as newborns, waiting to rise like summer wheat. On the floor beside the bed is a book of verse we read last evening—the poems now obsolete, confused as old bones, not able to bear the breath from your panting mouth, feel my flesh in yours, or catch the ache of harvest.
Grand Prix

We venture into each other’s unknown.
Little by little, we steal
into one another.
Our phones do not ring,
neighbours are out,
the streets quiet.

Then, from five miles away,
a thunderclap of killer jets
sheets the sky, the roar
and sleet of racing cars
knuckle the world,
and the lust of a crowd
fist-punches its own high octane air.

But what do we care?
For our race
is born from the need for discovery,
our need to know over and over,
again and again,
that track
where midnight is warm
and clouds have no depth,
where our hands together
fashion a bridge between two dreams,
where the hours slip by
unnoticed,
engraving a prize upon our bodies.
Spring tide

If
on this deserted beach
we entered the swell
of a beam sea
with the moon
fat and full
and aligned to the mind
of the sun,
we would swim out
beyond the lip and curl of the break,
swallow each wave,
know the undulation
and rhythm
of the ocean’s systole.
We would return
after the surge,
naked in sunlight,
shiny with droplets
glazed in salt.
I would warm your hands,
your face,
burnish your body,
until the spring tide
took us again.
A garden in Kathmandu

Night weans itself from the world, and an always-to-be
yellowy sun climbs through a banyan tree into a tin sky.

A whitewashed moon, not yet done, retreats at the pace
of meditation. A mood of wood-smoke and juniper
begins to fill the air and mingles its foggy breath
with the pull of late summer jasmine. Distant traffic stirs.

A squirrel in a Fire-Blue pine runs the tightrope
of its tireless day. Above the velveteen of bougainvillea
an orange-billed chough swoops at gnat veils and pits
its squawk against the city's larynx. Near a lotus pond
the blaze of roses and somnolence of orchids are guarded
by eight small bronze elephants. They look towards
a Buddha statue—it sits in silence, gazes to a lost distance,
ignores the mantra of the earth, as rills of night-dew run
in the rones of its stone tunic. A tiny butterfly flits among
the waking flowers. The Valley opens, frees itself of mist
hung in the clefts and shadows of its snow-clad heights. The
garden rises to my hands. I sit, waiting for my heart to settle.
Primrose Hill

Come with me now to Primrose Hill. For this is
the morning hour, split by the bark of the dog club,
the seep of spring rampant in the stir of trees
hustled by the smudge and chill of a north wind.

Take me past the school in the lee of the rise,
its yard spread out like an old blanket,
the crocodile of blue-uniformed girls
yet to form for the outing of a day's rort.

Pause at the tennis courts, watch the players,
jocular in their creams and scores and rackets,
their energy and synergy, their breath hanging
for moments in the crisp air as tiny white clouds.

Climb the asphalt lines with me, towards terraced privets
along the breast of the north escarpment, through the fields
of Parliament Hill where skateboarders sneer at canons
of gravity and tag park benches with vandal pride.

Pass by the azaleas, the grassy meadow and lovers' oak.
And in the gap between the plane trees, look southward
over old Kentish Town, toward the loam of London
where quietly, discreetly, a city has mushroomed.

Reveal to me here this oddly brooding landscape,
its body and fragile relations, its parts and silvery path
smattered by a seep of rain and, years ago,
the tears of a would-be mother for her unseen loss.
Release my hand and move ahead in your singular way, give ground to pedalers ignoring ciphers of the licit as they cruise the serpent of the downhill. Then come close again, let the breeze lift your hair and bring me its scent, and show me every nuance of the nape of your neck.
Walking with you along Altona foreshore on a winter's evening

*Sweetheart,* you call, *let's walk by the water*
*and take the air while the evening is still fine.*
The dull sun has long thudded behind the wrinkled
horizon. The night sky is awake, and the moon
and stars bulge above the blackness of the bay.
The leeward air clips us. We walk, a little drunk,
into the middle evening and catch the smart
of a rising breeze on our new faces, half buried
in each other and our leaky cotton scarves.

Fishermen on the pier finish their meditations
and mutter into empty pails. By the lighthouse light
they reel in lines, ready for a beer and whisky bender.

Beach-footballers play late by the Souvlaki van's oily glow.
Lights from ships at anchor shimmer to the foreshore.
We pour words and wishes into a sea-salt wind,
steal each other's breath, become lost in the blurred night air.
We walk on, holding hands, each bare finger
remembering what it meant to need gloves in winter.
At night, after writing

We wrote in winter sunlight on the balcony this afternoon, rugged up in each other, hearing the nearby surf ache in ruffled white streaks on sheets of blue ocean.

Your words, so secure, tamed by your left hand, flowed onto a clear page in your new leather-bound notebook, streaming from the Lamy pen gifted by your surfer son.

My lines fell as Rorschach images that summoned the face of a woman awash in memory's fragile truth, her bones razed of flesh that stained the paper with blood.

Now the balcony railing is slick with night-dew, the wind no longer hefty. The hand of night lies open, still. Inside the house, red-gum flares blood-red in the hearth,

ash is its only memory. Wood smoke tempers the air, loads up the night, ascends to little prickling stars that ripple as if a stone had been thrown into the sky.

The smoke lays a veil of chalk light across the wide-open moon, softening the scars of her face, as if tenderness itself had awoken, like love or something beginning to heal.
Sunday morning, Courtney Street

The early strike of steel hooves on bluestone, arrhythmic and contrapuntal, rises from the street and breaks the mood of our Sunday morning lassitude.

The passing empty carriage is open, upholstered in red velvet. Two heavy grey carters, bitted and bridled, have not settled. The cold breeze punches their mettled lungs, their breath snorting out through flared nostrils into a metallic blue air where it mingles for a moment and is shed. They shake their plumed heads, their manes ruffled as they prance reluctantly citywards, once more to meet the rugged-up tourist clamour. The street distils the scene in a sombre gold of fallen leaves, then lets the horses and coachman pass into silence. To the south a lurid sky is stained by clouds weighted with rain.

The catch of fresh ground coffee draws me back from the window. You are warm again beneath the covers, your arm across my chest, head becalmed on my shoulder. Our bodies ignite outside of time. On the other side of the glass a world recedes with the hours into its own history, we into ours.
Undiminished

Wake at night in a cabin by a tropical beach
and what happens next is music
you have to listen to. At the last few
metres of the ocean's edge, a crescendo
rushes over a bed of crushed shells.
The wave peaks, perhaps to half
a metre, then cannot help but topple
onto a base of gravestoned coral.
The soft roar blows exhausted in seconds,
the reflex back-wash settling in diminuendo.
Once over, you turn. She sleeps on.
You lie there in tropical heat,
a lover caught naked in moonlight,
waiting for the next orchestral wave—
a slow drumbeat of sea-power, sun-driven
for thousands of kilometres,
one of a million ripples beneath
the disguise of a fixed horizon.

What happens next is undiminished
for having happened once, twice,
a trillion times over. The music you hear
is simply salt water pounding beach-grit.
You are the luckiest man beneath the vault
of heaven's night sky. Now listen again.
These are my hands

I. My landscape is a hand with no lines

i

Somatopleuric mesenchymal budding.
Peripheral condensation.
Fluted radial degeneration.
Dorsal primary ectodermal elongation.
Focal plate ossification.
By the tenth lunar month—two hands.

ii

The cubical bones of the hand
lie in two rows of four,
positioned as if designed,
mortised and tenoned,
a *ménage à huit*
housed together,
arched and faceted and articulated,
gliding a fraction
to let the wrist begin and end.

*Scaphoid* – narrow, boat-shaped semilune
*Lunate* – crescent moon with five faces
*Triquetral* – three-cornered concavo-convex pyramid
*Pisiform* – pea-shaped nipple sitting on *Triquetral*

*Trapezium* – tubercled and grooved, a little table
*Trapezoid* – unparalleled in shape
*Capitate* – capital and centred
Hamate – wedged and hooked as a witch's nose

Such pretty names, such beautiful bones.

iii

Without touch
my hands grope
with uncertainty—
in palpable ignorance,
palpable darkness.

II. This troublous wringing of hands

i

I offer my hand to him.
He withdraws his hand,
reaches into a shallow bag
and takes out mumbles and tricks.

ii

Disorders of hands—
paronychia
camptodactyly
stenosing tenosynovitis
compound palmar ganglion
palmar aponeurosis contraction
touching another without feeling, without love, as if the hand were gloved.
iii

I wash my hands
under flowing water,
scrub them with brushes
and antiseptic soap
for five minutes
more than twenty thousand times,
but the stains remain.

iv

She uses her hands
to say what her tongue
cannot—
with the hands of a manipulative surgeon,
Luciferian in their elegance,
she removes the vermiform appendix
of love.

v

As I walk
in the early light of winter,
a small bird swoops away,
chattering a song,
its wings flickering,
black eyes clear.
It flies on.
I am far from home,
my hands cold.
One feather would have done.
Freedom holds out a hand to me.
I take it
grasp it
but cannot feel it
not the lightness of its touch,
for my own hand is unforgiven.

I see the first leaf fall on our grave,
a yellow leaf smelling of the season,
on its way to death.
But no event has a life all its own.
More leaves fall.
I sweep them away with my hands
but cannot hold back winter.

III. Hand folding hand, and nothing in between

I learnt a word
from every woman
I ever touched.
Those words
rest in my hands,
each a story
but none a poem,
until you.
Give me your hand,
give me moonlight.
Give me twenty-seven bones
all of them singing.

The highway of love
is not an open road,
but a rut of tumult
where souls creep along
hemmed in by passions.
Such love resembles trench warfare—
you cannot see your enemies
but you know they're out there somewhere.
So keep low,
cover your head with your hands
and do not surrender.

The winds of dawn
creep soft around your hip.
The sun trembles in its own light,
hovers in our room,
speaks of intimacy,
touches us with its hand.

Your breath is suspended,
your eyes closed,
your hand holds mine,
as you slip a short ecstasy
into a gap
between my thoughts.

We are in middle heaven
hurting towards pinpoint stars.
The silence creaks a little
but that's alright.
Soon the moon will spawn new words,
other words,
words that will outlast the stone hours
of darkness.
So don't look back.
Don't forget to breathe.
Don't be afraid to speak of the hands.

The flow of my days
is a handful of sand
I take up again and again.
Before you, it was an hourglass
I turned over and over, terrified
that the grains of sand
might not run through.

If I should die before my time,
I ask you
to cut off my hands
with your sharpest knife,
set them free from my soured corpse,
let my lifeless fingers go back
through the blue resonance
of this world's dark shadow
to find their true labour once again—
a scalpel, a pen, your body.

IV. And do good with your white hands

i
Does the beauty of a hand
reflect the soul inside it?
Does the soul of a hand
echo what it does?
Does the sound of a hand
tell the world the infinity of pleasures within it?

ii
Hands are vehicles
that lovers use to begin to know
the mystery of articulation,
to read and learn
the body.
Always, take pleasure
in the hands,
barter them against heaven,
for later they may be traded for hooks.
A sunbeam strikes the temple bell
and the long night begins to fade.
The speckled full-faced moon
lingers a little.
Sun pokes through the smoke
of sandalwood and juniper,
through banyan trees,
warms larks and danphes
in Maharajgunj, Kathmandu.
In a hospital there
a greenhorn youth
lies on an operating table,
his flesh sickly.
He looks up into my eyes——

Why so late here with your white hands?
The child and the word-tree

This is the way of a child, wondering and wanting. The child grew in the womb, from a word-seed sown when the light was blue, when need was unloaded as a gift from the gods. The word-tree murmured about nakedness, letting go, cutting the very branches to which the child clung. The child read headstones of the great, knew where he wanted to get to, but could not see how to climb the word-tree.

The moon is a door, the sun a face, the sea a crime—pictures that hung from the word-tree. The child cleaved to a pen, knuckles white as fright. The thing began. He dragged rocks and small boulders after him like Sisyphus, gasping with despair. Amid blackness and silence, with his mind dry as a witch's tit, a bell tolled and shook the word-tree. A bud appeared, a new limb bloomed. Blossom fell from the tree onto a page, affirmed a resurrection.

The word-tree pointed upwards. It had the shape of a ziggurat tower. The child looked to the tree. His eyes saw through clearing cloud. Moon and sun and sea became mother-origin for a moment. Their blue moods unloosed small gifts—sometimes a breeze, sometimes treason. The inchoate child saw faces rise up then settle, faces gentled by candle light, their eyes like mist over water. Words began to line the seasons as they fell from the tree. He had been healing.

The child ascended the word-tree. Even clouds flowered, turned night sky into the smile of a few stars. Inside the high tower maestros looked down, their hands stiff with holiness. They were used to this sort of thing and had nothing much to say. They lifted up the little pink statues of tenderness shaped by the child, a child now grown, his blood restored, his hands exchanged for hooks. And the message from the word-tree is—yes, it has been done.
7.3. Notes on the Poems


"Coming home: a semi-cento" takes the recurring line "I have found the warm caves in the woods" from Anne Sexton's "Her Kind".


"Monsoon" takes its epigraph from two lines of Henry Cole's poem "Cherry Blossom Storm".

"Uns in conversation" is a response to Greg Taylor's exhibition "Cunts ... and Other Conversations", Museum of Old and Modern Art, Hobart, 2015.

"The body perfected" takes its epigraph from the first two lines of Plath's "The Colossus".

"Two views of an operating room" is inspired by Plath's 1959 poem "Two Views of a Cadaver Room". The last line borrows from the third paragraph of Pablo Neruda's "Toward an Impure Poetry", the introductory essay to his Selected Poems, edited and translated by Ben Belitt, New York: Grove Press, 1961, 39.

"Pith and husk". An earlier version was commissioned by the Department of Anatomy, University of Melbourne, and read at the inaugural Commemorative Thanksgiving Service of the University of Melbourne Body Donor Program in October 2012.

"ANZAC Day 2015, Dharapani, northern Nepal". An earthquake, measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale, struck northern Nepal on 25 April 2015. A *Dhaka topi* is a traditional Nepalese brimless hat worn by men in Gorkha communities, and is made from highly-patterned loom-spun fabric. A *kukri* is a curve bladed knife issued to all Nepalese Gurkha army personnel.

"Those left behind" is a response, in the style of Plath's "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", to Angelo Morbelli's 1903 painting *The Christmas of Those Left Behind*, which hangs in the Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna, Ca 'Pesaro Palazzo, Santa Croce, Venice.
"Miranda Ann" is in memoriam of Miranda Ann Barnych (27.1.80 – 21.11.97), unknown to the author but to whom there is a memorial at Berry's Beach, Phillip Island, Victoria, Australia.

"Four in the morning" takes its title from the first line of Leonard Cohen's song "Famous Blue Raincoat".

"Dogs dancing on their hind legs" takes the line "the south wind breaking roses" from Ezra Pound's Cantos, Canto 125, line 26.

"In the days before poetry and prose" is inspired by and an adaptation of Van Morrison's song "On Hyndford Street".

"One morning in October" is inspired by C. P. Cavafy's poem "The Afternoon Sun".

"Tongues of hell" takes its title from the second line of Plath's "Fever 103°". The poem owes a debt of gratitude to Marina Tsvetaeva's poem "An Attempt at Jealousy".

"Thalamus" takes its title from the part of the forebrain that receives and relays nearly all sensory stimuli and is concerned with arousal and consciousness in humans.

"Primrose Hill" is inspired by Plath's "Parliament Hill Fields".

"These are my hands" has subtitles are taken from Plath's poems: "My landscape is a hand with no lines" is from "Childless Woman" [4]; "This troubous wringing of hands" is from "Child" [10-11]; "Hand folding hand, and nothing in between" is from "Widow" [31]; and "And do good with your white hands" is from "Recantation" [19-20].

Section IV, part iv: danphes – a brightly coloured bird of the pheasant family, the national bird of Nepal.

"The child and the word-tree" is inspired by and converses with Plath's 1961 poem "The Moon and the Yew Tree".
7.4. Acknowledgements

A number of the poems, some in earlier versions, have been published in anthologies and journals:


An early version of "Muses" was highly commended in Reason-Brisbane Poetry Prize 2010, August 2010.

"Virga" was short-listed for the Grieve Poetry Competition, Hunter Writers’ Centre, N.S.W., 2017.

"Thalamus" was awarded first prize in the free verse section of the Eyre Writers Annual Literary Awards, 2014.

An earlier version of "Primrose Hill" was long-listed for the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize, 2014.

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Author/s:
Francis, David Michael Andrew

Title:
Here be monsters: body imagery in the poetry of Sylvia Plath

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2018

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Revised thesis

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