UNIVERSITY OF CHICHESTER

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FACULTY OF BUSINESS, ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Poetry as Via Negativa: A Creative Enquiry

by

Hugh Dunkerley

Thesis for the Doctor of Philosophy

This thesis has been completed as a requirement for a higher degree of the University of Southampton

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF BUSINESS, ARTS AND HUMANITIES: ENGLISH

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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This creative enquiry consists of a collection of poems, entitled *Broken Ground,* and a commentary on the writing process. The central research question that the enquiry addresses is that of poetry as a 'via negativa': how can poetry tackle experiences such as death, the otherness of nature, desire and loss in a manner which acknowledges the liminal or numinous core of many such experiences? The poems and the accompanying commentary demonstrate how the approach of the 'via negativa' can provide new ways of relating to such experiences. In addition to this, the enquiry illuminates the poetic process that led to the writing of the poems. Consideration is made of the following: what modes and forms were most effective in addressing the experiences? how useful were different approaches to the writing process itself? how useful or otherwise were various models of writing? how did I discover the guiding principles which allowed me to structure the collection as a whole?

Contents

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Hugh Dunkerley, declare that the thesis entitled 'Poetry as Via Negativa: A Creative Enquiry' and the work presented in it are my own. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree, firstly at the University of East Anglia and then at this University;

- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated (two poems, 'Killing Geese' and 'The Skater' were originally submitted in different forms for an MA at the University of Lancaster);

- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;

- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;

- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;

- parts of this work have been published in various forms in the following: two pamphlet collections, *Walking to the Fire Tower* (Redbeck Press) and *Fast* (Pighog Press, *Oxford Poets 2007* (Carcanet Press), The Fiddlehead, Irish Pages, Staple, Orbis and the BBC Wildlife Magazine.

Signed ... H Dunkerley ...

Date ... August 2008 ...

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BROKEN GROUND

We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumours of death, beauty, violence...

Annie Dillard

Child

You were sleeping when they found you,
curled in a ditch, long summer grasses
bending down to touch your senseless face.
You never heard the clatter of the circling helicopter,
never noticed the men and women
in dazzling overalls combing the fields,
the battery of bristling cameras
waiting for you at the end of the lane.
You were silent when they asked
about the men who'd taken you,
what they'd done to you
with hands, threats, caresses,
how for weeks the grasses had gradually
closed out the light until you were finally
cocooned in a green darkness.
You never woke when they lifted you,
naked, from your hiding place
and carried you away,
some skin cells, a few stray hairs,
floating down onto the broken ground,
already finding their way
in the long slow sift of matter.

Early Warning

Suddenly the bees deserted the air,
the hives fell silent
and the garden filled with an absence.

Meanwhile the numb flowers
went on offering up their sweet surfeit
to nothing and to no one

and he scoured the skies
for some dark unseen threat.
Later, as he was planting

the first of the new potatoes,
the rain came, running in rivulets
down his back, soaking his shoes,

drumming on the hives like hail.
That evening, on the news, he heard
about the stricken reactor,

thought of the potatoes in their darkness
ticking with danger,
of his own wet skin, how by morning

the bees would be swarming
at the hive entrances,
yearning for nectar.

Lazarus

As white as a tuber,
still filthy from the grave,
I stagger back into my life.

The house is shuttered in mourning
and I hide in its dark,
unable to bear the sun's bright lances,
the baying crowds that grow
like a pestilence with each new day.

Their words crash through doors.
'What is heaven like?
Will we burn for our sins?'
I can tell them nothing:
death was dreamless sleep,
his voice an agony calling me back.

My sisters bring me food,
indecipherable tastes, everything
tainted with the odour of putrefaction.

At night I slip out,
walk the familiar dusty streets.
People I've known since childhood
cross the road to avoid me,
their heads averted.

I see it in my sisters' eyes:
the memory of the opened grave,
something pallid and awful
stirring in the graveclothes.

Rock Drill

(after Epstein)

The whole thing seems to be vibrating,
the insect god on his tripod,
the head a mask of anguish.

Between his legs
the huge drill yammers away
at the absent rock

or is it a weapon,
is he a gunner in armour
mowing down a notional enemy?

An emaciated jockey,
he seems to grow
out of the machinery

because there's nowhere it stops
and he begins,
just the same steel

black as a beetle's carapace
from the stanchion legs
to the jutting girder of his neck.

Between armoured ribs,
his progeny hunkers down,
ticking like a bomb.

Even his head's becoming something else,
the forehead a helmet,
the long snout a visor,

the eyes peeking out of their slots
like ball bearings.
Oil, he seems to say, *bit, swivel,*

ammunition.
The world is there:
it must be remade.

Hare

Snakes that cast their coats for new
Chameleons that alter hue,
Hares that yearly sexes change.
Fletcher: *Faithful Shepherdess*

I

You were surprised by its huge ears,
alert and stiff in the long grass

its masculine nose,
the lithe terrier-like body.

We were almost on it
when the hare erupted into flight

something more like a deer
than a rabbit in the way it ran

bounding in fast surefooted leaps
across the astonished field

until it veered suddenly, rose into the air
and was gone in the dusk of the wood

leaving only this impression
warm in the still unravelling grass.

II

Warm in the still unravelling sheets,
I run my fingers down your spine

trace the soft vestigial hair of an animal
that only minutes ago I held

bucking in my arms, a fierceness
I'd never imagined, straining for release

a changeling that slipped between my fingers
and was gone with a cry

now resolving itself back into you.

Killing Geese

Gripping the legs, I was almost pulled over
by that brunt acceleration,
gunning itself,
straining for flight;
the neck under a broomstick, my feet on each end,
then a sudden heave
and the windmill of the heart missed.

It made a hole in the day
where the bird had been.

What remained in my hands,
soft, slack and undone,
was cooling machinery.

Expeditions into the flesh
(the head came off,
then entrails slithered out with one hand)
uncovered pipes,
dark, wet passages,
an unseen inside landscape.

The Principle of Indeterminacy

And all along, it seems,
it might have been us
that drove the mantis
to consume mate after mate,
their twitching abdomens
still frenzied with pleasure
even as their heads were being torn off.
Scientists now point to a lack of food,
the glare of lights in the laboratory:
half-starved, on the bright stage
of our expectation,
she ate the first thing that moved.
Seen now, for the first time,
her pale, stick-like body and his,
their limbs still trembling,
the fabled act not happened.

(In quantum physics, Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy states that the position and momentum of particles are impossible to calculate simultaneously, in part because of the effect of the act of observation on the experiment)

Another Summer

Sussex stifles in the heat,
fields raked by sun,
the panting trees
weighed down with their greenery.

Your uncle points to hangars
that have evaporated like mirages,
runways overrun by battalions of wheat.
He remembers pubs he drank at,

wobbling back through the blackout
on Air-Force issue bicycles
- "it's a miracle no one was killed" -
and flogging Canadian cigarettes

and military blankets smuggled out
under bulky greatcoats.
In the dark of the museum he recognises
a few grainy photographs,

young men leaning nonchalantly on Spitfires,
cigarettes dangling from their lips,
two washing their feet outside a tent
and fighting over the soap.

He can name the ones who died,
slipping from radio contact somewhere over Normandy,
or, their planes already burning,
crashed short of the runway,

the fuel erupting in a balloon of flame.
At the gift counter he toys
with a shrapnel paperweight,
telling the woman he was stationed here

and how nothing but the skylines
seem the same.
Outside the light is blinding,
the car a furnace.

We drive away towards Chichester,
its spire still a marker,
although everywhere the trees have grown,
that summer trapped in their rings.

In the Darkroom

i Preparation

It's like being blinded,
this sudden immersion in darkness,
my senses floundering.
Somewhere I can hear the rustle
of the film as you unroll it,
your breathing in the thick flood.
And I'm trying to picture what's been lost:
your pale face above that
mauve jumper, your dark eyes,
the white plastic of the developing reel
as you press it into my hands.
I begin to wind the film
-easy five minutes ago-
but my hands are dumb
in this lightless world
and you have to guide my fingers
with the delicate braille of your touch.
When you turn on the light
the room leaps back into place,
unabsorbed wavelengths
flooding our retinas.

ii Developing

The mysteries of light caught
on this thin piece of celluloid.
There's an alchemy here
I don't understand, although
you try and explain it to me
as we wait for the chemicals
to reveal what has been hiding,
frozen in darkness.
When you finally show me the film
the ghost of light is there in its opposite,
the world revealed as dark matter,
like those photos of yours,
how you said the ice was black to you:
snow on the river swelling
into the shadowy contours
of a woman's stomach,
the soft grain of her skin.

iii Printing

Weeks later, I watch
as mountains emerge in the printing tray,
glaciers packed between their shoulders,
a dark tide of tree growth
lapping at their flanks.
In the foreground figures are walking
across a white space
which slowly translates itself
into a snowy field, thin wisps of dead grass,
a few footprints. We were at a wedding,
almost anonymous in our hats and scarves.
I remember my fingers, numb
as I held the camera,
the bridegroom trying to play his sax
at twenty below, the bride wrapped
in her parka and smiling.
And you, somewhere among the faces.
I lift the print from the tray –
the acid tang of chemicals
catching in the back of my throat –
lower it into the fixer,
scrutinising the print for your face,
finding it nowhere.

Staff Room

Coffee-talk,
bitter,
or strained humour,
a sudden unleashing.

Ties are loosened,
defences lowered,
egos patched
with "you should see mine..."

Beyond the windows
(shut even in summer)
'they' jostle and shout,
buoyant with youth.

Always too early,
the bell erupts:
faces are set,
jackets fastened like armour.

Waltz

Somehow his feet remember
as you lead him in a waltz,
your bare feet, his slippers
turning in surefooted circles.

The radio blares and for long
minutes it's possible to believe
he knows who we are, that you're
his third daughter, home from England,

possible to forget how each morning
your mother must school him
in the complex etiquette
of shirt buttons and trouser buckles,

explain what a toothbrush is for
and how it works. Two weeks ago
your sister, alerted by the
hollow music of water on steel,

found him standing over the
oven drawer, urinating
on the gleaming pots, a warm
reek rising to fill the room.

Now you're crooning to him,
'Well done, Dad, that's it,'
and he seems to be listening,
seems to recognise above the

sing-song slither of the violins,
the last resounding refrain
as the waltz rushes towards its end,
the incantation of love.

The Storm

A month before he died a storm
ripped across the city, lifting cars,
leaving boats stranded on suburban lawns.

Trees he'd have known as a boy,
huge maples, soaring elms split
or came toppling down in a roar of branches.

Point Pleasant took the brunt of it.
The park where he'd played in the thirties,
where I'd walk with him sixty years later

as he pointed out the harbour mouth
U-Boats once haunted,
now looked as if it had caught the edge

of a nuclear blast. Up there,
on the top floor of the nursing home
as the big panes flexed,

did he finally resurface, nineteen again,
criss-crossing the Atlantic with war brides,
salt-diesel cramming his lungs,

the south coast of England
about to come over the horizon
for the first time?

Vernon Street

In your sister's dream your father
is skating on Vernon Street,

alive again, the dark
tree-lined road one long rink.

He is alone, carving perfect turns
in the unmarked ice, the hiss

of his skates the only sound.
The houses pass: the one on the corner

where his mother lived;
your sister's old flat; number eleven

where the young widow would
run her hands through his teenage hair.

He knows the dead are in there,
waiting for him,

but for now he still has time
to make use of the old skates,

the leather straps creaking
with each thrust, the thin blades

singing on the ice,
the whole frozen street his own.

Nightmare Ground

For Keith Douglas

Three days after D Day you died,
killed instantly when a mortar round
exploded in the air above you,

its furious shrapnel driving
itself into your brain with such efficiency
no entry wound could be found.

In two years of war
you'd seen hundreds dead:
burnt abandoned corpses

mummified in the desert sun,
the newly killed looking
as if they'd just fallen asleep,

your own gunner shredded
in the tank beside you,
'the turret in a flurry of blood'.

On leave in Cairo, Tel Aviv,
laid up in El Ballah general hospital,
you began to forge lines tempered

by the steely glare of war,
each bullet-like poem
a fresh skirmish,

almost an epitaph,
a new language whose accents
we're still trying to learn.

(Normandy, 2007)

Bow River

Here the river is cracked and broken,
its motion stunned into ice,
thick slabs fracturing

where the last moisture
has leaked away into the frozen sand.
Everything in this place speaks of hunger:

skinny pines, their sap slowed
to almost nothing, ransacked pinecones,
a poverty of grass, dead under thin snow,

the fine tattoo of cougar tracks
floating across the ice,
disappearing into the far trees.

Weasel

This streaming across open ground,
a brown unsteady voltage,
freezing to interrogate the air,
the grass for shit scent.
On a river bank you pry at holes,
rattling the cages of the dumbly domestic,
finding the trace of fear
everywhere.
At night you go baring your needles,
quartering the meadow,
attending to the smallest quiver.
You float over the dew-wet grass,
strike at the soft white throb
of the rabbit's throat
and hold, hold.

Eye Test

It's almost like kissing, she's so close.
I can feel the heat of her face,
her shallow breathing in my ear.
She's peering into the lens of my eye
with a light so bright I can almost taste it
until I can see the back of my retina
like one of those satellite photos
of the sun's surface,
scored with fine red canals.
She shifts her weight, her breast
brushing against my arm,
and I remember being eight,
that young dentist cradling
my head on her white-coated chest,
counting off my teeth,
her breath mingling with mine.

Eels

Pourings of water,
the river quaking and rucking
as it accelerates over the concrete sluice,
upwellings carrying the stain of its breath.
I climb down to stand at the edge
where water slides,
a sheet of melting glass,
and see eels,
six-inch slivers of darkness,
mouths clamped to the concrete.
Every few seconds one fires upstream,
a writhing cord
thrashing the inch-deep current;
hovers on the rim
before it's flung back,
a loose thread gone in the power surge.
Instinct keeps them coming,
always more, climbing on each other's backs,
catapulting themselves
into the head-on collision of water.
How many make it in an hour?
I counted only one,
large and pale-bellied,
that somehow snaked itself
across a piece of hardly-wet concrete
and was gone,
loosed at the river's head.
Next day most have disappeared,
the few that are left
flagging in the piling current,
thin fuses burning out.

Medusa

At the spring the spirit
emerges suddenly, screaming.
You glimpse her above the water,
a lopped-off head,
coarse hair smoking upwards,
the mouth a ripped O,
the eyes little more than gashes
in a face that is little more than a wound.
Above the head, two fine brown snakes
tangle in airborne combat,
a frenzy of whipping coils and exposed fangs.
Below, the clear, untroubled water
reflects nothing
and when you look back she's gone,
just the half-dreamt scream
still beating in your ears.

Cycle

Is this the body's way of mourning,
the slow tide seeping between your legs,
an egg in there somewhere, smaller than a pinprick?

Whatever assignation was hoped for, it never happened:
my sperm arriving too late or not at all,
the egg's faint hormonal cry lost in a chemical static.

Every month your womb coughs them out,
these unmanned craft, adrift in a sea of blood,
bulletins from the body's dream of resurrection.

Under Cover

I

Under Cover

It's all she can do not to touch him.
He's driving her home, the streets deserted,
his expression unreadable in the dim
glow. All night she's been troubled
by his presence, his eyes flickering
across the room towards her, the other
guests nothing but an annoying
distraction. Now they've stopped, under cover,
a lay-by out of sight, huge trees looming
over the car. He leans across in the dark
and they kiss, urgent fingers struggling
with shirt buttons, stubborn zips, her bra,
until she can feel his fingers brushing her thighs
and she comes, quickly, gasping with surprise.

II

Birding

That joke about a pair of tits-
they were kissing in the bird hide,
their tongues nesting in each other's mouths.
As his hand cupped her breast,
the door rattled, light flooded the place
and an owl-like old man was blinking at them,
asking hurriedly if they'd seen much activity.

III

Coffee

Back at his place
she comes in for coffee
and within minutes
they're tearing at each other's clothes,
her tongue sliding against his,
and then he's inside her,
soft muscles closing round him
I have to get closer to you
and she's putting her hand over her mouth,
stifling her shouts,
and it's gathering in his thighs,
burning away all thought...

When he rolls over she's already half-dressed.
I'm sorry, she says, *I have to go. I'll ring you tomorrow.*
Listening to her drive away
he pictures the darkened house,
her slipping into that other bed.

Long after she's left, the smell of her
still clings to his fingers, his face,
a musk-delicate scent, almost perfumed.

IV

Mussels

In the sink they open slyly,
the occasional shift as one
nudges against another

the only indication that
anything might be alive
inside all that armour plating.

Dropping clacking handfuls
into the already erupting water
where they rattle and bounce

in a burning dance, she argues
they're senseless, denies that
anything so rooted in the plant world

can possibly know pain.
As the tender flesh
melts in their mouths

he remembers the limpets
he hacked as a child
from slippery rocks,

their silkiness, how each
creature shrunk back
helplessly into its shell.

Later, as she opens to him,
he's surprised at the pearly
softness between her legs

imagines himself pushing
through something sub-marine
and infinitely vulnerable.

V

Unsinkable

Wife, husband, children all slide away
as the huge ship of their lust pulls out,
tickertape streaming down its sides, the quay
shrinking until they can hardly hear the shouts
and cries of well-wishers, the small
explosions shaking the town. They float on,
oblivious to reefs and shoals, the cruel
rocks that lurk just beneath the surface, borne
along on a happiness so vast
they're convinced it must belong to everyone.
Below them, the holed wrecks of the past
subside slowly into memory, rust, bone.
They too were unsinkable, rigged for splendour,
foundered just beyond the harbour.

VI

Away

In another town they sit together,
candlelit in Pizza Express, play-acting
at husband and wife. He's overwhelmed
by the scent of her, the warmth of her arm
under his, and after three glasses of wine,
has his hand inside her skirt. Back at the
B&B they take their time, unpeeling
each other's clothes, voluptuaries of the flesh
where before they rushed to consume
one another in cars, once in a wood while ramblers
scuffed by yards away. Later, as he pulls out,
he sees the wreckage of the condom
imagines sperm already chasing down the egg,
a child, the impossibility of it all.

VII

Brighton

Even as they're making love, he wonders
who she is, her wind-tanned face wracked
with pleasure, his body moving inside hers,
their sweat mingling in the overheated
hotel room. Earlier, on the pier,
she'd pushed him up against an empty
hot dog stand, said she didn't care
who saw but that she wanted him, quickly,
right then and there. He'd pulled away,
blethering something about not being
able to breathe. Now in the bathroom mirror
he notices the crow's feet deepening
around her eyes, grey flecking her hair,
glimpses his own unfamiliar stare.

VIII

Nest

Months later he rings, his voice caressing
her ear, telling her how broken he feels,
how he'd make it work if only he could.
All she can think about is that day, nestling
in the corn, the ticking of her bike's wheels
as it lay hidden next to them, the wood
in the distance soft with the murmurings
of pigeons. He was naked, and leant over,
brushing her stomach with a loose stalk,
running it between her thighs, the glistening
hairs still wet, leaving grains she'd find later
as she slipped her knickers off in the dark.
She'd forgive it all, the withholding, the pain,
just to feel his body cupping hers again.

Prisoner of War

In 2001 a 75 year old man, thought to be a WW2 Hungarian prisoner of war, was found in a Russian asylum.

In the wrong century you resurface,
wearing the face of an old man,
gasping like a coelacanth
in the flashgun's glare.

After fifty-six years
your name, your language
mean almost nothing, the town
where you were born
part of another country.

You mumble in
old-fashioned Hungarian,
cursing the other inmates,
worrying about your crutches,
the wooden leg they've never given you.

But your life before the war,
the young soldier you once were,
are crushed beneath the memories of slaughter;
the burning cold of Siberia
permafrosted into your brain.

You were dressed in rags,
half-starved and already broken
when they brought you here.

As the continent convulsed
you turned your face to the wall
forgetting the way home,
losing yourself in the
trackless steppes of silence.

The Whale

Waterless, it lay under the sky
while the outgoing tide
nibbled at the pebbles
and the loud, airborne gulls
swooped and flocked over
the grey acres of its blubber.
Its breath was another tide
blasting over the stones, becoming
more laboured with every roar.
The small rheumy eye
flickered and waned
and the wilting flukes
stirred the pebbles, thrashing great pits
along either side of its body.
People came to watch its death:
dogs flew across the stones,
then stopped short, nosing the air,
puzzled by what they had thought
was part of the landscape;
a cloud of fishy breath
whipped downwind
and children screamed happily,
running to dodge its clownish shower.
Later, men with ropes arrived,
but by then the tide had left
and was glistening on the horizon.

Quebec

This was the Canada you'd always wanted,
the old fused seamlessly with the new,
like the timber framed lobby of the quietly
purring hotel, the restaurants serving
moules mariniere and endless coffee
but with none of the surly truculence of Paris.

I was fascinated by the St Lawrence,
its cargo of pack ice that seemed
to swirl around every side of the city,
the knowledge that to the north,
just beyond the few lights on the other bank,
there was whiteness the whole way to the pole.

You'd sprung the trip on me a few days earlier
as a Christmas present, hoping, I guessed,
for something to weave us back together.
At night I lay motionless, listening
to the low hum of the heating,
the huge space of the king-size bed between us,
while outside the lethal floes sped past.

Razor

I watch you shaving your legs in the bath,
the razor grazing the insides of your thigh,
licking its way along the soft folds
on either side of your crotch,
the dark forest of pubic hair
glistening and stirring
as your raise one leg and then the other.
That razor has rights I no longer have,
to find out your secret places,
to slide down to your backside,
each underwater buttock
so moon-white because
you would never expose it to the sun.
And yet, when you've finished,
when you've sluiced away the soap,
the tiny cut hairs,
it'll be binned and forgotten,
more easily disposed of
than the memories of love.

Connoisseurs

We're the connoisseurs of celibacy,
you and I, touching only when we have to,
when one of us is sleepy
and rolls against the other, our two
groins as far apart as a sister and brother's.
We've schooled each other in desirelessness until
I feel nothing for the small rounds of your
breasts, as ordinary as morning, sense no thrill
at the dark clutch of hair between your thighs.
Instead my dreams are filled with the wet
lips of strangers, the blunt wantings, the sighs
of a thousand women I've never met.
I wake, resurrected, stiff with desire, but alone,
knowing the only touch will be my own.

Tarot

For days all you'd do is play the tarot,
spread after spread on the sitting room floor,
sit there scrutinising the cards, narrow
your eyes every time the three of swords
kept reappearing. You were trying to choose;
which of us was the Devil, which a Lover,
trying to work out what you'd lose
if you gave up on me, trying to imagine another
life with him. Everything else had failed you:
your wavering instincts, the fragile
certainties of marriage, the new book,
begun a year ago, stillborn on your desk.
Crouched in your nightgown, you scanned the cards,
finding only yourself there, the queen of swords.

Underworld

It was as if he'd put a hex on you,
befuddled your instincts, led you down
into that dark underworld he'd been given
instead of a soul. There were others down
there, demented with grief, their screams,
their vengeful panics on the phone at night,
the woman who'd once tried to kill him,
pumping his veins full of heroin;
Maria, working out her redemption
in bony poems. You seemed to be dying,
your world turned to winter. *All I need is time,*
you'd say, *just give me time,*
as you walked deeper into the labyrinth
and I felt your hand slipping from mine.

Him

For months I'd wanted to kill him, dreamt
about knives and baseball bats, beating his face
to a pulp. I rehearsed every meeting,
how I'd ambush him late one evening,
get a blow in first, then cripple
him with a kick to the groin. It would be
easy, like felling an animal.
How then did we end up outside that pub,
shoving each other like drunks while you tried
to get between us, screaming something I
couldn't even hear? I still have the bruises
where he clutched my arm, remember his breath,
the hop-reek of beer, his body smell
as familiar as a lover's.

Departures

You kept looking back, your frightened eyes
searching me out in the crowd as the
queue snailed its way through passport control.
You were flying into what seemed like nothing,
a room on the other side of the world.
That night we'd slept in the same bed
for the first time in months, our backs almost
touching, our bodies rediscovering
the familiar curves of the mattress.
As your plane lifted off, circling overhead,
I imagined you looking down on me
as you'd soon be looking down on the
blankness of Greenland, then the alien
abstractions of the prairies coming up to meet you.

Cross-Border

It was late when you finally left,
and the cold air and the silence
and the land black under
a sky littered with stars
made you pause
and catch your breath.
You felt the dullness of the wine lifting
and knew you'd be alright
for the ten mile drive cross-country,
keeping to the back roads,
away from checkpoints.
And Mary, she'd be alright too
now that the lights were out:
her mother had never woken,
the house was calm, and as your feet
crunched on the frosted pebbles
you remembered your musky wetness
on her warm belly
and you began to stir again.
The car was blind,
the windows blank with frost.
You turned the key, expecting
the familiar churn of the starter,
half-heard, half-imagined
the whisper of a detonator
running down towards its end.

In a Japanese Supermarket

This is the land of plenty,
the world's fruits freighted here
in temperature-controlled aircraft,
a cornucopia of kumquats,
bananas and mangoes
bathed in super-cooled air,
every kind of flesh shrink-wrapped
on Styrofoam trays:
chocolate-pale calves' livers,
blood-wet steaks,
the purple bruise of tuna.
Prawns are packed in layers,
legs and feelers still stirring.
Without impermanence
there can be no beauty
said the Japanese thinker.
And it's there in the boneless ghosts
of dried cod, the steely sardines
like arrow heads,
the scales on the salmon's flank.
See how our eyes have their own hungers,
want to linger over the salmon's sheen,
the slick muscles of sea bass
laid out on ice,
the slippery sacks of nothing
that were once squid.

A Small Roadside Death

Sulawesi, Indonesia

The children had caught a flying fox
and were carrying it along the road
on the end of a long pole.

It had a broken wing,
if you can call them wings,
those big leathery capes of skin,

and hung awkwardly
from three of its four sets of claws,
flexing and folding the useless apron,

the fox-delicate face looking
at the children, then at us
with what I imagined

was that same mix of
fear and pleading you see
on footage of prisoners of war or hostages.

Vicki wanted a photograph;
as she knelt down
the little hose of the bat's penis unravelled

and urine was running down its fur,
an acrid brew of ammonia
and fermenting fruit.

Soon the children had forgotten it,
distracted by the camera,
and were jostling to be photographed

their dark flawless faces
suddenly bright with teeth.
As we climbed back into the jeep,

I saw a ragged shape crawl
into the undergrowth.
Seconds later there was a small shriek,

and I glimpsed a child raising the pole,
bringing it down again and again
on the shuddering greenery.

The Tranquillity Maps

Their co-ordinates are silence
and the voices of water,

their symbols concealed
in the revelations of bark.

They describe the contours of light,
the seedhead's vocabulary,

mathematics of stillness
and the geography of leaves;

elaborate the progress of lichen,
the wind's unstructured notations.

Tranquillity Maps were first produced by the CPRE in 1995 to denote the quietest places in the UK.

Fast

For days you must have lived on air,
the exaltation of hunger,
your stomach shrinking to a knot

until you couldn't feel anything,
not even the cold that had wracked you
through your thin sleeping bag, night and day.

In the tent crumpled biscuits, chocolate,
a half-opened tin of condensed milk
were scattered out of reach, the remnants

of a rite you'd long forgotten.
In the granite light the mountains wavered
while at night the stars rustled, tugging

at you with their tiny gravities.
You must have thought you were close then,
the chrysalis perhaps of something unimaginable.

When the last agonies came, the muscles,
the organs, consuming themselves in a final blaze,
what a purification it must have seemed.

Verity Linn, a Breatharian, was found dead near a remote Scottish loch in 1999.

Fresh Paint

I wait now, as every night I wait,
dusk thickening in the trees, the days
drawing in, wondering if he'll be late,
if he'll notice the sunflowers, their rays
fading in the gloom. The cars are coming home,
nudging into their slots, filling up the street.
I remember our first night here, how we roamed
through the house, astonished at our luck
and as I move through the darkened rooms
something of that untouched glamour still clings
to the walls, and I long for the fumes
of fresh paint, our packaged, untried belongings,
not this starved present, the house like a tomb.
In the nursery the empty space looms.

Woman and Fish

The woman runs her hands
along the soft flaps of the gutted fish,
opening it out,
savouring its marbled coolness
with long ringed fingers.
'It feels like labia,' she says
remembering the time
he slipped like a salmon
between her legs,
the salt roar of her coming,
the way his eye fixed on nothing
like the fish's eye.

Coyote

You had broken cover
and now, between the slowing cars
and the wood's beckoning darkness,
on the bowling green verge
you hesitated.
We killed our engine
and sat hushed as
dazzled by sly scents
you nuzzled the air,
a small, bony wolf,
ears pricked and swivelling,
each new sound
stringing you tighter.
Then some car door must have clicked
and as if stung by thrown stones,
you were suddenly running,
glancing back furtively
at the man already standing,
aiming the camera.

The Transit of Venus

In the blue dusk yours is the first light,
acetylene in the southern sky,
eclipsing everything except the moon.
I used to see you as the earth's cool cousin,
your orbit holding hands with ours
as we swung around the sun,
just beyond the reach of its fiery breath.

Now our telescopes watch
as you crawl across the sun's face,
little more than a cinder.
Below clouds of sulphuric acid,
your five hundred degree surface
is blasted by magma, cooking under a greenhouse
of runaway carbon dioxide.

I think of Jupiter, crackling with radiation,
the stone-cold corpse of Pluto,
the thin veil of our atmosphere,
its lie of blue.

Natural History

(Kingley Vale Nature Centre, West Sussex)

These are the casualties,
the ones who never made it
to the tangled safety of the other verge,

their lives seeping away in ditches,
or who, racked with toxins,
lay under bushes, uncomprehending

as a million suns
burned through their bodies.
Now they're pinned and labelled:

a catalogue of flattened rats,
voles and squirrels
frozen in assorted agonies,

the roe fawn like a mummified foetus,
its too-long legs
twisted at impossible angles.

An emaciated husk
was once a green woodpecker
that must have died of starvation,

its balding plumage almost colourless.
A pinboard is lined with skulls,
pebble-sized finches and sparrows,

the curlew's beak a huge needle,
four times as long as its head.
And below it, something I can't make out,

a thin dried-up tube of flesh
ending in two big-fingered paws
and a ruff of fur.

A faded card is lying beside it.
Mole, I can still read, *July '69*.
I lift the tube onto my hand.

It weighs almost nothing.
The long claws are like fishbones.
Whatever ate it turned its skin inside out

like a glove, stripping away everything
except this stubborn spine
and these feet with their wrinkled, human palms.

Discovery

We hung offshore,
listening, as if for the first time,
to the sounds of waves

foaming on the beach;
to the inconsolable wail
of unknown seabirds.

We had smelt the land for days,
a faint scent of pine
mingling with the salt breeze:

now it was overwhelming,
the resinous heat a shock
to our starved senses.

As we lowered the boats
and began to pull for shore,
cliffs rose in front of us like ramparts,

the forest hugged its darkness,
an unmitigated growth
crowding out all thoughts of passage.

On the beach we struggled with the boats,
murmured dry-mouthed prayers of thanks,
our words lost in the booming surf.

Find

Bones nestle in the heather,
the bleached remains of some bird
stripped by the weather and small teeth.

They still lie in order,
the frail jigsaw of vertebrae
outstretched as if in flight.

The Skater

The land recedes,
a dark line thinning
from the corner of each eye.

A lone vertical, he moves
across the sea's welded surface,
his skates etching a wake

on the glass calm, on the
diamond absence of the air,

his breath condensing
in long white chains,
freezing and disintegrating.

Hours ago, the others
fell back, their shouts
dwindling to insignificance,

a fine thread of the familiar
following after him,
then finally snapping.

Now the sky is birdless:
a featureless pewter,
it encircles him everywhere,

a single focus
on which the skylines rotate.

In this uniform glare
there is nothing to sustain the eye,
the mind's clamourings for restrictions;

only the horizons
as they relentlessly migrate.

Afterwards

I catch myself in the mirror,
the familiar topography of my face

altered somehow: the eyes she scrutinised,
the lips that pressed against hers

almost someone else's.
Does it change us a little each time,

this melding of our bodies,
the subtle interchange of DNA?

I remember the first time,
the strangeness of knowing

I'd been inside a woman,
looking down at myself,

the raw part of me
still sluiced in her wetness.

I had given something away:
a wholeness that had finally been broached.

Poetry as Via Negativa: A Creative Enquiry

Poetry is an orphan of silence
Charles Simic

The Central Research Question and Methodology

This is a practice based piece of research. A number of questions have been addressed in the writing of the poems in the collection *Broken Ground.* The purpose of this section is to reflect critically on these questions and to offer an analysis of the methodology of writing the poems. The central research question that this collection addresses is that of poetry as a 'via negativa': how can poetry tackle experiences such as death, the otherness of nature, desire and loss in a manner which acknowledges the liminal or numinous core of many such experiences? This central question has given rise to a number of sub-questions which also had to be addressed in the writing of the poems. These include: what modes and forms were most effective in addressing the experiences? How useful were different approaches to the writing process itself? How useful or otherwise were various models of writing? How did I discover the guiding principles which allowed me to structure the collection as a whole? This study will be an attempt to bring to light the ways in which the writing of the poems explored these questions. I will examine a number of poems in some detail, describing their genesis from the initial impulse that produced a first line or an image through to the workshopping, redrafting and final editing for the collection that they underwent. However, some poems are more suited to this analysis than others. In part this may have to do with the actual act of composition itself. If a poem has taken a long time and many drafts to come to fruition, there is clearly more to comment on. In addition to this though, there are some poems which I consider key to the collection as they embody certain ideas and feelings that are crucial to the research. In contrast there are poems about which it would be futile to add much to what is already articulated on the page.

As well as discussing the process of writing the poems for the collection, I will use a number of other poets and critics to examine the via negativa in poetry. Rather than suggesting a study of the via negativa in the work of other poets, which would take an entire thesis in itself, the rationale for the section entitled 'Articulating the Path; Poetry as a Via Negativa' is to lay out the coordinates by which I am going to examine the creative work. In addition to this, the wider reading I undertook in the process of the research has also informed my thinking at different stages of the project, and therefore the writing and ordering of the poems. There has been a fruitful dialogue between the two ways of approaching the subject which has permeated the whole enquiry.

The methodology of this commentary will therefore be an account of the ways in which the following helped illuminate the central research question: the influence of the work of other poets; wider reading around the subject matter; the use of notebooks; workshops; reflection and redrafting; the editing process.

Articulating the Path: Poetry as a Via Negativa

When I began writing the poems that constitute this collection, I was mainly writing about nature as a subject. The poets who had had the greatest influence on me at this stage were those who could summon up a visceral quality on the page. Ted Hughes was a powerful early influence. The sheer physicality of his early work in particular changed the way I wrote. But what is also clear, looking back, is that I responded to something else in Hughes's work too. Here was a writer who wasn't interested in making statements or exploring conscious ideas. Rather, his poetry was in Eliot's terms, 'a raid on the inarticulate'[1]. Hughes's best poems succeed in offering us the expression of an experience, rather than any explanation of that experience.

A poem which had a vital influence on me was 'View of a Pig'. Unlike other poems such as 'Pike' or 'The Jaguar' where Hughes is trying to summon up the energies of the animals concerned, this poem is apparently about deadness. The pig is described in almost domestic terms – as 'like a sack of wheat' and '[j]ust so much/[a] poundage of lard and pork'[2]. Instead of the violent energies of life

[1] Eliot, T.S. *The Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems* London, Faber and Faber, 1980, p.203
[2] Hughes, T. *Lupercal* London, Faber and Faber, 1960, p.40

we are presented with an image of non-life so strong that it 'seemed not just dead./It was less than lifeless, further off'[3]. The poem goes on to describe memories of other pigs – the greased piglet at the fair, the bites of pigs which are 'worse than a horse's'[4], but the overriding impression is one of non-being. And yet the poem has powerful energy of its own, a kind of negative vitality. In a recent essay, James Lasdun describes the poem as follows.

> The view of the pig is suffused with an immense, thwarted desire to locate the secret energies of the animal. Something vast is apprehended but it lies just off the page, one stray particle of it drifting over in the form of the greased piglet remembered from a fair – 'faster and nimbler than a cat' – but the bulk of it bafflingly occluded .[5]

The poem's power comes from what is not actually stated, from a gesturing towards an energy which is suggested by its absence.

At the same time I was reading Seamus Heaney's work. The central sequence in *North* had a similar effect on me. The poems are pared down, concentrating their gaze on the physical essentials of bog bodies in particular. Heaney may move into a consideration of the bog victims' roles as sacrificial gifts to the goddess, suggesting both implicit and explicit connections with contemporary Ireland. However, his gaze never moves far from the bodies themselves. There is also an intense self-searching going on in the poems, as the poet interrogates his own role in the gaze. The rigour of this approach is perhaps best summed up in the conclusion of 'North'.

> It said, 'Lie down
> in the word-hoard, burrow
> the coil and gleam
> of your furrowed brain.
>
> Compose in darkness.
> Expect aurora borealis
> in the long foray
> but no cascade of light.
>
> Keep your eye clear

[3] Ibid p.40
[4] Ibid p.40
[5] Lasdun, J. 'Notes on a Footnote' in *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes* (ed. Gammage, N.) London, Faber and Faber, 1999.

as the bleb of an icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.'[6]

The idea of composing 'in darkness' and without expecting the 'cascade of light' of any absolute kind of truth are key to Heaney's approach in this period of his writing. But Heaney's poems are not only pared down in terms of focus. The form of the poems also reflects the concentration on essentials. Many of the poems are written in three or four line stanzas, with much use of enjambment. The lines are generally short, most commonly between four and seven syllables in length. The effect of this is to suggest a stripping away of any lyric excess. The eye moves quickly down the page, drawn on by the line breaks and enjambment, registering the images like sudden shocks.

As I will discuss in the commentaries on my own poems, the approaches I encountered in Hughes and Heaney galvanised me into working in a new way. However, it wasn't until more recently that I found a vocabulary to describe this method of writing. The breakthrough came when I was in Canada in 2002 on a Leighton studio fellowship at the Banff Centre for the Arts. I had already come across a number of Canadian poets on previous trips to the country, and had been particularly impressed by the work of Don McKay and Tim Lilburn. This time I was in a bookshop in Calgary when I found *Living In The World As If It Were Home*, a collection of essays on poetry and place by Tim Lilburn. Lilburn is an ex-monk who now teaches literature and philosophy in Saskatchewan. The reason I have found Lilburn's work so useful is that he approaches the via negativa as a poet. Whereas there is obviously a whole tradition of writings about the via negativa in the Western tradition, it is Lilburn's application of this approach to nature, language and poetry which is so distinctive. In *Living in the World As If It Were Home*, he uses the Christian tradition of the via negativa to elucidate a way of being in the world. The via negativa has much in common with Keats's idea of negative capability, which he defines as that state in which 'a man is capable of being uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable

[6] Heaney, S. *North*. London, Faber and Faber, 1975, p.20

reaching after fact and reason'.[7] In the Christian tradition the via negativa is contrasted with the via positiva. Lilburn defines the two ways thus.

> There are two paths, said early mystical writers, the via positiva and the via negativa, the way of light and the way of darkness. Affirmative theology, the way of light, is an understanding of the divine nature as it is exposed in the intelligible order of being; one declares, tracking the divinity in ekstasis, that the source of being is good, intelligent, beautiful and so on. In negative theology, however, they said, a richer knowledge of the divine comes, the intimate knowledge of human ecstasy, a no-knowledge[...]On it, all the names of divinity are rejected as inadequate: God is not good if by this one would constrain the divine in images of human beneficence, nor just if one had in mind mere human justice. God is supra-goodness, beauty beyond beauty, No-thing.[8]

Lilburn applies the via negativa to his attempts to 'know' various landscapes. In the Christian tradition nature was often viewed with suspicion, as being linked to the body and the fallen state. However, for Lilburn, the natural world is a site of reverence and awe, the object of his contemplative practice. This practice is one of wearing away our habitual patterns of response, a kind of ascetic looking which attempts to see beyond names and concepts.

> Contemplation of nature, like contemplation of God in negative theology, is a knowing which is an unknowing, a frustration of the desire to know, in which nevertheless, this desire persists, heightened, hurtling one forward into the unknowability of unique things.[9]

This approach to nature is one which avoids the excesses of both scientific materialism and Romantic identification. Nature is neither just raw objectified matter, nor is it a repository for human feelings. It is in fact strangely other. Any attempt to comprehend it in terms of what one already knows is bound to fail. The act of contemplation is one of abandoning knowledge.

> It is a stance of quiet before things in which your various acquisitivenesses – for knowledge, supremacy, consolation – are stilled, exhausted before the remoteness, the militant individuality of what is there.[10]

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[7] Keats, J. Letter to his brothers, 21st Dec, 1817 in *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats* (ed.R.Gittings). London, Heinemann, 1966, p.40
[8] Lilburn, T. *Living In the World As If It Were Home* Ontario, Cormorant Books, 1999 p.14
[9] Ibid p.13
[10] Ibid p.21

The difference between the via positiva and the via negativa in the Christian tradition can be illustrated by comparing poems by Hopkins and R.S. Thomas. Both poets wrote out of a Christian context, but their approaches were very different.

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.[11]

Hopkins's poem is an example of the via positiva. The poet sees the divine order in the nature of things, intelligibly expressed. However disassociated humans might be from nature and therefore, the divine, there is the 'dearest freshness deep down things'. Morning brings with it the symbolic light of the Holy Ghost. The affirmative tone of the poem is also expressed in its form. The ecstatic nature of the vision is carried in the energetic movement of the sprung rhythm, connections emphasised by the constant use of alliteration. Hopkins adapts the sonnet for his own uses, but the underlying pattern of argument and counter-argument is still there, the poem moving from the dragging internal rhymes of lines five to eight, to the lighter counter-argument of the last sextet.

By contrast, R.S. Thomas's 'The Moor' is much simpler.

The Moor

[11] Hopkins, G.M. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (4th ed) ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie Oxford, OUP, 1975.

It was like a church to me.
I entered it on soft foot,
Breath held like a cap in hand.
It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over grass.

There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart's passions – that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cession
Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.[12]

As with Hopkins's poem, God is experienced in nature. But instead of being immediately apparent as an energy, God's presence is something that is felt in quietness. The key to the experience of the divine is in the 'stillness/ Of the heart's passions' and 'the mind's cession/of its kingdom'. The speaker is described as 'Simple and poor'. This is the via negativa, the divine glimpsed though a negation of the self and any ideas about what God might be, hence the fact that 'There were no prayers said'.

The approach I am describing isn't, however, limited to the Christian tradition. Mark Doty, an American, and Tomas Tranströmer, a Swede, are both contemporary poets who write about nature, but their approaches are markedly different. In 'Difference', Doty sets out to describe a school of jellyfish.

The jellyfish
float in the bay shallows
like schools of clouds,

a dozen identical – is it right
to call them creatures,
these elaborate sacks

of nothing? All they seem
is shape, and shifting,
and though a whole troop

of undulant cousins
go about their business

[12] Thomas, R.S. *Collected Poems 1945-1990* London, Phoenix, 1993, p.166

within a single wave's span,

every one does something unlike:[13]

Having begun with a simile, describing the jellyfish as 'like schools of clouds,' Doty, as a contemporary poet well aware of language's limits, then runs up against a lack of categories, of useful terms with which to name the jellyfish. 'All they seem is shape and shifting' he says. What follows is a list of metaphors. So each jellyfish is a 'balloon, a breathing heart, a pulsing flower, a rolled condom' and so on. As the poem goes on, the jellyfish being described as 'sheer ectoplasm, and 'some unlikely/marine chiffon', Doty continues to think aloud about what he is doing.

What can words do

but link what we know
to what we don't,
and so form a shape?[14]

This, I would suggest, is a contemporary version of the via positiva. Doty's poem is affirmative and expansive. As it continues, the question form adds a grammatical open-endedness to what is an acknowledgment of the necessarily shifting, open-ended relationship between language and the experience it is describing. So he talks about a shape which is both the thing itself and the metaphor:

which shrinks and swells,
configures or collapses, blooms
even as it is described[15]

Faced with the instability of language, Doty ends up celebrating the diversity of both nature and metaphor.

What binds
one shape to another

[13] Doty, M. *My Alexandria* London, Jonathan Cape, 1995, p.44
[14] Ibid, p.45
[15] Ibid, p.45

also sets them apart
- but what's lovelier
than the shapeshifting

transparence of *like* and *as*:[16]

The poem ends with a consideration of the poet's art itself.

Hear how the mouth,

so full
of longing for the world,
changes its shape?[17]

This then is one contemporary response to nature. Tomas Tranströmer's poem 'From March 1979' is radically different.

From March 1979

Sick of those who come with words but no language,
I make my way to the snow-covered island.

Wilderness has no words. The unwritten pages
stretch out in all directions.

I come across this line of deer-slots in the snow: a language,
language without words.[18]

Tranströmer's poem has much more in common with R.S.Thomas's. This is the 'stance of quiet before things in which your various acquisitivenesses[...]are stilled'.[19] While Doty's reaction to the otherness of nature is to celebrate diversity, to multiply the names, Tranströmer works by cancelling out names, by suggesting another language beyond the human. There is an ascesis here, a holding back, a refusal to name when names could all too easily draw the subject into the web of human concerns. I am not suggesting a value judgement when comparing these two approaches. Both have their strengths. In fact, each

[16] Ibid, p.45
[17] Ibid, p.46
[18] Tranströmer, T. *The Deleted World: Versions by Robin Robertson* London, Enitharmon, 2006, p.37.
[19] Op cit. Lilburn. p.21

approach is probably a matter of temperament as much as anything else. Rather I hope that they illustrate two different ways of writing about nature.

I have used the examples offered by Lilburn, Hopkins, R.S. Thomas, Mark Doty and Tomas Tranströmer to give an illustration if what the via negativa is. The via negativa is both an attitude and a style, the former determining the latter. It is an approach to subject matter which is one of abandoning what one already knows about it, a stripping away of accretions of concepts and names. By doing this, one tries to come into a relationship with the finally mysterious nature of experience. Writing for me is a matter of trying to find words which will express in some way that which is beyond the normal denotative function of language. In order to do this, language has to be re-made into new patterns to express what wasn't expressible before.

This method is articulated for me in Ted Hughes's essays in *Poetry in the Making.* Originally a compilation of radio talks given for school children, the book still strikes me as one of the most pertinent accounts of the writing process. In 'Learning to Think', Hughes describes the relationship between the inner life and the act of writing.

> There is the inner life, which is the world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence, and natural common sense, and which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously like the heart beat. There is also the thinking process by which we break into the inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it. That process of raid, or persuasion or ambush, or dogged hunting, or surrender, is the kind of thinking we have to learn, and if we do not somehow learn it, then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of man who cannot fish.[20]

Like Eliot's account, which Hughes's clearly echoes, the model of writing given here is one in which the writer approaches experience as a mystery, something which is beyond conscious understanding. Later Hughes describes words as tools that are 'learned late and laboriously and easily forgotten with which we try to give some part of our experience a more or less permanent existence outside ourselves.'[21] This sense of engaging with the alien or uncanny nature of our own inner lives is suggested again in Don Paterson's article 'The Lyric Principle' in *Poetry Review* (Summer 2007).

[20] Hughes, T. *Poetry in the Making* London, Faber and Faber, 1967, p.57.
[21] Ibid, p.119

> The white page is also sign to the reader that our poems were *won* from silence, drawn out from it – when we went there, and sat in the as-yet-consonant-free breath of our inspiration, and began to try and articulate the inarticulable, those beyond-words relations and feelings, and then we were granted a few strange words that seemed to adhere to them.[22]

The sense of finding 'a few strange words that seemed to adhere' has been my experience as a poet. The main body of this commentary will be an analysis of my own work in the light of these ideas.

Nature: The Ungraspable Diversity Of Here[23]

Context

In a time of environmental crisis and increasingly fast-paced technological change, our relationship with nature is repeatedly open to question. How do we confront our domination of nature? Are we estranged from the natural world? If not, how do we locate ourselves within it? In writing the poems in the first section of the collection, I have been confronted by these questions. In addition to these larger issues is the problem of language itself. As the Canadian poet Don McKay puts it in his excellent book *Vis à Vis*, '[g]iven the unique relation of language to our species, how can our perception, as well as our writing, *not* be a restructuring of the world?'[24] McKay's essays are particularly influenced by his readings of Heidegger and Levinas. These two thinkers are crucial to ecopoetics and ecocriticism. For Heidegger, language itself is implicated in what he terms the 'technological attitude'. Used instrumentally, language is part of the 'enframing' of the world, shaping nature as 'standing reserve'. However, language can also act as the 'house of Being', with the capacity to return us to the 'presence' of objects.[25] Levinas, who was initially immersed in Heidegger's work, questions Heidegger's idea of 'letting be'. Rather, 'the other', whether

[22] Paterson, D. 'The Lyric Principle Part 1:The Sense of Sound', in *Poetry Review, Vol 97:2* London, The Poetry Society, 2007
[23] Op Cit. Lilburn, p.15
[24] McKay, D. *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness* Nova Scotia, Gaspereau Press, 2001, p.29
[25] Heidegger, M. *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans Hofstadter, A.) New York, Harper and Row, 1975

human or non-human, is that which is addressed.[26] From this Levinas develops the concept of the Face. McKay comments:

> What Levinas means by the Face is, I think, the other encountered in a relationship of address and discovered to be quite untranslatable into systems of sameness and linguistic organisation; it is foreign-ness that remains foreign, always exceeding our categories of knowing, always "over and beyond form" (Totality and Infinity)[27].

Clearly Levinas's ideas, as interpreted by McKay, have much in common with the via negativa. For the reasons outlined here therefore, an awareness of language's tendencies to restructure the world runs, consciously or unconsciously, through the writing of my own poems in this section.

Killing Geese[28]

This poem came from an experience of helping a friend raise ten geese. The intention was to kill the fully grown birds just before Christmas and sell them. I later wrote another poem, 'Geese', which describes the arrival of the geese. When it came to the actual killing of the birds, I was in fact away and my brother and a local farmer helped my friend dispatch the birds. However, I heard about the difficulties, both physical and emotional, of killing the birds from both my friend and my brother. I knew that I wanted to write something about the actual killing of the birds and a few months after the event, I jotted a few lines down in a notebook.

Gripping that brunt acceleration,
gunning itself,
straining for flight.

I had the recollections of my friend and brother to draw on, but I also read up about how to kill a goose in *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency* by John Seymour.

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[26] Levinas, E. *Entre Nous* (trans Smith, M and Harshav, B.) London, Athlone Press, 1998
[27] Op Cit. McKay, p.97
[28] *Broken Ground*: p.8

> Grab the bird by its legs with both hands. Keep the back of the bird away from you. Lower the head to the floor, and get someone else to lay a broomstick across the head. Tread on both ends of the broomstick, and pull the legs upwards until you feel the neck break.[29]

I then wrote a first draft of the whole poem, which ended on the image of the 'cooling machinery'. At this stage I didn't know how to finish the poem. This is a common experience for me. It's as if the initial inspiration can only carry me so far. Then the poem often seems to need time to settle before I can finish it. I think this has something to do with an almost unconscious working out of what the poem is actually about. I have to live with the images for a while, until they sink into me, almost in a physical way. When I did manage to write the last section a month later, it came as a surprise, the words settling themselves onto the page in minutes. The fact that I wasn't actually present at the killing made the writing of the poem both easier and more urgent. I had to imagine the experience in writing the poem. My most successful poems based on actual experiences are those which have some element of the imagined in them. A too literal rendering of experience rarely takes off into an effective poem.

Looking at the poem now I can see a number of influences. An obvious one is the work of Ted Hughes. The matter-of-fact delivery, the lack of any lyric 'frills' are all things I can see I learned from early poems such as 'View of a Pig'. Some of the poems in *Moortown*, particularly 'February 17th' and 'Coming Down Through Somerset', probably also had an influence in that they attempt to confront the fact of death and negotiate some kind of articulation of its effects. The final section of the poem, it now seems to me, draws something from Heaney's poems in *North.* The cool, detached tone of 'Expeditions into the flesh' and the following lines has resonances of 'Punishment' and 'the brain's exposed/and darkened combs/your muscles webbing/and all your numbered bones'.[30] The extract from *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency*, some of which I almost paraphrase in the poem, also had an effect, giving the poem an instruction-like quality.

What these influences did was to suggest an approach and a vocabulary for confronting and exploring the experience of the goose's death. In retrospect I can see that what drove the poem forward was the notion of the goose's sudden

[29] Seymour, J. *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency* London, Faber and Faber, 1977, p.128
[30] Op. cit, Heaney, p.38

absence. One moment the bird is fully alive and struggling, the next there is just 'cooling machinery'. In order to convey this shift from the known to the unknown, the language of the poem had to be stripped of any kind of lyrical excess which might contain the kind of 'acquisitivenesses' which Lilburn talks about in *Living In The World As If It Were Home*, the desire 'for knowledge, supremacy, consolation'. I had to employ an imagery which would somehow gesture at the absence created by death. One way of doing this was to use metaphors such as 'It made a hole in the day/where the bird had been'. The effect of metaphor can be to undo what we already think we know. McKay, in *Vis à Vis*, puts in this way.

> With a metaphor that works we're immediately convinced of the truth of the claim *because* it isn't rational. The leap always says (besides fresh comparison) that language is not commensurate with the real, that leaps are necessary if we are to regain some sense of the world outside it. In this sense metaphor's first act is to un-name its subject, reopening the question of reference. It's as though we were able to refer beyond reference, to use sameness against itself to bring the other, and a *sense* of the other (that is, its smell as well as its content) into the totality. Thanks to metaphor, we know more; but we also know that *we don't own what we know.*[31]

The image of the bird as 'cooling machinery' opens up the reference to suggest a mixing of the man-made and the natural, so that what was an animal can now be referred to as apparatus of some kind. In doing this, I hoped to gesture at the strange and uncanny move from a living creature to a dead one, raising questions about how bodies can seem like machines, and yet are clearly so much more.

The final section of the poem uses imagery of exploration. I wanted to convey the foreign quality of the dead animal, but also to suggest a kind of penetration of its body, a form of colonisation. By using language such as '[e]xpeditions' and 'landscape' I hoped to suggest a scientific detachment on the part of the speaker which contrasts with the violation of what is actually occurring, thereby unsettling the reader and asking him or her reconsider the relationship between human and animal.

The Skater[32] and *Bow River*[33]

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[31] Op.cit, McKay, p.69
[32] *Broken Ground*, p.55

I have long been fascinated by white spaces: snow, ice, the arctic and Antarctic regions. One of the first poems I ever wrote was inspired by Casper David Friedrich's painting *The Polar Sea* (1824). I wrote the poem on the back of my A level English exam paper, then promptly lost it. Later I discovered how the Romantics were drawn to the sublime of the polar regions. In the mid-nineties I read Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*, a mixture of travel, science and imagination.

'The Skater' began with the words of verse one running through my head. I can't pinpoint why, sitting in my parent's front room one not very snowy Christmas. I should have had a kind of waking vision of someone skating across a frozen sea. However, once I had the first few lines, I worked on the poem intensively for the next two days. One important breakthrough came with the realisation that tercets would form the majority of the poem. I often write in this form. With the use of enjambment, this gives the poem an ongoing momentum as, unlike a four line stanza for example, the odd number of lines suggests something unfinished. The white spaces between the stanzas allow for a kind of short contemplation after each tercet or couplet. The pacing that the stanzas give was important for this poem, as I wanted to suggest a regular motion as the skater headed out to sea, the movement of the poem down the page imitating the thrust and glide of the skater.

Behind this poem, I can see the influence of Sylvia Plath's work, particularly poems such as 'Mushrooms', 'Ariel' and 'Full Fathom Five', all of which utilise the tercet form. But the influence of Plath goes deeper than this. In the aforementioned poems, she uses each tercet as a stepping stone to move deeper and deeper into the imagery of the poem. The impression is of a mind interrogating the initial image through a series of further images until there is some kind of resolution. Unlike a conventional short lyric poem, there is a sense of a journey. But it isn't a rational, discursive journey, rather it is on conducted through a dialogue of images. This is what I was trying to achieve in 'The Skater'. I wanted to deepen the initial image, interrogating it until I found some kind of resolution or working out of the idea.

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[11] *Broken Ground*, p.18

What this resolution actually means is still quite mysterious. The poem functions in terms of its images for me, but to speak rationally about meaning is difficult. Certainly the imagery of ice and emptiness is important. The scene is its own little via negativa. The skater moves from the land out to sea, abandoning the company of other people and eventually anything that would 'sustain the eye' or restrict the mind. Whether this is an image of freedom or death, I'm never quite sure. But this is also the poem's power for me, its final mystery.

A linked poem is 'Bow River'. This poem was written in Banff, Canada, where I spent three months during the winter of 2002. The Bow river passes through the town of Banff, then veers between two mountains before meandering through woods. When I was in Banff, the river had partly frozen over. The river fascinated me while I was there and I attempted to write about it a number of times. Eventually, the first line came to me as I was walking in the woods one day. Again, I found myself drawn to the tercet form, but in this case for a much more compressed lyric poem. While using enjambment, I have tried to suggest a series of pauses as the reader's eye moves through the poem. I experimented with one long stanza at one stage, but this seemed too condensed and rushed somehow. Although the poem is short, I wanted a sense of space in it. I can see now that I was trying to subvert the idea of the frozen landscape as sublime. By bringing in imagery of hunger and the 'poverty of dead grass', I was keen to suggest the desperation of winter. For while I worried about the cougar in the last verse. Was it, in itself, too sublime? At one stage I replaced the last verse with the following:

> that small herd of elk, scattered
> among the trees, ribs pushing
> through their tattered coats.

However, I now feel that the original verse is better, suggesting, as it does, the presence of the cougar, but only through a set of tracks, an inscription on snow which language can't follow. The animal itself is never seen. This echoes my own experience. A cougar would pass nightly through the campus where I was staying, but no one ever actually encountered it. I wanted this ghostly, suggested presence in the poem too.

The Tranquillity Maps[14]

I had read about the Council for the Protection of Rural England's tranquillity maps at some point in the mid-nineties. I was struck by the idea of mapping something so abstract as tranquillity, and went on to look at the maps themselves, which use what might be called isobars of sound to map where the quietest places in the UK are. I then carried the idea around in my head for a while, eventually jotting down the phrase 'tranquillity maps – what would they actually feel like?' in a notebook. When I came to write the poem, I knew that it wasn't the actual physical maps themselves that interested me, rather it was the concept. I soon realised that I could mix the technical language of map-making and science with more lyrical imagery in phrases such as 'the contours of light'. I made lists of words associated with geography and map-making, then used these to build images. Many of these images were discarded before I settled on the ten lines of the final poem. This was partly because I soon realised the poem had to be short: too many images and it would become list-like. The two line stanzas emerged as a way of slowing the poem down, allowing the reader to experience gaps of contemplation between each pair of lines. However, with only two lines, there is less instability than with three. Although I do use enjambment between stanzas, there is not the same sense of onward momentum as in a tercet based poem and each stanza can be read as a self-contained unit of two images.

For me this poem was an important breakthrough. By trying to describe something as abstract as tranquillity, I had to fashion images which stretch meaning in new ways. Many of the lines I abandoned went too far, the meaning breaking down as I tried to yoke two unlike things together. I hope that images such as 'the revelations of bark' in the final piece do conjure up the otherness of nature, its strange, almost numinous combination of familiarity and distance. As Tim Lilburn suggests in *Living In The World As If It Were Home*, poetry is a kind of language which is carefully aware of language's totalising tendencies. Instead of naming the world and assuming that the world is its names, poetry can constantly remind one of language's poverty in the face of nature.

[14] *Broken ground*, p.45

> Language asserts and cancels itself, names the world then erases the name, and in this restlessness one glimpses the aptness of confusion before the ungraspable diversity of here.[35]

And it is metaphor which allows language to assert then cancel itself, to reopen 'the question of reference', as McKay puts it. What a contemporary nature poetry can do best is to remind us of the dangers of the primordial grasp, to help us find a way of relating to the rest of the natural world while being aware of even language's tendencies to colonise everything it comes into contact with.

Elegy: Talking With The Dead

Context

While the otherness of nature presents the poet with a need to gesture at something outside language, the subject of death is even more problematic. Without the sustaining explanations of a traditional belief system, death is the radically unknowable, that which can never be satisfactorily represented. As Jahan Ramazani suggests in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy From Hardy to Heaney*, modern elegies often tend to be 'melancholic' rather than 'compensatory'.

> In contrast, modern elegists tend to enact the work not of normative but of "melancholic" mourning – a term I adapt from Freud to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent.[36]

In addition to the ethical problems of contemporary elegy, representation is also open to question. The elegy theorist William Watkin describes any attempt to represent death as 'thanatropism'.

> Thantropism is a complicated rhetorical sub-group that covers any figurative or rhetorical attempt to represent death, loss and grief. In the end,

[35] Op.cit Lilburn, p.15

[36] Ramazani, J. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy From Hardy to Heaney* Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.4.

> it is something of a catchall phrase because in as much as death can never be a referent for language, all talk of death is ultimately tropic.[37]

The elegy, however, is one of the oldest and most consistently utilised modes of poetry. For all the talk of 'making it new', one can't help but draw on a rich and varied tradition when writing elegies. The awareness of both tradition and a need for an expression of death in a contemporary context will inform my discussion of writing elegies.

Waltz[38]*, The Storm*[39] *and Vernon Street*[40]

This sequence of poems was written in response to the illness and death of my ex-father-in-law. 'Waltz' stems from a memory of him when he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's but was still living at home. Alzheimer's is a kind of living death. The person is still physically present, but their personality seems to be disappearing. Over a number of months I tried to write about this subject. An early attempt was 'Demented'.

Demented

Your father's growing backwards,
becoming your mother's child,
a monstrous infant she can
never let out of her sight.
Every morning she must school him
in the complex etiquette
of shirt buttons and trouser buckles,
explain what a toothbrush is for
and how it works. At dinner she cuts up his food,
bribes him with ice cream and chocolate
while the rest of us prompt him
with the names of his children,
these looming adults who sit around the table,
and have some connection to him
he finds it harder and harder to fathom.
Bored by the endless holiday of his life,
he sits blankly in front of the television,

[37] Watkin, W. *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p.58
[38] *Broken Ground*, p.14
[39] *Broken Ground*, p.15
[40] *Broken Ground*, p.16

letting the cataract of flickering images
wash over him. Nightimes
he can't sleep, wanders the house
in the dark of the early mornings,
his voice rousing your exhausted mother,
as he calls to no one, "help me, help me."

In this poem I was trying to use actual memories to convey the decline brought on by Alzheimer's. However, I felt that the poem didn't cohere, but was rather a series of different moments yoked together. Although the final image is based on a real incident, it seemed factitious when placed at the end of the poem. I therefore put the poem away, thinking I would abandon it. However, a few months later, I returned to the idea, jotting the lines 'Somehow his feet remember' down in my notebook. This line, and the idea of the ill man remembering how to dance, became the central conceit of the poem 'Waltz'. I quite quickly wrote five verses, lifting the last eight lines from 'Demented'. However, I was then unsure how to finish the poem. For a number of months, I thought the poem ended with the image of the ill man urinating on the pots. But the poem still felt incomplete. I tried a number of different endings. One such attempt involved bringing in an image of snow.

Outside it's snowing: the sky
is thick with it, the soft
relentless flakes already
covering the lawn, pattering

against the glass in their thousands.

I used the image of the snow to suggest the oncoming blankness of Alzhiemers. But this didn't seem to work. There was too much of a shift from the interior dancing scene to the snow outside. In addition to this, I decided the snow was overly symbolic. Another attempt used the image of music to suggest the loss of mental capacity.

The waltz begins to fade,
and he's suddenly unsteady, his feet
slowing, the announcer's drawl
a music he can make nothing of.

Finally I realised that the poem had to conclude on some positive note. I can now see that the consolatory note that features in the ending of the poem was there from the start. The image of dancing and the momentary suspension of time that it produces for the watchers, is key to the poem. To finish on a negative image would have given the poem a much bleaker resolution. The final two verses now reiterate and develop the initial dancing image. As is often the case, the writing of the poem was a working out of a feeling that was not fully conscious when I began to write.

Having written 'Waltz', I had a sense that there was more that I wanted to say about my ex-father in law. By this time he had died, and I suppose the urge to write more was in part a way of mourning, of trying to commemorate something about his life. But more than this, it was also a way of trying to understand the man more fully.

Just before he died, the tail end of a hurricane hit Halifax, Nova Scotia. At that time he had been in a nursing home in the city for about a year. Halifax was also the city he had grown up in and lived in for the majority of his life. I therefore began 'The Storm' with descriptions of the hurricane's effects. However, by focussing on the city, I soon began to write about my ex-father-in-law's personal history, as the destruction visited on the city became connected in my mind with his death. By piecing together different parts of his life, through associations with the storm, the poem began to function as a collage of time and history. I wanted to resist the temptation to present him as a settled whole, which is a strong urge when writing an elegy. By fracturing the time sequence, moving from childhood memories to the war, then ahead to the1990s, I realised I could suggest a sense of his disorientation. But I could also suggest the memories which seemed most important to him when he was still healthy, his childhood and the job he had working on a transport ship for war brides in the late forties.

I had moved away from the naturalism of 'Waltz' to the collage effect of 'The Storm'. The final poem in the sequence, 'Vernon Street', took me in another direction. In writing 'Vernon Street' I was influenced by Seamus Heaney's sequence 'Clearances', which appears in *The Haw Lantern*. Heaney uses traditional elegiac tropes, such as pathetic fallacy, but he does so in a way which suggests that these are not to be taken literally; rather they are the imagination's

attempts to come to grips with the experience of loss. So the final lines of the final sonnet suggest a transcendence, but one which is complex and ambiguous. Heaney compares his mother's death to the felling of a chestnut tree that was planted when he was born.

> Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
> A soul ramifying and forever
> Silent, beyond silence listened for.[41]

In writing 'Vernon Street', I drew on what is a common experience, a dream of the dead person. The dream wasn't mine. It was narrated to me third hand, by my ex-wife. I saw immediately that the dream would be part of a poem and that the poem would finish the sequence. The poem was written quickly, with few changes to subsequent drafts. Inspired partly by Heaney's example, I allowed my imagination to construct the scene, so that the skating became a kind of journey of the soul towards death. In one way the dream of the dead can be viewed as a consolatory experience conjured up by the mourner's own mind, and the poem can be read as consolatory too. But I hope that I have also suggested that this is an imaginative fiction. Discussing Heaney's use of more traditional elegiac devices, Ramayana describes how the poet 'salvages these consolatory tropes by curtailing their promise.'[42] This is precisely what I have attempted to achieve in 'Vernon Street'.

Cross Border[43]*, Fast*[44] *and Child*[45]

'Waltz', 'The Storm' and 'Vernon Street' were all written about someone I had been close to and knew well over a number of years. The next three poems I am going to discuss were written in response to deaths of people I either read or heard about in the media. Two are attempts to represent the moment of death itself, and consequently presented me with a number of problems. As both Ramayana and Watkins suggest in their books on elegy, the attempt to represent

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[41] Heaney, S. *The Haw Lantern* London, Faber and Faber, 1987, p.24
[42] Op cit Ramazani, p.353
[43] *Broken Ground*, p.42
[44] *Broken Ground*, p.46
[45] *Broken Ground*, p.3

the death itself is fraught with difficulties. As a contemporary poet, how does one approach what Watkins describes as 'the radical unknowability of death'?[46] One method is to reinvigorate traditional elegiac tropes, as I have described when discussing 'Vernon Street'. However, in the case of violent death, these tropes can become untenable, offering a consolation that can seem spurious.

'Cross-Border' is based on a news item I heard on Radio 4. A young man in Northern Ireland was killed by a car bomb after leaving his girlfriend's house late one night. The poem represents the imagined last few minutes of the young man's life. I wanted to convey the ordinariness of the moments leading up to the explosion. This was relatively easy. What was more difficult was suggesting the moment of death itself. After a number of drafts, I settled on the following ending.

> You turned the key, expecting
> the familiar churn of the starter,
> and suddenly knew everything
> and then nothing.

I felt that these lines conveyed something of the force of the explosion, mainly through the increased sense of rhythmic urgency in the penultimate line, even if the explosion itself wasn't actually described. In terms of semantic meaning of the last two lines, I was trying to suggest a momentary state of grace ('suddenly knew everything') before the blankness of death. However, I wasn't satisfied with this ending. Workshop colleagues found the last lines hard to make sense of and a number seemed to be mystified by the whole poem. I also came to feel that the moment of grace in the penultimate line was unearned. Being unsure how to finish the poem, had I been tempted to insert a consolatory note? The urge to do this is strong when writing an elegy. Whether this urge is psychological or something to do with the genre of the elegy is hard to tell. I also realised that with 'Cross-Border' I had in some ways set myself an impossible task. By adopting the victim's point of view, and then trying to follow this point of view into the moment of death, I had been forced up against the unrepresentability of that state.

I went back to the poem to try and rewrite the ending. The ending as it now exists takes the reader only as far as the moment before death and a possible

[46] Ibid. p.143

realisation on the victim's part of what is about to happen. I have retreated from any attempt to represent the moment of death itself. However, I still don't feel wholly satisfied with the poem. The mimetic rhythmic explosion of the first ending is gone and the sense of something 'running down' which is now there seems less effective in conveying the violence of the car bomb. It may be that the problems of representing the moment of death are irresolvable.

'Fast' was written in response to a newspaper report about Verity Linn, a Breatharian, who starved to death in a tent near a remote Scottish loch. Breatharians are a cult who believe that for the spiritually adept it is unnecessary to eat, and that one can live on the life force contained in air. I was immediately drawn to the story for a number of reasons. Firstly, it seemed a dramatic example of religious asceticism taken to extremes. But in addition to this, the lonely death, far from other human beings, resonated in important ways with a book I had recently read, John Krakenhauer's *Into the Wild*[47], a non-fiction account of a young American man who leaves his privileged home and travels to Alaska. There he heads off into the bush with few supplies and very little equipment, believing, it seems, that he can live off the land. Next spring, his emaciated corpse is found in an abandoned bus miles from the nearest road. Both stories seemed to be a kind of via negativa gone wrong, where the desire to abandon the trappings of an impure world and put one's faith in something greater had led only to death.

The newspaper article about Linn was accompanied by a photo of the loch where she had died. The tent and the surroundings became the focus of the first draft of 'Fast'. I wanted to describe the last few days in the tent in order to explore the process of dying that she would have gone through physically. I did some research into starvation and found out that the body starts to consume its own tissue in the final stages of life. At the same time, the poem was leading me into an exploration of the spiritual significance, however misconstrued, of what Linn was doing, in particular the connections between anorexia and an ascetic rejection of the flesh.

In contrast to 'Cross-Border', where I continue to struggle to resolve the ending, the final stanzas of 'Fast' were relatively easy to write. I have used the

[47] Krakenhauer, J. *Into the Wild* New York, Random House, 1996.

consolatory trope of death as purification, but it is a trope which is hopefully troubled and undermined by the state of mind of the dying person. The trope is therefore just a trope, it has no more traction on the fact of death than any other trope. The imaginative strategy here owes much to Heaney's example in *North*, not only in terms of the pared down nature of the imagery, but also with regard to Heaney's refusal to take shelter in potentially comforting abstracts of any kind, his advice to keep the 'eye clear/as the bleb of an icicle'.[48]

'Child' stems from the murder of Sarah Payne in 2000. In addition to experiencing the media coverage at the time, I was familiar with the place where her body was found, as I had often driven past the lane where she was discovered when I was travelling to Crawley to teach. The poem began with a series of notes about my reactions to both the murder and the public response. As is often the case, the first line came of its own accord. The next seven lines then appeared in one draft, and were focussed on the discovery of the body, but from the dead child's point of view. Then for a number of weeks I couldn't get any further with the poem, unsure how it should develop. I tried the following.

> Your blood had cooled,
> your muscles gone slack,
> the soft enfolded strata
> of your brain as blank as snow.
> You were back with the beginnings,
> your warmth already returning to the air,
> your molecules re-entering the long slow sift
> of matter, finding your way again
> in the restless womb of the world.

This seemed to suggest something of what I was trying to get at, but the image of the 'soft enfolded strata/of your brain' seemed too close to Heaney's description in 'Punishment' of the dead girl's 'brain's exposed/ and darkened combs'. I also felt that the initial conceit of the dead child being asleep had been lost in the last section. I went back to the poem and drafted a new ending.

> You never woke when they lifted you
> from your hiding place
> and carried you away,

[48] Heaney, S. *North* London, Faber and Faber, 1975, p.20

your parents' eyes hollow
after sixteen sleepless nights,
their voices freighted with a grief
so enormous that in the end
it seemed to need a whole nation to carry it.

I had been interested in the public reaction to the death from the beginning and now I had tried to incorporate this. However, the imagery of the last two lines began to seem too hyperbolic for a poem which was about a very specific child's death. Although the poem was written in response to the murder of Sarah Payne, I felt increasingly that I wanted to resist using this fact in too obvious a way. I had already decided against any kind of dedication. By revealing the fact that the poem was about Sarah Payne at the end, it could be the literary equivalent of pulling a rabbit out of a hat which would undermine the quiet tone I wanted in the poem.

However, I decided to keep the lines about the child never waking as she was lifted from her hiding place and carried away. I then realised that I had series of negative statements: '[y]ou never heard', '[y]ou never woke'. I then added a new section, beginning with '[y]ou were silent...' Now the poem seemed to have a structure, a series of negative statements which began each section. In the final draft I took the imagery of the long slow sift of matter and expanded this to end the poem.

Behind the poem is of course a history of elegies for dead children. In particular I can now see that Dylan Thomas's 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' was a kind of ghost haunting the writing of 'Child'. Thomas's poem was also written in response to the public death of a child he didn't know personally. The poem uses a series of negatives ('Never until the mankind making... Nor blaspheme'[49]) as structure. In addition to this, the imagery of the 'skin cells' and 'stray hairs' 'finding their way/in the long slow sift of matter' in 'Child', which is, I hope subtly recuperative, if only on a material level, perhaps echoes the child's return to '[t]he grains beyond ages'[50] in Thomas's poem.

[49] Thomas, D. 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London', *Collected Poems 1934-1952* London , J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, . 1989, p.85
[50] Ibid p.85.

The trope of the sleeping child with which my poem opens is, of course, a commonplace one, which not only appears in other elegies for children, but is also widespread on tombstones. However, in conjunction with the negations that run through the poem, the trope of sleep is intended to suggest the unrepresentability of the death state. By not actually stating that the child is dead, I hope to use the techniques of the via negativa to open up a space where absence, though it can never be described, can be gestured at.

If, as Watkin suggests, 'all talk of death is ultimately tropic'[51] then the contemporary elegy must find new ways of speaking about the experience of death, or go silent. In my creative exploration of the elegy, I have detailed a number of approaches to the contemporary elegy. In conclusion I would suggest that while the contemporary elegy can make use of the tropes of mourning, it must do so in ways which acknowledge that the tropes are only conditional and that death itself is unrepresentable. It must adopt its own version of the via negativa and be willing to face the fact that absence cannot be grasped. Tim Lilburn compares the ascetic aspect of the via negativa to the act of mourning itself.

> You grieve and this is a way into things and home. In this awareness of things' oddness and in your compunction over your separation from this is a letting-be-of-the-world while you are turned fully toward it.[52]

The contemporary elegist must not only mourn for the lost subject, but also for language's inability to represent that subject now that he or she is dead. And yet from this mourning, this ascetic retreat, this undoing of names, comes something else – a gesture towards absence, a longing that is given momentum by what cannot be named. By using language's apparently fixed categories against themselves through metaphor, by undoing and recasting familiar or worn out tropes, the poem takes us beyond what we think we know.

Desire: So Close Yet So Far

Context

[51] Op cit. Watkin, p58
[52] Op cit. Lilburn, p.22

The third strain of poems in the collection concerns relationships, particularly sexuality. Longing, loss and desire itself are all experiences which are often strange and unfamiliar while also being incredibly intimate. Language struggles to represent these liminal experiences without falling back into cliché, which is the deadness of already used up language. And yet these experiences themselves come from somewhere prior to language, often from the body's autonomic memory. The struggle to represent these experiences in language can in itself be a via negativa, an attempt to go beyond the familiar names of what we know to the strangeness of what is mostly unconscious. Using the imagery of photography, which I also employ in 'In the Darkroom', Anne Michaels describes writing poetry thus.

> Parts of our selves are exposed, and like the latent image on film, develop; silver bromide of knowledge darkening. A poem can give us night vision; getting used to the dark, we begin to make things out.[53]

This sense of beginning 'to make things out' has been my experience in writing these poems. The act of writing itself has been one of exploration rather than one of expressing already realised concepts. While these poems all have their roots in actual experiences, I wouldn't say that many are directly confessional. The process has most often been one of transmuting actual experience until it fits the emotional truth of what it is the poem is trying to express.

In the Darkroom[54]

This sequence emerged initially from an interest in photography. While I was on a Leighton fellowship at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada, I learnt how to develop films in the darkrooms they had there. While my skills with the camera and in the darkroom were not particularly successful, I became fascinated with the whole process of developing and printing. The title 'In the Darkroom' was the first thing that came to me when I thought of using the ideas of photography

[53] Lilburn, T. (ed) *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Interviews and Essays* Ontario, Quarry Press, 1995, p.180.
[54] *Broken Ground*, p.11

in a poem and I immediately saw its power as an image for desire. I began writing what became the first section of the poem, the description of preparing the film for developing. When I had finished this I was unsure of how to proceed. What I had written seemed self-contained, but I felt there was more to explore. In the notes I had made about being in the darkroom, I had been interested in the technicalities of the whole process. Re-reading these notes, I realised I could structure the poem using the processes of preparation, developing and printing. I quickly wrote the second section. The third emerged a few months later, when I was back in the U.K.

Looking back on the poem now, I can see that the photographic imagery gave me an objective correlative for talking *about desire. At first there* is a blindness. This involves entering a state of unknowing, a via negativa, where one's usual conceptual apparatus no longer operates. But there is something latent in the darkness, which slowly comes to be revealed as a negative, half understood. When it comes to 'fixing' the prints in the final poem, what is looked for isn't there. All that is left is memory, which is perhaps unfixed, changing with time. Of course, the sequence is also about the act of writing itself, the attending to something which is only half known, 'frozen in darkness', but which emerges from some strange 'alchemy' that the poet never quite understands fully.

Coffee[55] *and Hare*[56]

While 'In the Darkroom' explores desire as something latent in darkness, 'Coffee' and 'Hare' are about sex itself. 'Coffee' is part of a sequence of poems entitled *Under Cover* which charts the progress of an affair. The first draft of the poem was written quickly, and consisted of the first and last verse. I used short lines to convey a sense of the urgency of the lovers. Similarly, verse one is one long sentence, the different phrases connected by a series of 'and's. The last verse uses longer lines and is intended to be more meditative. When I had completed the first draft, I felt that more about the lovers was needed and that I had to take the poem beyond the sexual moment itself. I therefore added verse two, both to give some sense of context, but also to allow us to see the two lovers

[55] *Broken Ground*, p.27
[56] *Broken Ground*, p.7

in a different situation. In the sequence as a whole, I attempt to structure some sort of narrative about the two people, though *I don't want this to become too* coherent, more a series of snapshots. An influence on 'Coffee' and on the sequence as a whole was John Sewell's sequence, 'Scenes from the Cutting-Room Floor', which was published in his collection *Bursting the Clouds*[57]. Sewell's short explicit poems also narrate an affair. But what helped me in reading Sewell's work was the example of someone writing about sex in a contemporary and unadorned way. Sewell's poems are not love poems, rather they deal with obsession and loss. Poems such as 'Blackberrying' and 'Penis Talk' create an erotic charge, but one which is qualified by the sense of two *people caught up in something* which seems beyond their control. Each poem is also like a snapshot of a particular moment.

In writing about sex in 'Coffee', I was faced with the difficulty of representing such an intense experience in words. I have attempted to suggest the rush of desire in the urgency of the structure of verse one, with one short line running onto the next. However, when it actually came to the moment of orgasm, I wanted to create a sense of language giving out in the intensity of the moment. In order to do this, I have used ellipsis to suggest what happens beyond language, as thought is burned away. Verses two and three then represent the re-emergence of language again, as the moment of orgasm is passed.

'Hare' attempts to tackle sex in a different way. The poem began with a description of an actual hare. I was particularly interested in the ways in which a hare is different to a rabbit and the first section of the poem tries to evoke the strangeness of the hare. When I had finished this section, I felt there was more I wanted to explore, especially regarding the role of the hare as a changeling in myth. From North American trickster mythology to superstitions about witches turning into hares, the animal has long been seen as magical. This desire to explore other connotations of the hare stems in part from a feeling that I had about other animal poems I had written. I felt that I wanted to do more than write energetic descriptions of animals. I had written a number of such poems in the past such as 'Weasel', and while I am still pleased with many of them, I feel that I have come to the end of that particular strategy. So this poem was an attempt to

[57] Sewell, J. *Bursting the Clouds* London, Jonathan Cape, 1998

connect the animal and the human in another way. In part I can see the influence of Michael Symmons Roberts's collection, *Corpus*[58] on this poem now. Roberts's poems, all of which concern the body in some way, are pared down and work by association more than by narrative or logical argument. In poems such as 'What Divides Us', there are a number of different sections which, while linked by the notion of lovers' bodies, reflect on the main theme in varied ways. A similar tactic is employed in 'Grounded' and 'The Hands'. Having read Roberts's work, I was keen to work in this more oblique way and 'Hare' gave me the opportunity to do so. The second section of the poem is intended to be a kind of oblique reflection of the first section, blurring the boundaries between the human and the animal. I felt that this was an effective strategy for writing about sex, as the real hare, the mythological animal and the human are all hopefully conflated to suggest the mingling of human and animal instinctiveness.

Brighton[59] *and Afterwards*[60]

'Brighton' is one of a number of sonnets from the 'Under Cover' sequence. I had been interested in the sonnet form for a while before I wrote this poem. What I find liberating about the form is the way in which a formal structure can, oddly enough, allow me to use more colloquial language than I would normally. There is something about the constraint of the sonnet that allows for a less imagistic approach. I was particularly struck by Roddy Lumsden's sonnets in *Yeah, Yeah, Yeah* and *The Book of Love.* In the poem 'Yeah Yeah Yeah'[61] Lumsden constructs a compelling sonnet from an apparently conversational voice, using little imagery. The power of the poem comes from the combination of the strict Shakespearean form allied to the very contemporary voice. In 'An Older Woman'[62], Lumsden uses the same form again, this time to chart a chance sexual encounter. The tone is matter of fact; instead of complex imagery, he lists details of the encounter such as 'A Brookes and Simons dress' and the 'spray of freckles

[58] Roberts, M, S. *Corpus* London, Jonathan Cape, 2004.
[59] *Broken Ground*, p.31
[60] *Broken Ground*, p.56
[61] Lumsden. R. *Yeah, Yeah, Yeah* Newcastle, Bloodaxe Books, 1997,p. 22
[62] Lumsden, R. *The Book of Love* Newcastle, Bloodaxe Books, 2000, p. 12

on her shoulders'. An intensity is created by meshing the colloquial voice with the finely tuned machine of the sonnet.

'Brighton' began with the idea of one person wondering who the other is as they make love. As is often the case when I write sonnets, the demands of the form began to influence the direction the poem took, so that the need to find rhyming words suggested new directions that I might not otherwise have encountered. The poem was initially going to be about the man's sense of wondering who this woman really is. However, the last four lines, with their play on mirrors and reflections, combined with the demands of the last couplet, extended the poem to include the man's own sense of hardly even recognising himself.

This sense of the blurring of identity in the sexual act is also central to 'Afterwards'. The poem began with the image of someone looking in a mirror after sex and seeing themselves as slightly different. The rest of the poem then developed as an extension of this idea. The idea of exchanging DNA was in the back of my mind already, although now I can't remember its source. I seem to remember that I read it somewhere, though I have found it impossible to track down where. The poem fell naturally into couplets and I can now see that this is to do with the pacing. As with, for example, The 'Tranquillity Maps', I wanted a sense of space in the poem, a chance for the reader to reflect as they move through the poem. However, in this case, the enjambment between couplets adds a note of uncertainty, destabilising the couplets somewhat.

From the imagery of photography of 'In the Darkroom', to the ellipsis of 'Coffee'; from the use of an animal, both actual and mythological in 'Hare' to the suggestion of unstable identities in 'Brighton' and 'Afterwards', what I have been attempting in these poems about relationships are a number of strategies for writing about desire. Each poem has involved entering a place of unknowing where the usual signposts no longer apply. New strategies have to be developed each time to cope with the demands of the subject matter. As with poems about nature or death, contemporary writing about desire can utilise the via negativa to explore the more liminal and less conscious aspects of experience.

Structuring the Collection

Reflecting on a collection of poems is a strange experience. Different occasions, different locations have produced different poems. Unlike the writing of a novel, which is a journey from A to B, with various detours and side trips, but still a movement from an opening to a conclusion, the writing of a collection of poems is not a continuous process. Instead, one looks back on a series of separate moments and at a certain point intuits that they form a whole of some sort. Of course, some collections are themed from beginning to end, though when and how the poet decides this is another matter. In looking back one begins to see connections and relationships, though at times the whole can seem like a room of competing voices. Still, even then, one can sense that all the voices have a relationship with one another, even if some voices are shouting and others are whispering. The job of the poet, at this stage, is to try and bring the voices together into some form of harmony. One begins to look for rhythms of emotion, for connected themes, for an overarching movement.

With this collection, I was faced with poems written over a decade or more. The conditions of my life had altered significantly over that time. What could the earlier poems possibly have to say to the later ones? How would my favourite pieces get on with the ones I still have reservations about?

With the exception of the sequences in this collection such as 'Under Cover' and 'In the Darkroom', I don't write poems with any theme or aim in mind. One can put certain pressure on oneself to write and I know that certain subject areas can be more fertile than others, at least for a while. If a particular seam is mined for too long however, one can end up writing the same poems over and over again. In some ways, therefore, the subjective experience of the collection did feel like a series of breaks with previous subject matters. For example after writing almost exclusively about the non-human for a number of years, I began to write elegies, in part as a way of trying to break out of an old style which had begun to feel stale. At this time I abandoned a number of poems in the older style as they seemed to be pale imitations of what I'd written earlier.

When I initially began assembling the collection, I was looking for subject areas. Broadly I seemed to have three types of poems. The first, and largest group, were about nature. Many of these poems had a similar tone, and were

often concerned with death or absence of some kind. However, others were more descriptive and celebratory. The second group of poems were about relationships. A number of them were part of a sequence that later became 'Under Cover'. The third group of poems seemed, at the time, to be a miscellany of different subjects. I knew that I wanted to include the majority of the three groups of poems in the collection. I therefore came up with three sections that related to the three areas. However, there were a number of problems with this approach. The three sections felt quite separate. In addition to this, the final section, the miscellany, felt as if it was really just a place to put all the poems which didn't fit into either other section.

At this time, I was also beginning to work on this commentary. This forced me to focus on the collection as a whole and what it was I was trying to do in a more conscious way. I began reading about elegy, as I felt that perhaps I could link the different groups of poems through this approach. At one point, I was going to use Schiller's concepts of Naïve and Sentimental poetry to try and link the nature poems to the idea of elegy. Interesting as this avenue was though, I soon realised that I would then have to leave out the relationship poems. However, by thinking about elegy, I saw that the third group of poems were in fact mostly elegies. This led me to look again at a number of poems which I hadn't included in the collection at this point. I now saw that 'Cross Border', 'Prisoner of War' and 'A Small Roadside Death' fitted well with the theme of elegy.

It was at this point that I went back and re-read Lilburn and McKay. As I describe in the first section of this commentary, this was a breakthrough for me. I now had a vocabulary for describing what I had been attempting to do in so many of the poems. The poems concerned with nature, the elegies and many of the poems about relationships had all emerged from a particular approach to their subject matter, that of the via negativa. Having realised this, I looked at the collection again. I now saw that some poems had to go. 'River', and 'The Guardians of the Water', which are included here in an appendix, are more affirmative than the other poems about nature in the collection. This variety in tone is at odds with the elegiac note struck by the collection as a whole. 'The Guardians of the Water' is also different in terms of form. While the collection does contain a number of other poems which might be termed narrative, such as

'Cross-Border', 'A Small Roadside Death' and 'Coyote', the approach of 'The Guardians of the Water' is altogether looser and lacks the lyric economy of the other poems. This isn't to say that I think 'The Guardians of the Water' is any less successful as a poem, rather that its approach isn't that of the via negativa, with its focus on the unspoken.

I was also still unhappy with the sequence of poems about an affair. By this time I had five poems in the sequence. However, I felt that there were narrative gaps that had to be filled. While I didn't want a conventional narrative which told the whole story of the two people, I did want the sequence to move through a number of different stages. I therefore made notes on other moments in the relationship that I could write about. This was a new approach for me. The earlier poems had emerged mostly from a single line, a memory or an image. I felt now as if I was writing something more like fiction, trying to find interesting narrative moments to develop. However, the approach proved fruitful. I would begin by making lots of notes, trying out word orders, then moving onto something else if I got stuck. The first poem that emerged from this process was 'Unsinkable'. Later I added 'Under Cover', *'Away' and* 'Nest'.

Having added some poems and taken others out, I went back to the ordering of the whole collection again. I still wasn't happy with the three sections and I wondered what would happen if I mixed up the different sections. I decided to unpack the whole collection and lay the poems out on the floor in random order. I then starting grouping the poems according to their relationships with each other. At first the number of poems made this task seem overwhelming, but once I started I began to find that there was an emotional movement that was determining which poem I chose next. I realised that there were key strong poems, such as 'Child', 'Fast' and 'Killing Geese', which would need quite a lot of 'clear space' around them. I therefore planted them at intervals through the collection. The other poems I tried to place in order to create an emotional movement. So the sequence of elegies made up of 'Waltz', 'The Storm' and 'Vernon Street' is followed by 'Bow River', a poem which is about nature, which has a strong elegiac note to it. This, in turn, is followed by 'Weasel', a poem about predation and different kind of death. The poems that made up 'Under Cover' would need to go together and I decided to put these at the centre of the

collection. I felt that by doing this I would give the sequence the space it needed without unbalancing the rest of the collection.

The assembling of this collection has therefore led me to see that there are a number of preoccupations and strategies which run through the majority of the poems. I can now see that I have been addressing certain themes, and that the poems which have made the final cut have, for the most part, done so because they share some common ground. The central research question was there all the time, but as a writer one works with the unconscious, often feeling one's way by intuition and hunches, only vaguely aware of what it is one is pursuing.

Conclusion

The central question that the writing of this collection has addressed is how can poetry tackle concerns such as death, the otherness of nature, desire and loss in a manner which acknowledges the liminal or numinous core of such experiences. Through an analysis of the creative process behind the writing of the poems, I have demonstrated the ways in which poetry can utilise the approach of the via negativa in addressing these areas of experience.

Because characteristically its subject is that which cannot be fully articulated in language, the poetry of the via negativa is about what is left unsaid as much as about what is said. This is well expressed by Louise Glück in an essay entitled 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence'.

> I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish a whole poem could be made in this vocabulary. It is analogous to the unseen; for example the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied.[63]

A pared down poetry, stripped of any lyric excess is best suited to this kind of writing. In a number of the poems I have used tercets, as this form works well in a poetry which deals with the liminal, the odd number of lines in each stanza

[63] Glück, L. *Proof and Theories: Essays on Poetry* Hopewell, Ecco Press, 1994, p. 73

suggesting something incomplete, particularly when combined with enjambment between stanzas. I have also experimented with the sonnet, but in ways which suggest contemporary experience, combining colloquial language with a fractured narrative of two lovers.

But the experience hasn't been a matter of adopting a style once I decided on my subject matter. Rather, the subject matter has demanded a use of language which is, from the very first, about suggestion, the unsaid and the unseen. The approach I have adopted in these poems can be described as a kind of contemplation, which requires a stripping away of what one already knows. Discussing the relationship between what he terms 'secular contemplation' and writing poetry, the Canadian poet Dennis Lee describes this approach.

> Both work intuitively. Both start by moving into a space of darkness, silence, attending. Both are life disciplines. They don't own anything, they're claimed by small openings.[64]

This sense of 'moving into a space of darkness, silence' is one with which I am familiar from my own experience. Initially one has little idea of how the poem will eventually turn out, or even what it is one is trying to achieve. The writing can feel like a long drawn out wait. One returns to the poem over and over, often with little apparent result. I am a slow worker. Poems can sometimes take years to finish. But 'small openings' do occur. Patience is needed as there seems to be no way to short-circuit the process. The process requires silence and attention, which are often hard to achieve in everyday life. Poetry for me has been a rather monk-like experience, to extend the comparison. I try to spend as much time as I can at a retreat centre. I find the ability to have large blocks of uninterrupted time in which to attend to poems the most helpful way of writing. Of course, lines and ideas do come at other times. But the actual work of completing a poem usually occurs in one of these quiet periods. For this reason, the three month residency I had at the Banff Centre for the Arts was particularly beneficial, giving an extended period in which I could concentrate solely on writing.

The influence of other writers has, I hope, been made clear. What I discovered in various models of writing was a way of approaching the liminal. The tracing

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[64] Lee, Dennis. 'Poetry and Unknowing' in *Poetry and Knowing* (ed Lilburn, T.) Ontario, Quarry Press, 1994, p.44.

of the influences of other poetry on my own work has been an important part of the commentary, bringing a clarity to the ways in which reading and writing interact. Sometimes the relationship between reading and writing has been fairly easy to track, as in the case of John Sewell's poems in *Bursting the Clouds* which were an important influence on the poems in the 'Under Cover' sequence in my collection. Other influences were more subtle however. When I first read Tim Lilburn's *Living in the World as if it Were Home* I wasn't immediately aware of how it might relate to my poetry. I had long had an intuition that contemplative practice and poetry had something in common, but I hadn't been able to articulate what it was. I re-read Lilburn a number of times. As I describe in the section 'Structuring the Collection', Lilburn gave me a vocabulary which allowed me to see more clearly what it was I was attempting to do. Thus this wider reading helped me formulate the guiding principles which allowed me to structure the collection as a whole.

A number of insights have therefore emerged from this study, all of which, as detailed above, are directly applicable to my own practice as a poet. In addition to this, some of these insights can be extended to the contemporary theory of poetry.

Following the way in which different poetic subjects have emerged in my own work, the trajectory of this enquiry has been from the otherness of nature, to the unknowability of death and finally to the instabilities brought on by desire. Yet what all three areas share are their unknowable or liminal qualities. Describing her own preference for a poetry that 'harnesses the power of the unfinished' in her essay 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence', Louise Glück describes her reasons thus.

> All earthly experience is partial. Not simply because it is subjective, but because that which we do not know, of the universe, of mortality, is so much more vast than that which we do know.[65]

This sense of being unsure of our own ground is surely key to so much contemporary experience. What the approach of the via negativa can offer is a way of bringing this radical unknowability into focus, not just in terms of subject

[65] Ibid, p.74

matter, but also in terms of approach. The strength of the via negativa is its ability to evoke the liminal, whilst acknowledging the limits of conceptual thought and of language itself. As I have already stated, there is an ascetic element to this approach, which Lilburn characterises as mourning. William Watkin describes something similar in his discussion of the poetry of mourning.

> This is why poetry and loss are still so important to us. Language is marked by a sense of loss, by what it tried but could not say.[66]

But the via negativa isn't a counsel of despair. Rather it is a humbling experience in which the limits of our concepts are seen because it acknowledges that there is an element of our experience which is outside language. Poetry then becomes a way of gesturing at the other. For Don McKay, the place where contemplation and poetic composition come together is in what he calls 'poetic attention'.

> [B]efore, under, and through the wonderful terrible wrestling with words and music there is a state of mind which I'm calling "poetic attention". I'm calling it that, even though I can feel the falsity (and in some way the transgression) of nomination: it's a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess, and it does not really wish to be talked about. To me this is a form of knowing which counters the "primordial grasp" in home-making, and celebrates the wilderness of the other; it gives ontological applause.[67]

The writing of a poetry that can 'counter the primordial grasp' and which is aware of what we don't know as much as what we do, has been my aim in this study. As Anne Michaels states in an essay entitled 'Cleopatra's Love', the 'real power of words[...] is that it makes our ignorance more precise'[68].

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[66] Op Cit. Watkin, p.13
[67] Op Cit, McKay, p.26
[68] Michaels, A. Cleopatra's Love. In *Poetry and Knowing* (ed. Lilburn, T.) Ontario, Quarry Press, 1994, p.178

Appendix

The Guardians of the Water

For Chris

They came in the middle of the night
- three old men he'd seen at the bar
and thought nothing of -
banging on the big wooden door,
asking for the señora,
not even meeting his eye.

His wife, wrapped in her dressing gown,
still tidying her hair with one hand,
spoke rapidly in Spanish,
and led them down to the kitchen.

Standing by the sink, he felt excluded,
just as he'd done at that bullfight,
the crowd seething round him,
his head aching from the heat,
the trembling bull, bloodied and exhausted,
collapsing in the dirt.

Then one of the old men produced a sledgehammer
- from where he couldn't imagine –
and with a soft thud
knocked a hole in the back wall.

In the semi-darkness he could hardly make them out,
the three of them
crouched by the white-edged hole,
muttering something about drought,
the old Arab water course that used to run below the house.

They said little as they left,
just grunted to his wife
and were gone.
He wanted to know who was going to pay for the plaster,
but his wife shrugged, said she was sleepy
and that she was going back to bed.

The next day, walking in the garden,
he was sure he could hear the sound of running water
detect its clear metallic tang -
like the smell of an English summer day after rain -
among the hot scents of rosemary and thyme.

River

It's turbid freight is always slipping away
downstream,
the sliding surface a welter of accelerations
and sudden brakings,
of whirlpooling gullets.

Where the water runs roughshod over stones,
sunken trees,
it roughens in foaming reversals,
flows upstream like another river
tussling with the current.

Whatever debris is bodied downstream,
unweighted by the water's uplift,
is laved in seamless swimming,
is turned and spun by watery hands.

Water boils at the legs of bridges,
is torn and maddened by boulders,
slides over weirs and shatters,
thundering its applause.

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