

**I am still Bed Six:  
A Collection of Poetry**

and

**Poetry as Therapy  
and Poetry beyond  
Therapy**

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## **Abstract**

This collection of lyrical poetry is significantly inspired by personal experiences, particularly a diagnosis of Ankylosing Spondylitis, a chronic inflammatory arthritis and autoimmune condition. Issues such as hospitalisation, the power dynamics between doctors and patients, and managing both physical and emotional pain inform the writing. Highly specified form in the poetry serves to contain and organise powerful emotions using simple, epigrammatic language. The layout of the research mirrors the layout of the poetry.

The researcher's own experiences of finding therapeutic value in her own poetry writing led to the research element which explores how and why poetry writing works therapeutically and whether poetry is more effective than other forms of therapeutic writing. The specific benefits of poetry writing as therapy for those who have experienced emotional distress are explored in depth. The difference between poetry as therapy and poetry as art is also considered.

A small scale research study was undertaken with service users at a local charity, who have experienced emotional distress. A qualitative, semi-structured interview design was used, which was then analysed using Interpretational Phenomenological Analysis. The findings suggest that poetry is a particularly useful form of therapeutic writing as poetry promotes successful processing of a traumatic event through the use of image and metaphor. The participants retained the distinction between their priority of expressing themselves honestly and a preoccupation with artistic endeavour.

Stevie Smith and Julia Darling provide examples of poets who found therapeutic elements in the writing process. Some of their poems are analysed in depth and their views on poetry's therapeutic effects are considered. Alongside this, the difference between poetry as therapy and poetry as art is explored. Research reveals that poetry as therapy prioritises self-expression and poetry as art prioritises artfulness, but the two are not completely distinct; rather, they lie on a spectrum.



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**I am still Bed Six:  
A Collection of Poetry**

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## **I) Created for Sickness**

*Because she cared*

She met me after my appointment.  
I was still dazed.

She drove me to her favourite spot:  
An old lichen blotted churchyard  
Leaning away from  
A grey windswept church.

She told me to sit down.  
We sat in bleak sunshine  
Among the sun-warmed graves.

*I brought a flask of tea*

She said  
Pressing a slice of fruitcake  
In my hand

*It will get worse*

I said

*There is no cure*

I said

*I'll always be in pain*

I said

And cried,  
My fruitcake crumbling  
In my shaking fingers.

*It's never as bad as it seems*

She said

*Don't give up*

She said

*I'm here for you*

She said

She patted my arm

Then turned and walked away

Around the corner of the church.

She thought I could not hear her.

When she returned

She said nothing except

*Be strong.*

*I Am Bed Six*

I am bed six  
Apparently.

Somewhere between  
My admittance to hospital  
And my release  
I have changed into  
A bed  
With starched sheets  
And locked wheels.

I hear the nurses say  
Bed six needs  
Medication/blood taken  
Discharge papers (someday)

I am bed six  
I feel nothing.

But after long weeks pass,  
And I finally leave,  
Wheeled into the sunlight  
Across the hospital carpark  
With my white linen  
And iron legs

Eager for my restoration

I find that  
I am still bed six,  
Flat, awkward and  
Unwieldy,  
Created for sickness.

## *Makeshift*

I saw pain on my X-ray.  
The doctor showed me my neck  
Utterly straight, drawn tight  
By the muscles contracting  
With each burning wave.

Yes, I said  
As I looked at the screen –  
*Yes, I see it.*

(I see the sleepless nights  
The endless days, and the  
Muscles hardening, hardening  
Pulling the bones out of shape  
As they clench ever tighter.)

*And do you know why they do that?*  
The doctor asked.

He told me that my brain believed  
My neck was broken –  
My muscles were acting  
As a makeshift splint  
To keep everything in place.

Yes, I said  
*I understand –*  
And I did

Just as I know my silence  
Serves as a makeshift splint  
To keep everything in place –  
If I do not open my mouth  
Nothing will crumble or break.



*My Dark Guardians*

My eye drops trickle  
a burning trail  
down the back of my throat.

Amitriptyline makes  
my tongue numb.  
Codeine is very bitter.

Oramorph is sickly sweet  
like roses or syrup -  
then the chemicals catch  
at the base of my tongue.

When the warmth spreads  
through my body  
I am floating  
away  
into the  
serene gardens  
of the dispossessed.

Oxycodone is metallic.  
Bitter as iron and blood  
tasting of lampposts  
and tar and men  
digging the road.  
The gate to pain clangs shut  
dragging me into wakefulness

I am grateful  
For my hazy existence  
Among the ranks of  
The medicated –

I am grateful for  
My dark guardians who  
Wake me and put me to sleep -

Sometimes, though,  
Stirring with the taste of  
Chemical kisses on my lips  
I know we meet as lovers.

## *Autoimmune*

Autoimmune diseases work like this –  
Instead of fighting germs, the system sees  
The healthy tissue as the enemy,  
Attacking it repeatedly. I wish  
I didn't understand, but this is rich  
With implication (also irony).  
Of course this is the way of my disease;  
This is my life – betrayal with a kiss.

My mind betrays my heart at every beat  
And gently whispers: *Hide the way you feel.*  
*You know it's safer if you don't reveal*  
*Your deepest self; it only makes you weak*  
And while my heart accepts that this is wise  
I know that something deep inside me dies.

## *General Anaesthetic*

*Sharp scratch.* They access  
The cannula. They ask my  
Name, explain the procedure  
(Again), place the mask  
Over my face. *Deep breaths.*

The darkness falls like a  
Guillotine. I do not dream.  
My mind hangs empty in blank  
Eternities, while they  
Rummage among my insides.

Although they try to rejoin my  
Chemically severed body and mind,  
Waking, I find a disconcerting  
Disconnect - a memory of a lack of  
Memory. Nausea. Panic. Pain.

## *Shipwrecked*

I am in the hospital  
Again. Hospital is  
Where patients wait;  
We wait for test results,  
For blood to be drawn,  
For time to pass.

Doctors are motor boats,  
Nurses are canoes,  
They move with purpose.  
They have not had to endure  
The shipwreck of their health,  
The burning hours of illness.

We are polite and humble  
*And when do you think*  
*I can go home, doctor?*  
(When does the waiting end?)  
And they reply *We will*  
*Have to wait and see.*

But they are not the ones  
Left to wait, stranded  
In a sluggish ocean  
On sheeted rafts,  
Plugged in to an IV  
Or a heart monitor.

Patiently waiting  
For health, we  
Drift doggedly and  
Imperceptibly closer  
To a rescue. We can do  
Nothing for the drowning.

## *MRI*

The MRI machine  
Is not a coffin.  
That is too simple.  
It is a white plastic cave.

It is a tube  
They slide me into  
And squeeze me out again  
Like toothpaste.

They warn that  
*It might be a little close.*  
The blank ceiling hovers  
Inches from my nose.

Occasionally, their voices  
Come, as down a long tunnel:  
*Are you alright in there?*  
*Not long now.*

I have been told  
To stay perfectly still,  
So I itch and twitch  
My hip digs into the mat.

The machine clanks, clunks,  
Grinding around me  
I am being processed,  
Assessed (and distressed):

The machine churns out  
My catalogue of failings.  
Areas of inflammation  
An angry red.

They slide me out  
Like a dish from the oven,  
And say *That wasn't*  
*So bad, was it now?*

## *Lines*

Doctors have the best lines –  
Passionate. Dramatic.

*Get the crash cart! Check her pulse!*

*He can't breathe – he's asthmatic!*

Doctors have the best lines –  
That morning when you tried  
To send me to the hospital –  
And when I whined and sighed

And said I had to go to work,  
You looked at me and said  
*You have to go to hospital -*  
*You can't work if you're dead.*



## *Conversation with Pain Specialists*

Tell us about your pain.

Does it throb, or burn?

Does it stab or sting or ache?

Does it keep you awake?

Please be more specific.

You are wrong. You are here

With chronic pain

Which does not 'stab' -

It throbs or aches.

Acute pain stabs. After all

You couldn't bear being

Stabbed over and over –

Therefore your pain does not stab.

Your description is inaccurate.

You are not listening to us.

We will tell you how to deal

With chronic pain if you will

Accept that your pain is

Not as bad as acute pain.

Then we cannot help you. Because

You are not helping yourself.

You are inaccurate. You

Are exaggerating. You do not

Know what you are feeling.

We are the specialists. We know.

It is you who do not know.

You are the patient.

We are the experts.

You should listen to us.

Wait. Wait. Where are you going?

## *The Injection*

The nurse taught me  
How to inject myself:  
Swab down my thigh  
With an antiseptic wipe.  
Pinch the skin between  
Thumb and forefinger.

Remove the cap. Ensure  
No air bubbles remain.  
Then grip the plastic  
Pen at right angles  
To my skin and click  
Down the button on top.

Hold the pen steady.  
Count to ten. This is  
The hardest part. Holding  
It steady for ten long beats  
While it burns into your  
Bloodstream is unnatural.

*I could never do that,*  
Others say, and they mean  
*God forbid I should ever*  
*Have to.* We are constantly  
Surprised by what we can do  
When we have no choice.

A hundred tiny pin pricks  
Are worse than one deep cut;  
Just as one crisis will not  
Kill you but a thousand tiny  
Cares will wear you out,  
Since every one draws blood.

## *Physiotherapy Group*

If you were to transplant us  
From the hospital  
We would look very strange  
Sitting in a circle,  
Solemnly drawing back our necks  
Until we all have double chins –

Or kneeling down in a ‘shell stretch’  
More like a position of worship  
Than anything else, bums in the air  
Noses to the ground  
Arms stretched forward  
In supplication

Not to mention as we bob  
In the hydrotherapy pool –  
A float around our necks  
A woggle or two around our hips  
And dangling from one foot  
A rubber ring.

Such concentration  
As we coax our bodies  
Into bizarre positions –  
Fighting this strange disease  
Determined to crumple us up  
Like used silver foil.

## *Rituals and Runes*

If I tell them the name of the disease,  
They do not understand (Well, mostly.  
A few have heard of it. My favourite  
Response? She looked at me and said  
*Oh yes, I had a friend who had that.*  
*She died.* I admit, my lips twitched.)

So instead, I say I have arthritis.  
This is also dangerous. Immediately  
They tell me *My auntie had that once*  
*In her left knee. Have you tried hot baths,*  
*Copper bracelets, or cutting out starch?*  
*And aren't you too young for arthritis?*

I am tired of explaining the difference  
Between osteoarthritis and inflammatory  
Arthritis. So now I just nod, and say *Yes,*  
*I am too young.* And I tell them I have tried  
Such and such and it was useful, or I tried  
Thingamajig and it didn't do much good.

I am done with advice. I will not be dancing  
Widdershins around a rowan tree, or  
Eating nothing but blueberries and  
Porcini mushrooms. I will not be coating  
My skin with yellow mud, nor will I  
Be channeling the sunset through crystals.

Embarrassed by uselessness, they wish  
To offer something – anything – to appease  
The angry gods. That same need long ago had our  
Ancestors throwing salt over the shoulder,

Carving curses on sheets of lead: there is power  
In rituals and runes, however curious –

But I have found my tools already, scratched  
Down in black on white, my healing charms.

*Ankylosing Spondylitis:*  
*A Lesson*

Here is what I have learned:

Ankylosing Spondylitis

Comes from the Greek:

*Ankylos* – fused

*Spondylos* – vertebrae

(*Itis* (Latin) means inflammation)

My immune system

Fights itself: the joints

Become inflamed

Repeatedly, burning, stiff,

Until finally the spine

Will fuse together.

So why is this a poem?

Surely it belongs in

A medical textbook,

Words that should be

Recited by medical students

Passing exams.

But these have become

My words; this has

Become my language.

*Peripheral joint involvement*

They told me when

My wrists were throbbing.

*Iritis*, they say knowledgeably

When my eyes are burning,

*Costochondritis*, is their rejoinder

When I can't breathe for the pain,

*Plantar Fasciitis*, when I can't  
Put weight on my heels.

*Rheumatologist, tendonitis,*  
*Intramuscular, instability,*  
*Ophthalmologist, enthesitis,*  
*Genetic predisposition:*  
Unfamiliar words fill my ears  
I learn them, but stay silent.

For I am just a patient and  
Must be patient. From the  
Latin *pator* meaning 'to suffer'.  
Also the root of the word  
Passion. I suffer the doctors  
I suffer the pain

And one day, when I  
Have suffered enough  
And learned my lesson  
Of pain and patience,  
When my recitation  
Of Greek and Latin is over

Dead languages finally  
Silent in my mouth,  
Knowing it is finished,  
The only words left  
Will be infinity,  
Eternity, and rest.



## **II) Tortured by your Ghost**

### *In This Place*

See the landscape, dry and strange,  
You are quite alone  
With half-remembered endless thirst –  
Rivers crack like bone.

Tell yourself that you are chosen,  
Say you're not afraid,  
In this place as blank as truth  
You will be unmade.

Stripped of all that made you human.  
Stripped down to the soul.  
When you leave you will be different.  
Cauterized. Unwhole.

Vultures circle, closer, closer,  
Who will hear your cry?  
Burn and blister as you writhe  
Beneath a glaring sky.

Do not think that there is hope here.  
Hope is not your friend.  
Hope will whisper (lying, always)  
Soon your pain will end.

Do not think that you will find here  
Shelter from the sun.  
I have searched the scorching earth  
And there is none.

## *Hard-Hearted*

The heart lies buried in the snow.  
Protected now, it cannot feel -  
The hurt is deeper than you know.

The heart lies deeper than you know.  
The heart with hurts that cannot heal -  
The hurt that lies beneath the snow.

The heart has hardened in the snow.  
Although you beg, although you kneel –  
The heart is harder than you know.

## *Tortured*

Everybody lies.

That can be accepted.

What cannot be accepted

Is the loss of things expected.

Everybody leaves.

That can be survived.

What cannot be survived

Is the silence left behind.

The people we have lost

Are the ones who hurt us most.

I find it strange to think that I

Am tortured by your ghost.

## *Anger*

I said it didn't matter.

I said I didn't care.

I lied. You lied. We all lied.

And still the truth was there.

The anger aches inside me

Like fingers in a glove,

It was so deep and painful,

I thought it must be love.

## *The Way*

You gave me rules and when I hid  
My sins from you, I knew you'd see:  
This is the way that I must live -

My stern, uneasy heritage.  
I take this as my legacy  
And grieve for what you cannot give.

So watch me as I wrestle with  
An infinite apology -  
This is the way that I must live.

Although my thoughts are fugitive,  
I guard my soulless strategy  
And grieve for what you cannot give.

Your strict instructions were the bridge  
Between us: Now we both agree -  
This is the way that I must live

To feel you close - a primitive  
Bond of rigid scrutiny -  
And grieve for what you cannot give.

It is too late, I know, but if  
This means you're not ashamed of me  
This is the way that I must live  
And grieve for what you cannot give.

*The road I used to know*

There was a road I used to know.

I used to know it well.

There were green, green hedges on either side,  
And the road was white and the road was wide,  
And it stretched across the hill.

There was a road I used to know.

The sky above was grey,  
The sky reached down with clouds like claws  
And the fields were grooved and gored and torn,  
While the bushes looked away.

There was a road I used to know

And it swam before my eyes,  
As I ran and I ran to escape from you,  
And the terrible, terrible shame I knew  
And your endless, senseless lies.

There was a road I used to know

And I do not know it now,  
But on nights when the wind sings treachery  
I know the road still runs in me  
And back to you, somehow.

## *Journey*

I expected something –  
Not these dreary  
Snow painted wastes,  
This empty sky.

A tree nestles in  
The distance and  
A truck spins  
Down a grey road.

Alone on the train,  
Trapped behind glass,  
I see the landscape gaping  
Open to swallow me.

*January*

Bitter with the mockery  
Of thinking it is possible  
To start again,  
January tells the truth;

No hope prophesied  
Or promised.

Dip your hands  
In frozen earth.  
Listen to stark trees  
Whisper in icy winds:

*This is the truth that you  
Cannot deny.*





## *The Dancer*

Here beneath the gilded lights  
How she dances, higher, higher,  
Sweating, straining, reaching out,  
Tendons filled with fire.

How the audience applauds!  
Not the dancer but the dance  
(Bleeding toes and burning lungs:  
Costly elegance).

Later when the lights have faded  
See, she comes to dance again,  
Leaps across the empty stage,  
Tantalised by pain.

This time she will get it right.  
Desperate for a lost precision  
See her whirl as endlessly she  
Begs to be forgiven.

Such a dance goes on forever  
Every dancer spins alone  
Hoping, pleading, broken, bleeding,  
On and on and on.



## *Apologetic*

The GP surgery: I'm saying sorry again.  
My doctor smiles, as always, tells me I  
Don't need to apologise for being in pain.  
Oh, but I do. I've learned the ways of my  
Family too well. If I am ill  
I am despised, I've failed, I've given in:  
It demonstrates the weakness of my will –  
That I should ask for help when I should grin  
And bear it. Once in hospital, I heard  
My mother ask my sister, was I 'really'  
In pain? She was quite undeterred  
By diagnoses. She alone saw clearly  
My weakness, my hypocrisy, my lies –  
What's left for me, but to apologise?

## *Unhealed Fracture*

*There is an old fracture in your ankle*

The doctor said, looking at the X-ray.

*It is unhealed, making your ankle unstable.*

*Surgery may help, but I make no promises.*

I remembered it all. I was fifteen -

A barge trip with my family. Jumping

To the bank, my foot turned over sharply

As I landed. Shaking with pain and shock

I was gently led back on board and

Given an icepack and hot sweet tea

By my nine year old sister. My parents

Were busy with the boat. Later I asked them

To take me to the hospital. They shook

Their heads. *So dramatic!* My mother sighed.

The injury took a long time to heal. When

I rang my mother today, after seeing the doctor

And told her what he said, she asked

*Was that the ankle you hurt on the barge?*

*Yes, I said. I suppose we should have taken*

*You to hospital,* she pondered, fifteen years

Too late; I have lived too long with fractures

Spreading through my body to the heart.

### *In Sickness and in Health*

You are twenty-one. You know nothing.  
You say 'In sickness and in health'  
Lightly, joyfully, as you practise your promises.  
The church is cold. This is the rehearsal.  
Tomorrow you pledge your forevers together  
Bound by a golden ring.

My sister, remember our grandma,  
Who, at the age of sixty-four  
Had a brain haemorrhage and lost  
Who she was and who we were -  
Our granddad has stayed faithful to her  
For nearly twenty years.

Sometimes I think you are braver than I am,  
To trust something so changeable  
As another's love. And sometimes  
I think you are foolish, like now,  
When I sit in this cold church and see you  
Radiant, fervent, and so young.

*Rock-a-bye baby*

*Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop*

*When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,*

*When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall*

*And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

Rock-a-bye baby, it doesn't seem fair,  
One moment you're happily up in the air,  
Around you are so many things that can kill,  
And suddenly, baby, you're cold and you're still.

Rock-a-bye baby, I wish I knew why  
Some babies are healthy and some babies die  
Why sometimes the bough that seemed solid and strong  
Will break into pieces and hurl you headlong.

Rock-a-bye baby, you look like you're sleeping,  
Surrounded by wires that keep your heart beating,  
Oh baby, my baby, so tender and small,  
I touch your frail hand and I pray you don't fall.

*Not my Mother*

*I am not your mother*

You said

*Yes*

I said

*I know*

*You are not my mother*

*(But when you leave me*

*Alone in the dark*

*It's hard to know the difference)*



## *Violin Lesson*

I learned the violin when I was eight,  
And had to keep my nails short. The day  
That I forgot, my teacher did not wait;  
Snatching some blunt school scissors, obdurate,  
She took my hands and hacked the nails away.

These days, it wouldn't be allowed. I find  
That strange, for at the time, when I perceived  
Her passion for her art, I did not mind.  
Besides, I found her touch was not unkind –  
My teacher did not make my fingers bleed.

## *The Handmark*

*You're making too much noise*

He bellowed, glaring,  
Racing downstairs,  
Eyes filled with righteous flames  
He charged into the hall  
Shouting their names.

Her sister fled, quick-witted,  
Hid behind the sofa,  
While the girl stood frozen,  
Staring at blazing anger  
In his face, his hand upraised  
To slam across her thigh.

It landed forcefully  
And knocked her backwards.  
She refused to cry but felt  
The heavy weight of fingers  
Throbbing through her skin.

That night, she saw what he  
Had left – neatly defined,  
A handmark on her leg,  
Distinct and true, which turned  
From red to mauve to black;  
A bruise marked out each finger.

Next day at her desk,  
She rubbed her small palm  
Up and down the mark  
Through her green-checked  
School dress. The teacher asked  
If she was feeling well.  
She answered *yes*.

And yet, years later,  
If you ever dared  
To try to get to know her  
You would see  
How she is branded  
By the choice she made -

Her heart holds a black handmark,  
Which, unfading,  
Closes around her heart  
And warns *Beware*.

### III) So Many Words

*Interviewing Angela, who is homeless*

It was the angels.

They told me I was

Chosen, I was blessed,

And I believed them.

They whispered I

Could walk on water,

Fly like a bird on

The wings of the storm.

I was all-powerful -

But couldn't pay the bills

Pouring through the letterbox

In a papery flood.

So I left. Took the angels

With me, one at each shoulder.

They say I am Queen

Of the Heavenly Spheres.

I like that. Sometimes, the

Pavements are gold and pearl

But sometimes I wake up

When it's been raining

And I wonder What am I

Doing here, with my hair

Full of grit and dirty water,

And the angels, silent?

## *Singing*

There was nothing anyone could say.  
The hospital seemed endless miles away  
And the whole journey, hammering in her mind  
(Along with her headache) was the thought of going blind.  
The light on her eyes was torture; her sight turned grey  
And she prayed (though she'd said she would never pray).  
When she got there, she did not find them kind –  
They burned her sockets with bitter drops. Inclined  
To be hasty to save her eyes, they did not tell her soon  
She would see again, so she lay there, lost in a blurred  
And shadowy world; half-blind she shuffled through  
Long days until one startling afternoon:  
She turned her head and saw the bird she'd heard  
Singing – and found that she was singing too.

*Moon in the Water*

There are two in a boat  
On a lake at sunset.

Shadowy hills surround  
The boat on the lake

And the bright globe of light  
Hanging above the pair

Is also dancing in the lake  
Beside the silhouetted boat.

Perhaps the pair are fishing  
For the moon in the water

Looking to hook that shining sphere  
Of white light on their fishing rods

To light their way home.  
They will hang the captured bauble

Still dripping water,  
In the front of their boat

And row back to shore,  
Marvelling at their catch

Which does not flicker or die  
As the moon fades in the sky,

But keeps shining on  
Their surprised faces,

Revealing all their wonder,  
All their fear.

## *Unravelling*

I found her on the beach again.  
She always wandered there  
The oily waves enticed her back.  
She'd sit and stare and stare;  
Her vision blurring blue and grey  
Salt settling in her hair.

That night the sea was thrashing black  
And hammered rocks like lead.  
She sat there, soaked by churning spray.  
*Let's get you home*, I said.  
She turned to look at me, replied  
*No, I'll stay here instead.*

I sat beside her, held her hand,  
*You're crying!* she declared,  
Confused that I, her comforter,  
Should be so lost and scared.  
We sat and watched the broken waves  
Unravel as we stared.

## *What Humans Do*

She was a little kind and that was all.  
She thought she'd make the world a better place.  
But sometimes need is greedy. I recall  
The last, lost look that washed across her face.

She was a little kind. She saw me drowning,  
She came to help. She promised me to stay.  
But when she saw the way the waves were pounding  
Perhaps she thought she might be swept away.

She was a little kind – I caught her hand  
As I was struggling, begged her to hang on –  
Instead, one smile, one tear, and, safe on land,  
She loosed her grasp and tenderly was gone.

I can't forget; forgiveness still seems distant.  
She let me go. And yet, she saved me too.  
She was a little kind, but not persistent,  
For she was human. That's what humans do.



*On looking up 'lost' in the Thesaurus*

So many words for that which isn't there;  
For things defined by absence and by yearning.  
So many people, losing something, found  
In all their dictionaries, with all their learning,

There was no word describing how they felt  
About what they had lost so each created  
Another word to speak of what was gone,  
To be quite sure that each time they related

The tale of how they lost the precious thing  
They could be accurate in their description,  
It was not *lost*, but only *gone astray*,  
Or *hidden*, or *misplaced*, in their depiction.

Perhaps it had just briefly been *mislaid*,  
Perhaps *invisible*, but still around,  
The brave say *gone*, or even *irretrievable*,  
While others deem it *nowhere to be found*.

For me, I choose to say that you are *wayward*,  
*Off-course*, perhaps, or *wandering* – that is all,  
Of course you will come back, you haven't *vanished*,  
Although you never answer when I call.

Besides, you needn't think this is about you,  
I turned to the thesaurus just for me,  
To find out how I feel now you are *absent*,  
I will not cry when I reach *all at sea*.

## *Many-Worlds Theory*

Perhaps you decided not to leave  
The house that day, stayed in instead,  
And watched *EastEnders*. And if  
That world exists, where

You didn't leave – or you  
Came back - it gives me hope.  
Somewhere, we are still together  
In a world I can almost touch

Or glimpse on the other side of  
The brutal mirror: I look in it now,  
And see myself, looking ten years older;  
Behind me, the bedroom door

Begins to open. I know that you  
Are just about to step through,  
Calling my name, shaking off  
The snow of another world.

## *Glorious*

Just because I'd not conceived  
You leaving, didn't mean you'd stay.  
I was wrong. You went away.

Glorious pain! I can't despair –  
This one truth has pierced me through –  
I was loved, and loved by you.

## *Valentine*

Of course my heart is broken –  
It stutters, flutters, races;  
They give me medication  
And monitors and traces.

Of course my heart is broken.  
It shattered on the day  
You kissed me and you told me  
You had to go away.

Of course my heart is broken.  
You must not think I mind –  
I'd rather be the one who leaves  
Than the one who's left behind.

## *Love Song*

My darling, I love you  
From England to France,  
I love you to Russia  
And back,  
I love you in sunshine,  
I love you in snow,  
In a house or a palace  
Or shack.

I love you at daybreak,  
I love you at night,  
I love you from wrong  
And I love you to right,  
I love you excessively,  
Splendidly, endlessly,  
Caught like a child  
On the string of a kite.

My darling, I love you,  
From Saturn to Mars,  
From the sun to the moon,  
From the moon to the stars,  
I love you past Jupiter,  
Love you through space,  
Where galaxies swirl  
In their endless embrace.

I love you forever,  
My darling, my love,  
From the earth that's beneath  
To the heavens above.  
My love is eternal,  
And boundless and free -

But what does it mean  
If you cannot love me?

*Not Unkind*

I told them I fell in love with your mind  
And that was true  
I did not tell them I also fell  
In love with the rest of you.

When we found ourselves together  
At last, I could not stay  
It wasn't fair to your family  
So I went away.

But I'll always have those memories  
Locked in my mind  
I am glad that I met you and I am glad  
You were not unkind.

#### **IV) I Remember This**

##### *Therapy*

I will tell you all my secrets,  
I will tell you all I know,  
You will question, you will listen,  
You will teach me to let go.

You will promise not to judge me,  
You will soothe me when I cry,  
You will show me care and kindness,  
I will always ask you why.

You will promise me that one day  
I will find that I am healed.  
I will find it hard to trust you,  
I will keep my pain concealed.

I will ask about your family,  
You will make the boundaries clear:  
You will question, I will answer -  
You will always sound sincere.

You will care for one hour only,  
You will then bid me farewell.  
You will then return to living  
I will then return to hell.

I will think about you daily,  
I will hope you'll rescue me,  
You will tell me that can't happen,  
You will smile so patiently.

You will never be enough for  
I will always long for more,  
You will help me understand this,  
I will feel my heart at war.



I will wonder how you learned this,  
You will wonder who I see,  
We will try to work together  
We will fail, courageously.

### *It Should Be Me*

You cough again. I wince. How can I bear it?  
It should be me; this is my gift, my curse.  
I will be ill, if those I love are spared –  
My bitter bargain with the universe.  
I'm selfish really. Your pain hurts me worse  
Than anything my illness hurls at me  
For in my throat lies something more than thirst -  
Guilt rises like a desiccated sea.

(It Is My Fault. This thought won't let me be,  
For someone said, a long, long time ago  
That anyone I told, undoubtedly,  
Would soon grow sick, or die, and as you know,  
I told you all about it, for you cared –  
And now you cough and cough – and I am scared.)

## *Your Touch*

The language of medicine is touch -  
My pulse flutters beneath your fingers.  
We are silent as you listen (such  
Intimate silence) to my blood singing  
Through my veins. Doctor, please be kind.  
Your gentle hands are sometimes filled  
With needles. While I am deaf and blind  
You carve my skin – deft and skilled,  
You probe among my organs. I wake  
In a white room, a slab of meat  
On a counter, but then you take  
My wrist and softly count each beat.  
I know so little. I've lost so much.  
But I still feel you. I feel your touch.

## *Exquisite*

The doctor poked me in the ribs. I gasped,  
Wincing back instinctively. *Ah yes*, he agreed, *it is*  
*Exquisitely tender, isn't it?* Not quite the way  
I would expect him to describe the pain.

To me, exquisitely tender means the look  
In a mother's eyes as she smiles  
Down at her newborn, or the touch  
Of a lover in darkness.

Exquisite, of course, can mean both  
'Intensely felt' and 'beautiful and pleasant,  
In a delicate way' so that synonyms for exquisite  
Can be both 'lovely' and 'excruciating'.

So when I say I am feeling exquisitely tender  
You will have to guess which I mean.

## *Costochondritis*

I

My ribs have been painful for  
Months. I am on morphine patches,  
Which work reasonably well,  
But are no good for long-term  
Pain relief due to the addiction risk.

So back at the hospital, I chat to the  
Rheumatologist whose manner is  
Slightly peculiar – a caricature of the mad  
Scientist: glasses, beard, crazy hair,  
Addressing comments to my left shoulder -

I like it now. It is, after all, I think,  
How he entertains himself, through  
The endless hours of human misery.  
A rheumatologist needs stamina for  
The parade of chronic conditions.

II

Today, he talks about blocking the nerve  
To the rib that is causing the problems,  
Temporarily at first, and then permanently.  
Apparently it can be done fairly simply  
*And you don't really need that nerve anyway.*

But first, he will try some more steroid  
Injections. Painful, but less permanent.  
He rubs his hands as he stands in front  
Of a selection of bottles and needles.  
*Which shall I use?* He mutters happily.

He carefully draws up the injection, warns  
*Sharp scratch!* In a way that is both  
Gentle and callous, he slides two very large  
Needles between my ribs. It is uncomfortable  
But not excruciating. That comes later.

### III

That afternoon, I have to go to bed  
Because of the pain. I wish you had  
Been at the appointment with me  
For so many reasons, but mostly  
Because if you had been there

I would not have to be writing this now,  
Pretending I don't mind, pretending this  
Is normal, looking for the humour  
In the situation so that you don't think  
That I minded being alone in the hospital.

And I didn't mind really, at least, not  
In the way you might think I'd mind.  
Well, I didn't really enjoy the silence  
As I drove home, the fact that I had to  
Breathe evenly to keep my hands steady

But what I really minded was your casual  
*You'll be okay, won't you? It's not as if*  
*You've never been there before.* The way  
You seemed both callous and gentle as  
Your words slid cleanly between my ribs.

## *Stitches*

Do you remember, dear, when the stars  
Like white apples in the night, hung low,  
As if we could pluck them from the sky?

How strange, that it should be ten years ago!  
I did not expect the years to grow like bars  
Across our lives. Now every time we try

To remember those days, I see how we lie  
To one another, desperate to believe it was so –  
We stitch the scenes together, leaving scars.

## *In Sickness*

All privacy is gone. They watch me here.  
They say they care – but can they really know  
What it is like? To lie at night in fear  
And watch the empty hours come and go?

I lie with unwashed hair and unwashed skin  
And wait for light to come – five hours till day,  
Five hours of pain, and then we can begin  
A new charade both sick and healthy play.

The healthy watch the sick. This is the stage  
Where I must play my part and never dare  
To switch my role, to struggle or to rage,  
To state the truth we always knew was there -

The truth the healthy know, but cannot face:  
One day (quite soon now) they will take our place.



## *Leaving Words*

All she had left were words, at the end,  
Which is unusual and perhaps not the worst way to go.

When the clot slotted into her mind  
Blocking the blood, causing an artery to burst  
Washing most memories blank,  
Her words remained.

She spent her time placidly doing crosswords  
(or redoing them - sometimes you erased her answers  
and she filled them in again not remembering).  
She still spoke French and German  
'Though she did not know my name.

It was clear her release came from the pure meaning of words  
Not as applied to her confusing life.  
She played *Scrabble* with you, blind to the score.

You used to tell me I was like her.  
You don't say that anymore.  
But still, I see myself in her, and wonder,  
If all else died in me, but words were left,  
Could I too find such peace?

## *The Train Home*

The weariness begins  
To seep into my bones  
Now I am sitting down  
On the train home.

Travelling – an endless  
Reliance on the kindness  
Of strangers. Limping  
Down eternal platforms -

So train, carry me gently  
Home. I am weary now.  
Cradle me, rock me  
In the rhythm of your wheels;

I am tired of strangers,  
I fear being lost in the dark,  
I am aching and alone –  
Carry me home.

### *Studying Stars*

The stars are biting hungrily  
Through the bitter winter sky  
I used to think  
I'd never die.

Each night I sit and watch the stars.  
Each morning with the sun,  
They flicker and they blink out  
One by one.

## *Underground Map*

Safe in the train's grimy warmth,  
Clutching my map, at every station  
I reassure myself of my position.

But the doors sweep shut.  
Beneath the heavy weight of earth  
I lurch into a shadowy throat

And no map prepares me for the journey  
I take into the darkness -  
As the light dims, I remember this.

# **Poetry as Therapy and Poetry beyond Therapy**

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# **Chapter One: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

Writing as therapy has been investigated by a number of writers and health practitioners, and ‘expressive writing’<sup>1</sup> is generally agreed to improve emotional health (Baikie and Wilhelm). I am particularly interested in the value of using poetry as a form of therapeutic writing, as I have always found writing poetry to be useful therapeutically for me. I am looking to understand how and why poetry writing works therapeutically, and to consider whether any differences exist between writing poetry as therapy and writing poetry as art, and if so, what they are.

## **1.2 Research Context**

I first became interested in therapeutic writing as a social work student, working at a local charity. Encouraged to pursue my passions there, and being interested in creative writing, particularly poetry, I read widely about therapeutic writing and its positive effects. Afterwards, I carried out therapeutic poetry writing exercises with service users. One service user in particular responded very positively, and I was invited back to carry out similar work at the charity, if I continued researching in this area.

Alongside my research, I am also writing a collection of poetry suitable for publication, significantly inspired by my own personal experiences, although not overtly confessional. Having experienced severe physical and emotional pain (I have Ankylosing Spondylitis, a chronic inflammatory arthritis and autoimmune disease, and I am also a survivor of significant childhood trauma), I am using experiences such as hospitalisation and the power dynamics between doctors and patients to inform my writing. Throughout my life, I have used poetry writing therapeutically and I wish to understand more about this phenomenon.

## **1.3 Main Aims of the Research**

Existing literature (Hunt and Sampson; Philipp) argues that poetry writing as therapy is effective; I wish to examine how and why it works. I will examine this question

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<sup>1</sup> Writing about traumatic events; pioneered by Pennebaker and Beall in 1986

critically and practically: exploring therapeutic writing through examining existing literature, considering it in my own poetry and developing therapeutic writing work with a local charity.

As a poet myself, I am particularly interested in exploring poetry as a form of therapeutic writing and discovering whether it is more beneficial than other writing forms. I also wish to consider to what extent a distinction can be made between poetry as self-expression (or therapy) and poetry as art, and whether such a distinction causes any tension for professional poets. I hope to demonstrate that therapeutic writing need not displace the artfulness of poetry, as the expressiveness and artfulness of poetry are not diametrically opposed. I intend to explore this by looking at professional poets and discovering to what extent they have found their poetry to be therapeutic, and by considering their views on poetry writing as therapy, alongside the views of therapeutic writing practitioners.

Whilst exploring therapeutic writing critically and analytically, I will be drawing on James W. Pennebaker's work in the United States and contemporary writers such as Gillie Bolton in the UK. I am particularly interested in Pennebaker and Susman's work on trauma. Bolton summarises their work as follows: They conclude that although circumstances allow few people to share as much about a harrowing event as they need to for psychological health, disclosing on paper at a later date can do much to undo the original harm (200). I wish to consider the potential benefits for those who have experienced emotional distress or trauma, if poetry writing is used as therapy.

There is a definite interest in the links between writing and health in both the Literature and Creative Writing sections of the School of English at Newcastle. Holding Masters Degrees in both Creative Writing and Social Work, research into the therapeutic benefits of poetry writing is particularly suited to my skill set. I believe that therapeutic writing will increasingly be regarded as an important tool in the healing process across multiple fields. As a user-led form of therapy it is empowering to the service user and has the benefit, in troubled economic times, that it does not require intense intervention from professionals.

Considering therapeutic writing critically alongside my own creative work will enable me to make valuable connections between the academic world of the university and the surrounding community. In addition to its intellectual value, it is a project that can have practical benefit and application. Therefore, I also want to explore the practical applications of my findings, for those who wish to practise poetry writing as a form of

therapy. I am aware that therapeutic writing is not unambiguously positive and I hope to understand how it can be used most helpfully.

#### **1.4 My Personal Experience**

Having found my poetry writing therapeutic, I wish to explore this now. I began writing poetry aged five; this continued through my childhood, my difficult teenage years and into my adult life, when I was diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis. Throughout my life, poetry has enabled me to explore my emotions, communicate my thoughts and make sense of my experiences.

Looking back, I believe my use for poetry evolved. As a child, I wrote for enjoyment – I loved writing. My poetry was almost always in a regular form. I came from a musical family and had an instinctive grasp of rhythm and rhyme. Some of my earliest influences were the hymns we sang at my church. I remember being quite distressed when we started singing newer choruses in church, which didn't rhyme or have regular stanzas. I also wrote partly for reasons of 'play': playing with rhythm and rhyme, experimenting with my abilities, imitating poems I had read. Playing with language is part of a child's development (Whitebread), but I believe I derived particular joy from my learning.

Even then, I had some awareness of audience. I knew my family enjoyed my light-hearted verse and so I wrote more of that, although I found my darker verse more helpful – as I had experienced abuse, my poetry often reflected my sense of helplessness and pain. Perhaps instinctively I had turned to writing as something I could do independently (I felt very alone as a child) and which also allowed me to express myself and process my feelings. Mark Robinson writes: 'there is something in the writing process itself, carried out at whatever literary level, but involved with the choosing, ordering and manipulating of language which promotes well-being' (*Conflicting Views* 15).

As a teenager, however, I began using my poetry in a more consciously therapeutic manner. I believe I would have written poetry had I suffered difficult experiences or not, but, as Graham Hartill writes, 'the case has long been made that in the illnesses and wounds of life lie the very wellsprings of creativity' (47-48). Andrew Brink observes that the impulse to create usually comes from some early damage to the self. Doubt, pain, trauma, insecurity and uncertainty are feelings that fuel the

creative process<sup>2</sup>. My difficulties provided a springboard to an intensity of writing as a teenager which continued into adulthood. The depth of emotion I felt at that time was poured into my poetry. I wrote a sonnet called ‘The Answer’ to demonstrate how important poetry was to me:

### *The Answer*

Don’t ask me why I write. I do not know.  
Go, find the eagles, ask them why they soar,  
Ask rippling rivers why they fleetly flow,  
Ask avalanches why down slopes they roar.  
Ask why the spring should bloom and buds release  
Or ask the swallows why they fly so far,  
They do not know, and yet if they should cease  
They would no longer be the things they are.  
To understand, take breathing as a guide  
For if I did not breathe, I could not live;  
I cannot hold my whirling words inside,  
You cannot carry oceans in a sieve.  
The words I weave are such a part of me  
That if I did not write I could not be.

I saw my writing as both natural and essential. When I was fourteen, my father was arrested. He was later found innocent of the crimes for which he had been arrested, but this experience nevertheless had a huge influence on me. From the dawn raid on our house to the trial at which I testified, it was a very difficult experience. As a natural communicator, I found it painful being forbidden to talk to anyone outside the family about the trial. Writing poetry provided an outlet. In my poem ‘Ophelia’, written aged seventeen, I was ostensibly giving voice to a dramatic character, but in reality the poem gave voice to another young woman who felt silenced – me: ‘It seems my voice must always go unheard/ While others speak for pages undeterred’. Expressing my private thoughts safely was very important to me.

Writing as a teenager also helped me to form my own identity, particularly an identity as a writer. The poem ‘Make Me’ was written after my mother wrote a book, partly about my family<sup>3</sup>. I felt I had been portrayed falsely, hence the line: ‘Lies to blind

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Brink (*Creativity as Repair*) quoted by Louise DeSalvo (*Writing as a Way of Healing*)

<sup>3</sup> (Metcalf, *Insight into Anguish*)

the eyes of fools'. I recognised that 'Part of me remains my own'; I could form an autonomous identity through my poetry.

### *Make Me*

Again I come to ask who am I  
Knocking on your bedroom door  
You who made me once now make me  
Twice but not quite like before.

Shape me once with tears and laughter  
Shape me twice with blinding pain  
And if I am not right this time  
Why not shape me once again?

Make me once, your flesh, your frailty,  
Make me twice, through childhood rules  
Make me three times, with your pen now –  
Lies to blind the eyes of fools.

This will be the last remaking -  
Part of me remains my own.  
What or who I am is nothing;  
Lonely children walk alone.

Writing poetry like this enabled me to explore difficult areas in my life. Before I wrote a poem down I rarely knew how it would turn out, and was often surprised by the violence of my feelings. I strongly believe the use of form facilitated my writing. One of the most therapeutic functions my poetry accomplishes is capturing chaotic feelings in a precise, concise form, giving a sense of control and ownership. It allows me to shape and organise my thoughts and feelings. The times when my poetry has lost any sense of form have been the times when I have been closest to breaking down.

As I grew older, I wrote for another reason; to connect to others. Robin Philipp quotes Francis Bacon: 'This communicating of a man's Selfe to his frend works two contrarie effects; for it redoubleth Joys and cutteth Grievs in halves' (33). I would give my poetry to those who understood me best, and to those I hoped would understand me in time. I found speaking inadequate for conveying emotion, much preferring to write. I believed writing was clearer and more considered and I felt less inhibited.

Examining my experience, I began by finding my writing therapeutic, and yet I am now seeking to produce art. Therefore, the two cannot be mutually exclusive, as one can lead to the other: I believe my poetry has evolved. Originally, I wrote for my own benefit, although even as a child I had some awareness of audience. I did not draft much when young, but as I have taken my writing more seriously, I have drafted more to ensure that my poetry communicates clearly to others. At first, I used form because I enjoyed experimenting with it and it came easily to me. However, I also began to understand the idea of memorability. Don Paterson states: ‘a poem is just a little machine for remembering itself’ (Poetry Library). I wanted my poems to be memorable and I realised form was a good way of achieving this.

From my reading I had learned that ‘good’ writers were published; this shows the beginnings of an awareness of standards. I saw my writing as natural, but I also learned to work at it. As I grew older, I pushed myself, trying out different forms; partly because I enjoyed writing, but also because I wanted to be good at it. I learned how to separate myself from a poem; my most therapeutic poems appear the most private at first, but often, through changing a few lines, or switching from first to third person, I can transform the poems quite easily so I am comfortable to share them. The idea of impersonality in poetry is a matter to which I shall return in chapter three.

I did not come into contact with any ‘professional’ poets until university. Previously, my teachers were poetry books, or theoretical books about writing poetry. Meeting a professional poet was a shock. While she was encouraging, she expressed surprise that I did not draft more. She also said that I was very young to want to be a poet. (There is, of course, a difference between writing poems and wanting to be a poet - being a poet suggests a desire for recognition – but as I enjoyed sharing my poetry, I had always wanted to be a poet). The encounter did not change my wish to be a poet, but it did result in more time being given to drafting.

When expressing strong personal emotions in writing, I naturally turn to poetry, perhaps because of my personal affinity with music and rhythm, or alternatively because poetry enables the expression of deep emotions. For example, when my cousin - who was never interested in creative writing before - lost his little daughter in a tragic accident, he turned to writing poetry. Bolton observes that ‘people who don’t habitually write often turn to poetic form when in trauma or emotional disturbance’ (13).

Writing poetry can be seen as therapeutic because of the fact that difficult experiences and emotions can be transformed into a work of art. David Constantine writes: ‘Poetic form... makes the desolating material bearable. Or we might say out of

that material, itself ‘terrible’, ‘unbearable’, something, a poetic drama, is made which we can, in profound and complex ways, enjoy. That transmutation is as amazing as it is necessary’ (60). The painful transformed into something of value is, of course, a complex topic, but the way that poetry reframes an experience cannot be overlooked. I find the fact that my Ankylosing Spondylitis is providing material for my poetry very satisfying.

I never believed that the fact that I found writing poetry therapeutic was something to be hidden. Nonetheless, I always took great care to disguise the poems I considered to be more ‘private’ when sharing them with an audience, so they could never be clear what parts of the poem, if any, were taken from my own life. This suggests that although I did not feel that stating that I found writing poetry therapeutic was taboo, I was aware that there was a danger that my poetry would be seen as directly reflecting my personal and private experiences, which could mean that my poems were taken less seriously as art, and I wanted to avoid that happening if possible.

## **1.5 Survey of Recent and Current Thinking**

### ***1.5.1 Writing and Emotional Health***

Philips, Linington and Penman (14) state that writers have always known therapeutic benefits can be gained from writing. They cite Shakespeare, Keats and Virginia Woolf as examples of writers who have turned their distress into a literary form. They point out that Freud credits the poet with the recognition of the unconscious, long before the academic theory came about<sup>4</sup>. Mick Imlah simply says: ‘Poetry is a way of talking about things that frighten you’ (Astley 369). It is clear that writing, and perhaps poetry in particular, fulfils a therapeutic function for writers. What is less clear is why this is the case. A summary of theories is below.

Philips, Linington and Penman tell us writing ‘allows for the expression of feelings, both positive and negative’ (16). Geoff Lowe builds on this, referring to scientific studies demonstrating that psychological well-being can be enhanced through writing about traumatic experiences. He suggests: ‘Putting traumatic memories into words can help ease turmoil and defuse the danger’ (19). The process of turning thoughts into words is considered both calming and liberating. Philips, Linington and Penman explain: ‘Writing is... a means of articulating difficult feelings and unhappy

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Everywhere I go, I find a poet has been there before me’ Sigmund Freud (O’Dwyer)

memories, and transmuting them into a form that makes them possible to confront' (13). The benefit lies not only in the expression of feelings, but also in the fact that feelings are turned into a manageable form, enabling the writer to gain the distance needed to confront them.

Writing gives a degree of control to the writer and provides greater understanding of their situation. Bolton refers to the self-efficacy this can produce: 'A therapeutic session is brief; paper and pencil can always be there – in the middle of the night, for hour after hour if necessary... Clients do not always need to be listened to by another; they can – to an extent – listen to themselves and work on their own understandings on their own' (Bolton et al. 1). This ability to work on issues without the need for a therapist present is extremely useful.

Other positive experiences additionally linked to writing include the encouragement of self-esteem as writing skills progress (Bolton 22), and improvement of mood as writers can remind themselves of positive memories through recreating them (Philips, Linington and Penman 18). Furthermore, writers can take a difficult experience and turn it into something positive, displaying the redemptive quality of writing: 'When people are in a state of great distress, or in a great depression, they may feel that they have nothing good in their lives. Writing is a means of evoking positive memories and of enabling the production of something valuable from the imagination which can provoke appreciation' (13). Nonetheless, this case may be more complex for poets producing work at the level of art.

### ***1.5.2 How and why does Therapeutic Writing work?***

I am aware that although therapeutic writing is generally agreed to 'work', there is much less consensus about why it works (11) and I am particularly interested in this area. Various ideas have been raised to explain how and why therapeutic writing works. Philipp believes that creative writing has a beneficial effect on both physical and emotional health as it allows us to digest and interpret life's experiences (Fuller 5), helping us to understand and use them.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explores this idea in greater detail, suggesting we currently neglect the habit of writing. He describes the purpose of writing as creating information, not merely transmitting it. He explains how Victorians used writing to make sense of the day's experiences through diaries and letters: 'It is the slow, organically growing process of thought involved in writing that lets the ideas emerge in



the first place' (131). Bolton explains that writing is different from talking, as it is a creative act providing a means to explore 'cognitive, emotional and spiritual areas otherwise not accessible' (Bolton et al. 1).

However, there are also dangers associated with therapeutic writing. Lowe warns: 'Until we have more high quality research which informs us about why, when, where, on whom, by whom, under what conditions, and with what possible after-effects or side-effects, then we should perhaps proceed with caution' (22). Therapeutic writing does not help everyone in the same way. Gidron et al. studied a group of trauma survivors with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); survivors who disclosed their traumatic experiences reported feeling more upset after writing, and more health care visits and avoidance symptoms at follow-up (20). Field argues: 'The writing process should be treated with the same respect with which we treat fire – it is a valuable resource if properly harnessed' (Bolton, Field and Thompson, *Works* 18). During my research, remembering this, I will ensure safeguards are in place for the service users with whom I am working.

### ***1.5.3 Poetry as Therapeutic Writing***

Csikszentmihalyi wrote in 1991: 'The major creative use of language... is poetry. Because verse enables the mind to preserve experiences in condensed and transformed form, it is ideal for giving shape to consciousness' (130). He proceeds to explain:

Everyone can learn, with a little discipline and perseverance, to order personal experience in verse... even ghetto children and semiliterate elderly women in retirement homes are able to write beautifully moving poetry if they are given a minimum of training. There is no question that mastering this skill improves the quality of their lives. Not only did they enjoy the experience, but in the process they considerably increase their self-esteem as well.

While Csikszentmihalyi's view of 'beautifully moving poetry' is clearly subjective, the question remains why poetry is apparently so effective as a form of therapeutic writing. Rose Flint suggests:

In my experience, poetry – as distinct from any other form of writing – works, at a therapeutic level, in a similar way to art. The raw materials of poetry, words themselves – the sounds they make, the associations they carry, the images they can construct, their very 'colours' (as in the way words such as *heavy*, *down*, imply sombre shades or words such as *bicycle*, *dance*, are light, even glittery)

seem to behave in the same way as paints or clay; and poems read out in the session can provide the same kind of access to the imagination as a picture (142)

Flint's account is likewise subjective but works as a mode of explanation, enabling people to understand the use of poetry in therapeutic writing; she suggests that poetry's visual qualities can be used in a therapeutic fashion, similar to art therapy. She continues: 'The very unfamiliarity of both poetry and art to the majority of the clients I have come in contact with enables them to... go 'deeper' to a self that often surprises them with its clarity of knowledge' (142). Regarding the unfamiliarity of poetry, there will be an interesting contrast between myself and the service users with whom I will be working. I have been aware of poetry and have written poems for almost as long as I can remember; however, it is likely that at least some of the service users will regard poetry as an unfamiliar art form, because of a lack of opportunities to encounter poetry.

Another reason why poetry is considered so useful as a form of therapy is explored by Philips, Linington and Penman. They write: 'Poetry, especially, is one of the creative forms most associated with intense and painful feelings, and it can be enormously beneficial for anyone to encounter suggestions of their own experience in a publically recognised and appreciated form' (19). Although they are discussing reading rather than writing poetry, an excellent point is made. Poetry is associated with an intensity of feeling that makes it exceedingly appropriate to use as a therapeutic tool.

One of the strongest arguments for using poetry is picked up on by Philips, Linington and Penman, who explain: 'Poetry is a particularly valuable form of writing in a therapeutic context because it offers a means of organising chaotic thoughts into a formal shape and unity' (29). Considering my own experience, I would agree. They continue: 'For those who may be experiencing chaos in their lives, it can be particularly valuable to contain painful and difficult feelings within a very limited generic form. The constraints of the form can act, paradoxically, to require the writer to experiment with language and writing, and so free forms of expression which might otherwise not have come to mind' (30). Kate Compston expands this idea:

If I write entirely 'free' verse, I tend to find myself putting down what I already think i.e. what is in my conscious mind. But if I... need a word that is going to be harmonious with another according to a certain pattern, then the sound tends to come first, and the idea follows on. And that follow-on idea comes from a deeper place than anything my surface mind can suggest... something new is released (Bolton, Field and Thompson, *Routes* 29)

She suggests that form enables the unconscious mind to participate. Bolton explains: 'the writing hand not only knows what the thinking mind doesn't but also knows how much that mind, as well as the feeling heart, can bear to face' (99).

Wendy French also demonstrates how the rules of poetry can assist the poet in their writing, relating her experience of trying to write about a young girl's suicide: 'I could make nothing meaningful out of words and her senseless death. It was only when I tried the poem in the pantoum form that the strict rules helped the poem to take shape' (Bolton, Field and Thompson, *Routes* 159). Averil Stedeford writes: 'A poem, because it involves discipline and structure, allows the expression of profound and almost intolerable emotion within a framework of control... Writing the poem [meets] the double need for expression and control' (Bolton 151-152). French and Stedeford highlight the fact that form can act as scaffolding for emotions which appear disorganized and tumultuous.

#### ***1.5.4 Poetry as Therapy and Poetry as Art***

Plenty of ink has been spilt regarding the difference between poetry as therapy and poetry as art, and indeed, whether there is a difference at all. Firstly, I wish to consider Bolton's view of therapeutic writing. Bolton is one of the foremost proponents of therapeutic writing and has written prolifically on the subject, arguing there is no real distinction between therapeutic writing and creative writing. She comments in 1999: 'Both creative writing and therapeutic writing would lose much of their power if there was' (13). However, she goes on to explain: 'Writers very often write therapeutically and work on this material to create publishable works. Poems... go through stages of maturation. To begin with they are often a very personal expression, a communication with the self. Through the stages of redrafting they become less personal and become part of the writer's relationship with others' (224).

Bolton's view, however, appears to have evolved. In 2004 she suggests: 'The writing used in therapy is not necessarily an art form. It is probably more helpful to both therapist and client if it is seen as a very particular form of communication (with the self, as well as with others), and a way of developing an awareness of experience, rather than an *art*' (Bolton et al. 2). The key to Bolton's view seems to be that 'The focus of therapeutic writing is upon the *processes* of writing rather than the *products*' (2). Her paragraph reflecting on this is worth repeating here:

To be therapeutic, the initial stages of writing need to be encouraged to be personal, private, free from criticism, free from the constraints of grammar, syntax and form, free from any notion of audience other than the writer and possibly the therapist... Writing as an art form necessitates an awareness of all these at some stage. Therapeutic writing need never respond to the needs of these forces (2)

Robinson has also considered this question. He apparently agrees with Bolton, writing: 'Literary excellence demands a secondary transmutation, following that of experience into words from experience-in-language to experience transmuted-into-art' (*Writing Well* 79). He suggests that 'the purging element' (that is to say, the therapeutic element) is merely the first stage of the writing process (*Conflicting Views* 14).

Nonetheless, it is important to consider whether Bolton's views stand up to scrutiny. If the 'purging element' or 'personal stage' is, as Bolton implies, the locus for therapeutic recovery, where does this leave the 'redrafting' stages? Can no therapeutic value be found in redrafting? Furthermore, can poetry writing be divided so strictly into the purging stage and the redrafting stage?

Shirley Serviss implies disagreement with Robinson's view that the therapeutic element of writing tends to take place during 'the purging element'. She argues: 'While the act of writing – putting words on the page – can be healing, what is most healing for me is not the writing in itself, but the work of crafting it into a poem or essay' (Bolton, Field and Thompson, *Routes* 55). Serviss' definitions are interesting, as most writers would consider 'crafting' the words an integral part of writing. Attempting to separate writing into different stages can become complicated and confusing.

Robinson also suggests considering use versus function in writing. Robinson carried out a study comparing the poetry writing experiences of mental health support users and poets (*Conflicting Views* 15), discovering that poets largely disagreed with the statement 'I write mostly about myself and my feelings and experiences' with which none of the mental health support users disagreed. Both amateur and advanced poets may initially use their personal experiences, but advanced poets may move away from this as they redraft and consciously craft their work for the public.

Serviss explains that when crafting a poem she finds: 'As I do this, I become more and more distant from the initial experience or emotion. The piece of writing becomes something unto itself and is no longer a part of me' This distancing enables Serviss to 'move on' and also, to share her writing. Serviss observes: 'I'm often asked how I can read something so personal in public and my answer is that it's no longer

about me. By using a form, the writing moves beyond simply being cathartic into a more public realm' (55). This echoes Eliot's views about the poet's escape from personality: 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates' (*Tradition* 35). The poet becomes separate from the poem through the process of revising.

### ***1.5.5 Questions raised***

The research considered does, however, leave us with some questions. Robinson asked why such a high proportion of writers suffer from depression, if writing is supposed to be so good for you. In his 2004 T.S. Eliot lecture, Don Paterson said:

The systematic interrogation of the unconscious which is part of the serious practice of poetry, is the worst form of self-help you could possibly devise. There is a reason why poets enjoy the highest statistical incidence of mental illness among all the professions. Your unconscious is your unconscious for an awfully good reason. If you want to help yourself, read a poem, but don't write one (Poetry Library)<sup>5</sup>

Paterson argues that poetry writing, which involves 'the systematic interrogation of the unconscious', is actually very bad for mental health. Having said this, later in his lecture he comments: 'Poetry is a wonderfully therapeutic thing to do at amateur level' (Poetry Library); his point is that professional poets are likely to be troubled, rather than that those who attempt poetry for therapeutic purposes are likely to become troubled as a result of it.

He is right that poets are likely to be troubled. Bolton (216) discusses the research of Felix Post (1996): Out of a sample of one hundred writers, he discovered that only nine of them displayed an absence of classifiable mental illness. However Hunt argues that it isn't clear: 'whether poetry actually causes the mental illness or whether it attracts people with mental health problems because of the potential benefits, such as the way poetic form can serve to 'hold' personal chaos' (5).

Csikszentmihalyi agrees that writers write because of the therapeutic benefits they find in writing. More contentiously, he suggests: 'One reason they become full-time writers is that their consciousness is beset by entropy to an unusual degree; writing becomes a therapy for shaping some order among the confusion of feelings' (132).

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<sup>5</sup> Charities such as The Reader in Liverpool embody such advice, working to 'connect people with great literature through shared reading' (The Reader)

Morrison appears to support this, arguing that poetry and insanity both deal with censored feelings but poetry is controlled expression of these feelings (Fuller 3). I am willing to accept this ambiguity for now, although I hope that as my research continues, I may find my way towards some answers regarding this complex matter.

## **Chapter Two: A Small-Scale Study of Therapeutic Poetry Writing**

### **2.1 Focus of the Study**

As part of my investigation into therapeutic poetry writing, I wished to lead people in therapeutic poetry writing exercises to discover what benefits (if any) they found. I was particularly interested in exploring the benefits of using therapeutic poetry writing with those who have experienced emotional distress or trauma. This study involved leading service users in therapeutic writing exercises and interviewing them about their experience.

I therefore designed a small-scale study to implement with interested contacts at a local charity. The charity provides advocacy, support and counselling for isolated and vulnerable birth parents involved with child protection services. It is the only charity in the city that provides this specialist advocacy for parents with learning disabilities (Barefoot Research and Evaluation). I believed this would be a helpful setting for my enquiry as the women at the charity had been through substantial emotional trauma. This was also the same charity where I had previously carried out therapeutic poetry writing exercises with service users, so I was aware of some of the challenges that I would face, and the charity were willing to support me in my research.

I also believed this would be an excellent testing ground for the usefulness of therapeutic poetry writing, as I did not expect to find a very high level of literacy among the charity's service users, due to the prevalence of learning disabilities<sup>6</sup>. I believed that if therapeutic poetry writing was helpful to women with a lower level of literacy, it could also be helpful for those with a higher level. The charity is therefore an example of a 'least likely instance'; a case study selected to test the validity of a theory – in this case, the benefits of therapeutic poetry writing – in a situation where it might be least expected. If I can find evidence to support this theory, even under these 'least likely' conditions, then this gives it more credibility (Denscombe 58).

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<sup>6</sup> By learning disabilities, I mean mild to moderate levels of intellectual impairment; some service users also had learning disorders such as dyslexia.

## 2.2 Epistemology

Firstly, I wish to briefly outline the epistemology that underpins my research methodology. The tradition in which I am broadly working is that of feminism, using a phenomenological approach, although some aspects of trauma theory also appear. It is necessary to acknowledge difficulties of definition as feminism is a collection of ideologies, but at its heart lies the desire for equal rights for women, whether social, political or economic. McDowell and Pringle (3) state that women in society are defined not only in relation to men but as dependent on and subordinate to men; using this definition, women are seen as a marginalised group. The term 'Patriarchy' defines a pattern of domination among men which leads to the subservience of women (10).

Feminist standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s as a 'feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power', drawing on an earlier history of Marxian thought (Harding 1-2). It seeks to understand the world from the perspective of women. The three main claims of feminist standpoint theorists are:

- Knowledge is socially situated
- Marginalised groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalised
- Research, particularly power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalised

Sandra Harding, a feminist philosopher, first presented the idea known as 'strong objectivity', arguing that inquiry should start with the marginalised, rather than with those in privileged positions who had a vested interest in retaining the status quo (1-15).

Using feminist standpoint theory provides me with a foundation for approaching a marginalised group. When interviewing the women with whom I will be working, it is important to listen carefully to them. Hesse-Biber and Leckenby comment: 'many qualitative feminist researchers seek access into data and voices that have been traditionally silenced' (215). Silencing is also a key part of trauma; Herman refers to the 'wordlessness' of trauma (158). Both theories demonstrate the need for awareness of my own power and my assumption that I can grant a voice to the 'othered' (Leckenby and Hesse-Biber 215).

Critics of feminist standpoint theory consider its positioning of gender differences as simplistic; gender is now considered to be on a continuum. Additionally, feminist standpoint theory appears to argue that all women's viewpoints are the same, not allowing for differences like race or education, suggesting an essentialist world-



view. In the light of postmodernism, these arguments appear naive and old-fashioned, as gender is now seen as a product of culture.

Nonetheless, Webb declares: ‘Many feminists – in fact, probably most – think that where there are gender differences, those differences are socially constructed’ (53). I would agree, noting that the feminism underlying my work is a social constructivist feminism, as I am using a phenomenological approach. By this, I mean that women do not passively obey a set of social rules, but are instead ‘agents’ who interpret their experiences, actively creating an order to their existence. Furthermore, while their interpretations are shared with others in their group or community, the possibility also opens up that different groups might ‘see things differently’, thus establishing a world of ‘multiple realities’ (Denscombe 96-97).

### **2.3 Research Methodology**

I decided to adopt a qualitative approach to address my research questions in detail. A phenomenological viewpoint was selected as it is concerned ‘first and foremost with human experience’ (Denscombe 94). I selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as it can be used when research questions seek meanings of a phenomenon ‘with the purpose of understanding the human experience’ (Ray and Vanstone 840). Denscombe also points out that phenomenology is related to a social constructivist viewpoint, whereby people construct their own interpretation of events based on their experiences, and also a humanist viewpoint, that is ‘keen to accord normal people and their own everyday reasoning higher status in research’ (96).

When using IPA, Denscombe explains that, for the phenomenologist, ‘The task is to present the experiences in a way that is *faithful to the original*’ (95). This means using participants’ own words as much as possible and presenting generous context in interviews. IPA also tries to understand an individual’s perception of an event (for example, the participants’ experience of therapeutic writing), although it does acknowledge it is never completely possible for a researcher to understand someone else’s perceptions, because these perceptions are filtered through the researcher’s own perceptions (University of London).

The strengths of IPA can thus be clearly seen. However, there are some attendant weaknesses. It can be hard to identify what a sound analysis using IPA looks like, and there is a need for self-awareness, so the researcher’s preconceptions are taken into account (Brocki and Wearden 87-108). Sometimes IPA analyses are also criticised

for being too descriptive, so the researcher needs to make clear the distinction between data and interpretation.

## **2.4 Sampling**

My sampling frame was an exploratory sample, as I wished to probe an idea and gather new insights (Denscombe 24). I used both purposive and convenience sampling. It was purposive insofar as I wished to work with women who had suffered emotional trauma and who the charity felt would benefit from therapeutic writing. However, it was convenience sampling in that the charity immediately suggested a group of four service users who met regularly at a support group for mothers whose children had been adopted.

This group contained women who had a basic level of literacy, without a history of violence towards professionals, and it was ensured, through conversation with their project worker, that they had the level of emotional resilience necessary to enable them to potentially benefit from this research. As this group was for women who had gone through the child protection process and whose children were adopted, the level of emotional trauma was very high. After meeting the group, I agreed that this sample would work well in my study.

I met each of the four service users individually and as part of their group, and told them about my project. The service users were a variety of ages, from late twenties to late forties. They came from different areas of the locality, with different experiences of the child protection process (although inevitably all inclined towards a negative view). One of the three service users worked part-time, although during my time there she left her job. A wide variety of issues were represented by the service users: substance misuse, learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, domestic violence, adoption, bereavement, and probably others of which I remained unaware.

I felt a sample size of four was reasonable, given the time constraints under which I was operating and the fact that IPA suits small sample sizes. As it happened, one of the service users did not attend the sessions; however, the project worker took part, and she gave me some interesting insights.

## 2.5 Data Collection

After participants indicated they would be happy to meet and hear about my research project, I distributed leaflets with information about the research project<sup>7</sup>. The information was tailored for those with a learning disability. The service users were understandably very mistrustful of professionals and so I came to visit their group. I chatted with them and delivered a short presentation about my research<sup>8</sup>. The service users agreed to carry out the therapeutic writing exercises with me.

After getting to know the participants, and seeing how they supported each other within the group, I asked them how they would like the therapeutic writing sessions to be run. I had originally envisaged working with the participants one-on-one as I was concerned they could be embarrassed sharing their work with each other. However, after observing them, I wasn't surprised when they told me they would prefer to carry out the therapeutic writing exercises in the group. This originally involved more work for me, as I needed to adjust the exercises. Ultimately though, this worked out well. The service users benefitted from sharing their work with each other, and I did not have to work alone because the project worker also took part. She took responsibility for the emotional wellbeing of the participants, so I could concentrate on leading the exercises.

All sessions took place at the charity's building. During the first session, before starting writing, I slowly and carefully took each participant through an informed consent form<sup>9</sup>, which we both signed, confirming that the participants fully understood what would take place. With my supervisor's assistance, I prepared five two-hour group sessions of therapeutic poetry writing exercises<sup>10</sup>. Each session began with a warm-up exercise (often creating a group poem together), followed by two poetry exercises which each participant completed individually. The exercises built on what had been learned, so earlier exercises were more prescriptive than later ones. The poetry exercises were chiefly based on ideas found in therapeutic poetry resource books<sup>11</sup>.

The writing exercises were run as follows: firstly, I explained the writing exercise in simple language. I would then read out a poem, or part of a poem, to illustrate what I meant, repeating the explanation. Following this, I would read, and then hand out 'Literacy Prompts'. These had simple questions encouraging the service user

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix A

<sup>8</sup> Appendix B

<sup>9</sup> Appendix C

<sup>10</sup> For an example, see Appendix D

<sup>11</sup> Most frequently used: Kelley; Bolton, Field and Thompson; Philips, Linington and Penman

to start writing<sup>12</sup>. I ensured everyone understood, answering any questions. Ten to fifteen minutes of writing followed – in absolute silence! Sometimes we also used other aids, such as picture postcards. After writing, the group shared their efforts with each other. I would comment on their writing, picking out something I felt was particularly important or well-written, and sometimes suggesting ways to take the poem further. Sometimes the other members of the group also commented; I had proposed at the beginning that everyone was positive and encouraging about each other's work.

The project worker (for the purposes of this study, we will call her Deborah) and I also took part in the writing exercises so that the women did not feel we were asking them to do something we were not prepared to do. Deborah's involvement was useful from the point of view that I was able to gain her viewpoint regarding the therapeutic writing. When interviewed, she was able to give the viewpoint of a professional rather than a service user, but it was interesting to note that she gained as much therapeutic benefit from the writing as the service users even though she had not been through the trauma of child protection. Furthermore, Deborah had English as her second language and was able to make some useful observations regarding how she had found the experience as a non-native English language speaker.

I ensured that the exercises were not too intrusive and could be carried out at the level at which the service users were comfortable, whether this was exploring their feelings deeply, or not at all, or anywhere in between. The sessions were relaxed, with a break for tea, coffee and biscuits in the middle. I wrote notes about the sessions afterwards so I remembered what happened.

An unexpected result of the writing exercises was the decision to create an anthology of the participants' work. Deborah felt the service users had produced some moving pieces of work. I created a poetry anthology for them called *Unheard Voices*<sup>13</sup> using a self-publishing site, so the participants and charity could have a copy of the writing. It proved to be very popular, with many supporters of the charity asking for a copy.

The participants allowed me free rein when editing their poetry for the anthology; they did not mind if I grouped their words together into stanzas to make them more intelligible, as long as the words appeared in the order they had written them. Writing their narrative in a poetic form had already enabled them to express their

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<sup>12</sup> For an example, see Appendix E

<sup>13</sup> Appendix I

experiences (as described in Chapter 1<sup>14</sup>) and they understood that my editing was to ensure that their poems were more easily understood. This demonstrates an awareness of audience, despite the fact that the participants were writing poetry as therapy rather than writing poetry as art.

In the sixth and final week, I interviewed the participants about their experience of the writing exercises. I undertook semi-structured interviews with all four participants; the project worker, Deborah, and the three service users, Anna, Beth and Claire (all names have been changed). The interviews lasted between twenty and forty minutes, dependent upon how much detail participants could be persuaded to give.

Smith and Osborn (57) consider semi-structured interviews the best way of carrying out IPA as this form ‘allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise.’ I had a list of questions<sup>15</sup> which I roughly followed, although Smith and Osborn (58) explain: ‘the interview will be guided by the schedule rather than be dictated by it’. I showed or read this list to the participants beforehand, if they indicated it would be helpful. Although I was lone-working with the service users on this occasion, Deborah was in a nearby room.

## **2.6 Data Analysis**

Having decided to use IPA, I recorded the interviews with a voice recorder; the participants were aware that the interview would be recorded. Smith and Osborn (64) write: ‘it is not possible to do the form of interviewing required for IPA without tape recording. If one attempts to write down everything... one will only capture the gist, missing important nuances’. I then transcribed the interviews with as much accuracy as possible, knowing this accuracy was fundamental to my research.

After cataloguing and indexing my results, I analysed them, coding and highlighting key themes, taking into account Miller and Glassner’s views: ‘we can describe, truthfully, delimited segments of real-live persons’ lives. Indeed, in so delimiting, we may get closer to people’s lived experience’ (136). Smith and Osborn (66) explain that ‘meaning is central’, and understanding those meanings ‘involves the investigator engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript’. Although my

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<sup>14</sup> 1.5.3, p 78-79

<sup>15</sup> Appendix F

research was chiefly qualitative, Madill, Jordan and Shirley (17) claim that IPA findings can be viewed as reliable, as different researchers produce very similar results when subjectively analysing the same data.

Following this, I wrote up my findings. I wanted to provide as much access as possible to the participants' words, because phenomenology is about 'the ability to see things through the eyes of others, to understand things and to provide a description of matters that adequately portrays how the group in question experiences the situation' (Denscombe 95). This meant that I tried to provide full phrases from the participants' interviews, rather than single words reproduced without context.

## **2.7 Ethical Considerations**

My research included many ethical considerations. Ethical approval for my project was sought through, and approved by, the university<sup>16</sup>. Originally I intended to also provide questionnaires to the participants about their emotional health, but when I realised the level of literacy and comprehension required for this, I decided to rely only on interviews. The charity accepted university ethical approval as sufficient and provided their own 'Permission for Research' in writing<sup>17</sup>.

The participants had all experienced emotional distress, which meant therapeutic writing could be particularly beneficial for them; however, this also meant they were vulnerable and I needed to establish clear safeguards to minimise any added stress. Due to the level of trauma that the participants had experienced, and aware that therapeutic writing could trigger difficult feelings, I ensured there was appropriate support available for the service users involved. This was done by confirming that the participants were fully briefed beforehand about what to expect, and also by giving participants ample opportunity to terminate the writing sessions or interviews, if they wished.

I also ensured there was appropriate support available following the writing sessions and interview. The service users were supported through the writing sessions by the inclusion of Deborah. She took part, but also observed the participants, and would sometimes speak to a participant afterwards if concerned. The participants could also speak to a counsellor employed by the charity. If further support was required, service users could be referred to other professional agencies by the charity.

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<sup>16</sup> Appendix G

<sup>17</sup> Appendix H

I ensured the service users understood their choice to participate would not affect the way in which they were treated by the charity. I was also aware that safeguarding disclosures could occur (the indication of the possibility of harm to the person in question or to somebody else) and therefore made it clear to participants beforehand that should this occur, the charity would need to be informed and appropriate action taken.

I gained voluntary written informed consent from each individual as well as explaining the purpose of the study to the participants verbally. Any data collected was anonymised to protect the participant's identity before inclusion into the research. Any recorded data was kept safely until transcribed, and then destroyed. I conducted my research with the following principles in mind, taken from Denscombe (330-338): to ensure participants' interests were protected, to respect participants' privacy and avoid undue intrusion, and to guarantee the participants' anonymity. The Data Protection Act (1998) informed my actions regarding the collection and use of data. All data was coded and I was the only person to have access to the data (apart from the poetry in *Unheard Voices* for which participants gave their permission).

I assigned names to participants to humanise them, ensuring they started with a different letter of the alphabet to their real names so they could not be identified. Although I have occasionally referred to relevant details about participants in my findings, I am satisfied that participants remain anonymous.

There were also ethical considerations regarding my own work there. There was some lone working (for example, during the interviews) but I was in the charity's building, and the project worker knew where I was. There was potential risk to me from exposure to distressing topics that could emerge through the therapeutic writing exercises carried out by the participants. However, as a qualified social worker, I have had appropriate training.

## **2.8 Reflexivity**

I chose to use qualitative research methodology. This means it will unavoidably be shaped by my own understanding and interpretation of the data. I must, therefore, consider how my own assumptions and values impact on the research. Giampetro Gobo (22) defines reflexivity as 'the self-aware analysis of the dynamics between researcher and participants, the critical capacity to make explicit the position assumed by the

observer in the field, and the way in which the researcher's positioning impacts on the research process'.

As a white heterosexual female with a disability in her late twenties/early thirties, from a middle-class background, and with a strong Christian faith, I know my views will impact on my research. As I believe that writing poetry therapeutically has benefits for those who have been through emotional trauma, having found it helpful myself, I must be careful not to show my bias overtly whilst interviewing. I also know that I can build relationships well with women and do not want the participants to feel they have to say the 'right' thing for my research as I am in a more powerful position.

I am aware of my mixed feelings when working with this service user group. I have very strong sympathy for the difficulties that these service users have encountered in life, knowing of their poverty, and being aware of the immense trauma that mothers go through when their children are removed. However, knowing that their children have been removed and adopted means the mothers must have been unable to care for them, and the thought of what their children may have gone through troubles me.

I need to balance these two viewpoints when working with these service users, accepting that their children may have been damaged when living with them, but understanding that these mothers have been hurt themselves, and have ended up even more hurt due to their children's removal. I hope that therapeutic poetry writing will be helpful to the participants, and I will seek not to judge them, not knowing what I would do in equally difficult situations.

## **2.9 Findings**

The following tables identify key findings from the interviews and also show how many participants made the point. For example, if three participants made a particular point it is marked as 75% (any points which two or more participants made are included).



*Table 1: Summary of Findings*

<b>Benefits of Therapeutic Poetry Writing identified by participants</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps to process emotions (emotions were experienced but were not overwhelming) <b>(100%)</b></li> <li>• Facilitates change <b>(75%)</b></li> <li>• Acquisition of new skills and identification of unknown skills <b>(75%)</b></li> <li>• An altruistic purpose <b>(75%)</b></li> <li>• Fun <b>(75%)</b></li> <li>• Provides relief through release of difficult memories <b>(50%)</b></li> <li>• Enables reflection around the past and relabelling of difficult memories <b>(50%)</b></li> <li>• Encourages thinking and reflection <b>(50%)</b></li> <li>• Engages the imagination <b>(50%)</b></li> <li>• Working together in a group was helpful <b>(50%)</b></li> </ul>

There were various benefits of therapeutic poetry writing identified in interview. All four participants stated that the writing sessions had enabled them to process their emotions. Anna said explicitly: ‘It’s helped me to deal with my emotions’ (A:59). As researcher, I wished to identify how this occurred. Deborah, the project worker who usually runs the support group, identified that difficult emotions are usually hidden and therapeutic poetry writing brings them into the light. She said: ‘It’s just very helpful because it’s so difficult to talk about our emotions... Um, and you kind of realise that it’s not that difficult?’ (D:110-114). She also explained how through writing, and sharing that writing, personal growth occurred:

I think it helps you definitely to appreciate the, like, difficult emotions that people go through... because you, you kind of discover them in you and you’ve got to deal with them as well when you write... Um, and it kind of helps you to realise how - kind of - exposed, naked, you are...when you write about things... And when you’ve got to read them loudly and people watch you and you’ve got to do it... But when you do it, I think it makes you, kind of, stronger (D:93-103)

In essence, Deborah described how the identification and claiming of difficult emotions could lead to greater resilience and strength. The fact that therapeutic poetry writing

makes relating emotions easier is of great importance. Claire too describes how it 'builds your courage up' (C:39) when speaking about difficult things and Beth speaks about how the writing helps to process emotions because 'you're being more open' (B:68). Therapeutic writing, particularly poetry, offers a space for being more open about emotions, allowing hidden emotions to emerge and to be processed.

Emotion was certainly experienced during the sessions but it was not overwhelming. Deborah explained: 'I felt a bit emotional. I wouldn't say, er, upset' (D:269). Generally the participants worked through the emotions they experienced. Anna describes: 'Some of it was hard, but... after that, it was okay' (A:144), explaining that 'the emotion came... but... it went away again' (A:179). Beth described how she felt as if she processed the emotion in her writing during one specific exercise, explaining: 'The journey one... It's like, starts off quite miserable and then as you get to the end... there's more a happier end and it's quite – it makes it feel a bit better' (B:59-62). Claire agreed saying: 'It was a bit of both – a bit upsetting and again... a case of moving on from it...' (C:59). The participants acknowledged the painful emotions but as they continued writing, they moved on from those feelings.

Therapeutic writing can also lead to a change in perspective; Anna describes how therapeutic writing enabled her to understand her emotions better and to claim more control over her emotional life: 'If I feel sad then... I'm looking at why I feel sad. And how – which way can I change it?' (A:61) This was particularly interesting because as facilitator of the group, whilst encouraging participants to identify emotions, I wasn't expecting such self-awareness. I discovered that when negative emotions were identified, some participants went on to consider how to exchange negative emotions for positive ones. Three quarters of the participants described taking this step in their thinking. Anna was the most explicit:

It's... better when you put it down on paper... Because you can see it – like, well yeah these, these emotions did affect me... And then, you can try and turn them emotions around by writing a piece... of writing - say, say you feel sad but then you can also say – where – I seen, I seen... say, a flower opening, starting to bloom... And then that, that could take, that could take the sadness away? (A:149-158)

Anna describes a conscious crafting of a piece of writing whereby she identifies the negative emotions but uses positive imagery to offset them. This proved to be an unexpected step forwards for her.

This is particularly important because it might be assumed that self-revelation such as this could only come about through direct therapy. However, I discovered that the indirect processing caused by the therapeutic writing can also bring about this change in thinking, although the limits of this study mean that it is impossible to discover how durable this change is. Anna describes how she can control her emotions now: ‘if I feel down, then I think of ways I can change it’ (A:201). Beth also describes how: ‘It’s like, starts off quite miserable and then as you get to the end... there’s more a happier end and it’s quite – it makes it feel a bit better’ (B:61-62). There is a sense of moving from the negative to the positive and through this ordering of the experience a change occurs, both in the participant’s emotions and also in their perspective.

Alongside this, there is the change that comes about through the acquisition of new skills and the identification of skills of which participants were previously unaware. Claire described: ‘It was quite interesting... learning new stuff, and encouraged to build up to, like, be able to write about your experiences and things that happened to you in your life’ (C:30-31). Anna, when asked if she was surprised by anything she wrote, replied (laughing): ‘All of it’ (A:78). She went on to explain: ‘I thought, like, I would be rubbish at this... absolutely, like... just, I couldn’t do it... But once I got into the swing of it, it’s just kind of like – it... flows?’ (A:80-83) She later explained: ‘I’ve never done this, this kind of thing before... So it was like a big step for me’ (A:171-173). Deborah, like Anna, described how she had been nervous at the start but continued: ‘Y’know, with time, I think you discover... I, I definitely did – you’re not that bad in writing actually, that it’s getting better and... It’s getting easier with time... Um, and it can be good fun’ (D:129-135).

Three quarters of the participants claimed they found the experience fun. Both Beth (B:35) and Deborah (D:311) said the therapeutic writing ‘was fun’ and Anna described how sometimes somebody would ‘say something funny in the group’ and she would ‘get cheered up’ (A:191-192). It was clear from the attitudes displayed in the interviews that the participants did not find the group onerous; on the contrary, they apparently looked forward to it. They also showed up week after week, which suggested they enjoyed it.

The fact that the writing had an altruistic purpose appeared important to most of the group. Although not the original plan, we ended up creating a poetry anthology for the charity filled with the participants’ poetry, as it was felt that the work of the group was too impressive to go unseen. This was referred to by the participants in their interviews. Although the participants did not necessarily want to share their poetry with

anybody, they felt that writing the anthology might help others in a similar situation so they were enthusiastic as long as anonymity could be maintained. Anna said: 'I would prefer it if some people could read it... Because... obviously it might help them in the way that it's helped me' (A:349-351). Claire concurred saying: 'if they're in, people's in the same predicament as yourself, I would say you could share' (C:157-158).

Deborah described how, after a poem is written: 'it kind of belongs to other people once you've written down that and let it go' (D:364). Deborah felt that the group 'definitely wanted – to pass something to other people' (D:446-447) in order 'to help them' (D:464). Knowing their writing could help others encouraged the participants. They moved from being recipients of charity to being able to take part in giving charity themselves; an important transition both in terms of self-worth and in terms of the view they had of their power. One participant even gave a copy of the anthology to her child who had been adopted, partly to demonstrate a personal achievement to her child, and partly to share her story through her writing.

The fact that participants were considering their writing in terms of their readership shows that therapeutic writing is not concerned purely with self-expression. The participants in the therapeutic writing group, having decided to share their poetry, were concerned about how the writing would affect others. Similarly, when describing my experience of therapeutic poetry writing in the first chapter<sup>18</sup>, I described how I would sometimes show my poetry to others and was very concerned about what they thought about it and how they understood me, after reading my writing.

Therapeutic poetry writing also encourages reflection around the past and relabelling of difficult memories. Deborah describes this process very well whilst discussing how one of the writing exercises helped her to reflect on her past:

I didn't think about my parents for a long time because my dad died a long time ago... And, and my parents were kind of, they were always – so I remember as a teenager they were always fighting? But with that exercise, what I actually thought – well, like, ten or twenty years passed... I don't think about them as fighting anymore, I can kind of bring these memories of them enjoying themselves so these memories change and you kind of discover that...doing that exercise...So, um, yeah, so I would say definitely helped, because it, it helps to look at that, um, not from the point of view that you looked at that before, but from the point of view that you've, you've got now ...as a different adult person (D:208-221)

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<sup>18</sup> 1.4, p.73

Deborah's reflection on the past enabled her to gain a new perspective as an adult. She describes something similar in another exercise:

I've got, y'know, some really bad memories... when you are like a teenager and you don't know sort of worth of yourself and I didn't like myself anyway and it was horrible and then when you look at that back... and I didn't think about it for a long time really and you kind of can see that it's not, it's not bad, really, from your perspective now (D:228-233)

Through the reflection that arose from the therapeutic writing, Deborah realised her feelings about being a teenager were not necessarily accurate, which she found helpful. Anna too, prompted by the therapeutic writing, reflected on her past: 'I've been with my mum, for like, a long time... and... she did kind of keep me safe – but – not safe, if you know what I mean?' (A:71-72) Again, the identification of these ambiguous feelings around her mother's ability to keep Anna safe helped her to understand her past and move forward.

As well as reflecting on the past, some of the participants found a measure of relief through releasing difficult memories. Beth described it as 'letting...personal stuff out' (B:41) and viewed it as a positive experience. Deborah explains:

when you kind of think about bad emotions and about bad experiences, you kind of want to hide from them? You don't want to talk about them.... And you don't want - it's quite a natural thing to get away, you know?.. To have just a nice time and forget about them... And, and, and then you've got to write about it.... And, and in the end, I think it, it was kind of a relief, that you, that you are able actually to do it...Um, and that it, it wasn't so bad at all (D:167-188)

Deborah considers how difficult emotions and memories are denied or buried, but when the participant chooses to write about them, she finds relief in identifying the memories and talking about the feelings which emerge.

Some of the participants felt that therapeutic writing encouraged thinking and reflection in general. Anna commented: 'It's made me think' (A:9) and went on to explain, using one of the exercises as an illustration: 'Take the one about my hands, it's like – I never really looked at my hands before, but ... you never really look at something until somebody points it out, especially on yourself' (A:41-43). Deborah too, found value in having time to reflect as she says: 'it shows you things from a different perspective' (D:57). She points out: 'It helps definitely just to stop and take time and think about things that you don't actually think during the day normally... Because you

don't have time' (D:48-51). For Deborah, this slowing down process was very helpful: 'It definitely works... I'm running really from morning 'til night-time... And when you actually stop it kind of like, calms you down... It really does.... And when you go, you just feel much more relaxed' (D:59-65). When Deborah was asked whether she would be prepared to do therapeutic writing again, she replied:

Yeah, definitely I would, I would. I would, you know, with all my heart, I would, er, do it again, and just simply because, as I said, it helps you to think about things that you don't normally think about.... It helps you reflect, it, it calms you down. Definitely it's very relaxing... Um, and it helps understand that from time to time we just need to stop and, and do something – er - reflective (D:78-84)

Deborah describes the effect of therapeutic writing as being 'relaxing' which is interesting, considering it is dealing with difficult memories and emotions. However, it is clear that time to think and process is very important and with an activity like therapeutic writing, it is automatically built into the day. It would be interesting to consider how many other forms of therapy might be described as relaxing; probably not many.

Participants also believed therapeutic writing engaged their imaginations. Beth described how it 'gets you quite creative' (B:25) and Anna said: 'it brings... out the imagination?' (A:11). Anna expanded on this, relating an exercise when she had to imagine herself as an animal: 'I chose a dolphin. The reason why is because it's free? ... Nobody, nobody tells it what to do and – they're so intelligent as well' (A:15-17). Anna's choice of a dolphin enabled her to identify her feelings around her desire for freedom. Later, she talked about how she found this also helped her to meditate: 'the dolphin helps me a lot... when I'm like, lying on my own... or like, if I'm meditating, I use a dolphin?' (A:61-66). Again, Anna used a therapeutic writing activity, and gained further therapeutic value from it, by building on the skills that it gave her.

Finally, some participants simply found being part of the group helpful. For one participant in particular, Claire, whose learning difficulties were quite pronounced and who struggled with comprehension of the exercises, the activities themselves were not as important to her as belonging to the group. When asked if she would ever want to do therapeutic writing on her own, she explains: 'I think it would be better, like, if, um, as doing it in a group, not as like, doing it on your own, coz I think it would be more like, painful, if you were, like, writing, and doing it, like, on your own' (C:66-68). When asked who she was writing for, she replied: 'It was, like, for the whole, like, like

members of the group, like, coz to share, like, experiences, coz we, like, all have been, been through the same sort of experience of what it was like, as I would say, as a group thing' (C:73-75).

Claire said she felt 'a bit better' (C:88) after sessions and explained 'Because it was, like, mixed in a group, and you aren't sorta, like, sitting there sorta on your own, doing it, it was, like, with other people there' (C:90-91). Deborah also spoke of the importance of a 'supportive environment' when sharing emotions 'through writing or poetry'. She felt that writing made it 'easier' to disclose difficult emotions (D:116-117). Being in a supportive environment such as a group for the participants meant there were others with whom they could share their experiences and emotions.

*Table 2: Summary of Additional Findings*

<b>Other Important Points about Therapeutic Poetry Writing identified by participants</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although participants generally felt better after sessions, sometimes feelings were mixed <b>(100%)</b></li> <li>• Truth is more important than style in therapeutic writing<sup>19</sup> <b>(100%)</b></li> <li>• A variety of exercises is useful, rather than spending time on one longer exercise <b>(100%)</b></li> <li>• Different opinions existed around how the finished piece of writing could be described <b>(100%)</b></li> <li>• Using poetry in therapeutic writing has benefits over using other modes of writing <b>(75%)</b></li> <li>• Anonymity must be maintained <b>(75%)</b></li> <li>• Nervousness may exist at the beginning <b>(75%)</b></li> <li>• Sensitivity of facilitator is very important <b>(50%)</b></li> <li>• A choice of what to write about is important <b>(50%)</b></li> <li>• Some participants obtained most benefit from merely being part of a group and would not want to do therapeutic writing alone <b>(25-50%)</b></li> </ul>

<sup>19</sup> I was attempting to differentiate between self-expression and artistic endeavour for the service users and 'truth and style' with a short explanation of what I meant by each was the clearest way I could define the difference for them.

Having identified benefits of therapeutic poetry writing, other important information emerged from the interviews which could help those wishing to run similar groups. For example, all participants generally felt better after the sessions, but feelings could be mixed. Anna said 'I felt better' (A:186) and Claire said she felt 'a bit better' (C:88) but Beth, when asked if she felt better or worse following the sessions said it was a 'bit of both. Depends on how it went' (B:87). When asked why she thought that was, she explained it was because of 'letting stuff out, and it, like, plays on your emotions' (B:89). Beth identified ambiguous feelings about revealing difficult memories.

Deborah, although saying she felt better afterwards, described it as a 'very special way of feeling better'. She explained: 'I felt a bit, like, able to do things slower... Take time... And don't get, I don't know, panicky, about getting to place straightaway after, y'know and running from place - here to there - um, so, just feeling more reflective, I would say... In that kind of way, better' (D:280-290). This highlights the fact that therapeutic poetry writing is not a panacea to all ills. Whilst generally helping to improve mood, some participants may not feel better straightaway, and some may find it quite difficult at the time, as Beth did.

Crucially, when asked about the importance of truth and style in therapeutic writing, almost all participants felt truth was more important than style (that is to say, self-expression is more important than artistic endeavour: see previous page). Claire believed both style and truth were important (C:137) but Deborah said: 'I don't think we – like I definitely didn't expect, um, to write professional poems' (D:444). She said that having studied literature, she knows style is important, but added: 'I think it's, it's different with therapeutic writing... I think that the... honesty and meaning are more important' (D:417-419).

Anna agreed. Through concentrating on truth, she believed her heartfelt emotion would spill through into her writing, saying: 'if I was a writer, I would write truth... rather than fiction, because... I think fiction should just stay in films... Whereas truth... you could – put more emotion in it?' (A:316-320). She felt it was important to stay true to her experiences when writing. Anna distinguishes between truth and fiction here, and perhaps the use of the word truth in my interview was a little misleading as self-expression can be fictional, but in this particular group, the service users found it most helpful to write about their personal experiences.

Beth believed both truth and style were important saying: 'Truth as well as making it interesting... coz sometimes it can be boring if it's not a little bit interesting' (B:144-146). However, Beth added a fascinating comment: 'You don't really need a



polished piece. Because it spoils the poem at the end coz it's changing what you wrote!' (B:162-163). Beth felt there was a danger of affecting the authenticity if the writing was tidied up too much stylistically.

All participants agreed on the importance of spending time on a variety of exercises, rather than one long exercise. This proceeded from the discussion about truth and style; in the interview I pointed out that working on one longer exercise would give more time to edit and redraft the poem. Anna felt that doing a variety of exercises was better because otherwise 'people'd lose interest' (A:342) and Beth said it was 'More fun doing the two' (B:158). Claire thought a variety of exercises was best (C:150) and Deborah replied with characteristic analytical skill when asked whether just one exercise would be better:

No. Definitely not. Because it's, it, it wasn't a writing, er, lesson... It wasn't a writing class and, and we didn't expect that. Um, and I think those, er, like initial exercises... it was really helpful to prepare for the next part... And, and some, some of the exercises were quite – not difficult, but they... could bring some emotions, very difficult emotions... And going through them again... er, I think would be really, really difficult... Really hard (D:424-438)

Deborah highlighted two important points; firstly, that the expectation was not attendance at a writing class and so stylistic improvement was not expected, and secondly, that because some of the exercises were emotionally challenging, it would be difficult for participants to go over them repeatedly.

As researcher, I found it interesting that there were different ideas about how they described their finished piece of writing; I gave the participants four options. These were:

- A) Poems
- B) Pieces of writing waiting to be turned into poems
- C) My thoughts written down on paper and
- D) Something else – if so, what?

Anna chose B, seeing her writing as pieces of writing waiting to be turned into poems (A:211). When asked why, she explained: 'It's basic truth... Which I've written down' (A:217-219). When asked what took it beyond being her thoughts written down on paper, she neatly explained: 'it's feelings as well' (A:224). Beth selected both A and C, saying 'Um, coz it is a poem, but it's also... letting out your thoughts at the same time?' (B:110-111). Claire also selected C, saying 'I would say it was more like a... sort of

like a life story sort of thing' (C:109). Meanwhile Deborah selected A quite decisively saying her pieces of writing 'look and feel like poems' (D:341). This variety among their answers suggested that therapeutic benefits could be derived from writing at various different points in the writing process, no matter whether the service user saw their writing as their thoughts written down, or a fully-formed poem. From the point of view of facilitator and researcher, this was fascinating.

Seeing how participants responded to the suggestion of using other types of writing, such as diaries or letters, instead of poetry in the sessions, was particularly interesting for me. Having not experimented with those modes, I was surprised by the vehemence of the answers. Three out of four participants felt very strongly that poetry-writing would be most helpful to them. Anna explained she had never found diaries useful:

Researcher: *In most of these sessions, we've been working on poems and not things so much like stories, or diary entries, or letters. Do you think that is a good thing, or would you have preferred to try out other sorts of writing in this time?*

Anna: To be honest, I think it's a good thing... Because obviously diary entries... yeah, you put down... your thoughts, but if you're having, like, a really bad day... and you put that down in writing, then you've got something to look back on, and then you think, Oh well I was having a bad day then, and you see why, and it brings the emotions back again?... Rather than if you... write down something and put, like, a happy thought next to it, the happy thought's more stronger?

Researcher: *Yeah – so... you're sort of crafting, and like, turning a bad experience into something – like – meaningful?*

Anna: Mmhmm ... See, diaries... er... are like the worst thing – like – you could basically do - in my opinion anyway – It's like – if you write down something bad... it's gonna continue for the rest of the week?... Well, what is the point, say, if you look back and it's the same thing over and over again? I felt sad, I felt sad, I felt sad..... Whereas the writing – you could change it! (A: 268-293)

Anna's reservations around diary writing due to the factual, repetitive nature of the form are clearly demonstrated. Poetry, however, encourages the use of metaphors and symbols. Anna implied that poetry-writing meant she was not tied to the facts of her experience, but could write about anything she wanted, empowering her to rise above her experiences and to craft her emotions positively.

Beth, more prosaically, explained: 'I'm no good at diaries, I've tried them myself, I just can't keep up with them. So, yes, poems are good' (B:132-133). The

brevity of poems recommended them to Beth; she compared them to short stories from that point of view (B:135). Deborah also had reservations about using diaries, because writing a diary felt so personal, saying:

I was never good in like, diaries or letters and stuff, because they are... very personal things... written for yourself... mostly, and I think when, when you think about poems... it's the kind of thing that you can, at some point you can distance yourself from, because you give it to other people... basically. With, I mean, with letter, yes you give it to other person, but it's still your very personal thing from you to that particular person or other people... When with poem, er, it kind of belongs to other people once you've written down that and let it go (D:352-364)

This was a very interesting perception; that poems were written more for 'other people' than diaries were. Deborah also felt that poems were good because of their length. When comparing diaries to poems, she said, speaking first of diaries:

If, if I write, like, two pages of things, that's it, I am exhausted... I can't, I just cannot do it more, I am starting, y'know, making cup of coffee, teas, tidying up, and all sorts, and poem can be very short... you can do it in few minutes... Or you can spend hours and you know, return to it, and change it, and play with that (D:374-381)

Poetry was considered superior to other types of writing, being both shorter, and less personal. Moreover, some participants felt you could mould poetry to encourage yourself, whereas it was harder to do this with a diary.

The participants had other important concerns. One of these was their anonymity and the need to maintain it. 75% of those interviewed (and all the service users) cited this as significant. Beth summed up their feelings, remarking: 'Because you don't know who could pick up and read it, who might know you... and then start judging you about it later' (B:176-178).

Another point made by 75% was that in a therapeutic writing group like this, the facilitator needs to be aware of participants' initial nervousness. Beth explained: 'You're not sure what's what at the beginning... just – not knowing what's going on' (B:29-31). Claire mentioned that she struggled with an exercise in the first session, her implication being she was neither comfortable nor fully clear about how the sessions would work at that point (C:27). Deborah had an additional worry, explaining: 'I kind of struggled with words obviously – it's my second language so... so at the beginning I was nervous about that but... they [the exercises] were all brill!' (D:24-29). As the

facilitator, I knew I needed to remember how scary an experience therapeutic writing could be initially, particularly for participants who have found literacy problematic previously, and how brave the participants were to be willing to attempt writing, particularly in a form they were not used to using.

Other points were also made about the facilitator. Half the participants mentioned that the facilitator needed to be sensitive. Anna explained: ‘You did take the time to, to think about... like... our emotions, really... So you didn’t ask nothing too... harsh’ (A:33-36). She expanded on this later, saying:

You’re not harsh, like some people can be, y’know, you’re, you’re relaxed, you’re... you’re polite, you’re... outgoing, y’know, you’re, you’re just relaxed, whereas some of them are like, all grumpy... And y’know, I don’t like to say it, but sometimes stuck up?... Thinking that they’re, they’re better than anybody else if you know what I mean? (A:116-121)

The fact that I was willing to take part in the poetry exercises may have influenced Anna’s view that I was not ‘stuck up’ and I felt this was definitely appropriate considering the kind of group I wished to facilitate.

Having had difficult experiences with professionals in the past, it was important that the participants believed they would be listened to. Deborah said: ‘The way you kind of adjusted to everyone in the group... was great – um – and I think if that was done too professionally, if you want, too much like a classroom... People wouldn’t want to attend – and I, I, I wouldn’t... and it was done in a very kind of, er, like, personal way, if you want?’ (D:477-485) She added: ‘The excellent thing was... when we read them and in the end you kind of always had a few words about each poem... about each person and we could, we always had opportunity to add something on.... and, and it’s just very helpful because it’s so difficult to talk about our emotions’ (D:105-110). This would need to be borne in mind for future groups; the need to have a facilitator who was able to communicate well. Talking a little about each poem the participant read meant that a discussion could develop around the emotions mentioned.

Having a choice about what to write about was important for both Anna and Deborah. Anna explained: ‘If, say, somebody told me to write about... my youngest child, well I couldn’t do that... it did say write about like some things that you found hard but you still had that choice... it’s like, you weren’t ... targeting us, on, like, a certain subject’ (A:98-105). The fact that Anna had a choice about what to write gave her a certain amount of power in a world which had often left her feeling powerless. As

a professional, Deborah pointed out: ‘And I think definitely, when, when you think about people involved in such difficult experiences... like in our group, it’s just so different – the, the approach to their – um, emotions, to their experiences, it’s like completely different to other interventions’ (D:513-518). The aspect of choice seems to me to be vital for the success of a therapeutic writing group. If a group feels under duress to write about something, there will likely be some rebellion, either conscious or unconscious.

Some of the participants felt unable to continue therapeutic writing alone. Deborah (D:345) and Anna believed they could definitely do therapeutic writing alone; Anna even noted some advantages to writing on her own:

I would pick up a pen and paper, and do it... solitary - because then you could put a lot more into it, if you know what I mean?... when you’re in a group, you can’t – you can’t... open up as much? You’ve gotta try and keep... it limited?... Because you don’t want to upset other people in the group?... So, therefore, like, when you’re on your own, you could just basically write down anything you want (A:237-246)

Claire, however, didn’t feel she could write outside the group (C:110-116) and Beth said she would find it harder working alone: ‘I can do it on my own.... but it is better in a group... coz when you’re doing it by yourself, it’s like, really hard to do... Quite challenging’ (B:117-125). Therefore, only 50% of the group really felt capable of carrying on with therapeutic writing alone. Having said that, half of the group (or more accurately, a third, as Deborah, the project worker, did not struggle with literacy as the other members did, even though English was her second language) with a very low level of literacy may be considered quite a triumph, particularly if that number increases based on literacy levels.

Finally, it seems important to note that I have received many positive comments about therapeutic writing. Anna enthusiastically told me: ‘There’s no possible way it can be made better!... You’ve done a really, really good job!... and I really, really do hope you come back!’ (A:363-370). Deborah too said: ‘I think it’s absolutely fabulous. It’s fantastic’ (D:34). She said that she would do it again ‘with all my heart’ (D:78) and that ‘You didn’t ask if I would want you to do it again!... So, yeah, do it again!’ (D:493-497). The charity has invited me back to do more therapeutic writing, so it is clear that one charity at least believes in the benefits of therapeutic poetry writing.

## 2.10 Conclusions

I asked initially how and why poetry writing as therapy was effective. First addressing how it is effective, all participants indicated that it helps to process emotions. It also provides relief through the release of difficult memories, enables reflection around the past, assists in relabeling difficult memories, encourages thinking and reflection, and helps to engage the imagination. This matches my original reading. The expression of feelings, and the sense of control established by the emotions being in a manageable form, leading to positive change, was noted by Philips, Linington and Penman (16) and Lowe (19).

As for why therapeutic poetry writing is effective, the processing of emotions along with reflecting and thinking certainly helps to facilitate change. There is also the awareness of the new skills that have been acquired, and previously unidentified skills coming to light, improving self-esteem. Additionally, the participants found writing fun and entertaining. It was very different to anything else they were doing, so it had a certain novelty. The improvement of self-esteem had been remarked on by Philips, Linington and Penman (13), but the fact that the participants found writing both entertaining and enjoyable surprised me.

Additionally, some participants found group work encouraging and empowering. Judith Herman explains: 'Groups provide the possibility not only of mutually rewarding relationships but also of collective empowerment. Group members approach one another as peers and equals. Though each is suffering and in need of help, each also has something to contribute' (216). This research study has illustrated this very clearly to me, making me more prepared to work with groups in future.

The fact that the writing had an altruistic purpose was also beneficial for the participants. Herman describes how actions such as putting together an anthology for others: 'offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy and resourcefulness... It brings out the best in her; in return, the survivor gains the sense of connection with the best in other people' (207-208). I had not considered this benefit when beginning the project. Additionally, this suggests that therapeutic benefits are not only found in self-expression, but in other elements of writing too, such as sharing the writing with others.

The benefits identified are not limited to emotional health. One of Pennebaker's studies identified the fact that inhibition of emotions and memories increases the probability of psychosomatic disease, particularly actively avoiding thoughts and

feelings surrounding a trauma or not discussing a trauma. Speaking or writing about these difficult emotions and memories provided relief (Pennebaker and Susman 327-332) and this is borne out by my research.

Cognitive function is another area that may benefit, as thinking and reflection, and also ordering, is required when writing. Constantine writes: 'Poetry, extraordinarily various in its ways with words, expects – encourages, trains into being – a matching agility in the reader's mind... And these effects, which may perhaps be empirically tested and observed, are also suggestive of, and might even be the makers of, a more lasting attitude of mind' (65). Additionally, while therapeutic poetry writing is certainly helpful for those who have suffered trauma, the benefits associated with it mean it will also be helpful for those without such acute emotional struggles.

I also wished to consider whether poetry was more useful than other therapeutic writing forms. Although the participants did not experience other forms of writing in our group, it was interesting to listen to their perceptions of such forms. The majority of participants were much more positive about poetry than other sorts of writing. Diaries and letters remained personal, but poetry could be distanced from the purely personal. Most participants had very difficult daily lives, and poetry enabled them to craft their experiences to encourage themselves, which they felt unable to do when writing diaries, which were considered factual.

Poetry was also considered more beneficial than other therapeutic writing forms because poems could be short and completed in one session. I had previously explored many ways in which poetry was considered a particularly useful form of therapeutic writing, so it was interesting to me that the two reasons for its usefulness highlighted by the participants were its condensed form, which had been remarked on by Csikszentmihalyi (130) and its creative versatility, which I had not explored deeply during my preliminary survey.

I am very interested in any contrasts between poetry as therapy and poetry as art, and to what extent such a distinction can be made. In the group I facilitated, the emphasis was on poetry as therapy. However, when asking how participants viewed their writing, and whether they would prefer to make the writing more polished, it became clear that writing down the truth of their experiences was much more important to them than style. They did not see themselves as attending a writing class, but somewhere they could examine their thoughts and feelings through writing. Being honest and creating meaning from their experiences was more important to them than writing polished poetry. They were concerned that if the poem was too polished, the

authenticity of the experience would be lost. Having said this, although self-expression was their priority, this did not mean that artistic endeavour was not a concern at all, but rather that it was subordinate to their main priority of self-expression.

Additionally, the participants knew the limits of their attention spans, and felt it was more helpful to carry out a number of different activities rather than just concentrating on one. I believe they were right in this evaluation, which emphasises to me the level of self-awareness the participants had.

The participants also felt they were not attending the therapeutic writing group in order to improve their poetry writing but rather to express and share their emotions. Herman (1977) claims that when dealing with traumatic events: 'The recitation of facts without the accompanying emotions is a sterile exercise, without therapeutic effect... the patient must reconstruct not only what happened but also what she felt'. The participants were therefore correct in believing that the best way of spending their time was in writing about their experiences and feelings, rather than seeking to improve their writing; again, a testament to their self-awareness and the insight they possessed.

One final question to consider was the practical application of my findings for those wishing to facilitate therapeutic poetry writing. Philips, Linington and Penman make some useful suggestions in *Writing Well: Creative Writing and Mental Health* and their suggestions are supported by my findings. The facilitator needs to be aware of many things, for example, the fact that participants may find some exercises difficult, and have mixed feelings afterwards. Personally, I was grateful to be working alongside a project worker at the charity, and to know the participants also had access to a counsellor. Louise DeSalvo writes: 'Writing can help us heal only if we ensure we're safe while we write' (161). When working with participants with complex issues and needs, therapeutic writing needs to take place in a supportive environment. If not, the participant could end up feeling more isolated.

The facilitator needs to be sensitive in their approach. The participants I worked with had experienced difficult relationships with professionals, and I needed to demonstrate I would not use any power I had against them. This was achieved by getting to know them beforehand and explaining clearly what was involved. It was also attained by friendliness and sensitivity when the writing started. Philips, Linington and Penman write: 'Sympathy and empathy are vital to any facilitator of a creative writing group' (22) and I tried to ensure all participants felt comfortable and safe with me. I emphasised that we were looking to encourage each other, so that the environment would also feel safe.



I took part in the exercises; this may not always be appropriate, but the project worker and I thought we should take part to demonstrate that we were not asking participants to do anything we were not prepared to do ourselves. Having said this, I was aware that writing can be self-revelatory and so, as Philips, Linington and Penman advise, I tried ‘to choose an option... not too close to a painful or difficult memory’ and in my writing I avoided any situations that ‘could be construed as unprofessional’ (24). Philips, Linington and Penman also advise caution if the facilitator is more practised in writing, as I was, so I ensured that the vocabulary and the way I wrote was accessible to all participants.

The participants indicated that taking part in writing exercises was very much outside their comfort zone, and the facilitator needed to be aware of this. Philips, Linington and Penman write: ‘For many people, the act of writing is in itself an intimidating task to take on, and can all too often be associated with bad memories of... school’ (24). The participants described how nervous they were in the first session, needing encouragement and reassurance. While I understood this theoretically, I don’t think I can ever fully appreciate how much courage it takes for somebody who struggles with writing to dare to commit their thoughts and feelings to paper.

The facilitator should also be aware when running a group that some group participants found attending and belonging to the group more significant than the writing exercises. Therefore time spent having a break in the middle was not time wasted, but rather was very valuable.

Another practical application is the need to maintain anonymity. The participants were happy sharing their writing with each other, as they had all been through similar experiences. However, we discussed how they wanted their names to appear in the anthology, and it was agreed that only first names would be added to their work. They were concerned that if they were identified, people who had not been through their experiences could judge them.

One final vital application involved the choice of what to write about. Philips, Linington and Penman write:

Exercises should... be carefully structured to ensure that they do not immediately demand revelations – there should always be an escape clause which enables people to hide behind their defences. The most successful work we found to emerge was from work that came at important feelings from an oblique angle, and which did not present itself as particularly revelatory (26)

I always tried to make sure that the exercises I provided opened up the possibility of writing very deeply, but also the choice to not write deeply. The participants liked the element of choice and would have reacted badly if I had insisted they wrote about a certain event in their lives. The exercise ‘Lost and Found’<sup>20</sup> is an example of not overtly seeking personal revelation. The participants were asked to write about things they felt they had lost and found in life. This offered many possibilities; they could write about anything from a lost pen to lost innocence. As this was the first session, I was surprised that the participants were willing to explore their deeper losses, but offering them a choice meant that this was not demanded.

Summarising my main findings in regards to therapeutic poetry writing, at this stage: I hugely enjoyed facilitating the group, feeling as if I provided a useful therapeutic service for the participants. This was borne out by the interviews. My small-scale study demonstrates that poetry writing as therapy is clearly effective, especially when exploring, expressing and processing emotions, which is often much harder to do through speaking. The use of metaphor provides a way into talking about difficult experiences, and poetry provides an ideal vehicle for therapeutic work because of the easy combination in a poem of both experiences and emotions. Finally, for those who wish to use poetry writing as therapy, it is self-expression that is considered the priority for participants; crafting the poem is less important and may even be seen as making the poem less authentic.

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix D (part two)

## **Chapter Three: An Analysis of Poets Writing Therapeutically**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will investigate the difference between professional poets who find a therapeutic element in the writing process, and those unaccustomed to creative writing who turn to poetry as a therapeutic activity. I wish to understand how professional poets view therapeutic poetry writing, and the difference they perceive between writing poetry as therapy and writing poetry as art. I also want to understand directly from poets what they find therapeutically beneficial in particular about poetry-writing.

I will begin by considering two professional poets who found writing poetry had a therapeutic effect for them; Stevie Smith (1902-1971) and Julia Darling (1956-2005). Both poets made use of personal experiences in their writing and found writing beneficial emotionally. However, they wrote in different times, in different parts of England and had different difficulties with which to contend. Darling was diagnosed with breast cancer, which much of her poetry explores. In 2005, she wrote: 'I have advanced breast cancer, and poetry is what keeps me afloat' (Fuller and Darling 11). Smith also found poetry writing helpful, through ill-health, unhappiness and a profound fascination with death. She wrote: 'The human creature is alone in his carapace. Poetry is a strong way out' (*Me Again* 126).

Smith and Darling are female poets; as this is a relatively small piece of research, I am concentrating on women's views. In chapter two, I explained how my epistemology is broadly that of feminism, with some elements of trauma theory. Women's views are of particular interest to me, as a woman, and I am aware that historically the views of women have been seen as less significant than those of men; this study goes some small way towards correcting the imbalance. Concentrating on poetry written by women when exploring therapeutic writing opens some avenues of exploration while closing others; I wanted to acknowledge that I was aware of this and my reasons for choosing this particular focus.

### **3.2 Examining the Poetry of Stevie Smith**

Stevie Smith was born Florence Margaret Smith in Kingston upon Hull in 1902. Both Smith and her older sister were seriously ill throughout early childhood and their mother was ill herself (Couzyn 33), dying when Smith was only seventeen. Her father was

absent from Smith's life; weary of marriage, he abandoned his family for a sailor's life (Sternlight 4). Aged five, Smith contracted tubercular peritonitis and was sent to a children's convalescent home at Broadstairs, later observing: "of course I was a fearful handicap, almost a dead loss. I mean, when I was five, I had to go away to hospital for three years" (Dick 66).

Although the institution was not cruel, Smith understandably took the separation from her mother very badly. Frances Spalding comments: 'the pain of seeing her mother turn to wave goodbye was on one occasion so great that the doctors feared for her chances of recovery and forbade further visits' (16). The young Smith perseverated over her mother's poor health:

Towards the end of her stay this anxiety, combined with the misery of homesickness, became intolerable... Helpless in the grip of an institution and its relentless routine, subject to the whims of others, the eight-year-old child contemplated suicide. Only when her existence seemed most at the mercy of external forces, did she paradoxically take hold of her life through the realization that the ability to end it lay in her control: this sovereign power was hers... the potential to kill evidences the power to live... she retained this richly anarchic realization that death lay within her control, an idea which was to inspire some of her best poems (17)

All her life, Smith remained obsessed with death. Couzyn comments: 'Smith loved life, but she loved death almost more, and spent most of her life in an intricate dance with him' (39). Her mother's death in Smith's teenage years had a profound effect on her. Spalding records: 'In 1969, thirty-three years after the publication of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Stevie, in a television interview, broke down and was unable to answer when asked if she had been present at her mother's death' (32). Additionally, Smith blamed herself for her father's departure, saying: "poor Daddy took one look at me and rushed away to sea" (Dick 65). In her poem 'Papa Love Baby' (*Collected Poems* 16), she writes:

I sat upright in my baby carriage  
And wished mama hadn't made such a foolish marriage.  
I tried to hide it, but it showed in my eyes unfortunately  
And a fortnight later papa ran away to sea.

These lines typify Smith's poetry; the exploration of deep emotions and bitter experiences through singsong, apparently whimsical lines. In less skilful hands, the poem would be doggerel: Smith's control of tone is such that she can confidently flirt

with disaster. The closeness to doggerel has the dual effect of disarming the reader and delivering a delayed shock at what is actually being said.

Outwardly, Smith led an unremarkable life, living with her aunt in the same house in London in which she had been brought up. Spalding comments: 'It surprised her friends that, living with her aunt in Palmers Green, Stevie Smith could find material for poetry in such restricted circumstances' (1). Smith also suffered all her life from a feeling of tiredness (Couzyn 34) which limited her activities further. However, her imagination was alert and resourceful. Couzyn writes:

Her life was fired by a lively tension between opposites, the priorities of her dangerous internal and safe external landscapes. ... Fear is a recurring theme in her poems, but rather than having the effect of paralysis, it rises through them as a source of power and energy, a kind of mad sanity... She felt great contempt for fear, as courageous people often do (34-35).

Smith unflinchingly explores the pain of the inner life. Richard Church comments: 'In almost every phrase she utters, not excepting the many witty and hilarious ones, her purpose is to explore the cavities of pain and to find a way out of their horror and darkness' (Spalding xvii - xviii). Church explains how Smith's words act like a lantern, allowing her both to explore and escape from her misery.

Spalding also speaks of Smith's 'refusal to turn aside from pain' (xvii), which Spalding feels aligns her with the feminist cause, citing Adrienne Rich, who argues: 'only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experiences can enable women to create a collective description of the world which can be truly ours' (16). In her unpublished poem 'Miss Snooks, poetess' (*Me Again* 226), Smith describes a woman who 'never wrote a poem/ that was not really awfully nice/ and fitted to a woman'. By satirizing 'Miss Snooks', Smith suggests that her own poetry may not be 'awfully nice' and thus not 'fitted to a woman'; she will explore her pain honestly and openly.

Smith died of a brain tumour in 1971 at the age of 68, having written hundreds of poems<sup>21</sup> and three novels. Sanford Sternlight describes how Smith was acclaimed twice in her lifetime, first as a young 1930s novelist writing in stream-of-consciousness fashion 'and over twenty years later as the laconic, piquant, fiercely honest poet of the 1960s... The youth of the sixties made her a cult figure' (3). He suggests the reason for this later interest in her poetry: New Criticism, which considered the text as self-sufficient without reference to external factors, was losing ground as a literary theory.

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<sup>21</sup> There are over 450 poems in her *Collected Poems*

Poems were being 'returned to the author', which he believed 'was the best possible turn of critical events for Stevie' (17).

For reasons of space I will discuss a single Smith poem in detail. This poem is 'To Carry The Child', first published in 1966 (*Collected Poems* 436-437). I chose to look at this poem as Smith wrote it towards the end of her life and as such it deals with themes that emerge in many other poems, for example, the conflict between the viewpoint of children and adults, the internal struggle within the mind, and the question of expressing or concealing strong emotion. Smith's work also seemed to grow more assured as she grew older and I feel this is an excellent example of her stronger work. I also noted that the poem, if considered in the light of trauma theory, is fascinating as it seems to describe a dissociative experience:

### *To Carry The Child*

To carry the child into adult life  
Is good? I say it is not,  
To carry the child into adult life  
Is to be handicapped.

The child in adult life is defenceless  
And if he is grown-up, knows it,  
And the grown-up looks at the childish part  
And despises it.

The child, too, despises the clever grown-up,  
The man-of-the-world, the frozen,  
For the child has the tears alive on his cheek  
And the man has none of them.

As the child has colours, and the man sees no  
Colours or anything,  
Being easy only in things of the mind,  
The child is easy in feeling.

Easy in feeling, easily excessive  
And in excess powerful,  
For instance, if you do not speak to the child  
He will make trouble.

You would say a man had the upper hand  
Of the child, if a child survive,

I say the child has fingers of strength  
To strangle the man alive.

Oh it is not happy, it is never happy,  
To carry the child into adulthood,  
Let children lie down before full growth  
And die in their infancy  
And be guilty of no man's blood.

But oh the poor child, the poor child, what can he do,  
Trapped in a grown-up carapace,  
But peer outside of his prison room  
With the eye of an anarchist?

Before looking at the text of the poem, it is important to note that the text in itself does not comprise the poem as a whole. Smith's drawings around her poetry added an extra dimension, as did her performances. Douglas Cleverdon commented: "She lived every poem that she spoke – the tone, the timing, the characterisation are all impeccable" (Barbera and McBrien 165). Thus Smith's poems should not be considered on their language alone. Furthermore, Sternlight comments that if we read Smith's poetry in the light of Elaine Showalter's proposed 'double-voiced discourse'<sup>22</sup> in women's writing,

It becomes far less important to try to identify a single, consistent voice (a Stevie Smith) in the poems than to note that the multiple voices of Smith's children, women, and fantasy characters often speak through and are seldom fully at ease with the languages and conventions that make up the discourses of their cultural (and the author's literary) environment... It is the poetic performance not individual poems that must be considered (Sternlight 100-102)

An individual poem can only represent a poet's work in part. Nevertheless, it is a good starting point. 'To Carry The Child' is divided into eight stanzas of four lines each, except for stanza seven, which has five. The poem has a rhythm that recalls the ballad stanza; there are generally four stresses in the first and third lines, and three stresses in the second and fourth. In stanza seven, the rhythm of the fourth line is repeated in the fifth, producing an echo effect, while in the final stanza, the phrase 'the poor child' is repeated, providing a break in the rhythm and a strong emphasis.

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<sup>22</sup> A discourse embodying the social, literary and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant (Showalter)

The singsong rhythm and imprecise rhyming pattern recall a nursery-rhyme; ‘it is not’ is rhymed with ‘handicapped’, and ‘powerful’ with ‘trouble’. This emphasises the lilting rhythm, making the poem sound childlike and naïve. Martin Pumphrey writes: ‘the imaginative license of the nursery rhyme makes possible the division in Smith’s poetry between the stable authoritarian, restrictive world of adults and the linked, fluid worlds of play and fairy land that are inhabited by children... women, poets, and the muse’ (103). The poem is pulled between the child and adult’s viewpoint, acting out the quarrel tonally. Seamus Heaney wrote that Smith’s performances: ‘suggested two kinds of auditory experience: an embarrassed party-piece by a child half-way between tears and giggles, and a deliberate *faux-naïf* rendition by a virtuoso’ (Sternlight 211). The performance that Smith gives recalls a child, perhaps, but a wise child who has seen too much<sup>23</sup>. The material being explored is nightmarish, and the juxtaposition of a rhythm that appears casual with the disturbing images is stark.

Smith’s central argument is that bringing a childlike part of one’s personality into adult life is both dangerous and crippling. The child and adult parts despise each other, and the adult part is nervous of the child part’s presence because the child is ‘defenceless’. While the adult constructs defences and rationalizes hurt away, the child cannot do this. Similarly the child despises the adult for being ‘frozen’, not expressing emotion. Smith draws a sharp contrast between the rational and the emotional life. The child ‘is easy in feeling’ and ‘has colours’, but the adult has no colours and is ‘easy only in things of the mind’. At first glance, Smith appears to suggest that the emotional life is more authentic than the rational, a sense familiar from the Romantic poets, but she also challenges this because the emotional life alone is seen as unstable; the child is considered dangerous.

Despite the fact that Smith was an avid reader, there is little evidence to suggest a particular interest in psychology; her poetic discoveries appear to have come purely from her own experience. The fact that Smith answers her question in the first stanza with ‘I say it is not’ suggests that she has a stake in the argument. Similarly, in the sixth stanza, the poet writes ‘You would say...’ countering the statement with ‘I say’; this has a similar effect, drawing the reader into the poem to stand for a conventionally held opinion.

At this point, Smith stops merely contrasting the two parts and proceeds to explore their power dynamics. The child, with the greater strength of feeling, is ‘in

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<sup>23</sup> During my research into Stevie Smith and her poetry, I listened to ‘The Spoken Word’ recording by the BBC and this informed my writing (British Library Sound Archive)



excess powerful'. Smith identifies the dangers of ignoring the child: if the child is not engaged with, 'He will make trouble'. The adult does not want life interrupted by the child, but the child is determined to interrupt, if ignored. Smith then goes further, arguing one would think the adult more powerful, having 'the upper hand'. She continues 'if a child survive'; from this statement we understand the precarious position in which the child part lives in adulthood.

However, in perhaps the most powerful part of the poem, Smith states: 'I say the child has fingers of strength/ To strangle the man alive'. This statement, with the alliteration of 'strength' and 'to strangle' depicts internal conflict of a terrible kind; a psychological asphyxiation, or a parasite feeding on its host. Although the child and adult are parts of the same person, the child is nevertheless capable of destroying the adult. If the child part controls the adult, this would lead to madness, with no rationality balancing the emotional impulsivity of the child.

As Smith builds to her horrifying conclusion, the two final stanzas reiterate: 'It is not happy, it is never happy,/ To carry the child into adulthood'. The effect of this slightly formal and faintly anachronistic utterance adds to the authority of the speaker. Another startling statement follows; it is better for children to 'die in their infancy/ And be guilty of no man's blood'. Children should die before becoming dangerous: a shocking consequence. Smith implies this is the only possible response, as adult and child cannot co-exist; a child part surviving into adulthood becomes intolerable for both, eventually leading to violence. The alternative is an endless struggle for control, an agonizing coexistence of competing impulses. Smith's tragic account of war in the human psyche involves a terrible and inescapable human conflict. The wisdom of Silenus overshadows the poem; the Greek tragic view that it is best not to be born at all, but failing that, one should seek to die as soon as possible<sup>24</sup>.

This sentiment also echoes Blake's proverb: 'Sooner strangle an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'<sup>25</sup>. Smith's poetry was often compared to Blake's (Sternlight 19) and she said of Blake: 'His are very easy echoes to catch' (43). Mark Storey points out the similarities between Blake's poetry and Smith's; the simple directness, the marginal drawings and the importance of the singing voice (178).

However, perhaps it is Smith's religious preoccupations that align her most closely with Blake. At her memorial service, Father Irvine said in her eulogy: 'she has

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<sup>24</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, ll. 1225 ff. Accessed online in translation (Jebb)

<sup>25</sup> William Blake *Proverbs of Hell* (from 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell' 1790-1793) Accessed online (Academy of American Poets)

much in common with that deeply religious poet, William Blake' (Barbera and McBrien 299). Smith's friend, Jacynth Lawrence, wrote in a review of Smith's *Selected Poems*: 'Stevie Smith is an avowed agnostic. But these are religious poems' (241). Smith wrestled with her faith, and the influence of the King James Bible on her work is obvious. In 'To Carry The Child', echoes of 1 Corinthians 13<sup>26</sup> can be observed as the speaker struggles to 'put aside childish things'.

As the pitch of the poem intensifies, in the final stanza we may perhaps sense where Smith's sympathies lie. She describes: 'the poor child, the poor child.../ Trapped in a grown-up carapace'; the repetition emphasizing her pity and repeated, decisive 'p' sounds highlighting the closing of the trap. The repetition is also an obvious break in the rhythm; a fracture in the poem like a break in the voice. Trapped in adult life, she suggests that all the child can do is plot destruction. The child's and the adult's world do not blend and eventually the child will destroy the adult. The poem demonstrates Smith's experience of life at psychic extremity; her outward life appeared calm and quiet, but the poem illustrates her inward intensity of feeling.

### 3.3 Stevie Smith and Therapeutic Poetry Writing

Smith said of her poems: 'they are written to give ease and relief to me... I want to get something out that is working away at me inside' (Spalding 197-198). Smith found her writing therapeutic, commenting in her poem 'My Muse': 'Why does my Muse only speak when she is unhappy?/ She does not, I only listen when I am unhappy/ When I am happy I live and despise writing' (*A Selection* 157). Smith suggests that although her Muse is constant, Smith only listens when unhappy. She does not write because she is unhappy but rather, because she is unhappy she is able to write. Spalding describes how Smith 'used her poems as a means through which to control, delimit and objectify what she found burdensome' (197). Writing about a difficult situation enabled her to manage the pain 'working away' at her, 'inside'.

A number of critical approaches could be applied to the poem 'To Carry the Child', but considering the level of trauma that Smith experienced, and the manifestation of this trauma in her childish behaviour, suggesting an experience not fully assimilated, I believe that trauma theory provides a useful focus for this poem.

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 11-12 KJV 'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' (The Holy Bible)

Eaglestone describes trauma theory as: ‘a critical-theoretical way of attending to and addressing the representation of human suffering and ‘wounding’, both literal and metaphorical’ (Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone 12). As to the nature of trauma, Caruth defines it thus: ‘The trauma is the confrontation with the event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge... and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time’ (153).

Herman explains:

The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most apparent in the way traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event. The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness... which mental health professionals, searching for a calm, precise language, call “dissociation” (1)

If Smith found what happened in childhood too hard to assimilate (such as being sent away from her mother, or her father’s desertion of the family), unconsciously shutting off her feelings (or dissociating) would allow her to continue functioning.

Smith wrote: ‘I often try to pull myself together, having been well brought up in the stiff-upper-lip school of thought’ (*Me Again* 11); Smith coped with difficult feelings in daily adult life by trying to ignore them. Lee describes how Smith explained: ‘People who ‘manage to keep going’ under pressure or in pain are to be ‘honoured and magnified’, even if the pretence of being ‘jolly and ordinary’ and of ‘feeling at home in the world’ (phrases used during a poetry reading) sometimes break down’ (28). Smith believed she had to pretend to be ‘jolly and ordinary’ even when miserable.

As Smith grew older, those around her noticed that her childishness increased. Sternlight writes: ‘In her late thirties, fortified by her literary success, Stevie became less shy and began to grow slightly eccentric in her behaviour and dress... She began to wear clothes suggestive of a schoolgirl’s, she played mischievous pranks, and sometimes she even spoke baby talk... the attention-seeking and child-costuming increased with time’ (11). Smith’s early trauma likely contributed to her desire to return to the safety and security of pre-trauma childhood. Rees-Jones points out: ‘The childish quality of Smith’s drawings strongly prefigures the development of Smith’s adoption of a child-like attire and the two strategies seem obviously connected’ (*Angels* 72).

Barbera and McBrien refer to Smith’s prose-poem, ‘Surrounded by Children’ (*Me Again* 26-27), set in a London park. A ‘famously ugly old girl’, a caricature of the author, ‘spies a luxurious perambulator and, attracted by the security it offers, tears off

her clothes and climbs into it. In a gesture that is partly prophetic<sup>27</sup> she stabs herself with a hatpin and draws blood....Stevie seems to depict her struggle to climb back into the condition of infancy' (Barbera and McBrien 129-130).

Smith's drawings, dress and behaviour all demonstrate a childlike part of her psyche that could not be ignored. 'To Carry The Child' explores this phenomenon, conveying indications of dissociative experience. The child in the poem is not under the control of the adult, and appears to be dangerous, suggesting the child is the product of a traumatic experience; after all, many people believe they retain a childlike part of themselves in adulthood, without fearing this childlike part could destroy them. However, the child part in the poem appears to be unhappy and trapped. If we infer this child part is carrying trauma, the poem becomes clearer. Nonetheless, the poem's strange power comes partly from the fact that Smith acts as if the reader should already know the significance of the child and adult parts of the self.

In order to comprehend this poem in the light of trauma, the basics of trauma need to be understood. Trauma has already been described as an experience that is not fully assimilated. When traumatic experiences occur in childhood, a child will often resort to dissociation. One author<sup>28</sup> describes dissociation thus:

When faced with overwhelmingly traumatic situations from which there is no physical escape, a child may resort to 'going away' in his or her head... By this dissociative process, thoughts, feelings, memories, and perceptions of the traumatic experiences can be separated off psychologically, allowing the child to function as if no trauma had occurred (ATW viii)

Nancy J. Napier goes on to describe what may happen in adulthood, after a child has dissociated from trauma experienced as a child: 'certain parts of the self are created to hold, encompass, or embody certain aspects of abuse. In time they may become autonomous, to some degree or another, and exert a tremendous influence on daily life' (35). From these descriptions of trauma, dissociation, and the evolution of parts of the self created to hold trauma, we understand why the child part in the poem exerts such a malign force. For an adult, an autonomous child part that forces unwanted 'feeling' onto the adult part is dangerous. If the child part that has experienced trauma is not listened to by the adult part, the child part is likely to 'make trouble'.

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<sup>27</sup> It is also suggestive of the fairy-tale 'Sleeping Beauty' (Grimm Brothers)

<sup>28</sup> No authorial name given

Wallace Stevens writes: 'The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself' (64). Stevens suggests that although the mind is capable of conceiving terrible things, it is also our best defense against them. The poem demonstrates this; Smith deals with the difficulty she experiences because of the lack of resolution between the adult and child parts of her mind, by writing about it. Dramatizing the situation assuages its power. She may not have fully resolved the problem, but she now understands the situation much better. Robert Frost describes how a poem brings a 'clarification of life' providing 'a momentary stay against confusion' (45) and this is precisely what we find in Smith's poem. The 'clarification of life' may indeed constitute most of the therapeutic effect of writing the poem for Smith.

Herman describes how the traumatized person recovers: 'No longer imprisoned in the wordlessness of the trauma, she discovers that there is a language for her experience' (158). Nonetheless, it is worthwhile noting here that while trauma theory can illuminate poetry, its interests are not identical with those that actually create poetry. Both Stevens and Frost's comments above are written to discuss and elucidate the role of poetry, whereas trauma theory, as Caruth defines it, involves 'learning more about the traumatic reaction to violent events and about the means of helping to alleviate suffering' (vii). If the source of the trauma is healed, the poet may not be able to write; an undesirable situation for a poet.

As a manifestation of trauma, the child becomes an unwanted ghost in the psyche. However, another interpretation identifies the child as a muse, a manifestation of Smith's attachment to her art. Barbera and McBrien suggest that childishness was a strategy for Smith to retain a unique view of the world, describing 'To Carry the Child' as 'a poem central to an understanding of Stevie and the perils she risked in her effort to preserve such qualities of childhood as the originality, freshness and directness she deemed essential for a poet. But to carry the child throughout life often entails the perpetuation of attitudes and behaviour that are painful, isolating and paralysing' (129-130). Smith carried a dangerous child-like part of herself as a necessary evil, enabling her to write. Skelton explains: 'the child lives in a world in which he completely participates... it is a more real world than the adult one – more real in being more true to the facts of perception. Here is one reason why poetry so often refers back to childhood' (*Truth* 122).

Kathleen Raine, a near contemporary of Smith, writes: 'My Inspirer has always been very real to me; not the feminine figure of the muse, but as it were the *puer eternus*, the Eternal Child, an unageing presence nearer and more intimate than friend or

lover, and not to be denied, at the price of life itself" (Couzyn 60). A child who is not to be denied sounds very similar to what Smith is writing about, and this could be an alternative interpretation of the poem. Furthermore, the child is an ambiguous figure, just as poetic art is ambiguous and not automatically on the side of reason.

### 3.4 Stevie Smith: Female Poet

As a well-known female poet, Smith was given prominence in a time when prominence for female poets was rare. Despite this, Sternlight writes how Smith

suffered from the arrogance of male privilege; the drudgery of thirty years of secretarial work that drove her to attempt suicide... the dullness of a self-imposed suburban exile... and from a natural diffidence and distancing that she could only throw off when, late in life, she mounted a reader's platform to sing her verse, dressed like a schoolgirl in middie blouse and short skirt (1)

One reason why Smith may have desired the state of childhood so much is due to her perception of its freedom and absence of pressures. Ruth Fainlight explores this theme from the perspective of a female writer:

Art is play – and one characteristic of play is that absolute seriousness and absorption in the present shared by children and artists, and which has nothing to do with necessity, utility, or duty. My condition as a female has made it very hard to retain, to acknowledge, or to nurture, the child-like part of my nature. In our culture... woman is made the custodian and prisoner of the realm of matter, the "grown-up" one who deals with practical quotidian reality, while the metaphysical worlds of fantasy and intellect and spirit... have been seen as the privileged domain of men (Couzyn 130)

While that is not to say that every female writer feels this way, in an early manuscript of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Smith wrote about the problems of marriage as follows:

I work I have my money I live on it it is a little more than his money together ah but there it is we could not really be together at all always he is resenting this and he is very jealous of that he is saying When will you do my mending, but surely that should not be said because it has to be done certainly but in this sort of a marriage the sort of marriage ours must be if it comes to it the mending must be done but it is not to be stipulated the thoughts run through his mind I

must possess you in every way he says I long to possess you altogether  
(Spalding 99-100)

Smith demonstrates the pressures on women to be ‘made the custodian and prisoner of the realm of matter’, although paradoxically a simultaneous prejudice exists stating that women are impractical. The real subject of such contradictory role-enforcement is perhaps the denial of female autonomy, shown brewing in the quotation where the husband wishes to possess the speaker in every way.

Smith wrote ‘To Carry the Child’ in her sixties, and explained: “the man in the poem is meant to have the child in him and to feel the nuisance it can be... but then to see it is a nuisance for the child, too, and that where the two of them exist together, then each has a right to exist, and some value” (Barbera and McBrien 130). The fact that Smith herself describes the poem as a reflection on two beings who both have ‘a right to exist and some value’ could make an interesting case for a further exploration of the poem as a study in the danger of men trying to confine women in childish powerlessness. After all, the character in the poem appears to be male, rather than female<sup>29</sup>.

Smith felt the position of the woman poet to be uncomfortable and isolated; this was highlighted when she reviewed an anthology of female poets, writing: ‘it is awkward, very awkward indeed... Lady Stocks in her foreword speaks of “... women who are often plagued by this itch to write poetry” and advises them “to take heart and prove that they are poets” notwithstanding the fact that the greatest poets are men. Awkward’ (*Me Again* 180). She concludes her review: ‘neither odd lives nor sex really signify, it is a person’s poems that stand to be judged’ (181). This was Smith’s heartfelt belief; being a woman should not matter when writing.

However, when Smith was writing, poetry was seen as a more suitable pursuit for a man. Fleur Adcock writes: ‘The publishing world was dominated by men. Editors, publishers and critics were usually male... ‘Poet’ was a masculine word. The Muse was female, the poet was male. There was a deep-seated conviction that women couldn’t do it’ (1). In 1980, Smith was one of only three female poets out of forty poets published in *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse, 1945-1980*, edited by D.J. Enright (Couzyn 14). Similarly, Smith was published in the 1979 anthology *Poetry 1900-1975* (Macbeth). The Editor, George Macbeth, was male, and the anthology comprises both

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<sup>29</sup> Although arguably male pronouns were universalizing at that time

English and American poets. Of the 25 poets listed, only two are female: Stevie Smith and Sylvia Plath.

Dowson writes: ‘Male reviewers did not know how to assess poetry by women, so they left it alone, dismissed it or wrote about it obliquely’ (17-18). As a female poet at that time, Smith was both inside and outside the establishment. She was celebrated by critics, but not necessarily understood; her work was repeatedly called unclassifiable<sup>30</sup>. Sternlight writes of the futility of comparing Smith with male writers who belonged to the “serious” literary canon: ‘Smith as a poet never strives for the authoritative unity and consistency of voice that distinguishes “the great writer.”... It is precisely the coercive (because universalizing) assumption about individual identity unwittingly revealed in that phrase that Smith’s poetry most vigorously contests’ (112-113).

In Smith’s introduction in the *Macbeth* anthology, the following questionable phrase is included: ‘Perhaps the role of sorceress, which in her very different way Stevie Smith shared with Sylvia Plath, is the most appropriate one for a woman poet in the later twentieth century’ (127). Similarly, in reviews of her *Selected Poems* both Anthony Thwaite and the *Spectator* reviewer mentioned witches (Barbera and McBrien 241), as did Heaney (Sternlight 211). The character of a ‘sorceress’ could be seen as dangerous, morally corrupt, powerful and isolated. Intriguingly, Gilbert and Gubar write: ‘it appears that the woman poet must in some sense become her own heroine, and that in enacting the diabolical role of witch or wise woman she literally or figuratively risks a melodramatic death at the crossroads of tradition and genre, society and art’ (xx).

### 3.5 Examining the Poetry of Julia Darling

Julia Darling was an admirer of Stevie Smith, and even named her daughter Florence after her. Ellen Phethean, a poet and playwright, and Darling’s long term collaborator, comments: ‘she did like Stevie Smith, I think she thought that quirky individual woman’s voice... was great’ (298-301). This is hardly surprising as Darling was a staunch feminist and, as Sternlight writes:

The feminist movement and press have come to hail Stevie as a precursor for the expression of disaffection by modern women... Stevie documents for today’s women the not-so-subtle indoctrination of their sex towards self-ambivalence

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<sup>30</sup> Barbera and McBrien 241; Sternlight 79



and self-estrangement ineluctably created by the dominant male hierarchy as a tool of repression (1-2)

Nevertheless, Darling's poetic style contrasts significantly with Smith's, particularly in terms of voice. Hermione Lee writes: 'Stevie Smith is a highly literary and referential writer, and one of the peculiarities of her style is the way she infiltrates other voices into her own' (23) while Sternlight notes: 'The elusive "self" of the poems is not to be found in any one mask or image but rather, obliquely implied, in the endless play of construction and deconstruction the poems demonstrate' (110-112). Darling's poems, however, are often written in the first person, the implied author remaining consistent in tone, attitude and feeling throughout her poetry. Darling believed it was very important to write truthfully as a woman, without shame. Phethean describes how she had 'a cast iron constitution' where criticism of this was concerned (345).

Julia Darling was born in Winchester, Hampshire, in 1956. A 'serial nonconformist' (O'Brien, *Julia Darling*), she was expelled from school at fifteen, and attended Falmouth School of Art. Moving to Newcastle in 1980, she began her writing career as a poet, playwright and novelist. In 1995, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. When the disease recurred, intending to focus on living rather than dying, she enrolled on the Newcastle University Creative Writing Masters programme to hone her poetry writing technique. Gaining a distinction, she went on to publish two poetry collections, *Sudden Collapses in Public Places* (2003) and *Apologies for Absence* (2004) (O'Brien, *Julia Darling*).

In Sean O'Brien's obituary for Julia Darling, he describes her poetry as 'a means of dealing with illness, giving fear a name' (O'Brien, *Julia Darling*). Phethean described Darling's writing as follows: 'by putting it on the page and getting it out of herself, it wasn't... an unexamined... worry that was eating away at her insides... she could put it out there, down on the page, [and say] *there I've put it down, it's out there, it's not going to harm me anymore... I can control it, it doesn't control me*' (250-253). Darling believed that poetry had the power not only to contain disempowering experiences, but also to give the writer the ability to overcome them.

In her introduction to the anthology *The Poetry Cure*, Darling writes: 'I think one of the hardest things about being unwell is feeling disempowered and out of control. Writing poetry can make you feel in charge again' (Fuller and Darling 11). This reflects the views of the participants in the therapeutic writing group in the second chapter, who

also considered poetry to be useful, and indeed empowering, in difficult situations<sup>31</sup>.

The themes of power and female autonomy are central to Darling's work.

The poem I wish to examine is 'Too Heavy' (*Collapses* 16-17):

### *Too Heavy*

Dear Doctor,  
I am writing to complain about these words  
you have given me, that I carry in my bag  
*lymphatic, nodal, progressive, metastatic*

They must be made of lead. I haul them everywhere.  
I've cricked my neck, I'm bent  
with the weight of them  
*palliative, metabolic, recurrent*

and when I get them out and put them on the table  
they tick like bombs and overpower my own  
sweet tasting words  
*orange, bus, coffee, June*

I've been leaving them  
crumpled up in pedal bins  
where they fester and complain.  
*diamorphine, biopsy, inflammatory*

and then you say  
*Where are your words Mrs Patient?*  
*What have you done with your words?*

Or worse, you give me that dewy look  
*Poor Mrs Patient has lost all her words, but shush,*  
*don't upset her. I've got spares in the files.*  
*Thank god for files!*

So I was wondering,  
Dear Doctor, if I could have  
a locker  
my own locker  
with a key.  
I could collect them  
one at a time,

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<sup>31</sup> 2.9, p.93

and lay them on a plate  
*morphine-based, diagnostically,*

with a garnish of  
*lollypop, monkey, lip.*

This is a poem about language, particularly medical language. If we consider this in the light of trauma theory, the speaker identifies the fact that medical language is not sufficient to convey the experience of cancer, and, indeed, is not intended to deal with it. Herman notes how Janet, a psychologist specialising in trauma, ‘recognized that helplessness constitutes the essential insult of trauma, and that restitution requires the restoration of a sense of efficacy and power’ (41). Darling undertakes this through an implied critique, and even satire, of the complex, often Greek and Latin-derived, language of symptoms and treatments. In this satirical dimension, no established authority is secure.

This is a poem ostensibly written to a doctor, in order to complain. It is significant that the poem is in the form of a letter, because one inescapable aspect of being ill is the abundance of medical letters. As the ailments of the body are transcribed on to paper, illness arguably entails a literary experience, of a sort. Medical language has its own rhetoric; the functions seem, to the lay person, to be exclusion and the maintenance of secrecy. Darling turns this aspect of illness and language around, as the patient writes the letter to the doctor, taking control of the literary experience. Through this, the speaker gives a glimpse of what power could be like for the patient.

The poem begins: ‘I am writing to complain’; the use of everyday words leads the reader to expect the poem to be about an everyday aspect of illness. However, the next words jolt expectations, as the patient complains about ‘these words that you have given me/ that I carry in my bag’. This does not sound like a typical medical complaint.

The words complained about are: ‘lymphatic, nodal, progressive, metastatic’. Many readers will immediately understand these words can be applied to a description of cancer. The speaker goes on to explain: ‘I haul them everywhere/ I’ve cricked my neck, I’m bent/ with the weight of them.’ The medical words carry a metaphorical weight because of negative outcomes attached to them. The breaking of the line between ‘bent’ and ‘with the weight’ emphasises how the speaker’s body is being distorted. More medical language follows: ‘palliative, metabolic, recurrent’. These words are metaphorically even heavier: ‘recurrent’ suggests a return of cancer, and ‘palliative’ that end of life care is required.

This poem, however, is not written in a tone designed to elicit sympathy from the reader; it is light and irreverent. Darling continues by noting how the medical words ‘tick like bombs’. The reader infers that the prognosis is not good, and each time the patient visits the doctor, she is bombarded with more negative words, that weigh her down. She explains how these heavy medical words ‘overpower my own/ sweet tasting words’. Darling deliberately engages in a category error; she criticises medical terms in affective terms, disarming the reader and highlighting the impersonality of medical ideology.

The words the speaker uses to describe the parts of her life less affected by illness are ‘orange, bus, coffee, June’. These words are associated with everyday life. Food and drink, transport, weather: all these exist despite illness. There is a concrete element about words like ‘orange’ and ‘coffee’. They conjure up scents and colours to the reader, in a way that abstract medical words do not. The everyday words have fewer syllables than the medical words, making them seem more direct and easily understandable. They convey the simplicity of everyday pleasures, as if the speaker is determined to enjoy the simple things in life.

The patient views the medical words as an abuse of language; existing weightily, they don’t effectively communicate. Medical terminology is derived chiefly from Latin and Greek, so in a sense medical words are already translations, at a further remove from everyday speech. They are abstractions, twice distant from the ordinary patient. The language of medicine is the language of power, used to exclude the average patient from understanding. The function of language here recalls the Mass spoken in Latin in churches before the Reformation, designed to exclude peasants from understanding and therefore from questioning. However, it is worth noting here that the language of poetry is as exact, in its own way, as the language of medicine, and thus the patient’s complaint is somewhat ironic, framed as it is in the language of poetry.

Medical words are not everyday words, and yet for the poem’s speaker they have become quotidian. The speaker describes how she has been trying to throw these unpleasant words away, so they end up ‘crumpled up in pedal bins/ where they fester and complain’. Again, ‘pedal bin’ conjures up a picture of hospital life. The medical words are not merely inert objects. They ‘fester and complain’, apparently having malign intentions. These abstract terms are described concretely, showing the effect of what they conceal; they manifest, in a sense, the physical characteristics they appear to disguise. The use of the verb ‘fester’, a word already connected with disease, is particularly powerful. Another list of medical words follows; the reader gets the

impression the words are building up. As fast as the speaker tries to dispose of them, at each hospital visit more words are added.

The poem then turns in quite another direction, deliberately addressing the doctor: 'And then you say...' The doctor seems impatient and patronising when he speaks: '*Where are your words, Mrs Patient? What have you done with your words?*' The doctor talks to the patient as if she is a child. Calling her 'Mrs Patient' shows her subservience, her lack of agency and also the interchangeability of patients to the doctors; there are so many, it is hardly worth learning their names. The ostensible politeness, 'Mrs', could be seen as patronising. Medical terms are important to the doctor; the poem suggests that the patient comes under the doctor's control via the labelling process. Without these words, patients are nothing but a nuisance.

However, the speaker explains, there is something worse than being treated as a child; this is being treated as a non-person. The doctor views her with a 'dewy look'; a look of generalised pity for something defective. The look contains no empathy, and is, in fact, an assertion of authority and superiority. The doctor does not see her clearly; his judgement of her is affected by his view of her illness<sup>32</sup>. The doctor no longer speaks to her, but instead talks about her with somebody else. He says: '*Poor Mrs Patient has lost all her words, but shush,/ don't upset her. I've got spares in the files./ Thank god for files.*' The reference to the patient in the third person is a feature of the language of a parent or lover, but the affection which such language would normally suggest is absent, making it seem like a parody.

Calling the writer 'Poor Mrs Patient' and saying 'shush,/don't upset her' shows both the infantilization of those with illnesses, and also the way in which their experiences are unacknowledged. The doctor is now in control and perceives the patient as not being 'all there'. Her problem with her illness is emotional, but it is considered a physical problem, dealt with by an administrative solution – producing more words from 'the files'. The doctor cannot be himself without his resources. However, if he spoke to the patient, he would realise this was the opposite of what she wanted.

Darling was a dramatist as well as a poet; this comes through in her use of voice, as the speaker humorously challenges the doctor. The poem is written as a letter (a dramatic technique in itself, highlighting the distance between doctor and patient) but within the poem we also hear the doctor's speaking voice. The poem can be read as though the doctor speaks the patient's words, rather than the other way round, as the

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<sup>32</sup> The doctor's gender is not actually given in text and I have referred to the doctor as 'him' chiefly for ease of understanding

patient writes the letter. While the reader may be aware that Darling has experienced being a patient herself, by putting the poem in the form of a letter there is interplay between patient and poet, as the experiences of the patient are framed by the words of the poet. It is also satisfying to note that in the poem, the doctor's voice is sandwiched by the patient's, rather than the patient's by the doctor's, which would be usual in a medical consultation.

In the final two stanzas, the poet seeks to take back power from the doctor. She provides a solution for the heavy words, asking the 'Dear Doctor' to provide her 'my own locker/ with a key'. She requests a space to store her experiences, shutting out the doctor; space over which she has complete control, and which saves the painful effort of transporting the heavy words home and back. It is also a parody of 'official' status; like the staff, the patient leaves items on the premises, particularly those items which do not belong to her. Of course, the patient cannot demand this outright, not having complete control. At the very least, power must be shared with the doctor. The patient has to ask politely; otherwise she knows the doctor is unlikely to listen.

However, there is definitely a sense of restoration of power to the patient, particularly in the last stanza. The patient will lock the heavy words she struggles with inside the locker she has demanded - and at this point still more words appear: 'morphine-based, diagnostically'. Nonetheless, the poet is not satisfied with merely shutting the words away. She will provide these medical words 'with a garnish of/ *lollipop, monkey, lip.*' These playful words conclude the poem, demonstrating the spirit of the writer. The word 'lip' ending the poem brings to mind the colloquial phrase 'Don't give me lip', conveying the patient's determined attitude. She will not be cowed by these heavy words that she is continually served 'on a plate'<sup>33</sup>; at the very least, she will 'garnish' this unpleasant dish with some words of her own.

Phethean comments that Darling 'liked wit. Humour was important... it didn't matter... if it was a serious issue, humour really helped' (281-284). Wit emerges consistently in Darling's work, and is certainly clear in 'Too Heavy' where the poet wields language as a weapon against despair. This is very different from Smith who was drawn towards death; her use of wit was not necessarily to lighten a heavy subject, but rather to disguise the darkness in it. Sampson writes that Smith used: 'playfulness as a decoy... apparently guileless lines are written in very dark ink' (*Lyric* 217). Darling,

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<sup>33</sup> Even the word 'plate' shows the speaker knows she cannot completely escape medical words, as 'plate' could refer to an imaging plate for an x-ray

on the other hand, resisted death with all the resources at her disposal and humour was one of the weapons in her artillery.

### 3.6 Julia Darling and Therapeutic Poetry Writing

I now wish to explore Darling's view of the therapeutic uses of poetry writing in greater detail. Darling was born a little over fifty years after Smith; during her lifetime, there was far more awareness of therapeutic poetry writing<sup>34</sup>. In *The Poetry Cure*, Darling writes: 'I believe that poetry can help to make you better. Poetry is essential, not a frill or a nicety... As soon as we are in any kind of crisis, or anguish, that is when we reach out for poetry, or find ourselves writing a poem for the first time' (11). Darling perceived that poetry could have a practical use; this idea chimes with the Horatian ideal of poetry being useful as well as beautiful<sup>35</sup>.

One reason why Darling believed so wholeheartedly in the therapeutic benefits of poetry was because she had experienced those benefits herself. Phethean describes how Darling first came to write poetry: 'She got into writing, I think, as an escape route from the... mad domestic whirlpool she found herself in' (44-45). From the very beginning, Darling used writing therapeutically, as an escape from trying circumstances and as a way of asserting herself.

In my first chapter, I noted the idea explored by Philips, Linington and Penman, that poetry was particularly valuable as a form of therapeutic writing, because the poem provided a 'formal shape' for containing and organising chaotic thought (29). Darling agrees with this idea, writing: 'poetry... provides a structure that can contain chaos and difficulty' (Fuller and Darling 12). The American poet, Jane Kenyon, whose lifetime (1947-1995) spanned a similar period to Darling's, goes further, describing how she turned to formal verse when writing about her father's death: 'I found that in having to concentrate on the metrics I was shielded in some way from the content of the poems' (Finch 117). The suggestion of a 'shielding' effect is even more radical than the idea of containment, implying that in addition to providing a way of managing difficult experiences, there is a protective element to the use of form, which prevents the poet from being overwhelmed by the material. Suffering becomes subject matter; poetic form allows suffering to be processed and assimilated into life experience.

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<sup>34</sup> Lapidus, the writing for well-being UK organisation was founded in 1996 (Lapidus)

<sup>35</sup> Horace (c.13 B.C.) *Ars Poetica, Epistula ad Pisones* Accessed Online (North Carolina State University)

As well as form, Darling also believed the music of poetry could be therapeutic. She explains: 'poetry is all about music and rhythm, and music comforts and lulls us' (Fuller and Darling 12). At first reading, this appears to be a very partial view of music, which can have the opposite effect. However, she is writing this in the introduction to an anthology designed for those living with illness (7). Darling believed that the very sound of the words themselves, 'the cadences and the rhythms of poetry', could be calming and comforting. This can be seen in her poem 'Hollow' (*Apology* 45). The line 'Good Friday light, with a pale egg sky' has repeating long 'I' vowel sounds, along with repeating 'g' and 'l' consonants, creating a slow rhythm and music. Similarly, in 'A short manifesto for my city' (*Apology* 41), Darling creates music in the line 'Let it be salty, and rusty with iron' by using dactylic feet, and repeated 't' consonants.

Darling may have believed that the cadences of the poem take on a life of their own, creating a music which calms both writer and listener. However, given the urgent subject matter of her two poetry collections, it is more likely that she means music may be part of the assuaging effort of the poem as a whole. T.S. Eliot writes: 'the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning. Otherwise, we could have poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense, and I have never come across such poetry' (*On Poetry* 29). It is therefore the combination of form and content that produces music. His contemporary, Robert Frost, concurred: 'The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited metre are endless' (45). Darling seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion, via a different route.

Music also contains rhythm. Rhythm does not merely imply metre, but something alive and vibrant, beyond metre. Josephine Jacobsen associates the use of 'basic rhythms' with the many and various rhythms that permeate the world: 'breath, tides, seasons, music, incantation' (Finch 104); rhythm which poetry accesses is primal and instinctive. Carolyn Kizer speaks of 'the origins of poetry in prayer and dance: rhythmic activities', declaring: 'Writing about the iambic pentameter is like writing a defence of breathing' (131). Frances Stillman also links rhythm to the body, writing: 'In the living individual, the pulse of the heartbeat, though seldom consciously thought of, pervades the entire being. It would seem, in fact that all the natural, nonvolitional motions of life and matter are characterized by rhythm' (3). The rhythm of a poem is, therefore, essentially, its heartbeat.

Darling found poetry invaluable during her illness, explaining: 'Without writing and reading poems my journey through chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and the general



ups and down (*sic*) of illness, would have been unthinkable' (Fuller and Darling 11). She continues: 'Waiting 'patiently' for an appointment can make one feel hopeless and helpless, and I found that doing some absorbing creative activity in the waiting room completely altered the experience' (11-12). Phethean comments: 'I think when she got ill... [her poetry] was very much a reaction to...the silence people hold about 'the c word'... and also... how disempowering all the language is... the language of the doctors' (234-239). Darling found writing poetry empowering, enabling her to reclaim language, and also an absorbing activity to distract her from stressful situations.

Darling believed poetry could be liberating, writing: 'Poetry should be part of every modern hospital, not just as something to keep patients amused. It's a powerful force, which can help us through the darkest times' (Fuller and Darling 12). Phethean explains why Darling feels so strongly that poetry could help anyone: 'I think she thought it was... the beginning of talking about things that people felt unable to talk about... If you couldn't talk about it in, in realistic terms, you could perhaps step sideways and speak through... a slightly different form, which is poetry' (472-476). Imlah's proposal that 'Poetry is a way of talking about things that frighten you' (Astley 369), quoted in the first chapter, makes a similar point.

Darling illustrates the usefulness of metaphors, writing: 'Poetry uses images to help us see things in a fresh way... In my case I chose to imagine my body as a house, and wrote many poems during my treatment using this analogy... I was able to step out of the difficult present and to use my imagination to be somewhere else' (Fuller and Darling 11). Her illness encouraged Darling to find new ways to describe her body, enabling her to escape via the path of words she wrote. In her poem 'A Waiting Room in August' she wrote 'Our skin waits like a drum' and 'Our mouths are ironed' (*Collapses* 14-15), using everyday items in her startling metaphors.

Darling explains: 'Poetry is the pioneer of language and so we can express things in new ways' (Fuller and Darling 12). Phethean supports this, explaining why poetry was so important to Darling: 'when something big happens – you don't even know how to put it into words, whereas poetry can give you metaphors and imagery, that... allow you to access something much larger than yourself, and... you can speak about it' (504-510). Metaphorical language in poetry allows the writer to sidestep the rational, and move straight to the emotional and imaginative heart of the matter. Bolton and Latham suggest the reason for this: 'Poetry relies upon image and metaphor to explicate and convey complex experiential, emotional and mental happenings, elements which would otherwise be difficult or impossible to communicate' (117).

The use of metaphorical language in poetry contrasts strongly with the ‘heavy’ rationalism attributed to the medical profession. Fox writes: ‘The technology-laden atmosphere of hospital environments where we are supposed to be healed is often at odds with our needs as human beings... poem-making can be a way to remember we are flesh and blood’ (175). Darling agreed, explaining: ‘in the case of the physical body, poetry shows us pictures and metaphors that we can use, rather like visualisations... Once you have found a metaphor that works, you can explore and adjust it... and by doing so, establish a sense of control over the body’ (Fuller and Darling 11). The use of metaphor for those both in physical and psychological distress is one of the overwhelming arguments for the therapeutic value of enabling patients and service users to write poetry.

### **3.7 The Conundrum of being seen as ‘Confessional’**

It is clear that Smith and Darling consider writing poetry a therapeutic activity. Sean Haldane, a poet and consultant clinical neuropsychologist, stated: ‘I now think poetry has more capacity to change people than psychotherapy’. However, when asked if he had ever recommended poetry as a therapeutic practice, he replied ‘Never’ (The Guardian), describing himself as ‘happy to be a split personality’. Haldane’s comment highlights the tension that exists between poetry as therapy and poetry as art. He is content to be a poet, but not to recommend poetry as therapy, despite his personal feelings.

Some of the distaste towards poetry as therapy originates in poets’ fear of being seen as confessional. If a poet admits poetry writing to be therapeutic, this implies using their personal experience when writing, which is a hallmark of Confessionalism. Coined in 1959, the Confessional label came to encompass the work of poets of the 1950s and 1960s such as John Berryman, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Writing about personal experiences such as mental illness was seen as exhilarating and new. John Thompson commented on Lowell’s ‘Life Studies’: ‘For these poems, the question of propriety no longer exists. They have made a conquest: what they have won is a major expansion of the territory of poetry’ (Thompson). Diane Wood Middlebrook explains:

T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had helped to strengthen the notion that greatness in art was equivalent to impersonality... Snodgrass and Lowell’s poetry in the mid-

1950s was driving a wedge into this assumption. The autobiographical or “confessional” mode, no less literary for *seeming* less literary, invited the reader to equate word with person (83).

Earlier in this chapter<sup>36</sup>, Sternlight noted how equating word with person strengthened Smith’s popularity considerably (17).

However, Confessional poetry is often unpopular today, for the following reasons. Firstly, Confessionalism is considered obsolete. Yusra Amjad, a young Pakistani poet, describes it as ‘outdated’ (Silkstone), while poet and critic Charlotte Pence comments: ‘With the technological facility and pop-cultural fascination to record private moments and distribute them, poetry that reveals personal details and conflates the identity between speaker and author must feel the effects of what could be viewed as an over-saturation of the confessional’ (306).

Secondly, following the emergence of postmodernism and deconstruction, personal confidences from writers may no longer simply be regarded as absolute truth, since truth itself can be viewed as a rhetorical construction. Rees-Jones writes: ‘More than any other genre, the confessional poem demands a dynamic of belief between reader or listener and poet. The belief in the authenticity of the ‘I’... conflates the poet’s experience with the dramatized textual experience’ (*Angels* 129). Such a ‘dynamic of belief’ is rare these days. Pence suggests our suspicion is due to technology: ‘Through multi-media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and reality shows... personal space is increasingly public space’ (306). She alludes to cultural critic Jonah Lehrer’s phrase: ‘You are who you pretend to be’<sup>37</sup>.

Neither Smith nor Darling could accurately be described as Confessional. Pumphrey explains: ‘Lowell’s statement that he wanted to make his reader “believe that he was getting the real Robert Lowell” contains precisely those assumptions about language that Smith went out of her way to reject... confessional poetry suggests, however hypothetically, the possibility of a fit between language and experience’ (111) and Rees Jones wrote of the ‘satirical remove’ of the voice in a Smith poem (*Angels* 138). Furthermore, Smith invariably hid behind many different masks when articulating ‘truth’ so that it was very hard to tell what she felt personally.

Although both Smith and Darling wrote in a conversational manner, exploring personal emotions and experiences, they also both wrote humorously, as if determined not to take themselves seriously. While many of the Confessional poets also wrote

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<sup>36</sup> 3.2, p113-114

<sup>37</sup> Jonah Lehrer ‘We Robots’ *New York Times* 2011 (Lehrer)

humorously, they took themselves seriously in a way that Darling certainly didn't, and Smith didn't appear to. After all, Couzyn writes of Smith that 'the unsettling effects she achieved through juxtaposition of inappropriate ideas expressed as much the person she was as the way she worked... A small maker of mischief inhabited her head, a debunker of pomp and self-importance that sent her into a fit of giggling at serious moments' (18). While Smith deplored self-importance, the Confessional poets embraced it. David Yezzi, an American poet and critic, remarks: 'It is possible to admire the originality, the keening and crackle, of Plath's screed, yet to remain deeply suspicious of the ego that would equate filial grief with the atrocities of the Holocaust' (Yezzi).

This is not to say Confessional poetry was without wit or written unskilfully, but the poets searched inside themselves for truth, which held inherent dangers. A. Alvarez, an encourager of Plath, declares: 'She was... determined to break through... to the inner demons that would make her write the poems she knew she had in her. But when she did, the ghouls she released were malign. They helped her write great poetry, but they destroyed her marriage, then they destroyed her' (The Guardian). Yezzi highlights the dangers of searching the self alone for poetic inspiration, quoting Charles Molesworth: 'In the poetry of Plath and Sexton, we find... an irreducible choice: the poet either must become God or cease consciousness altogether' (Molesworth).

Richard Wilbur, a poet writing at the same time as the Confessional poets, also had concerns about the Confessional approach. Wilbur was a poet of order and of praise (Littoral), upholding Eliot's credo of impersonality (Yezzi) whereas the Confessional poets were poets of madness and doubt. Wilbur's poem 'Cottage Street, 1953', describes a meeting with Plath. He is supposed to 'exemplify/ The published poet in his happiness', but describes himself instead as a 'stupid lifeguard' who discovers a girl who has been 'immensely drowned'<sup>38</sup>. The poem ends with Plath finally stating 'her brilliant negative/ In poems free and helpless and unjust' (Wilbur). Wilbur, only in his early thirties when he met Plath, felt her brilliance had a price; his poem illustrates how the Confessional poet runs the risk of drowning in their own consciousness if they are without reference points outside themselves. He argued for seeing art as a window, providing a partial vision of the world, rather than a door: 'If art is conceived to be a door ... the artist no longer perceives a wall between him and the world; the world becomes an extension of himself, and is deprived of its reality' (Ciardi).

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<sup>38</sup> An eerie pre-echo of Hughes' poem 'Dust As We Are' in which his World War I veteran father had been 'heavily killed' (Hughes)

Alongside the problem that Confessional poets are now perceived to be naïve in their portrayal of an absolute truth about themselves, and taking dangerous risks to their sanity, their influence has resulted in amateur imitators. The Confessional poets, whilst using personal experiences as raw material, wrote with both care and wit. However, Don Paterson comments: ‘The result of the inadvertent democratisation of the art has been many people feeling that armed with a beer-mat, a pencil, and a recent mildly traumatic experience they are entitled to send 100pp of handwritten drivel into Faber or Cape’ (Poetry Library). Christina Patterson calls this kind of poetry: ‘poems, written by people who didn't know how to write poems, but who thought that what Wordsworth called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" was enough’ (Patterson). Although such writing is acceptable as therapy, it is unacceptable as art.

Professional poets, therefore, have concerns about being connected with such poetry. Jo Shapcott, while writing poetry that draws on personal experience, does not wish to be seen as a Confessional poet. An interview with her in 2010, discussing the poetry she wrote following her experience of breast cancer, elicited this reaction:

The suggestion that she might occasionally have dipped a toe into confessional waters is given very short shrift. "Not at all. No. No!" she shudders... “In *Of Mutability*, for example, the reader doesn't get an account of my experience with breast cancer. I'm not an autobiographical poet in that sense; I'm not someone chasing her own ambulance (The Guardian)

Similarly, Lavinia Greenlaw said in 2013: "No one wants to be called a confessional poet. It suggests all you do is blurt your feelings. To work explicitly with the self requires extraordinary judgement, detachment and control” (Patterson). Greenlaw distinguishes between self-expression and art, noting that working with personal experiences and emotions as a poet requires a great deal of skill; her comments demonstrate how poets try to avoid being labelled Confessional, even if writing about personal experiences.

Contemporary poets appear to be afraid that the label of Confessional poetry imposes an artistic limit on their writing, alongside the suspicion that the personal interest is likely to be valued more highly than the art. Anne Stevenson, speaking of her poem ‘Correspondences’, describes how she exorcised her guilt ‘without resorting to confessional poetry’ (Couzyn 187). Even when writing my own proposal for my poetry about illness I noted describing how I wanted to write poems ‘without being overtly

confessional', perhaps because the word 'confessional' is at risk of becoming a byword for amateur and over-emotional poetry.

Women may be particularly wary of the Confessional label and all it conveys because of very real fears of the limitations established by the traditional patriarchal view that women are over-emotional in their writing style. Anne Sexton is not the only female poet who has declared she feared writing like a woman, commenting: 'I wish I were a man – I would rather write the way a man writes' (Middlebrook 92-93); Plath was continually concerned with the idea of poetry-writing being a masculine endeavor<sup>39</sup> while Edith Sitwell wrote 'If one can't write like a man, one has no business to write at all' (Glendinning 164). Rees-Jones writes: 'even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the image of the woman poet as driven purely by emotion was to persist' (*Poets* 17) and Amjad describes the Confessional label as 'politely sexist' (Silkstone).

### 3.8 Julia Darling: Female Poet

Between the writing of Plath and Sexton in the 1950s and 60s, and women's poetry in the 1980s and 90s, a change took place. Peter Childs notes how 'the appearance in the 1980s of women-only poetry collections' came about 'partly as a reaction to the exclusions of the male literary scene but mostly as an affirmation of the shifts effected by the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s' (163). Claire Buck describes how women's poetry moved from 'the confessional model inherited from Plath and Anne Sexton' to 'a poetics of consciousness raising in which women's personal experience becomes central to the poetry' (91). Childs agrees writing: 'Women's poetry since the 1980s has dealt more readily with everyday female experience... A significant trend... has been an increased use of humour' (175-176).

Darling and Phethean espoused a female-centred poetics, quite different from the patriarchal model and were involved in feminism and activism in the early eighties. This led to the formation of a feminist political cabaret night, 'Sugar and Spikes' and then to a writing and performance group for women called 'The Poetry Virgins'. Linda France, in her introduction to the Poetry Virgins' 1994 anthology, *Sauce*, writes: 'An evening with the Poetry Virgins is one of initiation, hilarity and mayhem... There are

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<sup>39</sup> Plath wrote proudly to her mother that 'Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine... they are working, sweating, heaving poems' (Plath 244); Rees-Jones highlights how 'the poems are associated with the male, they work, they sweat' (Rees-Jones, *Angels* 96)

poems about bodies and bras, childhood and cars, sex, sport and drinking. They sing out loud and clear in the broad and strong register of a woman's voice' (10).

Comparing Smith and Darling as female poets, Darling viewed herself as part of a community of female writers, while Smith always felt very isolated. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Darling is unafraid to 'make her experiences knowable'<sup>40</sup>, seeking to clarify, using 'just the right image to express vividly the complex emotional sphere in which she works'<sup>41</sup>, while Smith remains more of a mystery for the reader. Smith framed her personal experiences and emotions with those of others, but Darling aimed for 'intimacy'. Darling wrote: 'I suppose I write for and about the invisible, for all the ordinary people, particularly women, who don't have guns, or even do particularly dramatic things, but whose everyday lives are still incredible, filled with poetry, pathos and small explosions' (*Elephant* 7).

Darling felt very strongly about the benefits of writing for women. Phethean explains: 'I think, even before she... got ill, as I say, and wrote about her body, she very much felt that... writing could give women a voice... to experiences that other people perhaps considered you shouldn't write about... or women felt they had been silenced about. It was important to speak out and find your voice and articulate your experience' (218-224). She considered poetry writing as a form of liberation for women. France agrees: 'The poems on the page, as well as in performance, are marked by an unusual fearlessness and refreshing positive humour. These are women not afraid to open their big mouths, break taboos, stand up and be wise and foolish' ( *The Poetry Virgins* 10).

This fearlessness and breaking of taboos is very important. In 1979, Gilbert and Gubar pointed out how female poets struggle against the traditional patriarchal view that women should be subservient and quiet:

The lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the inside, as a subject, a speaker: she must be, that is, assertive, authoritative, radiant with powerful feelings while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness – and hence, by definition, profoundly “unwomanly,” even freakish. For the woman poet, in other words, the contradictions between her vocation and her gender might well become insupportable, impelling her to deny one or the other, even... driving her to suicide (xxii)

The contrast between Darling and Plath is telling. Plath did not consider how poetry could help her, but rather saw it as a way of obtaining success and recognition,

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<sup>40</sup> W.N.Herbert, back cover of Darling's collection, *Sudden Collapses in Public Places*

<sup>41</sup> Jo Shapcott, back cover of Darling's collection, *Apology for Absence*

particularly from the male-dominated writing world. This led to paralysing fear; she wrote in her journal: 'What to do with fear of writing: why fear? Fear of not being a success? Fear of the world casually saying we're wrong in rejections?' (Plath 437). Plath's fear trapped her and left her without hope, while Darling and Phethean sought to break free from the fear of fully inhabiting their poetry and speaking out courageously as women.

### **3.9 The Poet's View: Poetry as Therapy and Poetry as Art**

In my first chapter, I wrote that I wished to consider whether any differences exist between writing poetry as therapy and writing poetry as art, and if so, what they are. During chapter three, I have looked at the views of professional poets, hoping to cast some light on this question. Professional poets have highlighted concerns around being seen to write therapeutically.

Setting aside the problem of being seen as 'blurt[ing] your feelings'<sup>42</sup>, there are other reasons why professional poets do not wish to be seen to be writing therapeutically (or 'chasing their own ambulance' as Shapcott defines it). One reason may be associated with Confessionalism; namely the conflating of the poet's experiences with the poem. In his 1920 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot proposes that the poet should seek impersonality, namely that a poet should seek to be a 'transforming catalyst'. He explains: 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material' (35).

Not every poet believes this to be the case, particularly following Confessionalism's popularity, but many believe it is dangerous to restrict a poem to autobiography. Matterson and Jones write: 'many poets have been keen to dissolve any perceived bond between the poem and their own lives... to depersonalize the poem, and, as it were, release it from the restrictions that reference to an author might place upon it' (100-101). It is certainly true, as Matterson and Jones point out, that while poetry started from an oral tradition, as part of 'a collaborative, communal expression', now 'we are inclined to privilege the poem, rather than prose, as if it provided direct access to the mind and the feelings of the poet' (94-95). Some poets consider this

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<sup>42</sup> Lavinia Greenlaw (Patterson); see p.137



problematic. They wish the poem to speak for itself, without the burden of personal context.

It could be argued that poetry as therapy places the poet in direct relationship with the poem, whereas poetry as art suggests that the poet and poem have become separated from one another. The professional poet acts as a 'catalyst', transforming the material through editing and redrafting. Smith declared that writing a poem 'puts the feelings at one remove' (198). Constantine writes: 'It is by achieving the figurative that a poem, rooted in particular circumstances, addressing them, extends also beyond them and so also beyond the life and personality of the poet' (27). For example, in Smith's famous poem 'Not waving, but drowning' (*Selected Poems* 167), the poem ends: 'I was much too far out all my life/ And not waving but drowning'. This is the move that Constantine describes; Smith does not describe merely a physical experience, but a figurative one.

Constantine describes how the poet becomes separate from their poem: 'The poem you write ceases to be personally yours by virtue of its being a poem at all, by its entry into a language which you may be more or less good at handling... but which does not belong to you; you participate in it, as do your readers' (28). If the poem has readers, it no longer belongs to the author; it becomes the embodiment of an experience, different for each reader. This echoes Wimsatt and Beardsley, in their essay on 'The Intentional Fallacy' (3), who declare: 'The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's... The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public'.

If the poem belongs to the public, conflating the poet with the poem becomes futile. Matterson and Jones identify the dangers of assuming that poet and poem are closely linked and that the poem is an accurate representation of the poet's experience: 'It is important to remember that poems, like novels or other narratives, create their own version of reality which is independent of any prior event or series of events' (97-98). Assuming an event in a poem is accurate is dangerous, because the poet has departed from their experience to create a poem with a fictionalized event which says what the poet wishes the event to say.

Another way of understanding this is in Skelton's description of 'emotional, not factual, truth' (*Calling* 35). Skelton notes: 'In writing a poem one not only exaggerates emotions for the sake of the poem, one also allows the language of the poem to develop a direction and purpose of its own. Thus the result is a poem which is always a distorted version of one's real feelings, and may well even be almost complete fiction' (10). A

poem written as therapy would be unlikely to be described as ‘almost complete fiction’ when compared to the author’s original emotions or experience, whereas a poem considered art could. The emotion or experience is transformed for the sake of the poem.

Having said this, in chapter two<sup>43</sup>, Deborah, one of the participants in the therapeutic writing group also noted: ‘with poem, er, it kind of belongs to other people once you’ve written down that and let it go’. This suggests that this sense of gaining separation from a poem does not belong to professional poets alone; some of those who write poetry as therapy may also feel that way.

Nonetheless, in general, those writing therapeutic poems consider the writer to be the most important person. The poetry they write may well detail their personal experiences over which they feel they have ownership. They may wish to keep the poems private or to share them, but the poem is still connected very strongly to them. There is no requirement for an audience, as Bolton argued, in my first chapter (Bolton et al. 2). The poem exists chiefly for the sake of the writer and their mental health. Eliot does not even see such a piece of work as a poem, writing: ‘a poem which was a poem only for the author would not be a poem at all’ (*On Poetry* 100).

For writers of poetry as art, however, the reader is most important. If the poet wishes to communicate, there must be an audience to receive that communication. Indeed, Constantine describes the poem as an event, participated in by both reader and poet (28). Poetry as art has a sense of audience and an awareness of poetic standards, shaped by poetic tradition, as well as an awareness of contemporary poetry and how the recently composed poem stands up in relation to both. The poem is shaped and changed, until it moves from merely being personal experience into an embodiment of universal experience. Poets may well find writing therapeutic, as explored in my first chapter<sup>44</sup>. However, the poem that is art goes through a transformation at the hands of a poet, which a poet is willing (or not unwilling) to undertake.

The poetry of professional poets exists in the light of poetic tradition. Eliot writes of the poet: ‘You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead’ (*Tradition* 33). This is an awesome pressure, far from therapeutic. However, a poet arguably has a desire to share their work, and thus to participate in and extend traditions, which entails reaching and maintaining high standards. As O’Brien suggests, we have to presuppose

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<sup>43</sup> 2.9, p.96 and p.103

<sup>44</sup> Robinson 79; Bolton, Field and Thompson, *Routes* 55; Couzyn 216

that some poems can be shown to be better than other poems i.e. more interesting, intelligent, subtle, honest, musically alert and imaginatively startling, more attuned to past, present and future: more seriously felt, more memorable, with more to offer (*Muse* 14)

This standard is shaped by poetry that already exists and makes up the literary canon. The poem is therefore drafted and redrafted so that it ends up as ‘good’ as possible; poets are aware that their poetry will be scrutinized.

For a professional poet, the discovery of an appropriate form is central to the achievement of a poem. Melissa Cannon, an American poet, comments: ‘I find that forms lead me to the essentials of my material’ (Finch 38). A poem written as therapy, on the other hand, need have no commitment to form. This does not mean, of course, that poems written as therapy lack form altogether, but rather that it may not be the most important aspect of poetry-writing for the writer.

Finding the right form and working within it is often part of redrafting. Skelton insists: ‘We must learn to order, to arrange, and to choose the right voice for the right poem. Poetry begins in freedom, but moves onward through discipline’ (*Practice* 14). He continues: ‘The amending of verse, the revision of it, has been called by Robert Graves *secondary composition*, and it has been said that it is the relative ability of young writers to revise their drafts that separates the men from the boys’ (74)<sup>45</sup>.

Skelton implies an arbitrary division here between ‘freedom’ and ‘discipline’, suggesting that a poet may use personal experiences and emotions to begin writing their poetry, but will move away from this through subsequent drafts. Nonetheless, many poets would argue against such a clear division as both ‘freedom’ and ‘discipline’ are required to write poetry and may well take place side by side. Kate Compston writes how establishing a particular form helps her to write poems ‘because this guiding discipline gives me a sense of containment, whilst also tempting out the ‘knowings’ of my unconscious mind’ (Bolton, Field and Thompson, *Routes* 29). She refers here to both discipline (as the form guides and contains her writing) and freedom (the ‘knowings’ of her unconscious mind), and both apparently occur at the same time.

If redrafting sets apart the professional poet as Skelton suggests, what is the role of revision in the work of Smith and Darling? Darling attached great importance to redrafting. Phethean describes how Darling was ‘fearless in her ability to... say, right, that’s not good enough, I’m going to do it again’ (390-395). This is also illustrated by

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<sup>45</sup> The irony of such an expression, given the previous discussion of patriarchy, is marked

Darling's requests for her friends to critique her work. Darling clearly had a sense of audience and deliberately shaped her poetry with that in mind. Phethean says:

If she'd written something, she was always dead keen... to get her friends around the table and share and get them to read... wanting feedback... on her writing... In the Poetry Virgins, y'know, when we were reading... one of the readers might say *Oh, I think it might sound better to do this*, she would, she would be open to sort of changing it... Even after it, it had sort of appeared to be finished (413-427)

The fact that Darling wanted to hear her friends' views on her work, and was happy to change her work in order to improve it, shows the value she placed on drafting. Her reason for writing was not only therapeutic, but to produce poetry for an audience.

Phethean explains that Darling enjoyed the process of drafting because she enjoyed writing; the more she wrote, the more she discovered about herself. Phethean said: 'I think she enjoyed the drafting process... just to be able to write was a sort of passion and a freedom and a discovering who she was and a... way to live her life and explore her experiences' (404-408). Somebody writing for therapeutic purposes only might disagree that through increased drafting, they could discover more about themselves. There could be concerns that drafting could carry them away from the original authentic experience or emotion. However, Skelton argues that a professional poet's poems 'do not constitute his self-portrait or his autobiography; they constitute his discoveries' (*Practice* 10).

Smith was a prolific poet, who also attached great importance to redrafting. She declared: 'You want masses of material and then you shape' (Dick 75). She expended a great deal of effort when preparing her work for publication (Spalding 86). In a letter to her editor, Smith wrote: 'It's the balance of the thing one can't quite see until one gets the galleys. Will you think it over and if any of the suggested "in" poems seem questionable to you, please do let me know because I want your opinion very much' (222). This also illustrates Smith's awareness of and reliance upon the opinion of others regarding her poetry's publication. Smith wanted her poetry to communicate clearly to others. She declared: 'All Poetry has to do is to make a strong communication' (*Me Again* 126). She reaped a therapeutic benefit from her writing, but also put great emphasis on the artistic process, shaping her poetry so it communicated well.

Perhaps a key difference between poetry as therapy and poetry as art depends to a large degree on the level of interest, or lack of it, in language and its powers and musical properties. Darling did not have to do a Creative Writing Masters – she was already

writing poetry – but she chose to do so in order to learn more about writing. For professional poets, it is the fascination with words that leads to many of the practices discussed above, such as the redrafting, and the consideration of the canon and how their poetry relates to it. For those writing poetry therapeutically, the interest in language will be subordinate to the desire to write ‘truth’; that is to express themselves, particularly in regards to difficult events in their lives and their feelings around those events, and this was made clear in chapter two<sup>46</sup>, where one participant highlighted a concern that the authenticity of her writing might be affected if it was tidied up too much stylistically. She did not want any separation between herself and her writing through redrafting.

As such, we can see that while there is a difference between poetry as therapy and poetry as art, elements of both are also tangled together. Attempting to separate the two completely is perilous, leading to inaccuracy and confusion. Professional poets find therapeutic elements in their writing, while writers of poetry as therapy may want to share their work with others and will revise it based on that desire. This suggests that poetry as therapy and poetry as art are more closely related than they may originally appear to be and this will be considered further in chapter four.

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<sup>46</sup> 2.9, p.100-101

## **Chapter Four: Conclusions**

### **4.1 Introduction**

As I write my conclusions, firstly, I wish to return to my original questions, identified in chapter one. I knew there was value in therapeutic writing, so I wanted to find out how and why poetry as therapy worked. I also wanted to look at the benefits of using poetry as a form of therapeutic writing, over other forms.

I particularly wanted to explore the benefits of using therapeutic poetry writing with those who have suffered emotional distress or trauma. I hoped the practical applications of my findings would be useful for those looking to practise therapeutic poetry writing as a form of therapy.

I also wished to investigate any differences between poetry writing as therapy and poetry writing as art. I wanted to understand why tension existed for professional poets around therapeutic writing and hoped to demonstrate that the expressiveness and artfulness of poetry could be reconciled.

### **4.2 Chapter One: Analysis**

In my first chapter, I introduced my research questions, described above, and considered the literature of recent and current thinking surrounding therapeutic writing. I also explained how I would be writing a collection of poetry, inspired by my personal experiences. The fact that I found this poetry collection therapeutic to write also informed my research. The collection, titled 'I am Still Bed Six', precedes my research and the research is arranged to mirror the layout of the poetry.

The first section of poetry is labelled 'Created for Sickness' and describes my experiences of illness. Just as the first chapter of my research explores my personal experiences, so too does this section of my poetry, as demonstrated by the fact that most of the poems in this section use the personal pronoun 'I'. The poems follow my journey from diagnosis through to the final poem 'Ankylosing Spondylitis: A Lesson' which summarises my experience and looks to a time when the pain will be over.

The second section is called 'Tortured by your Ghost' and describes various complex relationships and the painful feelings they inspire. I found this section particularly therapeutic to write. The majority of poems in this section are addressed to another person, using the personal pronoun 'you'. In the centre of this section is the

poem 'The Dancer' which stands alone in a pivotal position, as the way the dancer is 'tantalised by pain' reflects how my pain inspires me to write. The difficult emotions expressed in this section mirror the second chapter of my research which explores the experiences of participants in a therapeutic writing group and how they express painful emotions through therapeutic writing.

The third section is labelled 'So Many Words' and demonstrates how I have selected language to express complex experiences, both psychological and physical, just as Stevie Smith and Julia Darling have done, while the fourth section is called 'I Remember This' and seeks to bring the collection together as it closes, just as I seek to do in the conclusions in my fourth chapter.

My first chapter also explored the poetry I wrote when I was younger, and I noted that from a young age I had used poetry writing in a therapeutic manner. Writing poetry enabled me to explore emotions, communicate thoughts and make sense of my experiences. As I grew older, I also had an increasing awareness of audience and how my poems could affect other people.

As I described my experiences of writing poetry, I realised that poetry as therapy and poetry as art could not be mutually exclusive as I began by writing poetry as therapy but now produce art whilst still gaining therapeutic benefits from my writing. However, I was also aware that if my poetry was seen as being purely therapeutic, there was a risk that it would not be taken seriously as art. I was left with many questions at the end of my first chapter, which I hoped I would be able to answer in the following chapters.

### **4.3 Chapter Two: Analysis**

In my second chapter, I investigated the experiences of women who had suffered trauma and had never taken part in therapeutic poetry writing before. I facilitated a therapeutic poetry writing group, coming to the conclusion that therapeutic poetry writing is effective. It enabled the participants to process their emotions and reflect on the past, which led to the release and relabelling of difficult memories. Writing also helped them to slow down, reflect, and engage with their imaginations; this suggested the possibility of envisioning living in a different way, facilitating change.

Poetry is particularly beneficial because it uses language that can bypass the rational, connecting directly with the emotions and the imagination. Although participants did not experiment with other forms of therapeutic writing, they were

convinced they preferred poetry. Poetry allowed the use of symbols and metaphors, whereas diaries and letters were seen as too personal and quotidian. Writing a diary meant writing about things as they were; writing poetry meant writing about things as they could be.

I believe poetry is the best form of therapeutic writing. Flint suggests that poetry is often ‘written from the otherwise most difficult to reach parts of oneself and one’s world, in a process similar to the most effective therapy or analysis’ (Bolton et al. 106). My research demonstrates that poetry invites communication with both the self and others, communicating emotions and difficult experiences in a way that other types of writing do not.

I also came to the conclusion that poetry is particularly useful for dealing with trauma and emotional distress. Van der Kolk, Burbridge and Suzuki, discussing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), explain:

traumatic memories are retrieved as sensory and emotional representations, with impaired expression in communicable language. Failure to process information on a symbolic level... seems to be at the very core of pathology of PTSD.... It is important to help persons with PTSD find a medium in which they can come to understand and communicate their experiences (110)

DeSalvo notes that successful trauma processing requires linking both thinking and feeling (25) which poetry writing requires, and describes how medical doctors ‘have used metaphoric language effectively in the treatment of combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder... Metaphor seems especially useful with people who resist describing their experiences directly’ (166). In chapter one, I referred to a study (Gidron et al.) which researched the effect of therapeutic writing on people with PTSD, coming to the conclusion that it was unhelpful. Perhaps if they had been encouraged to write poetry rather than prose, the outcome might have been different.

Poetry writing accesses more spontaneous, less rational parts of the brain; areas where emotion is stored, in images and senses. Shapcott comments: ‘according to thinkers like Lakoff, metaphors actually structure the way we think. All this puts poetry right at the centre of our (bodily) experience’ (*Angels* Rees-Jones 216). The use of poetic language and metaphor can be vital therapeutically, circumnavigating blocks in the mind. Bolton and Latham write:

Metaphor, with its power of ‘metaphorical truth’ is not merely a poetic device, but an essential aspect of our mental and physical furniture, prior to thought; it is



the ‘open sesame’ to memories.... to play with metaphor in poetry writing harnesses the innate power of metaphor to connect with those memories and experiences which are unretrievable in other ways (117-118)

There are many other advantages to therapeutic poetry writing. Poetic form helps to organise chaotic thoughts and emotions while rhythm and rhyme allow the writer access to a deeper part of themselves. The ability to shape writing is also vital, providing power and autonomy over experiences. Constantine writes: ‘poetry asserts the hope of better. For there is no such thing as a nihilistic poem. Poets are makers; in the form of a poem, in beauty, they make sense’ (115).

There are also practical benefits, particularly when writing in a group. New skills can be learned and previously unknown ones identified. Meeting in a group and sharing difficult experiences through the medium of personal poetry can be very helpful. Skelton sees it in this light: ‘Poetry forces us to share the life of others at the deepest possible levels’ (*Truth* 117). I also wanted the practical applications of my findings to be useful for those looking to practise therapeutic poetry writing and I have explored in greater detail in chapter two the skills that such a facilitator would need.

#### **4.4 Chapter Three: Analysis**

In chapter three, I considered two professional poets, Stevie Smith and Julia Darling, who found a therapeutic element in their poetry writing. Both poets had been through difficult experiences; their poetry writing enabled them to deal with their struggles. Darling described poetry as keeping her ‘afloat’ (Fuller and Darling 11) while Smith described poetry as giving her ‘ease and relief’ (Spalding 197-198). Darling also wrote novels and plays, but she chiefly chose to explore her experience of cancer in her poetry, finding the experience empowering during a time she felt very powerless. She believed the language, rhythm and structure of poetry meant it was ideal for expressing difficult experiences.

However, I noted that very few contemporary professional poets are comfortable calling their writing therapeutic. They may want their poetry to stand alone, or may not wish to be seen as emotional amateur poets. I argued that this is particularly problematic for female poets, who have historically been seen as unduly emotional. Having carved out a place for themselves in contemporary poetry, female poets object to their poetry being conflated with their personal experience, fearing an adverse impact on their

work's reception. Greenlaw explains: 'In the past, quite naturally I have used what has been described as the controlled, detached "scientific" voice and I think partly I was concerned about allowing myself too much emotional space within my work' (*Angels* Rees-Jones 228-229).

When considering poetry writing as therapy and poetry writing as art, I concluded that there are some differences between writing poetry as art and writing poetry as therapy, but the two are also closer than they may originally appear. Both are concerned to some degree with both expressiveness and artfulness; however poetry as art is more concerned with artfulness, and sees expressiveness as subordinate, while poetry as therapy is more concerned with expressiveness and sees artfulness as subordinate.

There are various areas in which this can be seen. Poetry as therapy places writers closer to their work, and poetry as art places writers further away. Poetry as therapy means the writer explores their personal experiences and feelings in poetry to improve their emotional health, communicating with their own self. On the other hand, a poet seeking to create art is aware of a readership with whom they wish to communicate, who will also judge the poem's standard. There comes a stage of separation when the professional poet steps away from the poem.

However, poetry as therapy and poetry as art are not as far apart as they may originally appear. When working with the therapeutic writing group described in chapter two, one of the participants, Deborah, described how poetry 'belongs to other people'. While the writer of primarily therapeutic poems may not necessarily need to worry about the reception of their work, those who write therapeutically and wish to share their work are likely to be concerned about the reception of their work. The therapeutic writing group participants were concerned about the effect their work might have on others when it was published in an anthology. They also wrote for each other as well as for themselves. Being part of a group was important to them, and Claire said that she was writing for the group, knowing they would understand as they had shared experiences<sup>47</sup>.

If we consider form, the professional poet orders material very deliberately, to communicate powerfully, often through the use of form. Form would not necessarily be the primary concern of a poem written as therapy. Having said that, although the women in the therapeutic writing group tended to think that self-expression was more

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<sup>47</sup> 2.9, p.98-99

important than form when it came to writing about their experiences, that didn't mean that they thought form was unimportant, it was merely subordinate to other concerns.

Also, when considering redrafting, professional poets are likely to take their work through repeated drafts, aware of audience, and of a certain standard they wish to emulate. They may also feel that through repeated drafting, they understand both their work and themselves better. Those writing poetry as therapy, on the other hand, may feel that repeated drafting would take them further away from the authenticity of their experiences.

This is not to say that those writing therapeutically will not revise their work, as they certainly will revise to some degree. Deborah pointed out that the therapeutic writing group was not a writing class (D:424-426) and so stylistic improvement was not expected, but nonetheless the women understood the necessity of the work being clearly understood. While on the one hand, they did not want the poems so polished that the authenticity of the experience was lost, on the other hand, they allowed me to put punctuation and stanza breaks into the poetry when organising it for the anthology. By doing this, I retained the narrative but also made sure that it could be understood, and the women agreed with me doing this.

I also wanted to understand whether poems could be both therapeutic and acceptable as serious art, or if poetry as therapy and poetry as art were completely separate from each other. Robinson, as explored in the first chapter, believed that although the first part of writing is therapeutic, a secondary transformation is needed which he defines as 'experience transmuted-into-art' (79), before the poem could become 'art'.

However, I believe it is deceptive to divide poetry into therapy and art in this way. In the therapeutic writing group, the participants found their writing therapeutic whether they believed they were at the very beginning stages of writing a poem, or at the very end. They selected their words carefully in their therapeutic poetry, just as professional poets do. Putting together their poems into an anthology was also therapeutic for them, suggesting that therapeutic benefits are not only found in self-expression, but in other elements of writing too.

Similarly, professional poets do not generally consider the need to divide their poetry up into the 'therapeutic purging' part and the 'professional redrafting' part. Serviss, a Canadian poet, believes that it is not only the 'purging of the mind' that is therapeutic, but also the reworking of the poem (Bolton, Field and Thompson, *Routes* 55). I would agree, as in both elements one can lose one's self in the work, but I would

also question how far these two elements can be separated. Earlier in the chapter, Shapcott referred to the importance of metaphor, highlighting the fact that form may not be to do with revision, but may precede and inform all stages of composition.

Nevertheless, for a professional poet, there is, perhaps, a concern about the representation of ‘truth’ in therapeutic poems, and whether the language is subordinate to the experience, or the experience to the language. Poems written primarily for a therapeutic purpose are often based on an actual experience. Professional poets, if their poems are based on a real experience, often attempt to ensure the poetic representation is removed from the original experience through repeated redrafting. Latham speaks of the ‘agonising choice’ he sometimes faces with his poetry: ‘I can either write an inferior poem about a momentous episode in my life because truth must prevail at all costs, or I can write the best poetry I am capable of – thus honouring the experience – yet in so doing engage in some degree of dishonesty’ (Bolton and Latham 113).

Arguably, the therapeutic poet will generally choose ‘truth’ while a professional poet will choose to write the best poetry possible. As Hugo, a professional poet, writes: ‘The words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words. This may mean violating the facts’ (6). As a result, there will always be a degree of suspicion for professional poets about poetry written as therapy, not because of its ‘expressiveness’ but due to the question of its ‘artfulness’. A professional poet is perhaps less likely to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that a poem is therapeutic, for fear this may affect the view of its ‘artfulness’.

Poetry as therapy is therefore different from poetry as art, but not totally distinct. Both the professional poet and the therapeutic poet will often find the process therapeutic, and this therapeutic effect can be felt from the very beginning to the very end of writing a poem. As for each poem’s artfulness, the professional poet will most likely be more concerned with this than the therapeutic poet, as the professional poet will be willing to sacrifice ‘factual truth’ for the sake of art, whereas the therapeutic poet is less likely to do so. Nonetheless, to suggest the therapeutic poetry writer is not concerned with artfulness at all would be to do the writer a disservice. After all, originally I wrote poetry with a primarily therapeutic purpose, but learned to shape my work and would now consider myself a professional poet.

Perhaps it is more accurate to see poetry as therapy and poetry as art as being on a spectrum. Across the spectrum are poems written with far less artfulness and poems written with much greater artfulness, although even these categories are very open to interpretation. However, across this spectrum there is also a great variation in

expressiveness and therapeutic effect. This means that it is impossible to divide poetry strictly into art and therapy as some of the poems with greatest artfulness may have been very therapeutic for the poet to write, whilst other poems of great artfulness may not have been therapeutic at all. Seeing poetry as being on a spectrum in this way gives a greater flexibility to the way that it is considered.

#### 4.5 Final Thoughts

One final question, not fully explored, is why poets are prone to mental illness if poetry writing is therapeutic. Couzyn suggests poets are hypersensitive to the world around them, describing them as ‘people who don’t have walls’, adding: ‘I think that these walls are broken down in our society by pain, so that very often people with an unhappy childhood turn out to be like that... They don’t have the protection and the blindness that the walls offer. But you need blindness to survive in our society’ (Skelton *Calling* 177). My own experience fits with this description; my grandmother described me as missing an emotional layer of protection.

However, it is worth noting that while Felix Post discovered writers have far more psychiatric problems than the rest of the population, poets suffered least of all writers. He suggested this was due to the psychotherapeutic effect of ‘putting into harmonious and rhythmical language one’s own inner sufferings and distress in the concentrated form of the lyric poem’ (Bolton and Latham 115). Poets may suffer, but poetry helps them to deal with their inner turmoil; perhaps the very hypersensitivity causing them pain enables them to turn to poetry.

In our culture, there is a stigma attached to mental illness, leading to concern among serious poets that calling their poetry therapeutic puts their mental health in question. However, the idea of the ‘mad poet’ is alive and well. It is acceptable for the serious poet to say ‘If I didn’t write, I would go mad’, but at the same time, not acceptable to say ‘I find my poetry writing therapeutic’, although these two phrases are essentially the same. This is because the idea of the ‘mad poet’ is enshrined in UK poetry culture; Blake saw visions, Byron was ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’ while Keats was driven to distraction by obsessive love (Hudson). Joshua Mehigan points out: “‘Despondency and madness’<sup>48</sup> were the expectation before Wordsworth, and reached pandemic proportions in the twentieth century. Readers are disappointed by poets who

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<sup>48</sup> Wordsworth’s phrase ‘Despondency and Madness’ from his poem ‘Resolution and Independence’ (Wordsworth) described a phrase that preceded him

aren't at least a little mad' (Poetry Foundation). The 'mad poet' trope is familiar and historical, whereas writing poetry as therapy is new and suspect.

Of course, some poets believe that writing poetry is not therapeutic. Paterson warns of 'the interrogation of the unconscious' (Poetry Library) that takes place when writing poetry, arguing it is the worst thing to do. Skelton also highlights the problem of pushing the boundaries of the unconscious: 'The poet who continually and persistently attempts to explore the darker portions of the human psyche... is taking risks. We must, however, realise that the poet may not be able to help taking these risks... because of his lack of 'walls'' (*Calling* 179-180).

I agree that it is dangerous to explore the unconscious, although some poets cannot keep away from it. Having studied under Don Paterson, I learned to travel further into the unconscious and discovered it to be very dangerous for me. Andrew Brink argues writing can only be therapeutic 'if we use it... to recoup the nurturing we lost or to give ourselves the nurturing we never had. We can't use our work to persecute ourselves or others, to cling to our ills' (DeSalvo 176). Interrogating the unconscious, I would suggest, comes perilously close to persecuting the self.

However, when considering the whole of Paterson's lecture, his focus is on allowing poetry to become an art once again; for this reason he is deeply distrustful of 'chicken-soup anthologies full of lousy poems' and 'silly workshop exercises where you write a poem in the voice of your socks'. He actually concludes: 'Poetry is a wonderfully therapeutic thing to do at amateur level; but amateur artists and musicians don't think they should exhibit at the Tate, or play at the Wigmore' (Poetry Library). He suggests that writing poetry as therapy is very helpful, but that it is poetry that is art that should be made available to the public. Whilst there is certainly some truth to this, if poetry as therapy and poetry as art lie on a spectrum it is, perhaps, almost impossible to decide where the boundary lines should be drawn.

There is one final point to be made, however. Paterson may well never agree that the poetry writing process is therapeutic for the professional poet. Others may try writing poetry and not find it therapeutic. They may find painting more therapeutic, or exercise, or conventional talking therapy. People are not identical; not every person who tries writing poetry will find it therapeutic. However, I would argue that if more people were given the opportunity to write poetry, and particularly were given the chance to learn how to write therapeutic poetry in a supportive environment, many of them would be likely to find it helpful.

## Appendix A: Information Leaflet



### **A Guide to taking part in my PhD research: 'The Benefits of Using Poetry in Therapeutic Writing: A Study'**



Researcher:

Lindsay Reid, Newcastle University



Thank you for agreeing to take part  
in my research! Here are the details:

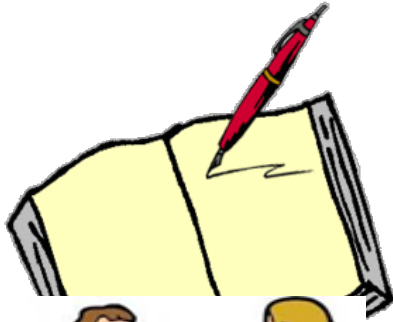


I am looking at whether writing poetry  
can help people with their emotions.



I will do this by running  
six sessions of creative  
writing between  
September and December

2013 in your group at  
[local charity].



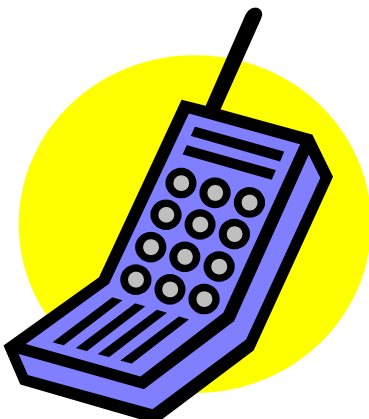
I will help you to write creatively during these sessions, and I will also ask you to fill in a questionnaire about your mood.



In the last session, I will interview you about your experience during the writing sessions.



When I write about my research, you will be anonymous (I won't use your name) and you can stop taking part at any time. However, **I will have to share some information** if I think that somebody is in danger of harm.

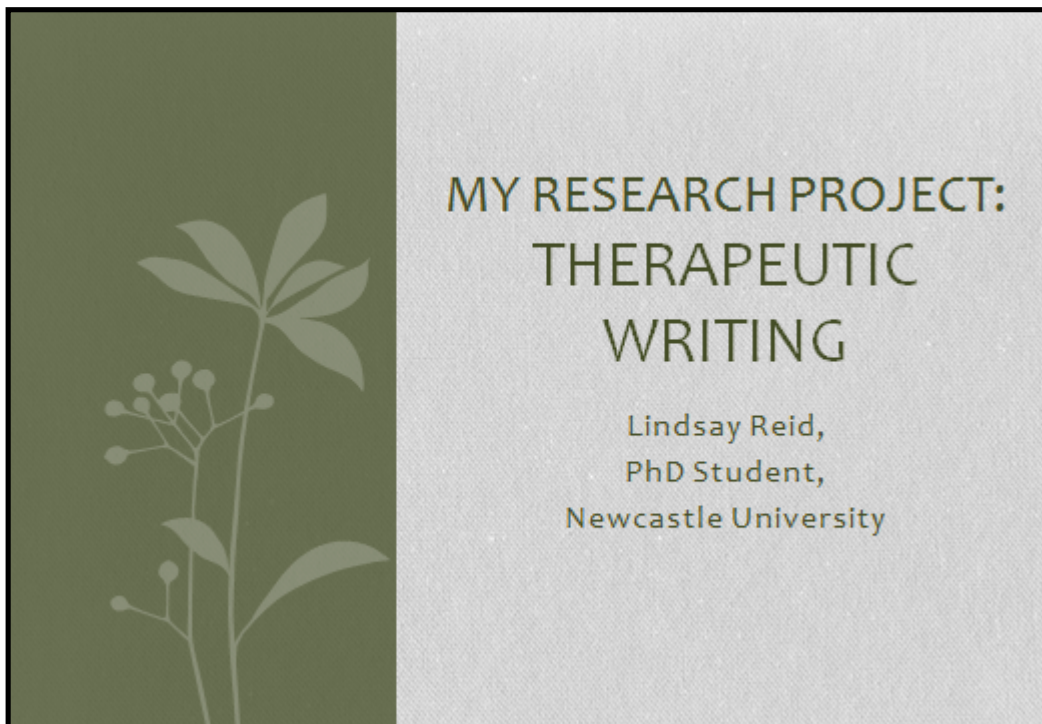


If you want to contact me, my email address is [l.reid@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:l.reid@newcastle.ac.uk), or staff at



[local charity] have my mobile telephone number.

**Appendix B:**  
**Research Presentation at Charity**



## **Who am I?**

- Lindsay Reid, a PhD Student at Newcastle University
- Studying Creative Writing
- First part of my PhD – My own creative writing
- Second part of my PhD – Research

## **Research into Therapeutic Writing**

- Can creative writing help people emotionally?
- I have done this work before and people have found it helpful
- Would you be interested in helping me with my research?

Let me tell you more...

## **What would happen?**

- Five writing sessions together
- Using exercises to create short written pieces (poems)
- Roughly 45 mins
- Sixth session - interview

## **The Therapeutic Writing Exercises**

- Don't be afraid about the exercises!
- Firstly: Not too hard
- Secondly: Not too deep
- An example of an exercise – writing about an emotion eg sadness



## Useful Things to Know

- You would be anonymous
- You can withdraw from the research at any time
- There are small risks involved
- Your writing is yours, not mine
- Some practicalities aren't sorted out yet – suggestions are welcome

**Any Questions?**

## Appendix C: Consent Form

**Participant Consent Form for 'The benefits of using poetry in therapeutic writing:  
A study'**

**Researcher: Lindsay Reid**

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _____.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been	<input type="checkbox"/>

	explained to me.	
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	I do not want my name used in this project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant                      Signature                      Date

**Researcher:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher                      Signature                      Date

## **Appendix D: Session Plan**

### **Plan for [local charity] Group**

#### **Session 1: Looking at my life**

(Have approximately an hour and a half. Split into two 40 min sections with a short break in between. Literacy prompt to support )

What I need to do:

- Bring: Folders, Pens, Paper, Literacy Prompts, Copies of poem, My Notes, (something large to write on?), Contracts

#### **Part 1) Introduction and My Hands**

- Welcome people; hand out folders; make sure everyone has paper and pens.

- Explain what will happen. There will be two halves to our meeting today, with a break in between. In each half, a talk about what we will be writing about, writing something down, and then sharing what we have written.
- Ground rules – listening to other people, respecting each other, spelling and punctuation don't matter, keeping quiet during the writing times, if someone shares written work, positive comments – not repeating outside room
- Ask about experiences of writing before. Brave. In this group, simply try and write the truth. Don't worry about rhyme (can distract from what you are trying to write). Try and be precise and specific. If you are talking about a bird, which bird? A robin? A seagull? Big difference. Try to show rather than tell.
- Just to start us off, I thought we could do a little exercise together. Today we'll be looking at repetition, and so we are going to write a little piece of writing together, starting each sentence with 'In this room'. Using the senses. See, hear, smell, touch – taste a bit more difficult! (Simple, truthful, specific, show don't tell, don't preach or try to be poetic).

## My Hands

- Explain the first exercise – look at repetition and patterning. Since managed first exercise together, give this a go. Know this sounds strange, but start thinking about your hands. Have a look at them. What do you see?

A man called Rilke once said:

*'Hands have a history of their own. They have indeed their own civilisation, their special beauty, their own wishes, feelings, moods, and favourite occupations.'*

Look at your hands – how much of your history can you see there? Look at distinguishing features, scars, calluses, knuckles, veins, nails, lines – think about the stories in your hands. What makes your hands different from other people's? What have your hands done? Complete the following:

My hands love...

My hands hate...

My hands wish...

My hands dream...

My hands remember...

Just to start you off with some ideas, I am going to read you a bit of a poem written by a lady called Carol Sanders (My Hands). A copy of whole poem I'll put on table.

- So, off you go. I have some sheets that I will give out to make it a bit easier, although you don't have to use them. We'll write for about 20 mins and then come back together. Try not to distract each other, although talking quietly is fine. If you need any help, just ask, and I'll do my best.

## **Part Two) Lost and Found**

Want you to think about things that you have lost in your life, but also things that you have found. They don't have to be big things, they can be small – you lost a pen, or you lost a button – or they can be big – you lost innocence, a friend, a pet, a member of the family, the ability to dance

The same for things that are found. They can be small like finding your gloves, or big, like finding happiness, a home, or friends. You can write about both together, or one or the other.

(Name six things you have lost in your life - innocence, a pet, a friend, member of family, ability to walk/write/draw/play the piano/dance, your temper, a race, a bet, a wager, freedom.

Name six things you have found in your life – happiness, contentment, a home, friends, money, peace of mind, a toy, gloves, a purse, a skill. )

Again, just to get you started, I will read you a very famous poem about losing things (One Art by Elizabeth Bishop). Listen to it, and see if you understand what the poet is saying. Try and listen to how she patterns her work – she moves from little things that get lost, like keys, to losing someone who was obviously very important in her life:

## **Appendix E: Literacy Prompt**

### **Literacy Prompt: Session Two**

#### **Part 1) The Furniture Game**

Think of someone you either love or despise.

Describe that person as if he/ she is....

First, write their name:

Then, describe them as a piece of furniture:

*(An old sofa? A cupboard holding secrets? A bookshelf with many shelves?)*

Next, describe them as a vehicle of some sort:

*(A speeding sport's car? A child's scooter? A rickety bus?)*



A sort of weather:

*(Stormy with dark clouds? Sunny and warm? A hurricane wind?)*

A type of landscape or place:

*(A wood? A field? A park? A railway station?)*

An animal:

*(A lion, hunting to kill? A robin? A slithering snake? A soft sleeping cat?)*

An emotion:

*(Anger? Happiness? Guilt? Anxiety?)*

## **Part 2) I am an animal**

Imagine you are an animal, bird, fish or insect.

What are you?

Where are you? What are you doing?

*(Are you hiding under a stone? Are you floating in a pond? Are you creeping along a leafy forest floor in the dark? Are you swinging from a tall tree in the rain forest? Are you flying above snow covered mountains?)*

Then think about what you see and what you are going to do?

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What do you taste?

What do you touch?

How do you feel? What do you think about yourself?

How will you end your piece of writing? Where does your animal end up?

## **Appendix F: Interview Draft**

### **Draft Interview for final session**

**Researcher: Lindsay Reid**

*There will firstly be a short period of time in which the interviewer makes the participant feel comfortable, showing the participant how the recorder works and asking some low intensity questions to familiarise them with the situation.*

*The areas identified below will serve as a guide to the researcher (the researcher will also have freedom to explore these areas outside the example questions):*

1. What was your favourite writing activity and why?
2. What was your worst writing activity and why?
3. Now that you've had a taste of therapeutic writing, what do you think about it?
4. Would you do therapeutic writing again? Why or why not?
5. Do you think that therapeutic writing helps you to deal with bad memories and difficult emotions? Why or why not?
6. Do you feel better or worse after these sessions? Why do you think that is?

7. Can you think of any way that you've changed, after doing these writing sessions?
8. When you look at what you've written in the sessions, how would you describe them?
  - a) Poems
  - b) Pieces of writing waiting to be turned into poems
  - c) My thoughts written down on paper
  - d) Something else (what?)
9. How do you think these sessions could be made better?
10. In most of these sessions, we have been working on poems, and not things like stories or diary entries. Do you think that is a good thing, or would you have preferred to try out other sorts of writing in this time?
11. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you think I should have done? Is there anything that you'd like to add to anything that you have said?

*The interviewer will conclude the interview by thanking the participant for their participation and reiterating the support available. They will also mention to the participants that they are welcome to a copy of the findings if they want them.*

## **Appendix G: Ethical Approval from Newcastle University**

Wendy Davison

To: Lindsay Reid

Cc: Cynthia Fuller

Inbox

15 August 2013 15:57

You replied on 21/08/2013 23:46.

Dear Lindsay

Thank you for your application for ethical approval of your project "The benefits of using poetry in therapeutic writing: A study". I confirm that Prof Andy Gillepsie has approved it on behalf of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Please note that this approval applies to the project protocol as stated in your application  
- if any amendments are made to this during the course of the project, please submit the revisions to the Ethics Committee in order for them to be reviewed and approved.

Kind regards,

Wendy

Wendy Davison

PA to Andy Gillespie (Faculty Research Co-ordinator)

Lorna Taylor (Deputy Head of Administration)

and Sue Mitchell (Research Funding Development Manager)

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Daysh Building

Newcastle University

Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU

Telephone: 0191 222 6349

Fax: 0191 222 7001

## **Appendix H: Permission from Charity**

### **Permission for research**

Local Charity [[localcharity]@gmail.com]

30 July 2013 12:37

To: Lindsay Reid

To Whom it May Concern

I confirm that Lindsay Reid has permission to carry out her research entitled 'The Benefits of using poetry in Therapeutic Writing: A Study' with service users of [local charity] who are fully informed about her research and are willing to participate.

Sue Matthews, B.A., B.Sc., Dip in Counselling, MBACP.

Counsellor

[Local Charity]

PO Box xxx,

Whitley Bay,

NE26 xxx

Tel: 0191 xxx xxxx

Email: [localcharity]@gmail.com

Website: [www.\[localcharity\].co.uk](http://www.[localcharity].co.uk)

## **Appendix I: Group Poetry Anthology 'Unheard Voices' Text**

### **About the writing group**

*There are five of us: Beth, Anna, Claire, Deborah and Lindsay. We all met regularly to write, using exercises provided by Lindsay. This time gave us a chance to think and reflect, and to explore and understand our feelings better. We also turned some difficult experiences into truthful and honest poems, which we have gathered together in this booklet. The poem below 'In This Room' is the very first poem we wrote together:*

### **In This Room**

In this room there is:

A piano    a table    a sofa    chairs    lights,

White walls    posters    white doors,

                    Brown carpets    a first aid box,

                    A cupboard    cups and a kettle,

And cushions.

In this room there is a piano that makes me  
Wants to play music  
Or at least learn to.  
In this room cups of tea are being made.  
In this room is a pink cushion  
Covered in sweets  
And looking at it makes me  
Hungry for jelly babies.

In this room there is one picture I made  
And one that I helped with.  
In this room hangs a tree picture  
That people have made and it  
Makes me feel like being outside  
On a warm summer's day.

In this room there is a ball of red wool.

In this room we met  
In this room there is friendship  
In this room we are meeting  
In this room there is a family.  
In this room there are five people  
Ready to write.  
We will meet.

In this room there are people  
Coming and going  
Hopes  
And things we want to forget about.  
In this room we can hear  
People moving about outside.

In this room there is a bright lamp.  
In this room there is a big window.  
In this room we can see the sky.

By Claire, Anna, Beth, Deborah and Lindsay  
A Group Poem

## **My Hands Poems**

### *My Hands*

My hands love my rings  
When I put them on  
They fit so snugly  
Against my skin.

My hands hate the scars  
That I have got over the years.  
Some tell a story  
Of being young and silly.

My hands wish  
That they could hold

My little boys again.

My hands dream

Of one day

They could hold a wedding ring

Ready to put on the person.

My hands remember

The first time

They held my first boy.

By Anna

### *My Hands*

My hands love

Cuddles, holding and feeling,

Washing and cleaning with them.

My hands hate

Hurting, soreness and crying.

My hands wish

For magic dreams

For life being better,

For hopes and happiness,

And things going right.

My hands dream



Of a better life  
And a change  
To better circumstances  
And better situations.

My hands remember  
Grief, loss, anger,  
Sadness, loneliness,  
Crying, broken heart,  
Devastation, emptiness,  
Life so sad and not fair,  
Wickedness, unfair world,  
No justice.

By Claire

### *My Hands*

My hands I was born with,  
My hands I get washed with,  
My hands I learned to draw and play with.

My hands I went to school with  
Where I learned to write and add with.

My hands I handle my newborn children with.  
My hands I pat a baby with  
To bring up wind and make a nappy with.

My hands hold a small child's hands.  
My hands I made meals with  
And cooked family meals with.

My hands I dressed with.  
My hands I dressed my children with  
And plaited their hair with.

My hands I prayed with  
When my children  
Were taken away.

My hands I hold books and letters with.  
My hands I walked a dog with.  
My hands I bathed a dog with.

My hands I've helped kittens being born with.  
My hands I've given kittens their first food with.

By Beth

### *My Hands*

My hands love warming up in the evening  
When we sit together after a busy day  
Next to the fireplace.

My hands hate being cold.

My hands wish they could wipe out all tears.

My hands remember a baby's soft skin,  
A grandmother's wrinkles  
And dad's stubble.

My hands remember heavy bags,  
Pushchair dragged through the city,

Teeth biting in silence,  
And friend's hands gently  
Put on my hands.

By Deborah

## **Lost and Found Poems**

### *Lost and Found*

I lost myself going to school every day,  
Coming here every day to the same abuse,  
Day in, day out, bullying at school,  
To shouting at home.

I found myself when I handled  
My beautiful baby girl  
For the first time,  
As I was a mother.

I lost my babies and lost myself  
All over again.  
Now the bullying started again  
From people with the rights

To take away your life.

I found a job  
Away from everything  
In a village seaside place.

I lost a job there,  
But found a friend I had forever –  
Now it feels like that.

I lost my cat  
And found a dog.

I lost my home  
And found a new house  
But it was never home  
As home needs a family

And I lost my family  
But I found my pets.

By Beth

*Lost*

I lost my best friend  
A few years ago.  
We were best mates.

We used to go  
Nearly everywhere  
Together.

I lost my three boys  
Two years ago,  
Who I loved very much  
And miss so much.

I lost my mam  
Who died on 8<sup>th</sup> March  
This year.

I have lost cards  
And money  
Over the years.

I have lost three uncles  
Over a matter  
Of three years.

And I lost my nana.

I stayed with her  
When I was a child.  
When I was young  
I liked staying there  
Every weekend.

It used to be great fun  
And my sister and cousin  
Used to stay too.

We used to laugh  
And carry on as kids.

They were all great times  
And something  
To look forward to.

By Claire

### *Things I found*

I found my son's first teddy  
Tucked away in the toy box.  
This little teddy was all alone  
Without his best friend  
To snuggle up to him  
And keep him warm.

I found a new home  
With lots of big rooms  
So my boys would have  
Lots of room to play.

I found my love.  
I found my friends.  
I found my son's dummy.  
I found four perfect boys.

And inside myself:  
I found friendship.  
I found trust.  
I found hope.  
I found love.  
I found hate.  
And I found sadness.

By Anna

### *Lost and Found*

I've lost a mobile phone,  
House keys, a book,

I've lost my dad,  
A friend, and a corner  
Where we used to play together  
So small, so happy, so naïve.

I've found you and this house.  
I've found people around me.  
I've found new keys, a new phone,

But I'm still looking  
For a lost track and a train;  
The one that would take me there –  
To a place called home.

By Deborah

## **Animal Poems**

### *I am a cat*

Not a fat lazy yawning cat  
Purring happily on your map  
Content with the fireplace lit up.

But also not a playful little thing  
Running in a circle  
Trying to catch a fake mouse.



Oh no.  
I'm both of them.  
I hide. I run. I go. I sleep. I dream.  
I see you  
But you cannot see me.

I hear you moving,  
Coming, trying to get me.  
Oh, you poor silly thing,  
Happy with your victories,  
Not knowing that I come and go  
When I please,  
Letting you catch me  
When I want.

I am a cat.  
What are you?

By Deborah

### *Dolphin*

Lost in the cold, big sea,  
Trying to find my pod of dolphins.  
Floating and swimming  
On the top of the sea,  
Searching long and wide,  
Day and night.

In the dark, cold sea,  
All alone and sad,  
Afraid of never finding my pod.  
Seeing a glimpse

Of something –  
Was that them?

Smelling the sea  
And longing for them –  
The salt sea of tears  
Of never seeing them again.  
Smelling the long cold sea,  
And other creatures.

Tasting the fish around me  
And longing to share  
The meal with others.  
Touching the sea as I slap the water.  
Feeling sad and alone  
Longing to be with my pod.

Waiting to be together again  
As we always should have been  
And never apart.  
Always searching  
Until the day we're all together  
In one big pod.

By Beth

*I am an animal*

*What are you?*  
I am a bird.

*What do you see?*  
Many colours.

*What do you hear?*  
Loud noises. Quiet noises.  
Jumping noises and tweeting sounds.

*What do you smell?*

Food. Fresh air.

*What do you taste?*

Sweet treats. Nice things.

*How do you feel?*

Upset. Angry.

But also happy.

*Where are you now?*

Sitting in a tree

Somewhere quiet

Listening to the world

In a happy bubble

As the world goes by.

By Claire

### *My Dolphin*

I am a dolphin swimming

In the deep blue sea –

That's where I live with my family,

And I am one year old.

I like playing with all types of fish.

They are fun.

And sometimes I go off on my own to swim

And see what I can find,

And after a little while

I can hear my mam calling me  
To come home  
As I am only a young pup.

When I eat my favourite food  
I can taste the salt in the sea.  
I feel free, as when I get older  
I can stay away for a longer time  
And go to my favourite place  
Which is with my mum, safe and snug.

When I go swimming, I can feel the cold sea  
Rushing against my skin.  
Sometimes the sea is very rough  
And I don't like it.  
When I go swimming  
I can see lots of different fish.

By Anna

## **Poems Describing People**

### *A Description*

He is like a solid table  
With all those massive chairs around.  
A table that you cannot really live without;  
A table so essential for a place called home.

He is like a misty, foggy morning,  
Hiding its secrets.  
Not revealing its promises

Or disappointments  
Waiting for you ahead.

And he's like an open land  
A quiet moor,  
Windy and sunny at once,  
Or like a peaceful sea  
Bringing hope, dreams  
And a mystery.

By Deborah

*Who is he?*

A bookshelf with many stories hiding.  
A cupboard, keeping himself locked away.  
A wooden table – solid but emotionless.  
A race car – always in a hurry.  
A hurricane; always moody, and changing fast.  
A wood – never finding him, always lost.  
A fox, secretive, crafty, lonely, shy.  
Anger – always moody and sad.

By Beth

## **Picture Postcard Poetry**

### *A Picture Postcard*

*What can you see in the picture?*

Calm sea. Water. Waves. Cliffs.

Wind. Sky. Thunder. Rocks.

*What does the picture show?*

A coast. A sea front.

*Is there a story in the picture?*

Could be. Danger on the rocks.

*Describe the colours.*

Blue. Grey. Blackness.

*Does it remind you of anything?*

The seaside.

*How do you feel when you look at this picture?*

Good times and happiness

But also sadness.

*Who might be there?*

Lifeguards. People. Families.

*What do you think is just outside the picture?*

Cliffs –

Take care near the water

And on rocks.

By Claire

### *A Picture Postcard*

*What can you see in the picture?*

I look at the postcard.

I can see people lying on the beach.

*Is there a story in the picture?*

The people are talking, reading,

Maybe dreaming, perhaps waiting,

Or just enjoying this moment

Of sheer joy.

*Does it remind you of anything?*

I look at the picture

And see my parents  
A long time ago, in another era,  
In a forgotten time,  
When they used to hold hands  
And ran through the sea  
Splashing the water  
All around them.

*How do you feel when you look at this picture?*

For a moment  
I feel like a child again,  
Sand and wind on my face  
Building a sandcastle  
As big as my dad.

*If you were there, what would you be doing?*

I don't play.  
I just sit there,  
Watching them.  
I can taste salt.  
Now in plain sight  
Yet hidden.

By Deborah

### *A Picture Postcard*

*What can you see in the picture?*

Old town buildings and a church  
At the end of the road.

*What does the picture show?*

It's a cold rainy night  
And a full moon is shining  
In a cloudy sky.

*Is there a story in the picture?*



People dressed in old fashioned clothes,  
In black suits and top hats,  
Are going home from their busy work life;  
In horses and coaches  
Are taking lovers out on their dates.

*Describe the colours and shapes.*

Dark and gloomy  
Squares and triangles,  
Bricks and half windows,  
A cold, wet and lonely night.

*Does it remind you of anything?*

Newcastle Central Station.

*How do you feel when you look at this picture?*

I think of home in an odd way.

*Who might be there?*

Elegant ladies dressed  
In old-fashioned elegant dresses,  
Dressed up for a ball.

*If you were there, what would you be doing?*

I would be dancing,  
Listening to the music playing,  
Sweet smells puffing everywhere.

*What do you think is just outside the picture?*

Another set of buildings –  
I think this is important  
As you don't know what is  
Around the next street corner.

By Beth

## **Journey Poems**

### *My Journey*

I would need my thick fluffy coat  
To keep me warm and cosy.

I would need my best pair of jeans  
As they're warm

And a woolly, floppy-necked jumper  
To hide in when things got bad.

I would need my boots  
To keep me going.

I would need some bread and tuna  
And a big jar of mayo for sandwiches  
And a basket of fruit.  
I would need a travelling bottle of water  
And a hob burner for hot drinks  
And chocolate for hot chocolate.  
I would need my two big dogs, Rose and Angel,  
As I couldn't leave them behind.

We would fly through the area  
Collecting all my children,  
And go to a castle to live in.  
We would have servants  
Seeing to our every need,  
And live as one big happy family  
With no-one telling us  
What we can and can't do.

We will paint and draw  
And play hide and seek around the castle,  
And roller-blade through the many halls  
And have picnics in the many gardens.  
We will dance and sing  
And have great balls to dance in.  
We will live life to the full  
With no rules.

By Beth

### *My Journey*

I will need a list of things  
To prepare to take with me.  
On that list would be  
All sorts of usual stuff  
You take on a journey:

Socks, trousers, soap  
And toothbrush,  
Something to keep me warm  
And light things to cool me down.

I may need a map  
To remember my way home.  
Definitely a few books, photos  
And old postcards.

Letters from the children  
And their silly gifts  
A stone and  
An empty shell  
Found in the garden.  
A necklace made of sweets.

I would sit and plan  
Where I would go,  
What I would see,  
But then I would have to  
Pack them all:

My little one  
With her curly hair,  
My son with his blue eyes  
Full of wonder,

Then their dad  
Would have to jump in  
To make sure  
We don't get lost.  
And I suppose  
I couldn't really leave  
The dog.

Oh my goodness!  
And they would all take things  
And stuff you usually need

For a journey...

Socks, trousers, soap

And a toothbrush,

Something to keep them warm

And light things to cool them down....

And it would get dark outside

And the fireplace would be lit

In my living room...

So – let's stay home...

Let's stick to the list,

Make it long

And go for a dreamy journey

Home.

By Deborah

### *My Journey*

I will need:

Support

Help

Comfort

Clothing

Food

Attention

Happiness

Loving

Caring

Music to listen to  
Something to pass the time of day  
Friends  
Family  
Relatives  
Hobbies to keep me busy  
Walks  
Day time  
Night time  
Adventures  
Daily routines.

By Claire

## **I don't like it: Group Poem**

Some of us have social workers.

I don't like it when social workers say to me:

*This is how to fetch your children up.*

*We are removing your children from your care.*

*Oh, didn't we tell you when the contact is to see your children?*

I don't like it when social workers say to me:

*I'm afraid your children don't want to see you.*

*You will see your boys when they are older.*

*I don't have a crystal ball to see into the future.*

And I really don't like it when people say to me:

*Perhaps you should have done more.*

Some of us come from a different country.

I don't like it when taxi drivers say to me:

*Why don't you speak to your children in English?*

*(I want to say Do you know another language?*

*If you did, perhaps you would use it to speak to your children.)*

I don't like it when teachers say to me:

*You can't go and see your family in a different country for Christmas*

*because the children will miss school.*

*I understand but I really cannot agree...*

*(I want to say Do you really understand? I don't think so...)*

I don't like it when teachers say to me:

*You can't be late to school with one child*

*because another child is ill. You must be on time next time.*

*(I want to say Do you know what it's like to be in a strange country*

*with no support from family? What would you do in my shoes?)*

Some of us see doctors:

I don't like it when doctors say to me:

*You're looking well.*

*(I want to say I feel terrible)*

I don't like it when doctors say to me:

*Are you sure your pain is that bad?*

*(I want to say Of course I'm sure! That is why I've come to see you!)*

I don't like it when doctors say to me:

*Often we don't find out why someone is in pain.*

*(I want to say But isn't that your job?)*

All of us are human:



I don't like it when people say to me:  
*Your hair's looking messy, as always.*  
*You've put on weight.*  
*You're not pregnant again, are you?*

I don't like it when people say to me:  
*You never learn anything anyway.*  
*You're always wasting money on rubbish.*  
*You break everything you touch.*

I don't like it when people say to me:  
*You lose everything anyway.*  
*You could never do that.*  
*You'll never change.*

And I really don't like it when people say to me:  
*God never gives you more than you can bear.*  
*It all gets better with time.*  
*Look on the bright side...*

By Claire, Anna, Beth, Deborah and Lindsay  
A Group Poem

## **'I wake at night' Poems**

### *A Fear Poem*

I wake up at night in the dark -  
But I have the hall light on  
So it is not too dark.  
I am afraid of the dark.

I woke from a bad dream.  
The night is long  
And I lie there thinking

Of what ifs.

I think of the dream  
I just had. It was horrible  
And I realise it was similar  
To my true life.

*In the dream  
I was taking money  
Out of the metro ticket machine  
And someone phoned the police*

*And I got told that  
As I was taking the money  
A baby was getting hit by my arm  
And died.*

*Then this was in the newspapers  
And I was going for lawyers  
And getting told  
I was getting life in prison.*

I lie there thinking  
I have got life in prison.  
My own prison  
Of loneliness and loss.

Not knowing my children  
Who are taken from me  
For life –  
That is my sentence.  
A life sentence of sadness  
And wanting something  
I can't have. Longing for  
My babies, my children.

By Beth

*A Fear Poem*

I wake at night –  
No, that's not true.  
To wake up, you have to be asleep  
And I haven't closed my eyes  
For a second yet.

I'm staring at my mobile phone.  
I check it again and again.  
Nothing. No text. No call.  
Where are you?

What kind of stupid silly  
Irresponsible thing  
Have you done this time,  
My little brother?

Too big, too grown-up,  
Too far away now  
For me to run and  
Make everything right.

I text you again.  
I try to call you again.  
Stupid, useless phone.  
It's night. Another night.  
How many more?

By Deborah

### *I Wake at Night*

*What has woken you?*  
Noises. Sounds. Winds.

*How are you feeling?*  
Sadness? Happiness? Tears on my face.

*What are you thinking about?*  
My children. Loving and caring for them.

*What will you do?*  
I will have to cope, and bear up.

I will have to handle things.

*What is it like in the room where you lie?*

Some light. Some darkness.

Tonight there is some light.

By Claire

### **‘And You -? What should I give you?’ Poems**

*What I would give*

And you, my boys,  
What should I give you?  
All the love in the world  
And a big hug  
To let you know  
I am still here;  
And lots of good things  
For you all  
To have lots of fun with;

A magic key  
Which can unlock  
All the things  
That you dream about;  
And I will give you a man  
That is willing to give you  
Love and care  
And strong arms to hold you  
When you are feeling down;  
And a safe home  
For you to come back to.

But what can I say?  
I would give you my life  
If it made you happy.

By Anna

### *Love Poem*

And you, my children?  
What should I give you?

I would give you  
Happiness, gifts,  
Sweets and treats,  
And stability.

I would give you  
Magical powers  
If I could.

I would give you  
Friendship.  
I would share things  
With you.  
We would be there  
For each other.

By Claire

## **First Line Poems**

*(Poems where we took the first lines of popular stories or poems and made them our own)*

*I have done it again*

I have done it again.  
Left money at home. Lost my credit card.  
Left my car keys in the car. Locked in.

Forgot about boiling eggs until  
The point when I heard them

Cracking. Quite loudly.

Not to mention losing my glasses  
(How can you find them  
If you can't see without them?)

Putting on different socks in the morning  
And adding sugar to your coffee  
(Thirteen years of marriage –  
Really, I should remember by now  
How you take your coffee)

But I'm so glad it was you  
I chose to survive it all,  
All those years long ago,  
My dear, patient, saint almost  
Husband.

By Deborah

### *I have done it again*

I made mistakes in the past  
And will make some in the future.  
I learnt from some, and some I haven't.

I learnt from really hard situations  
That I have to deal with in life,  
Finding the strength to carry on  
And move on from them.

People wish a lot of stuff  
Hadn't happened,



But when it has happened  
It is hard to get over.  
It is hard to cope with  
And come to terms with.

Life changes can affect people  
In all different situations.  
Depression. Sadness. Crying.  
Some people cannot  
Cope with them.

Some people look for shoulders  
To cry on but sometimes  
Nobody's there and they  
Have to deal with them  
On their own.

By Claire

### *God help me*

The big house was still,  
Almost empty.

That was the day  
The big house got broken.

No more fun  
No more laughter  
No more happiness  
No more family.

That was the day  
The social worker came  
And took my boys away.

God help me  
To stay strong  
For my boys  
And for them  
To come looking for me  
When they are older.

God help me to try  
And make the most  
Out of each day.

God help me to try and overcome  
The horrible feelings that I have.

God help me to find some peace  
God help me to find some hope  
God help me to find some goodness  
God help me to find some happiness.

God help me  
To find  
The real me.

By Anna

### *Home Birth*

All the way to the hospital  
I was in labour with my second child.

All the way to the hospital  
In an ambulance.

At the hospital, I had to wait around  
Then I was strapped to the bed  
With heart monitors, and told to be still.

They sent me home on the bus.  
A long, winding road.

All the way home again,  
Having been told  
I was not in labour.  
Take some painkillers.

All the way home, in pain,  
On a long, bumpy, winding road.

All the way home –  
It seemed like hours  
On that bus, in labour.

And then – home.  
Pain gets stronger.  
Another ambulance comes.

I'm lying on the bed  
In extreme pain.

I am told again  
*You are not far enough*  
*In labour – you could*  
*Be hours yet.*

Then I'm being told  
To stand up and I  
Am put on a stretcher,  
To go to hospital again.

But then I am told  
*Sorry, we can't take you*  
*To hospital –*  
*Your baby's head is there.*  
*We have to deliver here.*

All that pain  
And all that pushing

With no painkillers.

All the time, the front door  
Opens and closes  
As family come and go,

And I am lying  
At the end of the hall  
Having my baby girl.

As soon as she comes  
Into this world she is taken  
To the sitting room for warmth.  
No cuddles from me,  
Her mammy.

But all the way back to the hospital  
In the ambulance – this time  
With baby too.

By Beth

## **Emotion Poems**

### *Anger*

Anger is dark red, nearly black.  
It tastes of bitter wine  
And smells like rotten apples  
Next to go black.  
Anger looks a fire, full burning,  
Or a loud, fast train  
Going through a tunnel.  
Anger is like feeling hot,  
When you can't think straight.

By Beth

### *Happiness*

Happiness is pink and smells of roses.  
It tastes of sweet fudge.  
It looks and sounds like children playing,  
And it feels warm and loving.

By Beth

### *Sadness*

Sadness tastes like black coal,  
It looks like a black hole,  
Filled with the sounds of silence.  
No-one is there.  
It feels like loneliness  
And no-one getting through to you.

By Beth

### *Love*

Love is the colour deep red  
Because love is in my blood.  
  
Love tastes like all the things that are sweet  
That tingle on your tongue.  
  
Love smells like a bed of roses,  
Inviting me to lie there forever.  
  
Love looks like the best thing you have ever seen,  
Which to me is my four boys.

By Anna

### *Embarrassment*

Embarrassment tastes like an old lemon  
Bitter and salty  
Overwhelmingly horrible.  
It's grey and green and yellow.

Looks like an elephant  
Who is too big, or a bear,  
Trying to hide in the middle  
Of an empty room,

While breathing so loudly  
That it cannot hear its own thoughts.  
Praying it will disappear  
Asking for a miracle to happen –

It just stands there  
Big, naked and embarrassed.

By Deborah

### **'Taliesin' Poems**

*Taliesin was a Welsh poet who developed this kind of poem.*

### *I Have Been*

I have been alone, trying to find myself.  
I have been a mother to my siblings, my half-brother and sister.  
I have been a cook and a cleaner for my mum.  
I have been a rebel, taking sweets from shops.  
I have been a baby, a child, a teenager,  
I have been a daughter, and a big and little sister.  
I have been loved and hated as a child.

I have been sad and alone in houses full of people.  
I have been a friend, a singer around them,  
I have been a grandchild, a great-grandchild,  
I have been a cousin and a niece,  
I have been an aunty, a mam,  
I have been a lover, a girlfriend,  
I have been an artist and painted pictures.  
I am Beth.  
All these things I have been.

By Beth

### *I Have Been*

I have been alone up in my tree  
Thinking of all the mischief I can get up to.

I have been a rebel, not wanting to go to school  
As I thought it was pointless.

I have been a carer  
Looking after my younger sister and brother.

I have been a mam  
Looking after my three boys.



I have been alone again  
In the dark.

I have been to hell  
And back again.

I am Anna.  
All these things I have been.

By Anna

### *Taliesin*

I have been an angel,  
Blue eyes, curly hair,  
Dad's little kitty,  
Eager to please everyone.

I have been a teacher, or an artist,  
Painting the most beautiful pictures  
And creating music  
That would make people cry.

I have been a writer,

Taking others on adventures.

I have been full of wonder and mystery,  
Definitely famous, and very rich.

I have been a saviour of the world,  
Helping hand to all,  
Having remedies for all pains,  
And brilliant ideas  
That would solve all problems.

I have been a traveller,  
Discovering the world  
And the hearts of people.

I have been a disappointment  
When I couldn't be what I hoped.

I have been a mum and a wife,  
Changing nappies, cooking,  
Shopping, washing,  
Soothing tears, brushing teeth,  
Laughing so loudly, and dreaming.

I have been myself,  
Looking forward to a warm pillow,  
Good book, and the next day.

I am Deborah.  
All these things I have been.

By Deborah

### **‘Go and Open The Door’ Poems**

#### *Go and Open The Door*

Go and open the door.  
There is a great big world out there.

Go and open the door  
To let the fresh air in,  
So that I can smell the freshness.

Go and open the door,  
Just to see what is there –  
Maybe fields of green and yellow

Or maybe brown.

Go and open the door.  
There could be something  
Just for you, out there.

Go and open the door  
To see the birds high in the sky.

Go and open the door  
To see if it's sunshine or rain.

Go and open the door  
And let me in.

Go and open the door  
To let my love in.

Go and open the door  
To your happiness.

Go and open the door  
To let the bad things out.

By Anna

*Go and Open The Door*

Go and open the door. Go on.  
Somebody has been knocking.  
It could be important.  
Get up. Move.

But the pillow is soft.  
The blanket is so warm.

One. Two. Three.  
Up you go.

No.

Knock. Knock.

Go away. Whoever you are.  
I don't want leaflets, post, packages,  
Gas meters checked, new boilers,  
Or whatever else you have there.  
Go. On your way.  
I want my dream back.

Bang. Bang.

Get up. Go.  
He's still there. Waiting.  
It could be the person  
You're waiting for.  
Go. Go and open the door.

But the way seems to be so long.  
One step. Two steps.  
Put the dressing gown on.  
The slippers on.  
Look in the mirror.  
Do something with your hair.

Bang. Bang.

Alright. I'm coming.  
Keys. Handle.  
Open the door.

Nobody there.  
I missed it.  
No.

There he is.

Closing the gate.

Wait!

Thoughts are galloping in my heart.

Wait.

I've opened the door.

Please come in.

The day has just begun.

By Deborah

### *Go and open the door*

Go and open the door to the world of the unknown,

Go and open the door to a bright sunny day,

Full of options for you.

Go and open the door to a cold and lonely day

When you don't want to go out,

And close the door to the cold.

Go and open the door to a windy day

Where anything could happen.

Go and open the door to the snow  
Where your children are waiting to play.

Go and open the door to rain  
Where your tears fall,  
To happy children  
You longed to see a lifetime ago.

Go and open the door to a warm, loving day,  
When grandchildren await you.

Go and open the door to Christmas day,  
With a house full of love  
And family everywhere –  
Your daughters, your sons,  
Your granddaughter and grandson.

Go and open the door to a hot sunny day,  
To your happy ending  
With love all around you.

By Beth

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