

Life, Love and Loss
(under a few trees)

A dissertation submitted to
the University of Wales Trinity Saint David
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts Creative Writing

2018

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

In this collection of poems, I will explore three main existential concerns: life in general, love and loss, all arising from my own experience. The poems on the theme of life take the everyday as their subject matter ranging through my passions for textile-craft, gardening, my observations of the natural world, and my own, and others', creativity. The love poems are mostly concerned with my love of my family and friends, but also recognise the four ancient Greek forms of love, i.e.: Eros, the idea of sexual passion and desire; Philia, or deep friendship; Agape, or love for everyone and Storge, or longstanding familial love. Loss is something which we all will experience, the more so if we have loved. My poems in this category are mostly concerned with death and grief but also touch on the loss of relationships.

My research, as evidenced by my bibliography, will be into how other poets have approached each of my three themes. In my critical essay I intend to demonstrate this research condensed to an examination of the theme of loss. I have chosen this theme as I believe it to be the most complex and difficult to convey, despite being universally experienced. The poetry collections I shall study with specific respect to loss will include Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* and Helen Dunmore's *Inside the Wave*, but, as Bernard O'Donoghue has inspired me to write one of my poems, his *Outliving* is an essential text, as is Imtiaz Dharker's *Over the Moon* which was recommended to me by a friend. It is these two poets' work that has prompted my research question: 'How do poets Imtiaz Dharker and Bernard O'Donoghue approach the theme of loss in their work and what impact has this had on my own writing?'

In my preparatory reading I have found many poet's voices which speak to me and many of their poems have provided me with moments of recognition, consolation and fellow feeling.

The question that interests me lies in the oxymoron that we are all the same/ we are each unique; we all experience very similar events in our lives but we each experience them differently. If we turn to poetry for solace, or explanation, or just to connect with another mind, is it necessary for us to have experienced an event in a similar way? Is it arguable that reading someone else's experience of life, love or loss, albeit different, can help us cope with our own?

I shall explore critical writing both by and about poets. This will include works by editors and essays by poets themselves, along with introductions to anthologies and collections.

At the end of my research I hope to have gained insights which will inform my own creative practice. Ultimately, I think my poems are simple, accessible, translations of human experience and I hope to find other poets, who write on the same themes, whose work will impact on my own.

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Hand-made

The well-crafted pieces-
textiles, garments,
approved by Morris's tenets-
beautiful, useful,
-these are good.

Our home,
self- built of wood,
block and plaster,
- borne of our love
filled with our laughter-
dancing in the kitchen,
singing on the stairs,
-this is better.

My garden,
carved from the field,
roses sprung from cuttings,
ferns from friends,
seeds sown,
soul grown
-this is necessary.

The ultimate wonder-
my miracle child,
conceived against the odds,
nurtured to womanhood,
creative and caring,
-she is amazing.

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

But this,
these insistent lines
that show who I am,
that drag me from sleep,
demand to be channelled,
this well of words,
that rise through my dreams,
flow through my arm,
to my hand,
to the page,
to be sung by my voice,
or gift wrapped
for others
and read by their choice
-this is a mystery.

The Tree of Life

The trees of my childhood were not for climbing,
the grass for keeping off.

One limb we swung down from-
over the playground wall to the bus stop below.

When we moved to the country
climbing seemed overrated,
no thrill in it.

Hedgerow trees were small
compared to London planes
and unforbidden.

A few years more,
trees were for lying under
heavily petting
under the cover of clothing.

Protected, from the prying eyes
of passing walkers,
by the broad oak.

Much later
came the realisation
that I am drawn to trees,
as I am drawn to the sea,
to the earth.

Measurements

At ten I swam the width
across a Dorset bay
my 'uncle', six months
married to my mum
swam beside me
his breath as loud as whale-blow
my dad six years absent
it was a serious endeavour
a mile at least
a gull screeched its warning
as we scrunched Jurassic pebbles
down to the chilly tide
Mum was stationed at the other side
with towels, soup, sandwiches
my younger brother
ballooning her belly
the older pair
fishing from the rocks
I grew two more decades
before I knew my true paternity
half another
and I had lost him
two Dads down.

How

How many moments
would sum the total
of our knowingness
how many hours, days, weeks,
years?

How many walks
have we not taken
but lain in a particular field
under a particular tree
watched by those particular cattle?

How many dependencies
did you awaken in me?
How many memories held by these fingers,
the hollow of your chest
your thigh, your smile?

How deeply did you etch
the pattern of my life
on my then
unblemished soul?

The Old Man

We called him the old man
but he never got to be one
left his party early
younger than I am now
the first I knew
he was ill
was an unfinished meal
he'd appeared on my doorstep
hundreds of miles from his own
thought he'd pop in
he was halfway anyway
slept for an hour
then drove back
leaving his afterimage
in the doorway
it gave me time
that inkling
to talk about avoided things
paternity and lies
grasp a new memory
a jumble sale
a walk
the gift of his village
he didn't make a fuss
he knew there could be worse
horrific accidents
hideous guilt
a bit of pain
could be endured
"what's a bit of pain
compared to the man up the road

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

killed his child
reversing out of his drive-
how do you live with that?"
I wasn't told he was dying
'til I phoned on fathers' day
I raced to his deathbed
sang him to sleep
soon it will be three decades
he's been in my thoughts
visited my dreams
like that time on my doorstep
briefly present
then slipped away
with no resolution
to my unanswered questions
why lie when the truth is good enough?

How to Fly

First break into a slow run,
skip a bit then jump
higher, to a vertical take off
(your heart will lurch a bit).
Then swim in the air
-pulling a strong breaststroke
to gain height.

When you're up,
gaze down
at the familiar streets below.
Be invisible.
Follow your usual routes
so as not to lose yourself.
Keep a steady pace,
let giggling bubbles
fill your hollow bones.

Return to where you started,
tread air as you descend.
Feel happy, secretive, graceful.
Walk on smiling.
Try not to wake.

African

My hips have swayed
to African music,
my soul responds
to African drums.

I wept at the plight
of Nelson Mandela
and the African children
shot as they run.

I chose to refuse
South African produce
when South Africans
had no choice to be free.

I taught the children
African dances,
I sing my own
an African song.

I cried with joy
when the African people
chose to be led
by their African son.

And when I read
the African woman,
I know part of her
and I, are one.

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

So why,
- when the African comes to my doorway-
does the history of Empire
re-visit me

and my parents' prejudice
make his African skin
the first thing
I see?

I buy,
he smiles,
happily leaving me
with my shame.

friend

*until the
strong winds
blow and
shake the
branches
ripping
through the
sturdy
boughs*

*that I can
lean and
rest upon*

my friend is a tree standing tall and strong

*so that the
strengths*

*I thought I'd
found*

*are torn like
fragile leaves*

*than flutter
helpless to the ground*

Man

And is there a man in your life?

Well dozens I said

all mostly in my past

some like my father, dead

though he still visits my present

drops comfortably into my dreams

giving bizarre advice

and a cheery wave

a few in my present

my brothers, some excellent friends

a current disappointment

who it has to be said

still hands the occasional morsel

to keep my hopes fed

and one in the future?

Possibly maybe

the longed-for comforter

sympathiser jester

playmate friend

the one to bring the weary trail to its end

is there a prize

a reward for my strife

is there indeed a man for my life?

The Here and Now

I'm here now
and I found him
he is my treasure
and I am his
so I can forgive you
I don't hurt anymore
I hardly think of you
and never with anger
nor regret
you were simply
a stone in the path
stumbled over
then resolutely left behind
all of you.

Death in Spring

It goes against nature to be dying in spring-
to be fading while all around is burgeoning.
The earth gradually dons her wedding attire-
pale pinks, bright yellows, soft greens,
the occasional splash of red-
while we finger our sad dark suits with dread-
against the time when we will gather,
ashamed to be glad to be together,
the present survivors still here to mourn.
We, who wait in this current limbo
while nature
goes about her business.
The sap continues its urgent rise,
while we hold our collective breaths
for news of your demise.

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

Doorway

She is not gone yet
our love can't lead her back through
our perceived portals.

Breakfast

My mum came home today -
a brief visit
from that hazy horizon
she lives on.

We talked as we used to talk,
cosy amongst the breakfast debris,
the kettle pattering on the Aga.

She, in her dressing gown,
me, in gardening garb.
She, lucid and engaged,
me, stunned and amazed.

In those precious moments
she gave me permission
to be free.
And I wept,
in the sudden knowledge
of how much
I miss her.

Lady Moon

The moon tonight
is wearing her slightly worried face-
almost full.

I am relinquished from
your long- ago admonition,
that old wives' tale,
not to look at the new moon through glass
for risk of calamity.
How could I not,
bespectacled as I am and was?

We thought we would always be friends
yet we drifted apart.
I thought you so wise,
you thought me so ...what?
Our mutual admiration
soon eclipsed.

I talk to you through the cosmos,
light years pass by your reply
yet the same moon
still
hangs above us both.

Requiem

Handsome man, sexy dancer,
lip kisser, big hugger.
I never heard him raise his voice.
He'd greet my dramas- joy or woe-
with his sanguine smile,
listen well, think awhile,
give his counsel with a nod of the head,
knew that soonest mended
always meant least said.

Calm, slow, sure, unruffled,
for years he gently stepped aside,
let death pass.
I'm fine, you go ahead
I'm not quite ready yet.

He holds my gaze
from our wedding photo throng
and in this precious moment
he is not gone.

Pat in Spring/ Generation Gap

I won't want to be poetic when you've gone

my heart will be prostrate with sorrow.

Now is the time to tell you-

(after you've modelled your elegant dress for flying off to Canada;

after you've told me your age is irrelevant;

after we've laughed and debated, hugged and shared;

after we've tussled with your title-

auntie, big sister, spare mum?

I've settled with darling friend.).

-that the love between us is broader than a poem can contain.

Leycesteria

They say a pheasant's berry
can prove your friendship's true,
so, I've plucked a pheasant berry
and I'm sending it to you.

I've been working in my garden,
thinking of you all the while,
and the thoughts that I've been thinking
made me sit awhile and smile
about the things that we've got up to
in our present and our past
but I've sat and thought too long now
and I've got a grassy arse.

Now a 'gracias' is pleasant, when it's saying "I thank you"
but a "grass my arse" is funny
when your friend's got in a stew
about horticultural ignorance,
not knowing what is what
when it's growing in your shrubbery or growing in a pot.
Now, you're really very clever when it comes to all that stuff
and it's evidently obvious that I don't know enough!

So, I take my hat off to you-
and I hope it makes you laugh-

hylocereus undatus var. *madam grass my arse*.

Today and Tomorrow

Today I walk
in the spaces
my first child
will walk in
tomorrow
a slip in time
my shadow
will linger
for her
to slip into
we remain
disconnectedly
connected
not my child
but ever my daughter.

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

Mother's Comfort

I am not gone, darling daughter

I live on in you

and in your darling daughter

too

your brothers carry on their share

their children recite irreverent rhymes

throw back their heads

laugh like drains

before long you will think of me

and not be moved to weep

I won't command your thoughts

before and after sleep

you'll smile at the red and orange last light

reflected on wet sand

a yellow rose will be

just a yellow rose in your hand

my photos will shine

you will too

remember my failings with a wry smile

know that I loved you

your grief will still ambush you

but wound you less

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

there will be laughter

I am in it.

Swimming

I did not like gin
its taste too perfumed on my tongue
the tonic was ok
until the day
my brothers decreed
that gin must be
our mum's memorial toast
I complied
-what else?
it had changed
or else I had
and now
most nights
I swim in its depths
diving for pearls
with the taste
of my mother's scent.

Centenary WW1

It is right to celebrate
the end of that war,
good to honour the dead
but when we bow our heads
let it also be with shame
that war still happens
again, and again.
Once, just once in my life
-or did I dream it
(Christmas eve, '85?)
-the news announced,
No War Tonight!
No Armed Conflict in all the World!
A distant echo
of soldiers laying down arms to play,
refusing to fight on Christmas day.
If only that germ of sanity
could infect the earth-
a benign virus, a peace pandemic,
inoculating humanity against hate.

The Tree of Love

We sat under a huge chestnut
wondering if we had time
to grow our own
to lean against
I bought one secretly
had it planted
on our first anniversary
while you were in the field
ten years old
to steal the march
on the time we lost before we met
you were confused and guilty
new to this marriage lark
not knowing that our wedding day
was something we should mark
you thought that building our house
was testament enough of your love
it was
it is
we are
our chestnut is big now
enough to sit under
lie under
love under.

Bedmaking

He stores things, my man.
Carefully dismantling
putting them aside for future consideration.
He made our bed
from the store-loft boards,
long hours of sanding,
smoothing the upper side
-ravaged by the wear and tear
of clogs and boots
weighted with sacks of corn-
refined them lovingly.
Traced the rough- hewn underside,
sensing the hands that had gone before,
acknowledging their investment
now in his custody.
Four long mortice joints
carved from the chocolate teak-
the wood so fine
it was more like sculpture than carpentry-
formed them to protect our dreams,
a solid frame to anchor us
through the uncharted hours
as we sail through sleep
as they once sailed.
Simple honest lines
against our whitewashed wall.
Seafaring decks
still seep their history
and cradle our dreams
to bring us safe to shore.

Visiting the Celtic Cross on Islay

I whooped
at being a child again!
Sliding down the steep slope
under the enormous sky
above the naked bay
muddying my elderly bum
because my feet and legs
couldn't carry me
down and up
as they had
in our irreverent youth
plundering one monument
to make another
it's in the guide book now
so we posed
those of us that are left
grinning with our secret

forty years on
we are less and more
serious than then
more in tune with the elements
still politicking
still arguing
vying for attention
one-man upmanshipping
out performing
upstaging
saying we'll leave it to our kids
but not wanting to let go.

My Unknown Grandmother

At fifteen, she moved
and the photograph was ruined
she moved
and the image was made
for me, proof
that she breathed
no lifeless tableau
of any May Queen and her maids
but her, fidgety,
the only one who disobeyed
the cloaked figure
behind the three-legged box

Now here, at twenty-five
smiling from ear to ear
extravagant headdress
huge bouquet
more maids
her dapper man
happiness her only plan

Now here at thirty-one
between the wars
a family portrait
my dad
with grubby socks

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

leaning into her

starry skirt

Now here at thirty-seven

more black on white

love's last gift

remembrance.

Fox Trail

I followed in the vixen's path
and wondered would she heed my scent
when she next delicately
picked her way across our field
would she give thought to what heavy creature
had blundered through her meandering territory
which sways with yorkshire fog and crested dog tail
-as meadows should.

Would the rattle seeds which filled my shoes
stick between her hardened pads?

And come the day, which soon it will,
will she stare bemused at the shorn sward,
the altered landscape bereft of sanctuary?

Soon I will wait patiently
while my busy man fills the trailer
then drive two tractor lengths behind -
content to play the farmer's wife,
happy with my part in the harvest.

Gaps

In the spaces you no longer inhabit
I miss you most.
In the things I no longer do for you.

Light now dapples the stone wall
where once your pet's hutch stood.
Feeding him was a communion,
a daily link between us.

Perversely, I miss
the minor irritations
not there to rail against-
half- drunk tea
left to moulder.

My sad redundancy-
a selfish sense of loss-
is balanced by your joy,
your abundant happiness
at finding your place
beside your love.

There's still evidence
of your being here.
There will be many sorties yet
for things you need or want.
Much ferrying of stuff
from your ransacked room,
more hairgrips shed.

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

Before I reconfigure,
reorganise,
redistribute,
-to make the gaps
less gaping.

My constant companion
remains,
my shadow self,
the woman
I wish I had been,
reminding me
that I should have done
better
more.

The me who achieved her potential
and yours,
thwarted all the bullies,
protected us both
from hurt
-and worse.

The better woman
I wish I'd been,
mistress of her journey,
who stuck to a route.
Not misdirected,
storm tossed,
shipwrecked,
washed ashore.

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

I wish I had
arrived purposefully
at this safe- haven,
plotted my course,
steered us steadfastly.

Proposal Pending

I went to a poetry festival
and bought a dress
but it's a poem of a dress
pale blue silk
embroidered on one side
fit for a mother
of a bride
I must hide it away
not let it be a jinx
while I prepare
to be a spare
to hand her
into the care
of her chosen
to become
her less significant mother

'til then we'll pin
our interests
drop hints
eat cake
go on a mother and daughter break
while we await
his bended knee.

New Friends

It's not easy
to make new friends
in later life
there's no shared history
no reminiscing

with luck
there's instant connection
glimpses of what's made us

and there's risk

I took one such
loved her quickly
-we'd barely declared
our friendship
when it got complicated

long car journeys
news to be digested
vigils to be kept
brine to be wept

but what is life
without loss

hiding from its riches
to stay safe

take the risk
be enriched.

Mousehole Moon and Sun

We arrived with the autumn equinox
moonful delight over the sea taking centre stage
spotlighting empty patches
nocturnal fishing boats missing their cue.

Waking with awe
at the fisherman's warning sky
we west coast dwellers,
accustomed to the hesitant
curtain call of the sun at end of day
-will he won't he,
slowly descending,
disappointing his audience,
slipping behind a cloud before his exit,
just a rosy afterglow giving faint applause-
see here, a bold crimson slash
announcing his entrance
he blinds us
as he climbs
spectacular
from his salty bath
in a swift ascent
to start the day.

Excommunication

I have been disconnected
something to do with the wiring
his not mine
it's unlikely
that normal service will be resumed
anytime soon

he's not talking
not explaining his ire
not to me
nor our brothers
it's his pain
a one- sided war
with me the only casualty

I'm keeping a tenuous connection
with the next generation
hoping that the links remain flexible enough
to be sustained
despite interference
from static friction.

Throwback

I read a footnote
on Richard Jeffries
and am thrown back to you
the first cut is the deepest

my long-matured recognition
of your teenaged pretension
mingles with the memory
of how you licked your lips
before we kissed
the tang of Gauloise
the way you walked
like a land-locked sailor
the cupping of my face
with your large hand
the lifting of my heart
at the sight of you

you abandoned me
the best love of my life will not
memories of you
feel like infidelity.

Conkers

You never know
when will be
the last cut
in October
days become shorter
the rain will fall
the lawn become
a shaggy rug
time in the garden
grows precious
I am grateful
for the chilly sun
the drying breeze
riding my mowing steed
avoiding the glowing conkers
dismounting to harvest their shine

I always hated Autumn
wanted to see it gone
hurry on through
winter so that
spring can come
now I've learned
to love it
knowing I'm in mine
each day, each hour
is precious
when you're running short of time.

Mexican Wedding

Friends and family
gathered under a relentless sky
to hear the vows
of a truculent boy
transformed
by the love of his
glowing girl

THE MAGNIFICENT CARDBOARD CAKE

stood witness to celebration
and mariachi
and feasting
and fizzing
and heat
and happiness
and dancing

the dancing!
What exuberant prancing!
what thinly veiled sensuous expression of joy!
Oh, how these Mexicans love to dance!

No waiting
to be swayed by alcohol
like our British boys

just play one note
and they're on the floor
not even the dance floor
just where

they stand
they give their partners their
hand

and hips gyrate-
no effort required
minimal footwork
elegant hands
droop from flexible

wrists
their bodies are one
sex on legs
tantric salsa
a dance of love

all night long.

Chaos in Camrose

Hordes of men
have descended
big expensive
safety strapped
long lensed cameras
cradled in their hands
menacing tripods
across their shoulders
mayhem in our little village
cars abandoned
in our narrow lanes
who have they come
to persecute?
Who is the accused?
What murder done,
scandal exposed?

It's just a bird,
a small bird
with a funny face.
For this they have raced
across the country,
slept in their cars
under frozen stars,
to capture with their lenses,
note down in their books,
this little masked intruder
blown off course
to our sleepy rooves,
catching insects
in the cacophony

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

of clicking shutters.

Stay away from our gutters little bird!

Don't come near,

don't let our cats

become the villains of the piece!

On the 30th November 2016, the first masked wagtail known to have visited the U.K, (from its home in Kazakhstan), was spotted in our village.

May contain imperfections. Wash before use.

I'm sewing a scrap of sari
recycled
bought at a fair
I think it's silk
rolling a hem
between finger and thumb
neatening the three hacked edges
the fourth is faced with plain
to contrast the stylised iris
woven not printed
still bearing the dust
it was dragged in
Bangladesh-Birmingham
two spots of blood
a scratched gnat bite on your thigh
I stitch with embroidery thread
unknowingly bequeathed
I'll wear it at my wrinkling neck
a magenta bandage
bearing your blood
and the ghost of her fingers

Winter

I looked up
from my book
because a light
had switched on
I knew there was no light

it was the sun
suddenly released
from the cloud
opening his grey lid
making contact
eye to eye
through un-leaved
winter branches
low in the sky

I gazed steadfastly
uncaring that you shouldn't
look at him directly
two layers of glass
protected me

then a dimmer switch engaged
the light softened
faded
leaving tree silhouettes
consolation of winter
against the twilight sky.

Twelfth Night

It's time to take down Christmas
although it grieves my heart
I use my grandson's birthday
as a reason not to start
I should have been a Hindu
or Jewish-for the light
Hanukkah and Diwali
both make the winter bright
old Christmas must be put away
go forward with the year
I'll leave up one more string of lights
to make the nights less drear.

Transmogrification

I've lost it
but it's somewhere safe
it's bound to turn up soon
maybe it's behind the clock
up in Annie's room
I've rearranged the furniture
(without the aid of a saw)
I had to have a change
I couldn't stand it anymore
I've hidden all the ironing
where it's easy to ignore
'til it erupts over the the sofa
and we all will know the score.

I've donned my starry jumper
but with backward constellations
I've longed for the comfort of a fag
in stressful situations
I've confused my lovely grandson
with my not so lovely brother
that's it, I'm done, it's over,
I've turned into my mother.

Brother-at-war

I dream
of my brother
occasionally
I think
about him
constantly
he has imposed
this
premature grieving
I should feel
anger
but his
poisonous error
jealous rage
at imagined plots
outstrips us both
I am a child again
shut out
from his games
his club
his love

your love
your games
your club
you've shut me out
made me a child again
outstripped my sadness
with your anger
at imagined plots
your poisonous error

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

jealous rage

imposes

my

premature grief

constant thinking

occasional dreams

of you

my brother.

Love, Life and Loss (under a few trees)

The Tree of Loss

Plant me under the dancing ash
its keys will float and cover me
the sun will paint a dappled splash
plant me under the dancing ash
and I will lie quite still at last
underneath my final tree
plant me under the dancing ash
its keys will float and cover me.

Mother Nature

She's slamming about again!
-thrown the chimney from our roof
rocked the willow from its roots
leaves are tumbling helpless
through the terrible sky
the chestnut's hula hooping
birds struggling to fly
she's unbolted the cap off the silo
the top could follow soon
she's dealing ridge tiles like a croupier
howling at the moon
she's flooding all the lowlands
showing us who's boss
one day we might realise
what's making her so cross.

Take me with you

Don't leave me behind

take me with you
up the hill
to breathe in the view
or stride along
the wind hurling beach
taking the pulse of the tide

stand with glass
in hand
in the garden's last patch
of sun
by the wall
of old stone

dance me
around the kitchen
to the beat
of boiling
spuds

tell me
silly jokes
hear my laugh

curl up with me
and the cats
purring in and out

say my name
keep me in mind.

Critical Essay

How do poets Imtiaz Dharker and Bernard O'Donoghue approach the theme of loss in their work and what impact has this had on my own writing?

I am interested in the conundrum that the human brain, although physiologically the same in each of us, experiences similar life events in different ways. As my collection covers the themes of life, love and loss, I have researched how other poets express their experiences to consciously develop my own writing. This has led me to read many poets that I wouldn't otherwise have come across.

I then looked in detail at Imtiaz Dharker, Helen Dunmore, Bernard O'Donoghue and Denise Riley and their approach to the theme of loss, as I feel this is the most difficult of my three themes to handle. I found, through their work, the essential balance needed to help the reader believe that there is something to continue to live for after bereavement.

During my research, it has become evident that there is more than an element of mystery concerning the creative process. Ruth Stone maintained that she could feel and hear poems coming and that if she didn't catch them, they would pass through her.¹

Like Andrew Greig², my poems 'appear unannounced, unsought, usually while I am occupied doing something else' - for me, often when driving or gardening.

On my journey through this course I have learned that merely channelling what comes to me is not enough, and by reading other poets I am beginning to learn how to refine my writing and use some of the techniques employed by contemporary writers.

¹ Pamela Robertson-Pearce & Neil Astley, eds., *In Person: World Poets*, (Hexham, Bloodaxe, 2017) Disc 1. pp 35/36.

² Helen Ivory and George, Szirtes, eds, *In Their Own Words* (Cromer: Salt, 2012) pp. 4-5.

The two poets who had the most impact on me were Dharker and O'Donoghue who each inspired me to write a poem of my own. Imtiaz Dharker gives the impression of bearing her grief lightly but achieves heartrending poignancy throughout her collection *Over the Moon*,³ published after the death of her husband.

Her choice of language and form in 'Litter'⁴ could easily lead us to interpret the poem as a description of leaving a faithless lover behind, a revengeful act of throwing away his belongings – treating them as rubbish- as in the title. The first two tercets are complete sentences – she is being firm with herself, she is setting out to do the job of leaving bits of him behind, again she uses repetition with 'leave'. The memory of the ferry is too large to be contained in one sentence, but she must keep her determination to be organised so breaks the sentence rather than the tercet. There is some ambiguity around the photograph which she leaves –it could be a photograph that he took- but as she's leaving bits of him behind we can assume it's his image. This chimes with the location- between two cathedrals – which creates an image of a shrine. The fact that she has left it on 'Hope Street', repeated twice, belies the fact that there is no hope.

I find this the most poignant of her elegies to her dead husband because until the last two lines we are fooled into thinking that she is, as she states in the second line of the final tercet, leaving grief behind. The last two lines show us that she is giving up on grieving because she cannot let him go – she is bringing him home to live in a different dimension. The message of this poem inspired me to write 'Take Me with You', (p.53), a list poem structured around a set of imperatives which takes the story forward. In it, I hoped to achieve the same idea of living comfortably with the presence of the dead and to give a sense of

³ Imtiaz Dharker, *Over the Moon* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2016).

⁴ see appendix 1(p.67)

hope that a life goes on in the memory of those left behind.

Dharker's poem also highlighted the importance of titles and influenced me to examine mine. I have tried to make them mislead, and therefore surprise, the reader, for example:

'Bedmaking', (p.27), 'Swimming', (p.24) 'Measurements' (p.4).

Bernard O'Donoghue's, 'The Day I Outlived My Father'⁵ approaches the theme more obliquely. His father's early death impacts on the poem only in the effect it has on the author when he passes the age at which his father had died. The first septet starts in medias res and his use of 'your' adds to the conversational tone, as does punctuation throughout, together with very little rhyme (too/you, on/alone). The first line of the second stanza clearly marks the boundary of where the narrator foresees his own life into the future his father didn't have. This poem inspired me to write 'The Old Man' (p.6). I identified strongly with O'Donoghue's poem because I too had marked that day, albeit on social media rather than in a poem. It reminded me that I had had the first three lines, but nothing else, for twenty-five years and it gave me the impetus to try again.

In O'Donoghue's 'Alzheimer Fruit'⁶ there are two quintains and a couplet with each line having an initial capital. Could this reversion to earlier conventions symbolise receding into the past? Similarly, the use of enjambment throughout gives the impression of confusion over where to begin and end. There are very few poetical devices to make the reader comfortable – in keeping with the uncomfortable subject- merely a couple of alliterations, the use of 'prohibited' causes a halting in the way 'forbidden' would not. Unanswerable questions are asked, and caesurae are formed using a colon and a full stop. The recount of the dream shows the dreamer trying to find a clue as to the state of the dreamed of; 'over and over' is an echo of how people with Alzheimer's repeat

⁵ see Appendix 2. (p.68)

⁶ see Appendix 2. (p.68)

themselves. The scene is nonsensical, as dreams often are, but with a grain of sense. By separating the direct speech into a couplet, it is evident that the paragraph is the clue. After reading this poem I reappraised one of my own on the same topic. I examined a poem originally called 'Floundering' in which I tried to express my family's helplessness in the face of dementia. I looked for the spine of the poem and realised that we simply wanted to lead our mother back into our world. So, I re-wrote the poem as a Haiku, deliberately employing a double meaning of the word 'yet', thus distilling the experience of separation. ('Doorway' p.15). My poem 'Breakfast' (p16.) also explores the sense of absence created by Alzheimer's. It records my actual experience of a moment of lucidity, which I expanded after taking my tutor's advice on setting the scene and letting the reader know more about the significance of a few moments in a seemingly insignificant morning.

In his Poetry Society Annual Lecture in 2017 Jan Wagner made the point that it is our unique biographical backgrounds rather than our literary influences that inform our writing.⁷ Which takes me back to my initial conundrum about how other poets (especially Dharker and O'Donoghue) express similar experiences in different ways. After reading Imtiaz Dharker I found myself thinking harder about the voice I write in. Al Alvarez⁸ tells us that the poet's voice is

...unlike any other voice you have ever heard...communing with you in private, right in your ear, and in its own distinctive way.

So, I am trying to develop a distinctive voice of my own. For example, in 'Brother-at-War' (p.49) I deliberately flouted the mirroring device by moving from the first person's inner voice to

⁷ Jan Wagner, *The Poetry Review*, Spring 2017, p.63.

⁸ Al Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) p15.

a direct address to the third person to escalate into an imagined row.

Dharker's work also led me to examine whether I have left any surprise for the reader. Her poems 'Litter' and 'Say his name'⁹ prompted me to write 'Take me with you' (p.53) in which I hope I have achieved a little mystery by using the voice of someone departed or departing. In 'My Unknown Grandmother' (p.29) I have followed Dharker's lead by leaving the revelation until the last line. Dharker, O'Donoghue and my tutor have all also impacted on my use of verbs and I am learning to 'let them do the work', for example in 'Transmogrification' (p.48) where the ironing 'erupts' and in 'Mother Nature' (p.52) where the chestnut is 'hula-hooping'.

Having made my final selection of poems I had to decide how to structure the collection. I examined many poets' publications for inspiration. Jane Clarke¹⁰ has chosen to scatter, apparently at random, her poems of love and loss throughout 'The River' leaving the title poem, a poignant depiction of not evading loss, until last. I was torn between grouping my poems under each of the three headings or grouping them by similarity. My main difficulty lay in that many of my poems contain an element of each of my three themes. In the end I decided to abandon my original title sequence and follow a chronological thread but also grouping connected poems together. I added '(under a few trees)' to the title as I realised that trees are a recurring figure in my work. I am planning to write a collection around each of the varieties of tree on our farm, so I have written a 'tree umbrella' for each of the themes as a sign of the season to come.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ I met Jane Clarke at Ledbury poetry festival 2017 and attended her reading from her collection, *The River*.

John Ash¹¹ has written:

I distrust the kind of poetry that is never about anything but itself, and readers have a right to expect to find something they can grasp at once...

I concur, the point of my poetry is to share an experience, not confound the reader. I have found it a challenge, however, to find the balance between mystifying the reader and leaving no surprises, nothing for them to work out. Before embarking on this course, I wrote only for myself. In learning to edit and re-write, it has become evident that I have often left too much unsaid – I know what was going on, but a reader wouldn't. It was a huge challenge to look at my work objectively and to take constructive criticism on board. A good example of my creative growth in this regard is found in 'Gaps' (p.32) where I had to clarify that the third character is, in fact, a better version of the narrator. In previous drafts I had merely referred to her as 'the she'. 'The Old Man' (p.6) went through many drafts, gradually adding layers of explanation yet still ending with 'unanswered questions'.

I continue to use alliteration, anaphora, slip, slant and half rhymes instinctively, but I think I am learning to use language more inventively. In 'My Unknown Grandmother' (p.29.) for instance, I deliberately gave her age as twenty- five in the second stanza as a rhyme for the unused word, 'bride'. In 'Mother's Comfort' (p.22) I struggled to find an alternative to the clichéd 'sunset' and eventually came up with the far more effective

red and orange last light
reflected on wet sand.

¹¹ Clare Brown and Don Paterson, ed. *Don't Ask Me What I Mean* (London: Picador, 2012) p.7.

I have also been challenged to write in different forms but have succeeded in including two concrete poems, a poem written in couplets, a triolet, a haiku and a mirror poem.

Previously, I wrote when I was inspired to and I accepted the result without question. Now I find myself deliberately setting out to write and redraft. 'How to fly' (p.8) came as the result of a writing exercise¹², something which I had never tried before the course. I had a start, 'I used to dream that I could fly' but I was getting bogged down in trying to convey the emotions raised by my dream. After reading an essay on contemporary style¹³ I saw a simpler way to convey the experience whilst still being true to my own 'voice' and use my new skills.

My main challenges in the critical work have been to restrict myself to 2000 words and purposefully give evidence of my knowledge of style and technique.

I embarked on this course with the intention of learning how to edit so that I could self-publish the poetry I had already written, with renewed confidence that they were worthy of publication. I am enormously pleased that over half of my collection comprises of new poems and that only a tiny percentage of the rest appear in their original form.

I feel I have achieved what I set out to do and learned a lot more than I envisaged.

I am an ordinary person, simply recording, in lyrical form, the events and feelings I have experienced throughout my life.

I was advised early in the course to read more poetry than I wrote, in my reading of critical texts, many poets recognise and emphasise the importance of reading. This has been borne out for me personally by my tutor's observation that my writing has improved with my widening reading.

¹² Linda France, *Contemporary Poetry: the basics (Mslexia Minis)* (Kindle Location 16). Newcastle upon Tyne Mslexia Publications Ltd. Kindle Edition, p.88.

¹³ *ibid.* pp.42-88

I am learning to be actively creative, 'Measurements' (p.4) was sparked by watching my 10-year-old granddaughter swimming at Cwm yr Eglwys and remembering how much I loved to swim at that age. I fished for the poem rather than letting the memory float by.

The course has given me the tools to self-criticise and self-edit, thus boosting self-confidence, so that I feel able to continue to write –I have the seeds of three new collections already beginning to germinate.



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Appendix 1

Imtiaz Dharker

Litter

At Derby station
on the pavement where you stood
I leave your shoes.

At Sheffield
in the café where you sat
I leave the orange scarf.

On the Liverpool ferry
I leave your overcoat
by the freezing rail

where you pointed out
Hope street.
On Hope street

at the traffic lights
between two cathedrals,
I leave your photograph.

On the platform
at Euston, your suitcase
with green tags.

At the front door
I leave grieving.
Coming in, I say your name.

Saying your name, I bring you home.

Appendix 2

Bernard O'Donoghue

The Day I Outlived My Father

Yet no one sent me flowers, or even
asked me out for a drink. If anything
it makes it worse, your early death, that
having now at last outlived you, I too
have broken ranks, lacking maybe
the imagination to follow you
investigating that other, older world.

So I am in new territory from here on:
must blaze my own trail, read alone
the hooftracks in in the summer-powdered dust
and set a good face to the future:
at liberty at last like mad Arnaut
to cultivate the wind, to hunt the bull
on hare-back, to swim against the tide.

Alzheimer Fruit

In that underworld you ambled off to
On your own, you must have drunk or eaten
Something prohibited so that your memory
Of this life faded. But where could that place
Have been? And what was the fruit? If we knew,

We'd go there with you, or for you, and put it back:
Whatever it was you ate or drank or brought away.
I dreamt I came upon you in the early hours
In your pyjamas, scoring a sheet of paper
Over and over with a highlighter pen.

'This pen's gone dry,' you said. 'I'm trying my best
To make it orange up this paragraph.'