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Literary Transformations and Women Who Rewrite
&
Within the White Whale

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Submitted for the degree of PhD in Text, Practice as Research

Division of Arts & Humanities

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UNIVERSITY OF KENT

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Abstract

A literary transformation, simplified, is a rewriting of an existing piece of literature such as a novel, a poetry collection or a work of non-fiction. This is a genre of growing popularity, in particular with a focus on contemporary female authors rewriting ancient Greek mythology. This thesis examines these acts of rewriting. The products of this process have been termed 'literary transformations' as a result of the scattered terminology surrounding this creative act. In order to better understand the creative decisions that take place during the literary transformation process, two texts are analysed alongside my own creative literary transformation. The two texts selected were Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, a rewriting of Homer's *Iliad*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey*. Three translations have been used for each of Homer's epics in order to eliminate any potential bias from a singular translator. The analysis aims to evaluate the faithfulness, innovation and alternative points-of-view present within each of these literary transformations. From *Memorial* we learn that literary transformations can occur across language barriers, whilst *The Penelopiad* teaches us that literary transformations can emerge from a desire for representation. Similarly, my own practice demonstrated that literary transformations can be exceedingly personal and vulnerable to change as the conditions in which they are being written change. The creative component of this thesis is a literary transformation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, where each chapter has been rendered into a prose poem with the aid of found poetry techniques. Overall, rewriting is an excellent way to engage both critically and creatively with historical works of literature, providing the author with writing constraints and found material. For the reader, a literary transformation provides alternative points-of-view to challenge their current perception of the original text and the opportunity to enjoy an expansion of the original work. However, the genre is not without its practical concerns. In response, topics such as copyright, cultural appropriation, and access and participation barriers have been explored in this thesis. There is a wealth of possibilities present in the practice of creating literary transformations and we have only scratched the surface of what can be achieved through this medium.

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Table of Contents

Within the White Whale.....	6
Chapter 1: Literary Transformations	156
1.1 Defining Literary Transformations.....	156
1.2 The Feminist Tradition of Rewriting.....	158
1.3 Contemporary Women Rewriting Greek Mythology	161
1.4 Rewriting Through Found Poetry.....	165
1.5 Purpose of Thesis	167
Chapter 2: Alice Oswald & <i>Memorial</i>	168
2.1 Introduction	168
2.2 Homer’s Similes	172
2.3 Homer’s Laments	179
2.4 Erasing Heroism.....	186
2.5 Transformation Through Translation	189
Chapter 3: Margaret Atwood & <i>The Penelopiad</i>	194
3.1 Introduction	194
3.2 Rediscovering Penelope	196
3.3 The Real Housewives of Greek Mythology	205
3.4 Giving Voice to a Chorus of Maids.....	213
3.5 Atwood and Feminist Rewriting	221
Chapter 4: Rewriting <i>Moby-Dick; or, The Whale</i>	226
4.1 Why Write a Literary Transformation.....	226
4.2 The Fascinating History Behind <i>Moby-Dick</i>	228
4.3 Transforming <i>Moby-Dick</i> into a Prose Poetry Collection	232
4.4 The Influence of Mental Health Issues.....	237
4.5 An Alternative Ahab	241
4.6 Reflections for Next Time.....	244
Chapter 5: The Future of Literary Transformations	247
5.1 Copyright & Language of Theft.....	247

5.2 Cultural Appropriation	250
5.3 Encouraging Rewriting.....	253
Bibliography.....	257

Within the White Whale

A literary transformation of Herman Melville's novel

Moby-Dick; or, The White Whale

I

nightly I find myself wandering into dreams crowded by water gazers
fixed in ocean reveries watching trying to scratch that ever-lasting itch
for all things remote for anywhere but here while locked away growing
grim about the mouth hazy about the eyes over-conscious of my lungs
wanting waves to wash reason away having been told I can only be
virtuous or mad and I am irrevocably the latter a high tragedy forecasted
to knock people's hats off except whenever I find myself standing upon
that weather-worn pier ogled by those lulling dead eyes I panic thinking
there must be another way ahead so like hector I run from certain death
until a wrong step the creak of a plank throws me stumbling forward
into consciousness waking to silence splashed in three am streetlight

II



days elapse catching glimpses of gods within sparse rays of sunlight sifting in through unwashed apartment windows while waiting for imaginary dandelion and marigold fields to sprout beneath bare feet only fortune so rarely allows it when sky and clouds alike mock me adamant in reminding me I am stranded here a foreigner trapped on this famous old island while euroclydon howls and groans freely probing tenacious daisies poking up through cracks in concrete for my eyes keep drifting to cracks I might one day press myself through first a finger then a hand perhaps even an elbow in an attempt to escape the onslaught of news those blaring reports on politicians who neglect to inquire about lazarus's pandemic response plan and instead sally out in canoes to give chase to the coronavirus only to find the universe as we knew it is finished

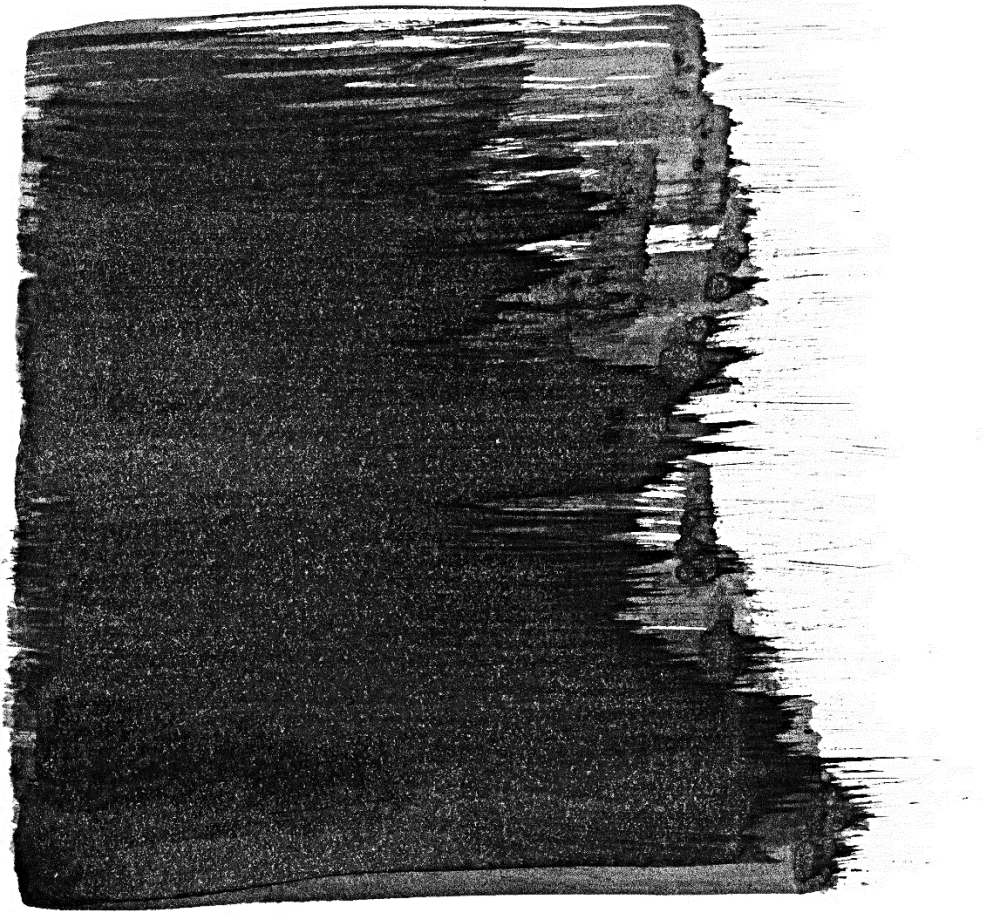




III

it starts with looking in the mirror and catching the eye of a stranger
deep shadows floating within dark brown irises swirling reminiscent
of a hyperborean winter scene a sort of sublimity which fills your heart
with frost perhaps you will remember this time as chaos bewitched
an accountable mass of shades and shadows the black sea in a perpetual
midnight gale or perhaps you will remember little more than mundanity
slipping in and out of cycles of sleep, tea and tv only time will tell if it
was enough to drive a nervous individual mad ever and anon pushing
against the limits of one's mind until ribs protrude skin, nails greet
muscle and half-held breaths evolve into panic pure as new fallen snow





IV

*Inspired by Rembrandt's
'A Man Seated Reading at a Table in a Lofty Room' (1628)*

trapped beneath dying florescent light we glared at a screen illuminated at night with hues of black and ochre fused together by paint strokes with a plain view into the painted room we studies a counterpane with not curtains and beneath it an indecorous figure half steeped in nondescript dreams *staving about with little else but his hat and boots* we watched as colour trickled in from outside you claimed the sun its source I the moon recalling the monthly stretch of blue nuzzled across the floor at home and for a moment I am there in that house of secrets lost in recollections those drunken rambles entertained with the patience of a child who knows no other way who will one day have to play scooby-doo and reveal the dark figure for who he is

V

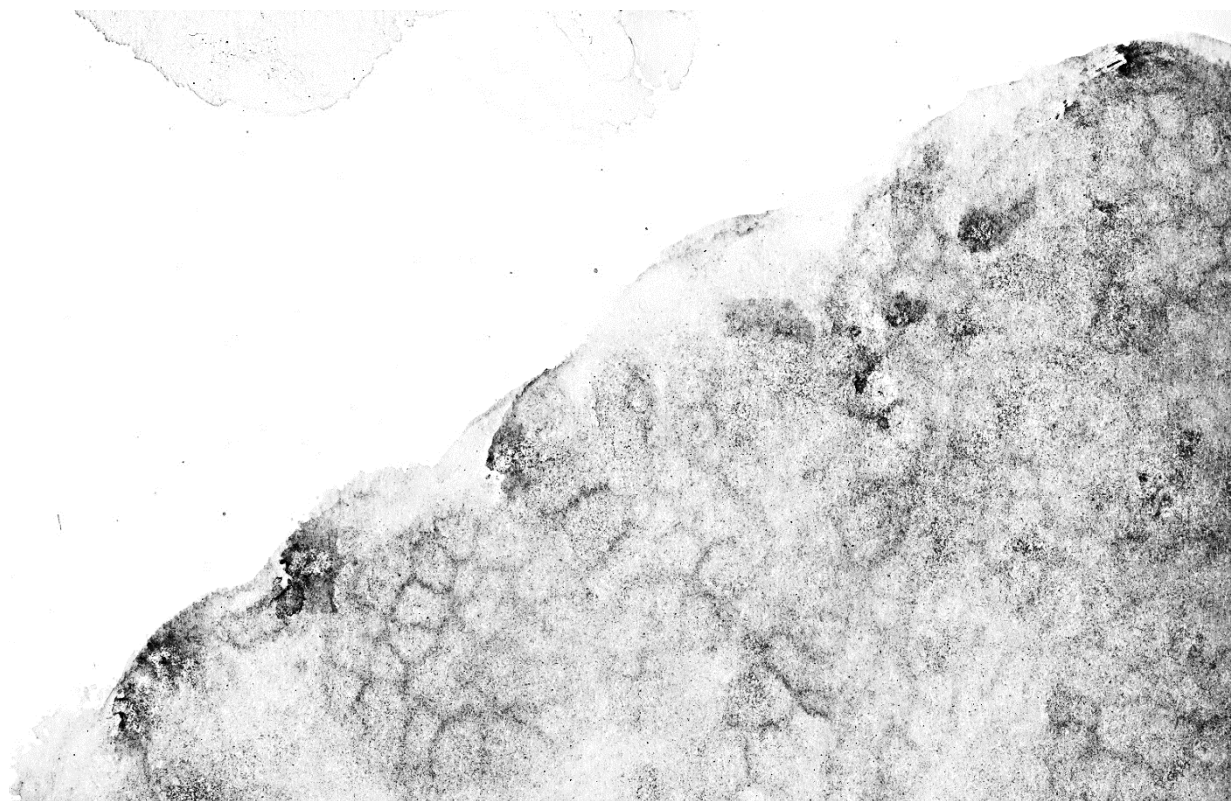
I imagine them sitting across the table from me a society of seadogs timidly wearing monkey jackets for morning gowns and smoking tomahawk-pipes till grey storm clouds crackle and spark along our apartment ceiling harpoons slung upon the table without ceremony always on the brink of knocking over half-drunk cups of coffee or tea with various degrees of milk ready they seem to duel dead the cereal slurping sea carpenters and sea coopers and sea blacksmiths all with bosky black beards and a topic tawn earmarking how long they have each been cast ashore in search of a mighty good laugh among fellow warrior whalemens before sailing off together once more leaving me with the dishes but I don't mind searching among them for something or someone or some other time I can't remember when only to find little along the breakfast table but arctic ambivalence rustling in my wake

VI

I was supposed to travel down the throat of the tempest to a land of oil ordained new bedford my reward for surviving myself to walk those famed melvillian streets neither running with milk nor paved with eggs each corner adorned with whalers chatting about climate change about how we won't outlive our actions so long as each city-bred dandy seeks profit athirst for gain and glory with no regard for those who wash ashore in the whistling gales of their by-products at least I hadn't bought the tickets yet imagining spermaceti-lit streets lined with exquisite shops and stalls owned by the granddaughters of harpooners proffering the passer-by with lavish tales of what once was taking their listener back in time to when these lanes were paved with refuse rocks tossed aside at creation's final day and dragged up hither by barren hearts from the bottom of the sea

VII

the cathedral is empty its god elsewhere leaving me thinking of its crypt and the candles I used to light for my grandfather the man who always made us smile compelled by the muffled silence of creamy white stone almost a thousand years old inviting even us disbelievers into ceremony to join those gazing at stained glass the way oysters observe sun through water caught it seems in some hopeless trance unaware of faith feeding upon them like starfish slowly consuming their prey from the inside out transforming those dead doubts into hope and while I can no longer go I still think about how we cope my father scraping splinters off his grief with the sip of a drink my grandmother counting demons like a child counts sheep and finally myself wishing beyond relief he would be proud of me for pursuing these wild dreams of mine while grave deep in self-doubt so every now and then I will light a candle for him at home blow out the match and wait for the dead to finally learn how to speak



VIII

my mother sends me photos of snow illuminated by a rising sleepy sun welcoming a new day and her car buried beneath last night's downfall so I bundle up and walk along the river in search of a photo to send back perhaps one of the swans pursuing their silent coup of the marshes or the three donkeys blissfully grazing in a stranger's backyard or the river glistening as gushing currents summon peculiar clefts along its surface only then I see it hiding among the winter-worn grass a handful of green towers aching upwards mild gleams of a new spring and after a few tries the word daffodil tumbles off my tongue so unlike their norwegian name *påskeliljer* meaning easter lilies except here they arrive too soon and for a moment I consider crushing them back into the ground tell them to wait a little longer we have all had to place our lives on hold and as my boot lifts the wind grows cold making trees sway like drunks once the last call has rung so I leave the daffodils alone and head home

IX

I find myself dreaming of seaside days of curious waves inching closer their rhythmical beat crashing and rushing away to the tune of a tolling bell asking myself when it will all come to an end whenever I feel like I am foundering out at sea when rumbling storms visit for a day when exchanging forced smiles with a man in a gas mask in the biscuit aisle both of us eating the weight of our worries in bourbons when standing alone in the streets wondering where everyone has gone while pigeons peck and scoff leaving me feeling anchor heavy with no windlass to retrieve me from these depths chanting it will end while gulping mouthfuls of seaweed the low humming of my phone altering me to new disasters and another catch-up with a friend cancelled so I take a breath and repeat: it will end

X

hiding beneath blushing blankets strung between bins we watched in silence as storms brewed to a boil dissolving into pink and orange clouds aglow with warmth reminding us of stories told before church and state were separate a heaven populated with gods and angels except the more we imagined them up there the more we began to notice our position down here with phantoms gathered in corners like dust bunnies with a bite so we did not speak only listened as the rain sung heaven's cast-off melodies and one day wild as she was she pressed her forehead against mine mumbled that henceforth we were married our honest hearts one ready to face the wolfish world and dare its thousand devils

XI

caught within thin slants of streetlight we wait until darkness becomes
our element mumbling I love you to outlines thinking *there you lie like
the one warm spark in the heart of an arctic crystal* and with daybreak
still hours down the road we talk retelling skeletons of the whole story
of us before I rest my head against your chest tapping out heartbeats as
they flutter by

XII

I wonder how our story will be told when there is nothing left of us but photos and words mixed together into an unrecognisable mess so I dig out an old photo album filled with window views overlooking a low tongue of land aglow with warm homes at night ancient woodlands cliff edges with curious goats a city hidden between seven mountains royal gardens where we would go swimming in the summer and soon I see that life has gone on without me childhood friends welcoming their first born into the world weekly family dinners museums I meant to revisit rhododendron blooms tires changed houses repainted funny stories told through the crackle of bad signal as their lives continue to unfurl whilst I remain locked up somewhere contemplating a world wicked and miserable in all of its meridians

XIII

with a nail dug into my index finger I attempt to forget their bodies focusing instead on voices stories half-heard the beeps of trucks and clanks of carts pulled across cobbles blending and breaking until nothing is left but a kaleidoscope of sound building to a crescendo stuck at the point of snapping like a tidal wave moored at the wharf waiting on the moment it can finally collapse and capsize the city below and so it goes each and every time I am unable to leave my anxieties behind forced to carry them with me as I walk through crowds thick as cream



XIV

an ode to dungeness

I turn the pebbles over in my hand each stone clinking against another
and then release them in time to greet the racing tide

I always thought of this place as ours, didn't you? like nantucket it
occupies a strange corner of the world take out your map and look at it
nothing happens here anymore it's a lonely place occupied by thistles,
wrecks of ships with faded names, a fenced-up nuclear power station
blocking the sunset, and a solitary lighthouse waiting for no one

yet here I am waiting for you or at least the haunting memory of you
those unwelcome thoughts which slither into everyday life memories of
what once was and what was never to be

so I close my eyes bite back the tears and instead listen to the gulls
crying out their own oral *iliad* against a backdrop of crashing billows
once more turning a pebble over in my hand feeling its smooth surface
against my fingertips and throw it back into the sea an offering perhaps
a token of peace a plea for the ghost of you to leave



XV

if hell had a chowder restaurant it would be called apollyon its book of reservations made out of shark skin guarded by a manager psychopomp conveying judgement over your poor choice of attire and the walls would be decorated with relics from a recently concluded past the floor paved in mosaic whirlpool swirls made from clam-shells and broken ribs and when our waitress arrives she would fiddle with her necklace a polished vertebra strung around her neck telling us of their specialties while gesturing towards gallows with tilted necks strung to air dry and when the food arrives we would eat in silence sipping milk from cows fed fish remnants while an old television set saved from a dump in the nineties crackles with warnings no one listened to because now these news stories are considered comedy or at least that's what I imagine when a week later I wake up frantically searching for those leftover bones in my clothes scratching skin again and again until everything is covered in red lines

XVI

even wolfish girls grow up and grow apart I realise while remembering the igloo we always tried to build next to the weather-stained plumtree returning home only once plans for tomorrow were made schemes concocted beneath swirling constellations & a haloed moon foretelling more snow to come later followed by half-humorous innuendoes secret meetings with boys in the woods school yard drama prank phone calls long walks in cemeteries while unpacking all of life's difficulties and then I left packed my bags escaped to pilgrim-worshipped canterbury desperate for new scenery space to breathe space to discover a new me meanwhile you found work love home child and I stumbled into student debt feeding a curiosity wild like miniature hurricanes roaring in lungs bloodcurdling storms feeding on stress, anxiety and imposter syndrome regretting now how I never got to marvel at your growing belly before travel restrictions severed my tie to home so now I cross my fingers and hope we'll one day meet up, go on a long walk and talk about life again



XVII

it promised to be a very cold night and I wonder if the night was indeed cold sitting in our living room wrapped in a blanket book in hand for there is nothing else to do till break of day but marvel at these fictional whalers with parsley caught in their teeth plucking it out with halibut bones while I sit still like a carved image trying my best not to think of why I am awake so early *but as soon as the first glimpse of sun entered the window, up he got, with stiff and grating joints, but with a cheerful look* I close my book and try to ignore my hands shaking my legs jiggling up and down my heart trying its best to escape out of my chest like they do in cartoons as I type in the number wait through a long answering machine queue and those horrible tunes and ask to book an appointment with a doctor

XVIII

some nights shadows speak to me the deep-sea salt lingering in their old language luring lulling leading me down brimstone steps past rusted signs telling me to please mind my eyes to spurn the burnt idols frightening my plaguy soul to remember what it is like to fear death to fear that hideous dragon with everlasting thunder gaze guardian of everything christianity fears and then my ghostly guide advises me to be aware fore and aft that when I prate in my ungodly guise eavesdroppers notice and it is dangerous to be noticed when one is a woman a daughter of darkness when we arrive I see no one feel nothing only hear the same old voice saying I'll soon be baptised anew in blue



XIX

when I was a kid my grandmother would take me to the arboretum an hour or so away from her home passing through woodlands speckled with arctic starflowers and a hundred other shadowy things scurrying beneath luminous green and while she would duck and dive to avoid those cunning cobwebs I would restlessly race along the brook eager to reach our destination and when she caught up I asked about my future which provoked a sigh and commonplace adages as she explains there is no magic crystal ball what's signed is signed and what's to be will be *c'est la vie* so instead she tells me of her childhood memories of chasing foxes with jumping ropes crafty cats who unlocked doors and parrots mimicking marching bands and only when I'm older will she tell more about the war about the gestapo who abducted and tortured her father about the explosion at the pier where her family worked about the basement bomb shelter they hid in and the explosives her mother kept just in case passing on these memories like heirlooms in the hope they'll never be forgotten

XX

so this is how the journey begins I think staring at this little white pill a gulp of water and down it goes all normal at first until an hour in sleep settles across my eyelids a strange seasickness despite remaining ashore in my bed a slow swirl of thoughts hurrying to a close while the days tick away my limbs growing restless shaking like I'm still trying to escape myself to stop these thoughts returning again and again to every way I may hurt myself nails digging millimetre by millimetre deeper into skin red rivers growing across my thighs a landscape of conflict a line for each day I continue to survive this transition this continuation of breath in and out hand glass water shaking as the pill goes down journeys through my body and tries its best to fix whatever is wrong with my brain wrong with me wrong with this life of mine



XXI

darkness fades stirred awake by a flock of restless seagulls scavenging trucks out on deliveries stray conversations slithering through bricks the pillow next to me long gone cold my phone pinging with messages but still the world seems so empty so hollow so I hide beneath the duvet free to spiral down whirlpool thoughts thinking this is not who I want to be not who I was supposed to be what went wrong what is wrong with me whirling quicker and quicker like those teacup rides leaving me nauseous and confused for why could I not be like one of those women who wakes up early who watch the sun arch above old buildings cast in shades of pink and orange who wanders empty streets save for a lone lost dove cooing for directions why do I have to be like this I think before forcing myself out of bed taking my pill and counting everything I will not be doing today

XXII

it was a short cold christmas lacking the bounty of profane words we were all yearning to speak so upon arrival I snuck out and steered towards sea a familiar mound of rocks where gulls sailed screaming overhead while I skipped pebbles into growling restless waves reaching toward my shoes until they were soaked through meaning it was time for dinner where we savoured several courses of sneering statements and passive aggressive remarks served with gravy followed by a dessert composed of sour declarations regarding my sullen nature because apparently I have changed as if that is not what growing up is all about so I retreat to the piano my untuned safe haven the perfect excuse to watch from afar a room decked with anxious strides and arguments about to blow occasionally increasing the crescendo when opinions get heated until I think of my grandfather playing the tune I composed for him before the diagnosis soft and slow but full of whimsy while I wait for the grieving to give up on merriness and decide it's time to go home



XXIII

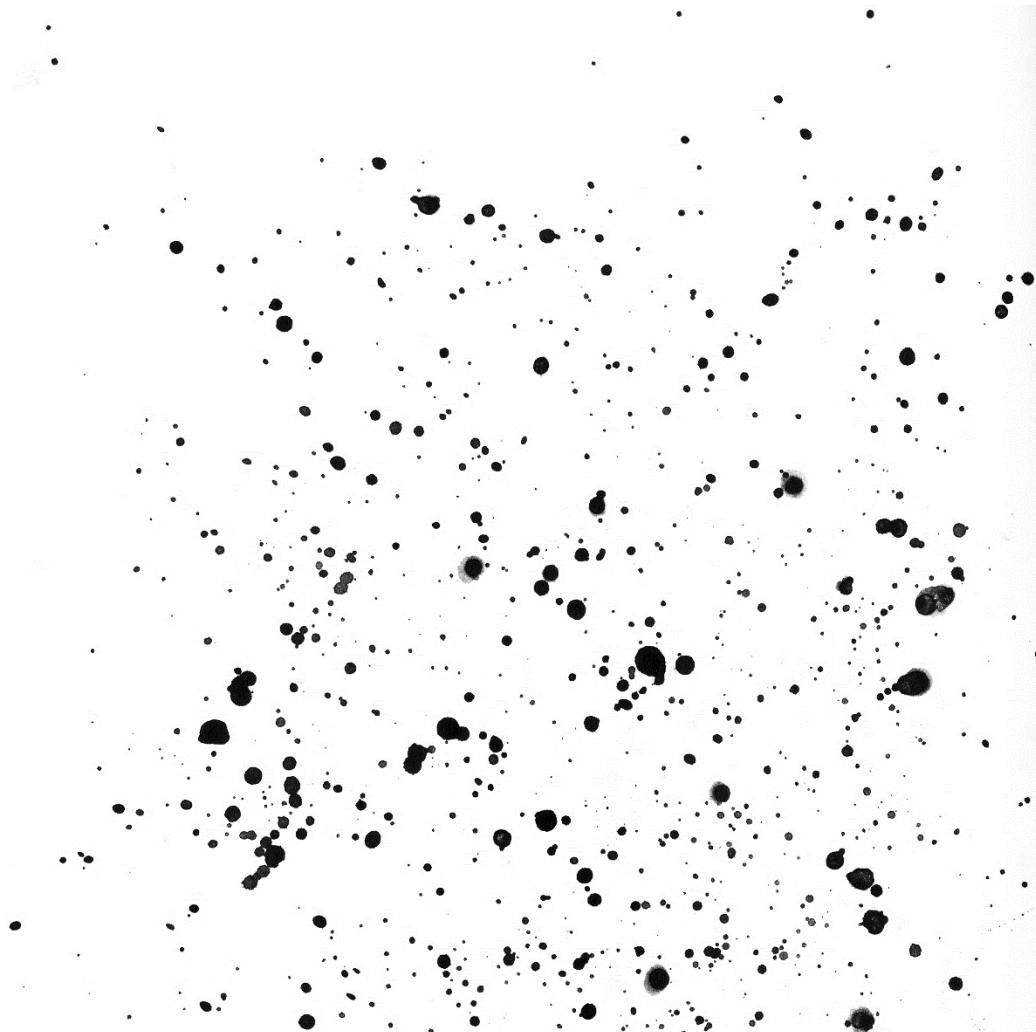
some decades from now on a shivering winter's night I will remember with sympathetic awe the maliciousness of my thoughts like waves spitting out a stumbling man only to discover the land is scorching to his feet the air acid to his lungs his storm-tossed shipped rendered to naught but cracked planks of plywood still washing up ashore to claim its toneless grave across the coast and when offered warmth he will shiver questioning his host's motives until one day he decides to flee all hospitality to abandon this pitiful port and throw himself back into that ungrateful gaping mouth

XXIV

today I am all anxiety I am the quickening of the heart the carousel of
the mind the rasp of a breath never quite caught I am panicking
meanwhile the whole world outside declines the news continue
to beget events so remarkable so continually momentous
so horrendous that the walls begin to feel like steel
and I can no longer distinguish if they are protecting me
from the outside or holding me hostage

XXV

we dressed up as oceanic kings and queens ready for our coronation
having harvested luxurious crystals of salt from cupboards reached only
with the aid of chairs we prepared for that curious process of seasoning
and anointing our tongues with the tale of the sea for we wished to know
to taste the crashing waves no one was there to witness to meet creatures
as they tossed and swirled within that mighty mass to seek out secrets
which lie too deep for the eye to see so we close our eyes open our
mouths and begin the ceremony



XXVI

with each passing month I struggle to speak with her to retain some remnants of sanity to draw rainbows over minor disasters whenever her world crashes down and her world crashes down almost daily now she will tell me the wild watery loneliness of her life as if I am not here the devils who pursue our family in the form of normal everyday events like bills which need paying things which break emails to be answered and as she talks a strange reverence settles across the room my mind drifting off unable to find light in this constant perennial rain of misery to see past the lingering image of who she once was the woman I miss hardened like a twice-baked biscuit without a care in the world so sure of herself before his cancer left her bereft of everything solid his death transforming her into a token of wasting anxieties the ultimate compression of a woman so I listen as best as I can and avoid adding to her worries while allowing my mind to ruminate elsewhere far too aware of the devils already hiding in my own thoughts

XXVII

the sky has erased itself leaving us happy-go-lucky individuals to take perils as they come with an indifferent air calm and collected whilst engaged in the most imminent of calamities perhaps we too shall compose and hum our own rigadig tunes whilst converting the jaws of death into a fashionable armchair dipping into our row of pre-prepped pipes to smoke us free from any reverence or sense of responsibility it doesn't matter if we are off-key if there is no one to inherit our mistakes cheerily trudging off with the burden of life in a world full of grave pedlars walking wide-eyed into any lethal encounter for the hell of it for how can we feel pain when numb to the bone testing our resilience with broken shards of glass carving marks for each day survived every minute we've fooled ourselves into believing anything we do matters



XXVIII

I wonder if he felt comfortable in his body standing starboard staring into sea crashing with acrimony against that unsteady ship fixed and fearless when faced with growing waves his crew rustling around with vague disquietude and diabolic incoherence the loud thuds of their steps the whispered nonsense the solemn whimsicality taking hold of the ship while he simply stood there on his one good leg one wooden prosthetic searching the sea for his enemy the cause of his imbalance the reasons for his every thought and every action as if its death will somehow reverse the damage done *so powerfully did the whole grim aspect of him affect me* that I second guess myself feel guilty for these silly thoughts of mine for hating a body which functions for nit-picking flaws small imperfections documenting every fight waged against this tempestuous mind of mine

XXIX

it weighs on my conscience like a toothache this burden he must feel the fear involved in loving a depressed mind having to constantly protect me from dangers he cannot see answering frantic phone calls reminding me again and again to breathe just in case I forgot like I always do for who can breathe when your worst nightmares sit on your chest its claws tilting your chin upwards slowly consuming everything you once were everything you wished to become leaving you a hulk of your former self an emptiness which no longer knows how to look after itself so he cooks me food helps me do the chores tells me to shower to leave the flat to keep myself entertained while he is out places games in in my hands guides my mind towards better thoughts and dutifully shuts down my fears whenever I ask how hard it must be to love me



XXX

it's become an addiction really this perpetual checking of our phones desperate for any form of news to come through only to discover frantic and raging fatalism so instead I've taken to writing about him that monomaniac man and how he would act if trapped in this stale-aired one-bedroom apartment leaning out through the window scrolling across article after article on his phone while he lights his pipe breathes in the smoke and releases it back into the restless breeze with slouched shoulders and weary eyes one can see him slowly losing faith in humanity as he blows out another puff of smoke and facing the brunt of the current wind has it blown back into his lungs again his breathing soon haunted by nervous coughs akin to that daunted rasp of a dying whale and without warning he tosses the still lit phone into the street below watching as the device cracks and pops as it shatters against the asphalt and then with the pipe still firmly jaw-locked he stands up and paces the small apartment once more

XXXI

with a mechanic roar the drilling resumes knocking me out of sleep before my alarm even has a chance to register morning's arrival transitioning from peaceful sleep into an entire landscape of comical phonetic phenomenons so I enter my conundrum left unable to write due to the presence of workers sounds crashing in like wrecking balls knocking out any thought or sense leaving me lost in the slow chewing of words a sort of eating of one's own gums a devilish broad insult if you ask me but it's not as if anyone asked us if this was okay they just walked in with their muddy shoes and imposed themselves upon our lives in order to benefit a stranger not caring about the slow throb throb throbbing of my mind evolving into yet another migraine requiring yet another dose of ibuprofen and the remainder of the day to recover left in a zombie like state until dawn resets this phonic prison

XXXII

I find refuge beneath the breezy billows of a budding oak sweat still dripping off my sunburnt cheeks while I watch leaves rustle above bees bumbling among the tall grass families out cycling along the river aware that this is life now soaking up sun and sweating off last night's binge so I adjust my pose too aware of the way my tummy folds itself while seated pinching skin and imagining life without this extra weight these superfluous concerns don't worry mister prime minister we've heard your message about hating our bodies loud and clear why else would I be here running away from my insecurities, anxiety and self-hatred trying so desperately to shed those extra numbers on my scale to whittle myself down counting calories starting and ditching diets forcing food I hate down my throat because it's all for health isn't it? this perpetual excavation for ribs and pelvis for how can it be self-harm when it makes me look healthy

XXXIII

sometimes I see ahab passing through the walls moving before me in all his nantucket grimness and shagginess having not had a shower since death or so I suppose as he examines every little domestic peculiarity of the twenty-first century with a mixture of elated grandeur and shouts declaring our way of life blasphemous for how can one live without the sea he says unable to comprehend our landlocked ways how such large virtues lurk in these small things lecturing me on the grand distinction between life on land and adventures at sea not listening when I say I have no choice this was not how this year was supposed to go I was going to travel across oceans like the pequod in search of whales to witness them first hand but he does not understand these rules we must obey and I worry sometimes what I must look like arguing with these white walls of mine

XXXIV

my mother tells me I inherited my arachnophobia from my grandmother on observation of her comical scorn of cobwebs conveniently forgetting my brother chasing me around the house with his eight-legged friends but I suspect I inherited another trait my gaze lingering in the mirror my mind ostentatiously sharpening its scalpels and imagining every bit of flesh it would trim wondering where these thoughts come from until yesterday listening for the hundredth time as my grandmother howls at her old age proclaiming all the clothes which no longer fit as evidence of some murderous indiscretion for it is an ugly sound hearing someone you love talk of how they'd like to whittle down their shape after each grave peep in the vanity listing foods they no longer consume while nursing an immortal hunger for their previous shape and I wonder why I hear her voice when I look in the mirror her pleas for me to stay pretty the importance of good looks ignoring every time my academic pursuits come up in conversation wishing more than anything that those echoes might one day fade away

XXXV

from sunrise to sunset we are lulled into an opium-like listlessness no longer counting days as much as giving way to the amalgamating cadence of thoughts and fears heaving like waves it is a romantic sort of melancholy I suppose spending one's sleepless nights witnessing the waxing moon skulk across the sky for here in these dead hours of night we hear no news and read no articles no longer need to pay attention to the fall of stocks and loss of jobs to the rickety rise of deaths resulting in apocalyptic headlines for only panic attacks await when we engage in reports of events beyond these four walls of ours so we settle down in this meditative delirium pretending the world is better off than it is





XXXVI

he emerges like black spots drifting in the corner of my eyes only ever half here the uneven thud of his walk announcing his approach except I haven't told anyone about him so I pretend he is not there turn up the volume of the tv while he eyes me and my partner with apprehension woefully disenchanted with his current crew of two while polishing a pound coin he pretends is a doubloon humming to himself his diabolical mission to seek out that agonizing fly which dips and dives into his daily cup of tea madness I think to be enraged by such a simple creature creating a detailed plan of attack with harpoons made out of toothpicks so I take a deep breath remind myself apparitions are not uncommon when sleep deprived one's mind wandering off in the realm of dreams pretending once more everything is okay

XXXVII

there is no greater phenomenon to a bibliophile than discovering the right book at the right time and perhaps that's how melville felt reading shakespeare's plays about henry the fourth and cherry-picking phrases for his new book the weight of a crown now assigned to a whaler self-described as madness maddened those strange moments when literature becomes truth and this is what it felt like when I picked up that book creased its spine and delved into stories about the human psyche reading about a young woman grieving a recent breakup and the psychologist pointing out how she grieves as well for the future she thought they would have except a part of me always knew those daydreams of us two reading by the fire in a small cottage somewhere were not to come true that this was temporary a young love never to be repeated like a rare sunset causing warm waves to blush like wine before the oncoming dark casts everything in an entirely different hue



XXXVIII

I watch with reticence as time and tide flows wide knowing well a white whale dips and dives round this watery world while I remain caught like a goldfish in my undersized glassy globe for this is my miserable office contained within a heaven-insulting depression waiting for the impious end of this pandemic one of many who coo their lack of things to do meanwhile I see ahab drifting in and out of sight busying himself with jigsaw puzzles, baking bread and propagating succulents strangely calm with letting time drift like an uneasy current having sailed worse storms and before long I realise I am growing jealous of a ghost and his ability to simply be

XXXIX

look up at the sky I've been thinking about it ever since
that first night bounding blithe through blue-tinted alleyways a laugh
seemingly the wisest easiest answer to all questions stumbling over
stones down an unknown passage searching for a place to crane necks
gazing at gleaming constellations some stars long gone fragments of
their memory still glowing high above the atmosphere until a brave star
broke free flying across black and disappearing into a distant horizon
I want to preserve the moment press it into a book and dry it out
my own personal pocket star meanwhile you strolled on you always
strolled on always a second away from leaving me behind always a
second away so I followed while a second star crossed the sky chasing
after the one before always chasing something already gone

XL

a collection of four midnights

I turn the page sneak a peek at him and smile aware of his proximity to me the slight touch of our feet my silent prayer to catch him staring while hours slip away unnoticed the first sweeping glance of warmth growing across the horizon introducing hues of peach and pink into dark and when we leave the library farewells clog in our throats so he offers a shy peck on my cheek bid adieu and then we walk our separate ways still revelling on the sweet aftertaste of a new crush

I come stumbling to a halt wanting to gaze up at a luminous full moon merry-drunk and mad with adrenaline my arm linked with his to steady myself and as his gaze shifts from the moon to me we have our first kiss too high on sentiment and excitement to even dream of the midnights to come the silliness which ensues with comfort and the ways in which this could all go wrong

two years later and our judgement day arrives rung in by words which never were supposed to be uttered like a harpooner he aimed threw and struck dread in me and as the clock strikes twelve I kick him out possessions in arms and close the door before collapsing on the floor sobbing in the dark listening again and again to those careless words echoing on repeat you are not reason enough to stay you are not reason enough I do not think I love you as much as you love me I do not think I love you while outside gusts of wind sharpen and cross their swords

that should've been the end shouldn't it but we never learned it seems never came to terms with the fact we perhaps just weren't mean to be granting ourselves second and third chances while ignoring the warning signs all those insecurities and doubts and tears and arguments resulting in a distance vast like a canyon growing between us until your letter arrives sent second class ending it all and permanently recategorizing you as little more than someone I used to love

XLI

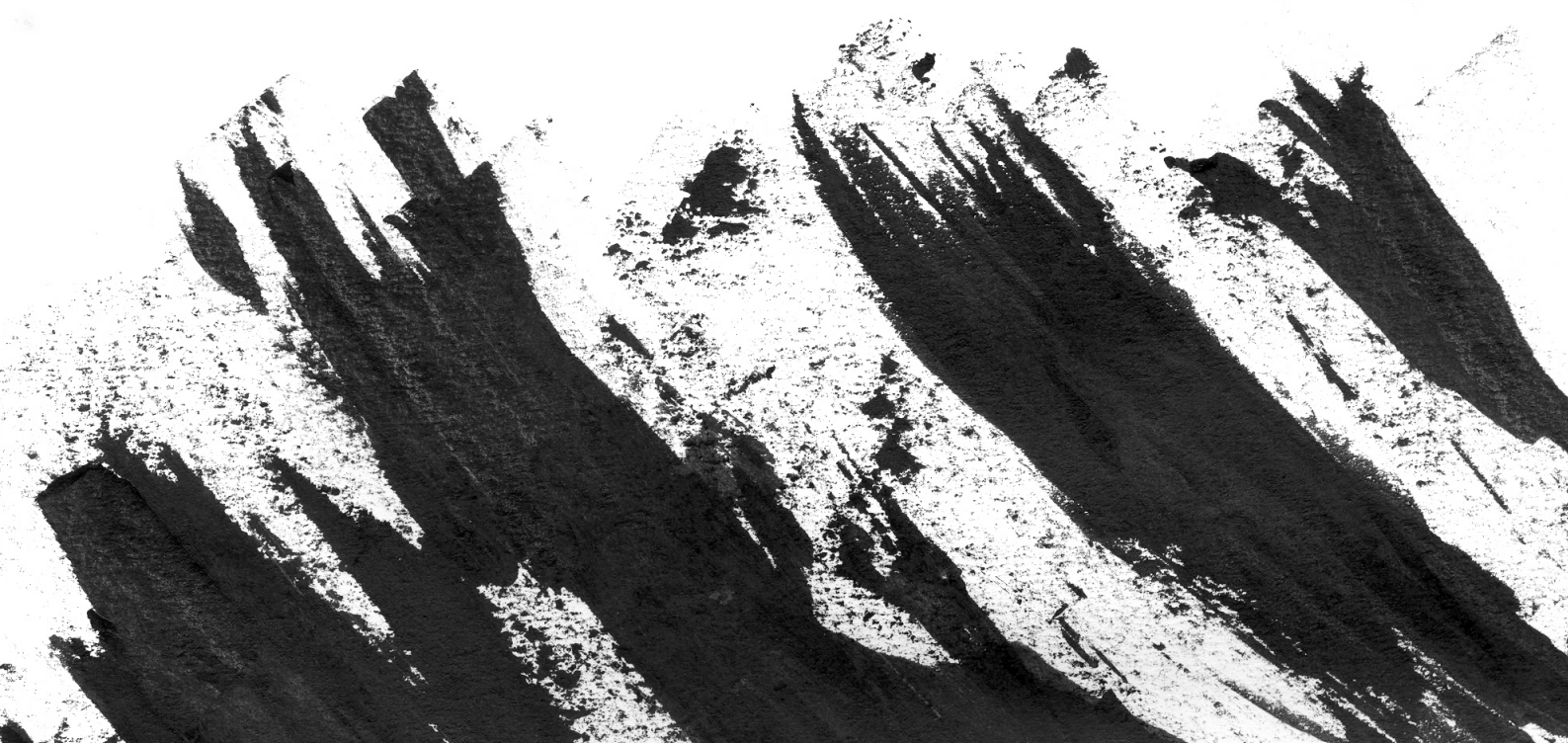
I keep thinking of ahab and how he would describe the whale beginning with the loss of his leg and the madness which ensued convinced of the intelligent malignity of the white whale describing what it was like to be continually athirst for high noon on a dark blue sea to cherish such a wild vindictiveness against what he saw as the great gliding demon of the sea how he could see naught in that brute but the deadliest of ills and I wonder how different his story would be if they could recognise his behaviour for what it was post-traumatic stress disorder caused by a violent work accident and I wonder what it was like to be sixteen and not have a word for what was going on in my mind to be depressed without knowing the existence of depression without the blessing of internet forums filled with likeminded individuals knowing I was not alone not drifting out at sea far away from everyone and everything hunting an animal who can answer no questions

XLII

as we walk down the street we hear shouts loud throaty voices littered with expletives even a whaler would shy away from emerging out of two older white men baking in the heat their teeth long-ago knocked out and as we follow their gaze we see a lone black man doing nothing but walking shopping bag in hand perhaps there is a grocery list somewhere a desire to buy milk for his cereal bringing him to the high street so when they continue to shout we ask if he is okay I'm used to it he says ignoring them as best as he can only now they turn to shout at us mouths packed with nothing but curses so we slow down remove ourselves from the situation call the police who arrive asking what the black man looked like because they are looking for a drug dealer we remind them he was the victim a man simply walking through the streets and as they drive away I think of Ishmael and the nameless horror he saw in white

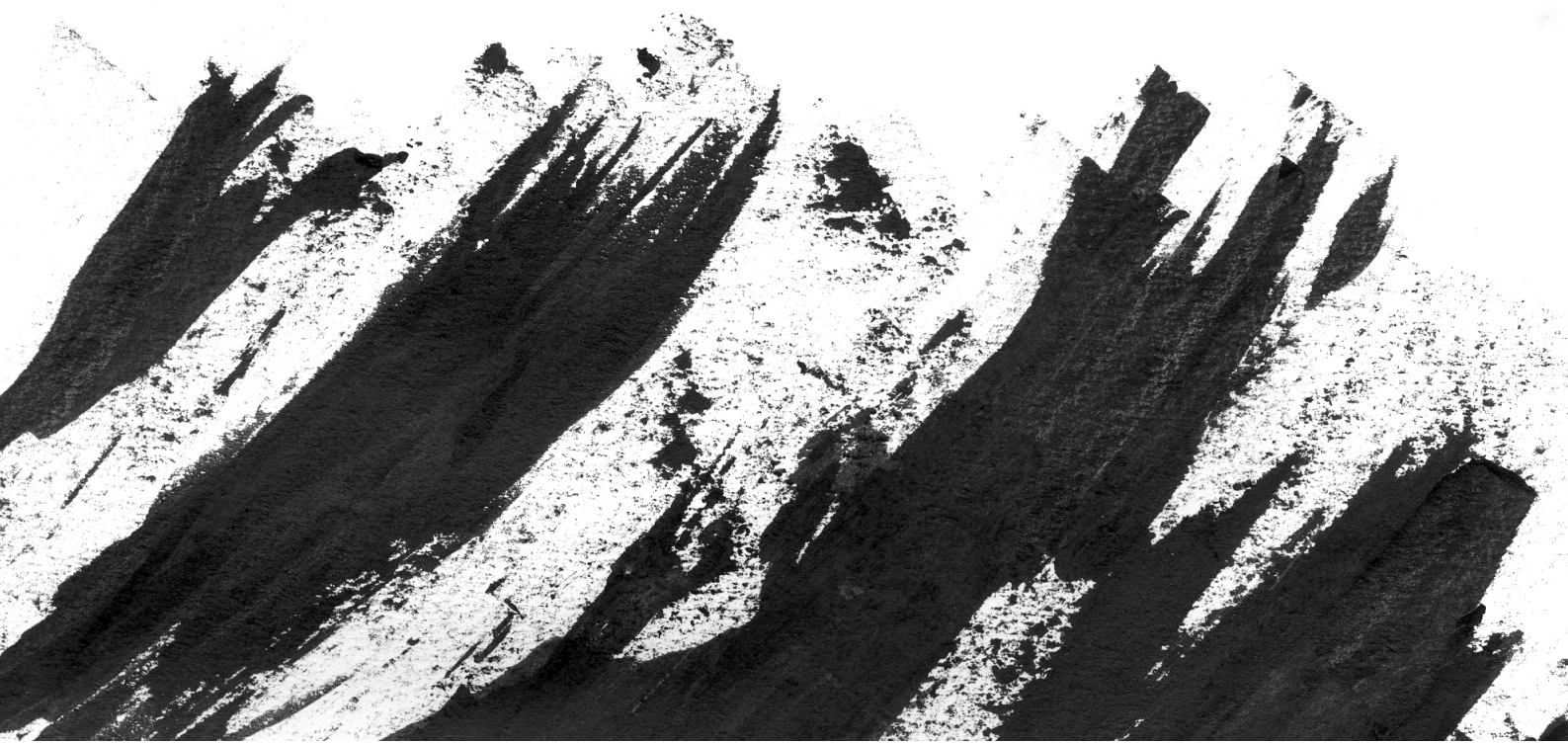
XLIII

as a blackberry branch scratches against my leg I think of how melville foreshadowed his dramatic conclusion each simile, metaphor and more wrapped in sinister connotations building towards the cathartic release characteristic of tragedy the source of which he found in real life events the sinking of the essex and as I wipe away the drop of blood emerging from this swelling wound I think of that ship and the fatal day in 1820 when a male sperm whale struck the ship head-on once twice stoving in the ship's bow the slow filling of water and I wonder what it was like realising mainland was thousands of miles away the nearest island rumoured to contain cannibals so off they went and as I taste my own blood I admire the irony of whalers fleeing cannibals to then eat one another the loosening of morals brought on by desperation and with the tinge of iron still on my tongue I think perhaps it was better melville allowed them all to drown instead



XLIV

on one of our last days together we drove into the countryside for you were showing me your home town the landscape of your childhood and as we navigated those winding roads we saw roadkill after roadkill the slow decomposing carcasses of squirrels and birds and you laughed when I asked if it was an ill omen and I wonder now if you knew then you were going to end things if you were already planning the letter which arrived weeks later sent second class if you laboured like him intently studying the lines and curves of your apologies like yellowing sea charts with no clear north because I still don't know why only time lessened my curiosity gradually eroding the bitter aftertaste of us in eddies washing away the undeviating ocean lines of excuses you gave with marvellous exactitude so when I see a dead squirrel along the road I think of us and wonder whether you have finally found whatever it was you were searching for





XLV

we spend our days daydreaming of owning a house frequently visiting the vague flitting idea of a home we could one day call our own after years of growing sick to the pit of our stomachs by one-sided rental agreements and landlords who rarely bother to fix what is broken so we peruse sale listings locked in place by a frozen housing market while disregarding our student debt the personal capital we do not have and the perilousness of the world economy as we scroll through photos play-pretending the coronavirus recession does not already have its own comprehensive wikipedia page that the stock market did not crash mere months ago that this may become if it is not already the worst economic downfall since the great depression brushing over the fact that we are either furloughed or unemployed that we can pay rent and buy food only through the mercy of our scholarships while debating how we would use each room what colour we would paint the walls and what flowers we could grow in the garden favouriting the properties we like and go to sleep dreaming of this sweet impossibility

XLVI

there is a subtle insanity in creating poetry from another's monomania to be continually wedded to that man's fiery whaling ways to the point of sacrificing all other mortal interests succumbing to a ruling passion for who needs to eat or sleep or rest when one can read about ahab and the fire he incited in the hearts of his crew of how even starbuck who abhorred his coerced quest never raised his voice how they all just let him simmer in the background withdrawn from the ship's day to day activities never considering what isolation can do to a person's mind how a sole thought can grow like weeds in darkness to the point of consuming one's brain and heart and hand until nothing is left but the festering roots of obsession

XLVII

the fabric feels soft between my fingers an old t-shirt dug out from the back of the closet and sacrificed for this noble cause alongside four forgotten hairbands for today we are making face masks within an apartment wide lull broken only by the intermitting dull sound of our kitchen scissors struggling through cotton and when we begin to sow our clumsy needles easy and indifferent weaving themselves up and down like waves pulsating across the ocean surface ever returning ever leaving he asks me how our story will one day be told should we decide to have kids how to convey the strangeness of hiding from something we can't see sowing masks from old shirts reading news like every day might be our last but I have no answers cannot see what that future looks like executing instead the utmost concentration so as not to accidentally stab myself as the needle gradually weaves two pieces of fabric together

XLVIII

do you remember when your steel-cool lips caught mine how time and time again I would break my backbone to accommodate your presence the sound of each vertebra as it cracks and pops surrendering everything to you because this is what I was taught to do charmed by the thunder in your voice and the brightness of your bluebell eyes unable to see all the ways in which you were harming me brushing away the tears and confusion while tracing the outline of us broken in our own ways because I did love you and how naïve I was to think that love would be enough to stop you from leaving

XLIX

I still remember that one night when I almost did not survive myself with the squalls and capsizings of heartbreak still too raw I locked doors turned off lights and surrendered myself to grief those raucous waves listening as worried friends tried to reach out to check in their worries drowned out by my mind's roaring surfs and that's when I remembered the painkillers an entire bottle prescribed for an old injury never opened never used instructions warning of its ability to melt away a stomach wondering if it could take away a different kind of pain

L

wake up he says wake up and so I arose with much interest to see ahab and the anxiety he evinced urging me to get out of bed to follow to see so we walked down the empty street until we reached the river watching as the souls of women and men and children drifted seawards tossing about the water upon planks and plastic bags and any unaccountable item which could float like castaway creatures only seen in one's dreams phantoms better not imagined asking the sun and moon why they were created and to what end except whenever the moon drifted behind a cloud they soon waned away gleaming in and out of existence when I turn to ahab for answers to this muffled mystery he too is gone leaving me alone once more search for answers perhaps best not found





LI

she will be a thing appointed to desolation fighting waves rolling
like scrolls of silver caught in perfidious silence as white bubbles
amalgamate at her bow heaving and heaving as if its vast tides
were a conscience vacating itself of life before her urn-like prow for
they are imitating his unearthly purpose in the name of
profit margins while scavenging sea-ravens gather above
treacherously beckoning on and on for they are practical fatalists daring
captain and crew to gaze dead into the muteness of humanity
here in the remotest and most savage seas with its blue blandness and
devilish charm for they are worse than their ancestors aided
by machinery which kills more efficiently caught between
profiteering and echoes of coffin-taps as his ghost paces the deck again
pleading for others to learn from his mistakes

LII

watch as a sail looms ahead its fabric fraying as the wind rises amain
while he places a trumpet to his lips and calls for the bodies of the sea
to rise shoals of harmless fish all darting away with shuddering fins
show yourself he cries out in his old lion voice for they shall see
how the pequod fares populated with human hearts long absent
from home their skin bleached like the skeleton of a stranded walrus
traced with channels of reddened rust hoar-frost strung along
each strand of hair perhaps they knew perhaps they themselves
were warned before pursuing the tormented chase of that phantom
perhaps this is judgement day after all

LIII

some days I am lost within the forest depths of language my thoughts echoing through the undergrowth my memories drifting along each subtle breeze only to be swallowed and sung out once more by robins for these woods exists in a whirlpool swirling dictionary definition code-switching mid-sentence like a gam between two languages caught between betokened storms descrying each other from opposite ends each squall booming with translated words pressing forth across this uneven sea of fallen pine needles leaving me the drunkard who claims to hold the universe in one hand to then promptly forget what the word for hand is as these storms continue to call out for equal attention leaving little behind but scattered words spelling nothing but nonsense

LIV

I remember the first time I went to counselling waiting in that white room covered with motivational posters in lieu of wallpaper those itchy upbeat phrases their promises of better days feeling like pretty lies so I waited gnawing my nails until nothing was left but goat-like gums thinking about my depression those late-night panic attacks and the time those suicidal thoughts almost left the realm of theoretical because still I feel like a fraud like I am overreacting for there is no spouting blood not any rumbling thunder no reckoning no change I am simply a person who feels sad all day long who is outpaced by a slug who struggles to exit her bed who has lost all faith watching dumfounded and stunned as the fuse is lit and trails across the ship's deck towards the powder-casks

LV

Homage to Jackson Pollock's 'Moby Dick' (1943)

I sat down and watched frozen swells the undulations of unfathomable waters their deformities floundering in a sea of blood and blue and buried buttercup days in a conscientious compilation of colour for with time the waves become as vivid as the crowds ebbing and flowing around me and those signs instructing my fingers not to touch not to be too fastidious in their curiosity in my search for that famed leviathan never sketched and reconstructed like those marooned whales their dead likeness as accurate of the living thing as a wrecked ship is to its sailing cousin for all we know the huge corpulence of that Hogarthian monster undulates beneath the surface of that scarcely drawn inch of water if it's even there at all and when opening hours come to a close I leave more aware than ever that there are no ways of comprehending that whale's earthly guise without running the risk of being eternally stove and sunk without my body sketched by scientists on a stranded stretch of shore



LVI

I am told I am too self-deprecating when I write honestly about my mind
how hot humid air clogs in my throat at the beginning of a panic attack
fear as real as if my leg were currently being sawed off by an apprentice
who cannot help but make mistakes

how simple worries and stress are like water being taken onboard an
already sinking ship leaving me waist deep in my own fanciful miseries
whilst desperately heaving bucket after bucket overboard

how recovery is like balancing on a monster's spine unaware of how far
I have come how far I have left to go self-conscious of every step I take
hoping with each fibre of my being that I won't fall down whilst a tiny
voice at the back of my mind keeps shouting

jump

LVII

a strange sight haunted the headlines last week a whale who got lost
upriver struck dead by a tourist ship and a part of me grieves for this
whale I never met wondering if words can ever be enough to describe
such tragedies because how lost does a humpback have to be to make
its way towards st paul's cathedral searching for a faith as frail as wind
brushing against hesitant waters

LVIII

imagine a meadow of scattered yellow dots and a breeze sailing across the field like waves crumbling ashore as you move through the field feeling the light bounce of each buttercup as it yields and returns in response to your hand skimming across in the distance you see shapes cows sluggishly chewing grass with open jaws so you unearth a handful feed it to the curious chocolate-milk coloured calf and then it searches you for more so you unearth another handful while soaking up sunshine feeling warmth on skin awestruck by the simple act of being outside butterflies passing by dogwalkers ducking as hounds shake off the river family bicycle rides pensioners on walks teenagers gossiping in shrubs a whole world of activity so easily forgotten on those grey days when simply getting out of bed is a battle most often lost

LIX

it is a hot stagnant day the kind where humidity rests heavily in lungs and desperate for a languid draught the serenity of shade the slippery waves whispering secrets as they softly run into shore but all I have is a small copper fan powered by my laptop held up against my face so I ask him to tell me a story anything to distract me from my discomfort so he reminisces of a similar hot day beneath the sultry sun when they encountered a strange creature undulating on the billows curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas they called it a white ghost because it had no perceptible face yet I can see his so clearly as he tells me of the eerie stillness which fell across the ship as they watched this unearthly formless apparition rising and sinking upon the indifferent sea



LX

they watch in horror as it slithers across the deck that silent serpentine which carries more terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair as potent as the seemingly harmless rifle holds the fatal powder ready to bring you down to where even the all-seeing sun himself could not find you this of course is the whale-line that crucial, magical, horrible rope so necessary for their hunt less than an inch thick but stronger than one would believe and it is here ishmael fancies himself a philosopher describing the inherent danger of life how all men but not women live enveloped in whale-lines born with halters around their necks and then I think what a strange attempt this is to normalise the horrid lack of safe working conditions and how I would not like to be in charge of writing the pequod's risk assessments

LXI

I see none but his hands gripped around a honey-honed harpoon whilst eyeing the vast corpse he has made watching with pride the ceaseless crimson pulsing so he lights up his pipe huffing and puffing until blue smoke fills my eyes leaving me nauseous growing dizzier by the minute as we sway idly back and forth like pendulums unsure of which side to rush to in case I need to puke watching grim death and grinning devils dance within this haze like a continual cascade along the bows to the tune of agonized respirations for all I can hear is that whale wheezing its wrath waning as the waves begin to bury him in his grave but he is still here still breathing in and out like a dusty accordion each rasp more painful than the last as his lungs fill with water and I wonder if mine are filling too my breath quickening tremors moving down my arms like I'm trying to shake off this sensation of dying the corners growing dark blue smoke and red waves fading into one my head surprisingly light to the point where the world ceases to be



LXII

the counsellor asks me if I can see the end if I can notice a change in the wind the sudden riverbend as I describe rowing through this disarray with no guide other than the wreck wrought by my previous episodes I am still learning how to take this weight of my shoulders the need to control everything to fix what is broken to tick off every worry as it arrives despite being unable to turn off my mind this incessant thinking unable to forget the world for even a second like the harpooner I expect myself to set an example of superhuman activity to keep going despite my muscles growing strained I remember a story my father once told from a seminar about stress the leader asked them all to hold out a glass of water until their arms ached and I feel like this is what we've been asked to do to support the worries wrought by the pandemic without being told when we can put these worries down so I keep on holding them whenever I go to work or to the shop or see friends arms stretched out trying to understand how anxiety and stress grows heavier with time

LXIII

it takes a while before I realise my counsellor is still staring at me patiently awaiting her answer so I lie and say I am fine things are okay granted it has been a difficult week but everyone is having a difficult time right now it's not like I have anything particular to complain about you know beyond my mind hunting me down like him trying to kill me but I am taking some pills for that and only occasionally do I wake up in the middle of the night unable to feel or move my arms staring at the ceiling until a shooting pain arrives but as side-effects goes that seems pretty mild so I don't complain what is worse are those moments when life seems too much like a burden I can't be bothered to bear any more but I am too petrified to even move frozen in place like a rabbit terrified of their own thoughts heart pounding feet thumping frantically scanning the room for signs of danger because I am afraid of what might happen to me whilst contemplating hurting myself the irony blazingly obvious but I am doing the things I tell my counsellor I am trying to be better

LXIV

we saw a dead rat on our walk yesterday ahab nudged it with his boot the sluggish swollen corpse seemed hardly to budge at all and as dusk continued to come on we walked along the stour hour after hour dodging and swirling while he talked of how the rat reminded him of when they'd secure a slain whale for the night the mammoth carcass wallowing in the sullen black waters the worst he said were the sharks their tails slapping against the hull waking every sleeping sailor swarming the ship like carrion insects eager to feast on death their mumblings mingling with their own mastication then he explained how they would follow slave-ships across the atlantic in anticipation of their next meal and as the horror of his words made me look away I saw the river run red like a sunset rendered into liquid

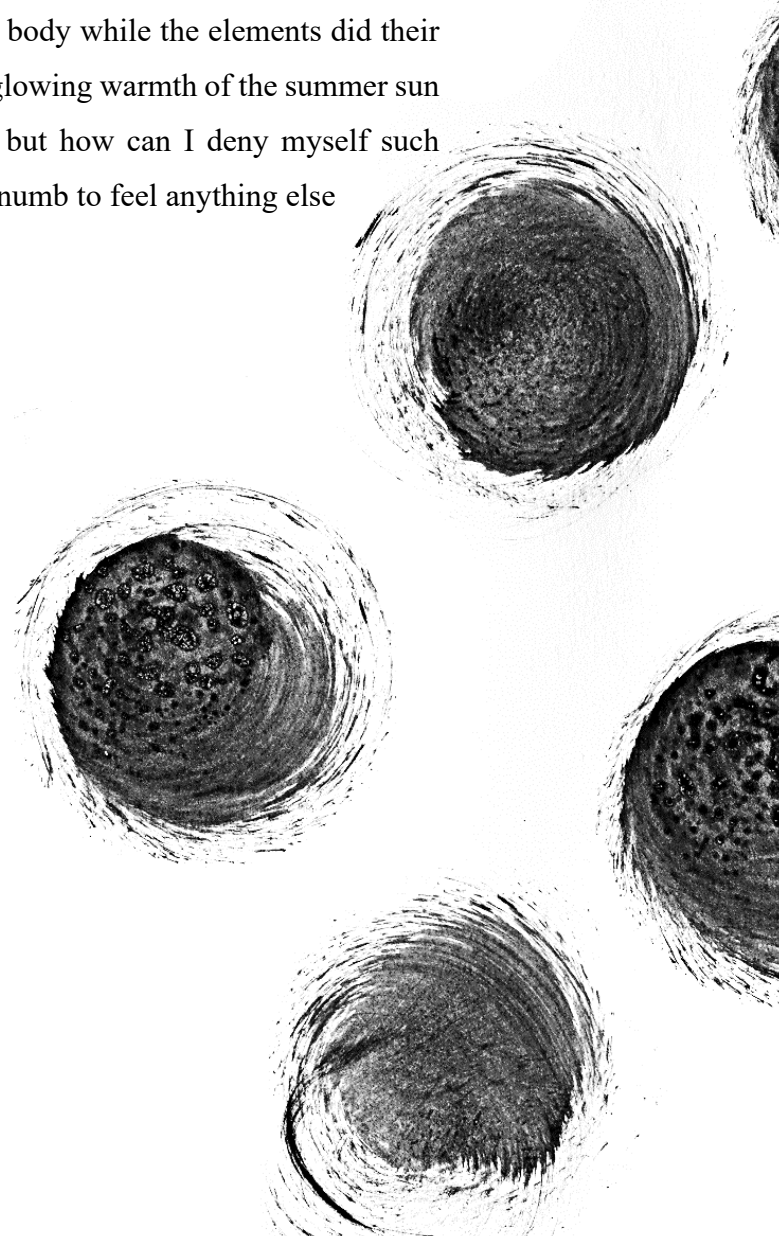
LXV

over the course of a month we scavenge the sparse ingredients needed to bake a birthday cake – flour eggs milk sugar butter baking powder – scanning up and down shelves left empty during the nation’s sudden obsession with baking but of course everything goes wrong from missing ingredients to over baking then we decide to stack it cutting the square into triangles as we abandon any preconceptions of normality the premade frosting so dense and sugary it takes away your appetite the corners crumbling under the weight of processed calories so a toothpick or two later and our frankenstein monstrosity is held together we pour an entire canister of sprinkles on top an explosion of colour covering the cake, counter and floor with sparking hues of pink and blue when we finally sit down before our completed creation I almost want to cry instead we grab a fork each and dig into our messy mutant



LXVI

watch as long gleams of light drift uneasy over the dark streets and nearby trees sway like waves so I open the window feel rain trickling in like droplets washed onboard during a storm as cold air goes about crowding the flat and I remember those days when I was young standing out in the pouring rain challenging those rampant winds feeling the cold of winter on my skin or simply standing with bare feet in snow because it was so easy to feel at home in my body while the elements did their best to put it in harms way even the glowing warmth of the summer sun would in time turn its back on me but how can I deny myself such simple pleasures while I remain too numb to feel anything else





LXVII

it takes a great effort to recover from the depths of one's own mind much like a ship with a whale suspended over the side recognition is only the beginning for now comes the work of attaching hooks and cutting holes whilst the ship careens over on its side life becomes lopsided as you try your best to fit in therapy and self-care and time to think to dissect these emotions and thoughts you've been carrying around for so long vulnerable to each gust of wind the ship trembling like my restless hands nodding its frightened mastheads to the sky while the work is undergone each plank croaking beneath the steps of whalers become butchers as they strike up a wild chorus narrating the non-stop strangeness of your mind as they embark upon the work of breaking down this extra weight into manageable barrels of insight



LXVIII

some days I wish to wrap up like a whale enclosed in their blubber
to retreat into the waters of my past that glowing mass of memories
which never asked too much of me to hear the click-clack of his clogs
shooting shuttlecocks into rhododendron blooms weaving us flower
crowns learning to play the accordion dancing cha-cha together at
sundown and playing late night chess capturing your queen for these
are the memories I hold close to heart alongside all those tall tales told
in order for me to grow bold for the beastly frost is biting the grass
tonight so I wrap up and warm myself like a whale hides beneath the
lee of an iceberg waiting for better days

LXIX

I study her the grieving wife for this was not the ending she foresaw
telling her barely standing grandchild how she should be the first to go
how she couldn't imagine being without him but cancer is cruel so here
we are ready to lay him to rest but she is crumbling piece by piece
breaking off fragments of herself like an eroding marble statue offering
up its flesh to the gods in the hope they might reconsider while we lay
snowdrops upon his new wooden frame and it pains me when I see her
desiring to follow in his steps a eurydice following orpheus into death
with no intention of ever returning and as the years go on we learn to
pirouette round his ghostly presence like sheep leaping over a vacuum
where a fence used to be counting cutlery with him in mind leaving his
seat free terrified of the day we will lose her too

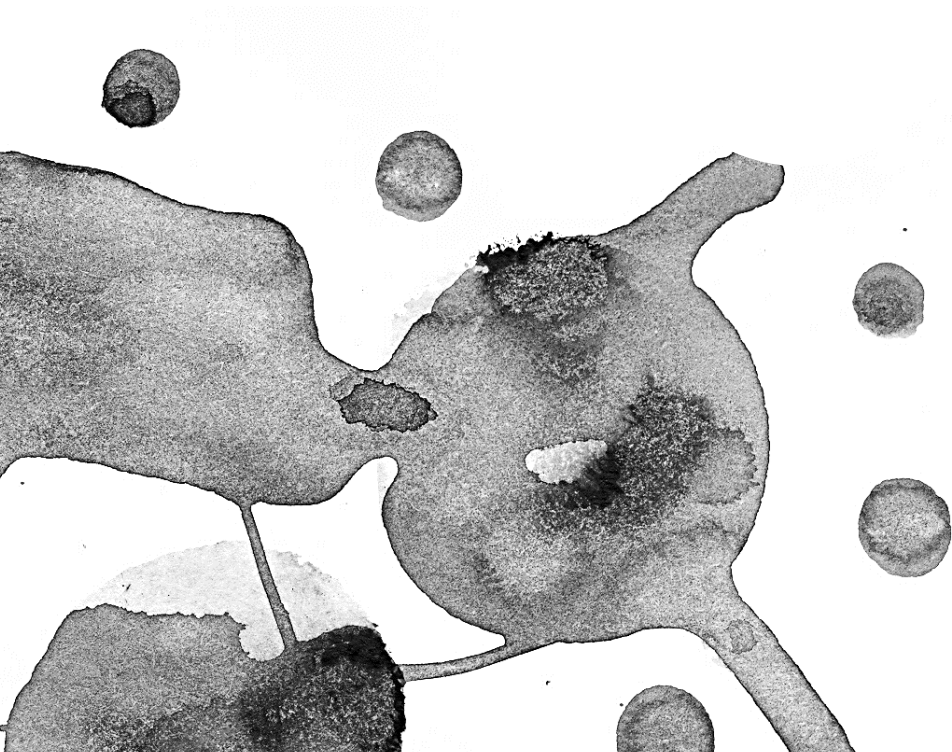
LXX

some days I feel like the ship's surgeon dangling uncomfortably high above a dead whale while exercising the utmost caution as not to plunge into the tumultuous sea below I have been told I need to behead the leviathan or was it wash the dishes I often confuse the two our sink now hosting whirlpools above its drain small sharks which nip at my fingers until the water grows dark with blood I have been told to scrub each pot and pan to the point of destruction smash each glass bend the cutlery for what use do they have beyond reminding me my mind has rendered me useless a fragile thing frightened by a kitchen sink boasting little more than unwashed dishes dotted with black and green mildew growing into intelligent lifeforms small forests of their own and soon stories told of the giant who once brought great rainfalls



LXXI

every now and then I catch ahab flicking through my heat burnished edition of moby dick the blue plastic crumbling at the edges the spine sighing with annoyance as it is cracked open once more so I watch as a strange sense of delirium grows in his eyes a pride perhaps in having been witnessed and scribed in such detail and I am starting to question the soundness of my decision to allow him to borrow my written copy of his undoing and then as he reads on I notice dull spots of green mould growing along the edges its pages withering a fast-forward of a hundred years stored somewhere damp and dark and I wonder if this is melville's fatalism brought to life a side-effect of his creation consuming a story of which death himself might as well have been the author





LXXII

the kettle whistles and spouts a cloud of condensation akin to a whale coming up for air and while I brew my cup of ginger tea I am reminded of aunt charity the only named woman in the novel co-owner of the ship who packed tins of ginger tea for harpooners to enjoy after a particularly perilous day dangling from the monkey-rope with the eager maws of sharks waiting patiently below only for the very same whalers to throw out her kindness for the sharks to enjoy preferring bitters to blow back life into a half-drowned man and I wonder sometimes how differently the story would go with more women aboard

LXXIII

it is funny how quickly normal shift shapes into any form of stability days now consisting of forcefully dragging myself out of bed hoovering whilst ahab shouts at the vacuum like a baffled dog ignoring the dishes until my invisible whaler begins criticising the things now growing in a forgotten teacup followed by elaborate plans to put off doing laundry scrapped by death grimacing in disgust for while I may be depressed I will not subject myself to criticism from a nineteenth-century whaler always somehow finding the energy as he follows me through every activity enthusiastically pointing out spots I've missed and scaring the life out of me whenever the cat has done something cute which I just absolutely have to witness regardless of whether or not I am hiding in the bathroom my one sanctuary from this persistent hallucination and at the end of the day I want to shout want to berate him for his unkind words until I realise his voice is still a lot kinder than my own

LXXIV

can you see him leaning over the side of the pequod while scribbling notes about the sperm whale's head for this is his opportunity to study practical cetology making notes about the whale's salt and pepper colours its eye so out of proportion to the magnitude of its head how it can never see what lies straight ahead thinking that all between must be lost in a profound darkness and nothingness this curiosity is idle in him this act of seeing involuntary for he desires to know more comparing its portentous lower jaw to a narrow snuff-box with hinges on the back and its ears to the dot of a quill and I wonder if melville did this himself during one of his many voyages if he passed on his curiosity to ishmael as a way of going to sea once more whilst seated at home quill in hand

LXXV

then it is time for the right whale's head compared to a roman chariot as he guides the reader's gaze look he says at this strange crested green barnacled thing this is its crown for this mighty monster is actually a diademed king of the sea and when we look into its mouth we see jonah and the home he's made inside complete with curtains and paintings all hidden behind its bristles its tongue as soft as a handmade turkish rug its expression stoic he decides depicting enormous practical resolution while facing death and I wonder how ishmael would feel if his demise was described with equally exquisite detail

LXXVI

we were going on an adventure to find a fox flashlights packed and out we went into the mid-winter dark wandering through woodlands where a neighbourhood kid said he'd seen one except our eyes kept seeing shadows apparitions taking on a life of their own monsters unlike anything we've seen before ancient things pulsing and growing behind the trees until it was everywhere until it was one with the darkness and then a sound was heard a crack the snap of a twig and we ran screaming crowding and crushing towards each other no longer sure who heard or saw what simply reacting because the other was until we reached the nearest source of light feeling safe once more beneath a lone street lamp



LXXVII

the thoughts are back the ones which tell me to hurt myself appearing as always out of nowhere like weeds inserting themselves where they should not be flourishing it seems in neglect and negativity drawing nutrients from all of my self-hatred and fear and I never quite know what to do with myself when the thoughts are there because as much as they tell me to hurt myself they also tell me everything which can go wrong with every method whether it's infections or scars or drawing attention because we don't want to draw attention we're already enough of a burden no need to make everyone worry so I open my laptop and write curious to see what these strange thoughts of mine look like on paper to watch what kind of life they take on once left on their own like haunting crystalline shoots growing within a pond of freezing water



LXXVIII

I understand it now how some can become reliant on substances to dull the constant thud of thoughts to just momentarily turn it all off to flick the switch because right now I so desperately want it to end so heart crushing need it to come to an end and when I ask anyone if it will ever get better they look at me with sad eyes because they know there is no cure no end to anxiety this is my mind this will always be my mind it will always be working on overdrive thoughts spilling over until they flood everything I am **it's** like living with a flood everything gets wet every shoe and shirt soaked with these thoughts and I am left with no other option than to show up to life soggy feeling cold and miserable because there is no end the water keeps on trickling out through every crack and cranny no matter how much time I spend trying to fill the gaps and I am not sure if I can manage spending the rest of my life trying to fill in the gaps



LXXIX

there is a peculiar joy to be found in pouring over centuries worth of academic writing attempting to unravel melville's love for that whale all of whom inevitably arrive at theories as diverse as themselves for even now the whale remains beyond our reach its secrets below water we can neither scan the lines of its face nor feel the bumps on its head and now I am caught in the same trap trying to distil this vast metaphor into something tangible into words shaped upon a page only I cannot meanwhile the whale lives on in our thoughts enjoying life on its own despite our hunt to comprehend its meaning for there are no blemishes to be found he is blank white reflective mirroring back our own nature in him we see ourselves: our fears our flaws our passions

LXXX

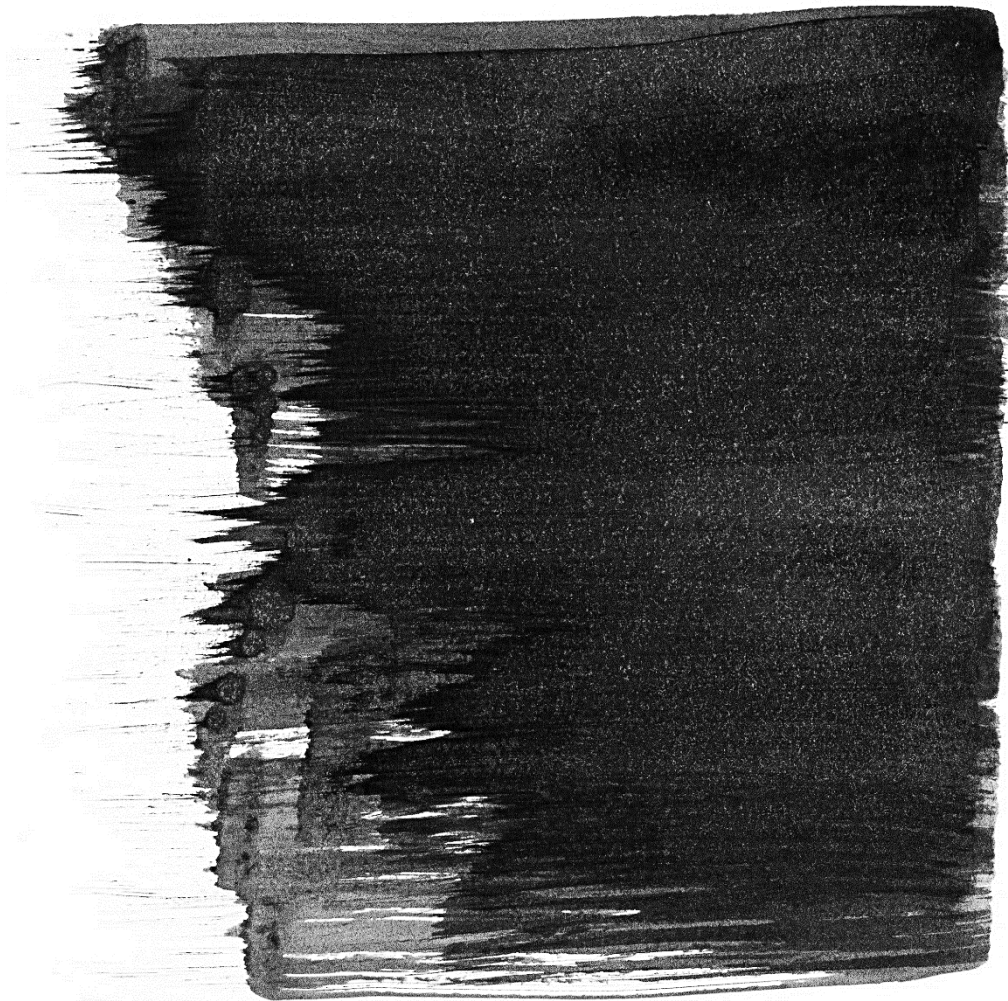
relax your jaw stretch your arms high above your head roll your neck left then right take a deep breath and look far into the distance pray the palpable pulsing sensation in your skull is temporary as you soak a cloth in warm water squeeze and fold swallow two white pills and escape to the darkness of your bedroom hoping rest and medication will dissipate this pain but until then massage the courses and convolutions with your fingers as they unfold in strange patterns across the innermost citadel of your mind all ideas placed on pause until your head no longer feels like it's being shrunk like there are earthquakes taking place above your eyes desperately hoping this migraine won't become indomitable but for now just relax – stretch – and breathe

LXXXI

it is boardgame night so we unearth our scrabble board gather round our chairs and begin each of us patiently planning our lettered tiles as excitement gives way to concentration as an astonishing atmospheric weight settles across the apartment I soon notice ahab peering above my partner's shoulder patiently puzzling together the rules of our game death it seems is a forceful gale capable of corroding even the mightiest of obsessions and before long I have to restrain a smile as my invisible whaler begins to excitedly suggest words old whaling lingo new to both me and my partner but I go with it checking dictionaries as we play exchanging a mischievous gaze with ahab as my partner starts writhing and wrenching away in apparent confusion every now and then looking over his shoulder just to check there's no mirror no poster with strange terminology and when I claim my eventual victory I whisper a quick thank you to my helper who undoubtedly knew I needed a win today however small

LXXXII

there was once a time when I was too young to understand whaling when I could wander unaware beneath twenty-four cetacean skeletons arms stretched high towards a blue whale weighted down by dust and stroll through the city's famous fish market advertising whale burgers to curious tourists too distracted by the king crabs huddled in a fish tank and the harbour's seagulls cooing for remnants only now it can't escape my notice a twinge of nausea at the back of my throat tasting of sea salt desiring nothing more than to conduct convoluted conversations with ghosts ready now to hear their tale of who hunted them



LXXXIII

meet the anthropocene whale swimming through water embellished with curious lesions and scars from fishing-lines doing its best to dodge the criss-crossed passageways of our cruise ships, shipping containers and fishing boats its oceans now contaminated with all the effluvia of civilization all those chemicals we wilfully forget journeys on long after we're done with them to a society of lonely whales their voices lost amongst the high-pitched sounds of machinery leaving them anxious, miserable and overwhelmed as they continue on searching for food forever starving despite a belly full of plastic their wounds growing infested with lice and is it a surprise then that they have decided against bringing new calves into this world we have created

LXXXIV

when I was a teenager we were invited to visit the institute of marine research and after a day of discussing how salmon lice could be cured and creating our own blend of food for their barrels of krill we were invited to visit their lab where a recently dead fish was placed on display its stomach slit across its organs dragged out on display for educational purposes except I could not look could not stomach the idea even just listening made me nauseous to the point where I had to leave so I took a moment to catch my breath much preferring the sterile environment of microscopes and vials and still now I cannot fathom how any of these whalers could sit by and watch as the creature they killed mutely died

LXXXV

after months of daily drowning our sorrows in cups of green tea alone in our one-bedroom apartment whilst perusing our current selection of books we are delighted that on this summer day we are once again allowed to venture out to visit our local bookshop for while some might go entire years without visiting a bookshop we however like the whale can only live by inhaling that open atmosphere smelling of old books and yellowed paper even if this is only one seventh of our time for while the necessity for these periodical visits may not be as mandatory as the whale's spout's when breaching for air the snowy sparkling mist cascading all around him beneath a blazing sun we imagine it as equally euphoric so we submerge ourselves once more in our stay at home lives revelling in the presence of new books to read

LXXXVI

after two years of neglect I decided to fix up my old bike with a branch
I untangle the webbed beds of spiders and shoo away confused ants as
the rubber ceiling of their home is moved once more with soapy water
I wash the dusty lines of beauty of this device apologising for my
neglect explaining how I wasn't taking care of myself either but I'm
trying to do better now *it is all in all what mood you are in* the
mechanical fibres and filaments of the chain are oiled the crescentic
borders of rust scrubbed off meanwhile I think of the white whale
forever hunted forever frightened never granted time for wounds to heal
dissect him how I may then I go but skin deep I know him not and never
will the wheels are filled with air an inner tube replaced and then it is
ready for a test ride the click-clack of wheels as it is rolled out into the
street and I take my first ride along the river gazing at grazing sheep
and a sunset crimsoning fields of wheat

LXXXVII

my fear becomes reality as he wakes me up blue book in hand reading in the dim dawn light *both chasing and being chased to his deadly end* asking me if melville always knew

I sit up mind foggy with sleep and fright for how do you explain to such an iconic literary character that he was created to suffer so I fall back on half-truths talking about melville's fascination with shakespearean tragedy but he grows angry shouting and swearing about how melville had time to read the bard's great works but not to think of any better ways of describing him than by his disability and worried brow whether he was ever granted any redeeming qualities if he was ever perceived as more than a madman better humoured

silence falls across the apartment as he calms down pondering it seems on where to go from here then he turns round with terror in his eyes and demands a better ending this time one where he is not hung by his illness and tells me perhaps I could write a cheery conclusion for both of us



LXXXVIII

I awake at four-thirty am rise without waking my partner get dressed and sneak out to my bike lockdown has cheated us all out of the pleasant delights of spring and now summer and I was not about to allow it to deny me this year's summer solstice already the sun has serenely advanced across the sky the brick buildings of canterbury asleep beneath hues of pink and yellow our high street empty except for a few curious seagulls prancing about to the beat of their own indolent ramblings the roads are deserted leaving me to cycle uphill in peace when I reach the university my heart is pounding full of fright, fun and recklessness there is no one here except me and a gradually brightening sky so I settle down on a bench overlooking the city it is a curious thing to watch we so often romanticise the sunset and forget its equally stunning counterpart full of ease and virtue listening to birds as they plan out their day and as the yellow of dawn yields to blue I return to my bike and rumble down the hill at such a reckless rollicking rate that I decide to relinquish all of my worries for the remainder of the day

LXXXIX

I am learning that recovery is messy like tidying a room where a tornado passed through except the winds remain strong blowing documents and leaves around temperatures so low your fingers grow numb skin crack mind foggy from the constant chaos and I am told to focus only on one task at a time but who can blame me for taking in the whole sight for feeling overwhelmed when faced with the momentous task of putting everything back into place with finding new routines to help me whittle down chores to repair the gaps where the wind and cold comes through to remove a year's worth of dust and to recreate a sense of safety in this space where my worst thoughts once ran wild

XC

today I met up with a friend the first time since lockdown commenced such a sweet sensation it was walking and talking the same way one would sip a cup of saffron tea savouring every moment as we spoke of days past lingering after work by the sea bare-footed in the sand and guarding our pastries from eager seagulls yearning for a quick bite then we unburdened our hearts disclosing challenges and aches and worries spilling a mile long fingertips tracing along green woven nets separating us from rows of cherries ready for harvest woefully aware there is little saccharinity to be found in these topics of ours so we wander on through fields of corn and through mournful woodlands attempting to dissect our separate situations like having an apple only to discover a rotten core eaten away by a stray caterpillar detesting feeling that there was nothing we could do

XCI

what are sleepy humid spring days for if not a walk with an eddying cloud of seagulls circling excited above and as we walk we happen upon a rose garden each bulb large enough to be cupped by two hands so I draw a yellow rose close and revel in its sweet scent explaining to ahab how as children we used to crush rose petals in water to make perfume he chuckles then goes on to tell me about his encounter with the ship rose-bud the captain of which was forcing his crew to harvest oil from a decomposing whale as if attempting to dig himself a cellar in the sea ahab took pity on the crew all working with their noses pinched closed so he made up a story about another ship whose crew caught a fever from a dead whale the captain he knew too green to recognise the scent of ambergris a whaler's stinky treasure then they watched as the ship sailed off before harvesting it themselves revelling in the knowledge that this strange perfume ingredient was worth a good gold guinea for every ounce when sold to a druggist and I wonder how easy he found it then to tell such a blatant lie in the name of profit

XCI

what a curious case it is when the threshold beneath your door grows mammoth in size taking on the guise of a whale captured within its wooden frame and I pretend this isn't my anxiety conjuring up hallucinations as I sit down legs crossed and examine the creature laying before me gagging at the pungent smell alerting me to the fact it is ill suffering dyspepsia an illness known for the production of ambergris a fragrant and spicy essence once worn by gentry as perfume ignorant to the fact they were boasting the inglorious bowels of a sick whale but what can I do it would take three or four boat loads of brandreth's pills and a crew bolting out of harm's way as workers do while blasting rocks to cure this beast it is almost peaceful I think in its suffering unaware of its gradual decay like how I was I think while throwing buckets of water across the whale's pale face sick and stuck in place and I could see it too was depressed yearning for azure seas yet stuck indoors with me so I stood up and began to push the whale out wanting to right what had gone wrong wanting to return it to where it belongs and before I knew it the whale was gone and I had crossed the threshold for the first time that week

XCIII

they say man's insanity is heaven's hell that when a single whaleship sunk in mad merry to steal the crown jewel of the watery world they uncovered a previously unseen primal realm populated by miserable mermen gliding to-and-fro among peculiar fish and colossal coral reefs their eyes passive as the crew crept deeper into those wondrous depths weaving through a seaweed labyrinth to find their spangled sea jewel that luridly illuminated gem glowing like wildfires burning so bright all becomes naught but black smoke except they found naught but stillness weed wrapping themselves around each limb until they too become part of this forgotten landscape a monument to man's money-making desires

XCIV

it is difficult to feel like you are making progress when you still get those days where the worries seem to swallow you whole like jonah consumed by his whale stuck in this worn-out track of thoughts circling those same old concerns like how to pay rent, expensive electricity and upcoming student loan bills except I remain unable to stop to put down these worries for even a moment my hands like eels restless and ready to slip away while others appear cool and crystalized like they are in control so I worry that I am doing something wrong that I have missed some important memo until worrying about worrying eventually immobilises me and I am stuck still like a statue listening to that familiar racetrack of thoughts reminding me of everything I could be doing right now if I simply was not so afraid



XCV

follow me through a tunnel of overgrown bamboo to a garden where friends have gathered sitting in socially distanced chairs spread out across the newly weeded lawn awkward I am sure in their delight as they tell tales of the past few months only to fall short because honestly nothing really happened so they heat up a disposable barbecue burgers placed to rest upon the burning coal whilst one and all waft away the unaccountable mist of smoke as it overflows maybe you would have noticed sooner than we did that the heat proof mats beneath were melting but regardless soon food was served up and it was wondrous each of us giggling and speaking with mouths full too excited to wait even a second as we discussed those good old times sharing memories still held close to our hearts until the embers have cooled and we sigh unaware of when we will be allowed to gather once more

XCVI

like waves eroding rocks over time I am steadily learning to chip away at my blocks of sadness the ones which seemed like monoliths at first into more manageable shapes occasionally even getting playful with the way I carve them while going about my work reminding myself time and time again to treat myself with kindness like a child in my care make sure I get enough food and sleep and water and vitamins and sun but still some days are difficult those waves now crushing me instead until I retreat once more to the comfort of bed waiting for them to stop or for my partner to come home offer a few kind words sometimes with a bouquet in hand because he knew I was in a low mood and slowly things improve to the point where I can keep on chipping away



XCVII

descend along the creaky steps to where the off-duty watch are sleeping each mariner a chiselled silence challenged only by canonised kings and their counsellors for within this dangling score of lamps on the brink of dying out the common sailor is worth more than royalty and as we move through the dream-driven darkness the lamps flicker out one by one all but the sacred aladdin's lamp in the middle alone in its glow until a gust of salted wind creeps in through an unknown crevice and blows it out leaving the air smelling of grass butter in april but it does not matter the light isn't needed anymore our eyes have adapted to a thick darkness illuminated by nothing but faint glimmers of moonlight smuggled in through slim cracks in wood

XCVIII

the days roll past with a tingling numbness as we're left constantly aware of those rising numbers whilst compelled to continue watching as less masks are worn more messages from friends now ill trying and failing to connect the dots between what we know is right and what we are being told to do so our entire lives remain encapsulated by this apartment by the safety of four white walls for we are safe here almost yearning once more for those lockdown days because at least then the world didn't expect much from us didn't demand our presence didn't ask us to keep on living despite the anxiety and doubt and fear because honestly I am afraid not of the virus but of that long shop queue people pressed up close not being able to step out the awkwardness of taking up space of making eye contact with strangers of having to abide by societal guidelines after almost two years of isolation so I continue to hide within the familiarity of these four walls

XCIX

listen in trickling silence as the doubloon unspools its soliloquy with queer curlicues for every sunrise finds it where the sunset left it last nailed to the navel of the ship amidst all the rustiness of iron bolts and the verdigris of copper spikes that talisman of the white whale growing desperate to complete some morass within the milky way retaining still that quintessential quito glow forever sanctified to awe-striking end like a magician's glass mirroring back each man's own mysterious self as generation after generation pass down these immortal metaphors ready for fresh eyes and eager ears to interpret melville's wonders anew

C

a bumble bee lands on a nearby lavender flower whilst the sun warms and the breeze brings a refreshing breath of air so I close my eyes to sunbathe enjoying this rare act of permitted relaxation to calm down not because I have to not because otherwise I would have a panic attack or hurt myself but because I want to enjoy a simple summer's day then I spot a snail slinking its way across the flowerbed listening as people talk about their concerns an auditory cut-up poem in the making as a nearby seagull attempts a stealthy theft a paddle of ducks nipping at toes a child calls out for their father a bevy of teenagers chat about upcoming university adventures and in this rare moment everything seems okay

CI

day by day the buttercups yield to wheat-coloured grass I cannot name across fields where cows curl up to sleep in the afternoon light whilst a holly blue butterfly flutters by and further down I spot a swan snoozing on the river edge its fluffy grey cygnets off exploring elsewhere while passing by I pocket a large white feather abandoned on the grass before encountering the sheared sheep bodies pink without their woollen coats and then I arrive at my beloved oak where I open that book once more surrendering myself to melville's profound thoughts as he digests facts having taken a deep dive into leviathanic histories and its famous ships while the back of my mind continues to ponder what I can do to avoid drowning in those horrid hateful thoughts once more

CII

I scavenge through my bookshelves discovering nature paraphernalia ranging from pinecones to seashells, large beach pebbles to sea glass while I search for the perfect home for the swan feather and whilst flicking through the pages of my blue book I wonder to myself where this impulse to collect and bring nature inside comes from

melville describes a sperm whale cast ashore after an unusually long raging gale its body stripped of its fathom-deep enfolding by carrion birds leaving bones to become dust dry in intense sunlight his fictional natives transporting these bones to a temple of palms to keep it sheltered trophies hung from the ribs the vertebrae carved with hieroglyphs while an aromatic flame is kept alive in the skull its smoke rising from where the whale's jet used to spout he describes the echo answering from within this skeletal temple wrapped with vines and ishmael forever the curious observer has the skeleton's measurements tattooed on his skin

then I look up wondering what form of trinkets they would have chosen to hang from the ribs and in my mind's eye I see seashells unusual stones feathers from mighty creatures and other offerings collected from the wild

CIII

I remember gazing up at the dinosaur-like bones strung above me
amazed at the size of the blue whale skeleton greeting tourists to
london's natural history museum only later did I learn they'd named her
hope with her open jaw gasping for air her circular basket of ribs
resembling the hull of a great ship her vertebrae reaching towards the
ornamental glass windows her iconic flukes which eddied along the
ocean surface over a hundred years ago now little but a phantom limb

I wonder if she's curious viewing the thousand visitors ambling below
like krill if she understands what's going on that she's on display kept
amongst others in a house dedicated to the dead

I wonder if her family can still be found out there somewhere in the
eternal blue telling tales of their grandmother who was found stranded
in wexford harbour in 1891 is it possible they survived the close-call of
extinction in 1966 are they disfigured like melville's moby dick from
wounds caused by harpoons and fishing lines collisions with ships and
rough plastic swallowed whole

I wonder if hope would even recognise the ocean as it is now

CIV

sometimes reading melville feels akin to drowning weighed down by his lengthy dictionary definitions deemed unwarrantably grandiloquent for I have undertaken to manhandle this old leviathan of a classic novel yet I cannot compress him cannot tell over again these revolving panoramas of whaling in the nineteenth-century instead I am stuck horror-struck actually flipping through pages after pages as chaos rolls over me granting little but dim shuddering glimpses into these tales of his mere credulous images flickering in and out of focus and even when taking a scalpel to his paragraphs I discover little but a love for alliteration, pretty words and an assumed expertise in everything relating to the whale and I wonder if maybe that is the secret pretending to know what you are doing

CV

I am losing myself to a hunt for words remorseless and wild a havoc
swimming through sneaky syllables charming consonants vagabond
vowels all desiring to exterminate my presence my manipulation of
their form creating an alphabetical ark ready to reimagine the world
anew spouting their frothed defiance for who am I without their
presence but a whaler stabbing water



CVI

I still see him in the corner of my eyes and today he has arrived wobbly
after a half-splintering shock has left his leg marbled with cracks

so I go out for a walk looking for a replacement and when I pass my
favourite oak I find as if preordained a broken branch as thick as a leg
sluggishly I carry it home the weight awkwardly distributed between
my arms and upon my arrival ahab insists on carving it himself

he takes plain practical procedures measuring the branch and sawing
off the excess whittling down the old joints where leaves once grew and
sanding everything till it was smooth to the touch

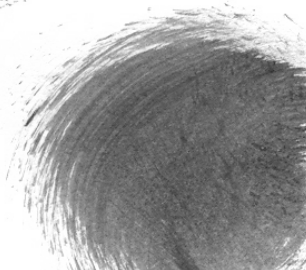
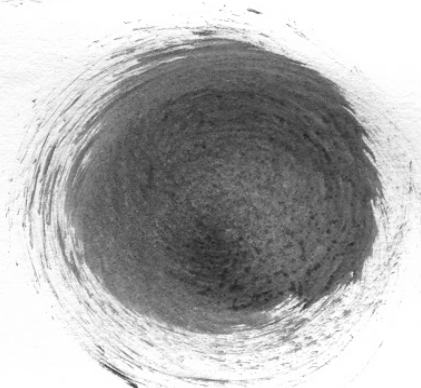
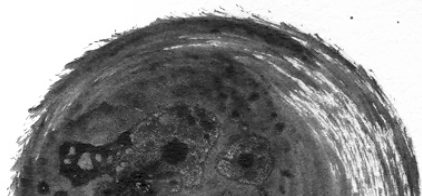
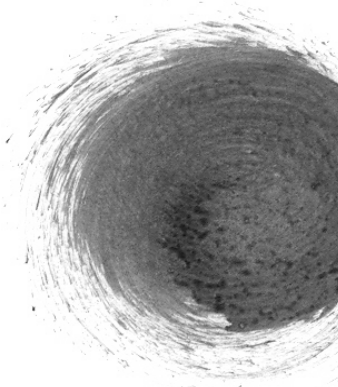
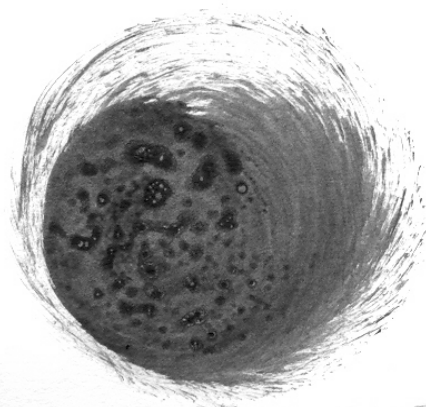
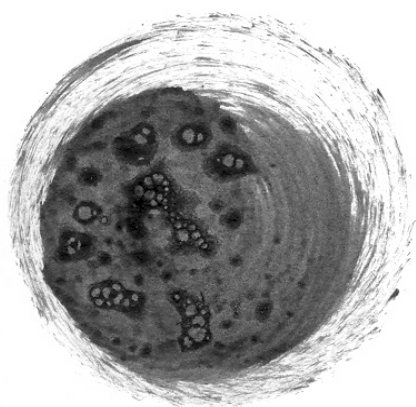
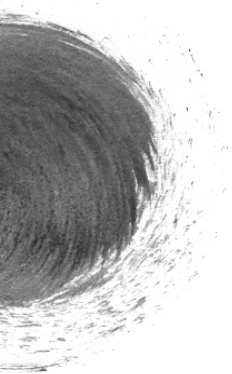
when it was done he seemed unsure what to do with the remains of his
previous leg all the anguish and former woe it represented so the next
day he travelled on his own to the sea waded far into the waves and at
last let the anger of the past slip away

CVII

in preparation for our wedding we visited a local flower field where we were left alone to roam and pluck flowers as we pleased bucketing everything from roses to pea blossoms to lavender to poppies among so many more we remained unable to name but they were beautiful and with shears in hand we wandered up and down those growing rows meeting every now and then in the middle where we discussed the sky its darkening clouds the odd drop of rain soon threatening to drench us but we carried on until we were ready to pose with two large buckets of blooms at the edge of the field proud of our mismatched collection and when it was time we worked together to cut and trim and arrange until we were left with table flowers, a bridal bouquet and enough left over for a flower crown to be woven on the day by my bridesmaid and while we could not save all of them the final two remain dangling off a door a preserved token from not one but two beautiful days

CVIII

one day while hiding behind windows speckled with small drops of rain
I ask him what it was like that eternal darkness of the ocean deep and
he sighs as if he knew this moment would come eventually so he tells
me what it was like gradually drifting through time whilst feeling the
fiery warmth of hell forever without a body for cursed be that moral
indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers but he laughs saying
how can he be surprised he's been assigned to spend eternity beside the
devil when he was cast to play the role of a ship's undoing then I ask
what is it like being back to which he looks grim answering in similes
like there is finally something in this slippery world that he can hold on
to like gripping a slimy vigorous fish waiting to escape knowing soon
enough it will slip away once more returning to whence he came




CIX

when the call is answered I can see the pixilated face of my father and before I know it my mother and brother arrive to join the conversation we speak of our week so far tell news both good and bad then bring the cats up to the camera revelling in the joy of sharing something so simple but eventually words run dry leaving us skirting around topics we know better than to touch like their desire for me to move home and my elder grandmother withering away with each new complaint slowly taking her toll on my father as well as he tries his best to solve each and every problem she can find searching for them as she does with a microscope but it is nice still to see their faces and hear their voices to remember there are people whom I feel close to even though they live across the ocean from me even though we have our fights and differing opinions so I cross my fingers once more that I will get to see them again soon



CX



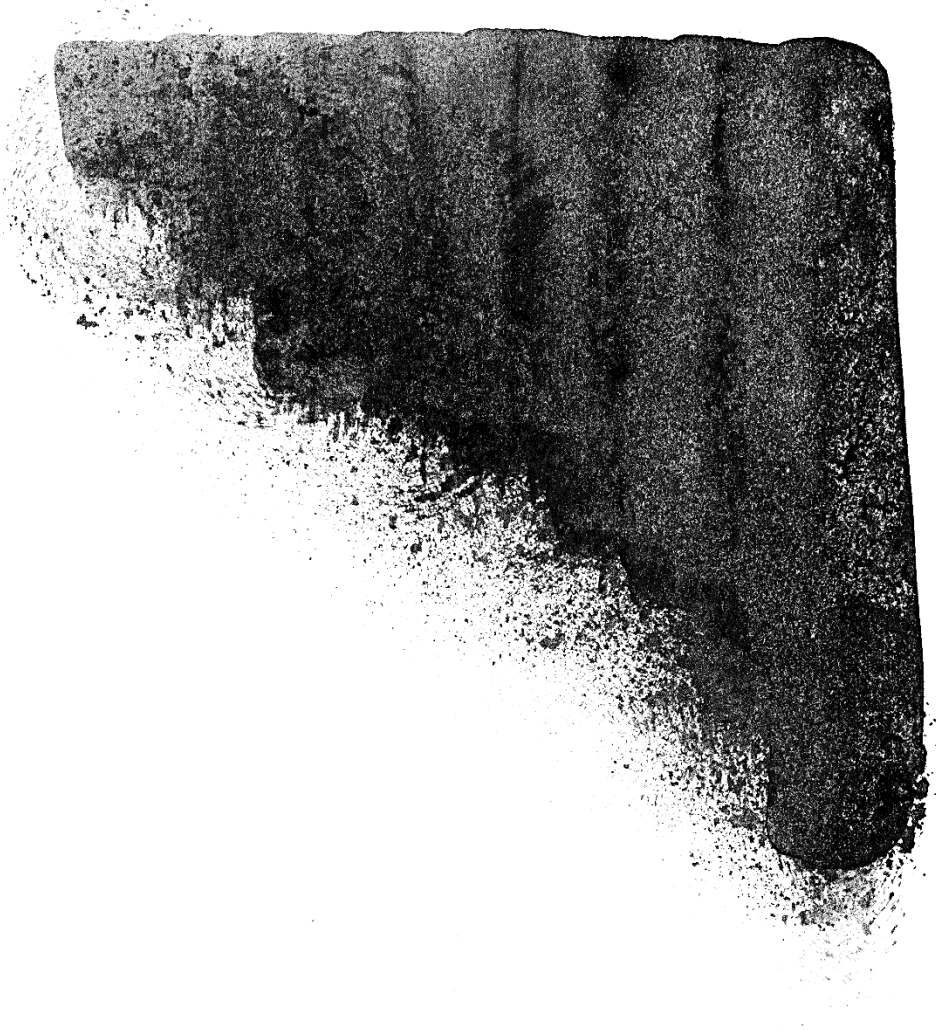
that night is still etched in my mind the dark library room the glowing screens my head top-heavy like any other dinnerless student with artistotle on their mind and fear in their heart racing against the slow ticking of the clock to get my assignments done before my morning flight because he was dying the family called back home to say goodbye to that pillar of a man my grandfather

for I had not been there to watch as he wasted and wasted away in those long-lingering days leading up to the diagnosis though I witnessed the end result where little seemed left of him but his frame

a week passed with us wandering deeper and deeper into those hospital halls trying not to disturb the slumbering occasionally peering through windows where other families were likewise grieving this after all was where they sent those on death's door

we sat side by side in a half circle around this waning man beholding those strange expressions which crossed his face while deep asleep dreams never placed into words for there was no changing his mind about dying no duty left undone which could reverse his cancer

in the end I wasn't there that final day my brother and I wasting hours at home until the news arrived at our front door



CXI

I take a pause from my run in a shaded spot next to the river and watch in awed silence as the water flows unceasingly swerving left and right round the underwater forestry it is never the same you see the water is composed of a million mixed atoms undulating like drowned dreams half-remembering somnambulisms and reveries inching closer to the river I feel the cool water as it slips through my fingertips I cup a handful and splash my face the cold refreshing on such a blazing warm day and I wonder when did I stop seeking out running water stop getting lost in woodlands and feeling the grass beneath my feet meanwhile a cloud drifts in front of the sun casting the world in shadows I get up glance at the river one last time and continue my run leaving the river to resume flowing in perpetual restlessness

CXII

call me perth a begrimed blistered old blacksmith toiling away at life
a patient hammer wielded by a patient arm in slow and solemn work
until he felt that deadly numbness coming over him under the cover of
darkness concealed in cunning disguise a desperate burglar with a
familiar face who took off with everything leaving behind little but an
unhappy nervousness and whistling insecurities and it was in this
hideous rot of life he grew faint until death seemed the only desirable
sequel a path he would have trodden were it not for the pacific's
thousand singing mermaids calling him forth to a life equally abhorred
and abhorring *come hither* they said *put up they gravestone* they said so
the churchyard will remember your name once your toil at sea is done



CXIII

we are speaking about the calamity of his melancholy ship and he asks what I think of that previous life of his and for lack of better words I fall upon my studies and explain how it is beautiful in its own wicked way a revenge tragedy really featuring a man so consumed with such a singular purpose there was no question it would end any other way taking a moment he thinks stroking his matted beard as if it might offer up the right words then he asks the question he originally wanted to pose have you ever experienced anything akin to that so I think digging deep into my memories until those haunted moments float up once more maybe a few times I say though more out of desperation than revenge and in the end I did not harm anyone but myself you see the urge to self-destruct is a frightening thing it is like the instructions are arriving from something other than yourself makes you wonder if you've lost your mind as you're stuck trying to mediate between these cruel thoughts and your own better wit but then the lines between the two begin to blur soon it is difficult to tell what is real and what is depression speaking

CXIV

there is a sickness growing in my bones a longing for crisp cold air for waves gliding forward like wind through tall boulder stones seagulls bobbing in and out of sight sleepless upon those restless waters more and more now I am thinking about returning to once more sit on those mountain rocks beneath an abated sun losing myself in simple moments of dreamy quietude to walk upon cobbled streets hammered with rain its tranquil brilliancy forever and always watering the city's tall forests and I wonder what it will take to unstick myself from my adoptive home those tricky tangled ties grown more complex with each passing year and return once more to a city I once called home

CXV

jolly enough were the sights and sounds that came bearing down before the wind I read from my book the words oddly appropriate for our current setting in the park resting beneath a warming sun whilst children play and teenagers tell tales all around us everyone dressed for holiday in the distance a small group of kids try to climb the old baobab plane tree to the dissatisfaction of their parents eagerly making their way up its swollen trunk *you would have almost thought they were pulling down the bastille* ahab comments I notice he is fiddling with a vial of sand nantucket he explains as he notices my gaze watching as the grains make their way from one end to the other slowly I close the book biting my lips while searching for words do you miss it I ask he nods then looks around at the ruckus of the park I know what I got to do now he says tightening his grip on the vial it is time I went home

CXVI

ode to the dying whale

it is a simple thing – buoyed by breaths of once living things floating into the sweetness of afternoons towards a sunset sea where water and air commence in a crimson fight beyond all human weal or woe it is travelling to a place where life dies sunward full of faith no sooner dead than death whirls around the corpse – floating – towards a baronial vassal of light meanwhile the wreathing horizon curls up in that rosy sky soothed to deeper gloom by vesper hymns rolling still on billows speechless and unspoken to

CXVII

he tells me he's dreamed it again the lantern hanging from the waif-pole casting a troubled glare upon the black upon the shadowed back of four slain whales the midnight waves chafing against the whales' broad flanks like soft surf upon an empty beach they seem asleep he says their unforgiving ghosts watching him listening to the conversation to come revelling in its irony at the same time sharks are tap tap tapping on the light cedar planks of the ship moaning their complaints in squadrons alone on the deck are two men I shall not die on this voyage ahab's dream double utters I shall slay moby dick and survive it a laugh of derision shackles the air always the same laugh *take another pledge old man* the parsee says his eyes glowing in the lantern gloom I no longer fear the gallows the double says suddenly usure of its words it is easy he knows now to be fearless of that which one has yet to live and as always they remain silent watching as the grey dawn comes on and the slumbering crew awakes this he says is where the dream breaks



CXVIII

we are walking along canterbury high-street beneath the high-noon sun the sky looks lacquered free from clouds while the horizon floats with unrelieved radiance so far we have acquired a couple of grocery bags and a few practical bits and bobs from various shops among them a vintage pair of blue tinted sunglasses ahab insisted upon transforming him into a strange blend of fisherman and 80s disco dancer but alas there are stranger sights to be seen wandering the streets today so we stop by a café take a seat outside and enjoy the fresh summer effulgence ahab takes sight of that solar fire gaining its meridian as if still attempting to calculate his current latitude then he pulls a pencil out of his pocket and scribbles a note on his leg unaware of my unanswered curiosity his writing too cursive to read at a distance when he meets my gaze he smiles places the pencil back in his pocket and falls into a silent moment of reverie

CXIX

small flecks of dust dash and dance through the air while I sit frozen in indecision my mind attempting to create a coherent picture from stray jigsaw puzzle pieces all in various shapes and sizes until ahab appears tilts his neck and takes a seat on the edge of the bed asking what the matter is so I explain providing him with the long complex tale which ends with me having to decide whether to take a new job or stay where I am and as I finally draw another breath of air he laughs like a full belly rumble of a laugh saying how silly it was to fear change when change came knocking on your door for one time he says when they were caught in a hammering gale descending into a thundering typhoon they had two options: go windwards into that blackness of doom or allowing that fair wind to carry them leeward towards home but then I go quiet for I know fully well what he chose the decision he made to not change course despite the opportunity provided by fair wind and I think about all the opportunities I have lost because my mind was too locked in its ways to even entertain such sweet possibilities

CXX

it is that day of the month again when I am stuck listening to that horrid 'please hold' music which plays on repeat until reception answers praying almost that I will be on hold a little longer as I near my bus stop but of course now they answer so I explain with new words than last with the hope it eases their confusion as I fall within the group who are not allowed repeat prescriptions bound by convention to provide a sign of life before receiving this month's antidepressants but all goes well leaving me to anxiously carry my phone around while at work praying once more they don't ring back mid lesson but again all goes well I slip away during break find an empty room and explain to this month's GP that life is complicated things are a bit topsy turvy but I am managing I am following my aftercare plan as recommended by the counsellor and slowly but surely I am learning to be kinder to myself and for the first time ever the doctor prescribes me two months of my medication a strangely beautiful sign of recovery which leaves me smiling all day

oh, take medicine, take medicine

CXXI

after six months of living in our new larger flat I am finally unpacking those last two boxes the ones which have been gathering dust and hair and dead leaves and simply remained in the way but which I never had the energy or patience to deal with until now and I think what a strange phenomenon it is to slow return to all those chores placed on hold once life seemed no longer a certainty and energy felt scarcer than diamonds but sure enough within half an hour the boxes are gone their contents relocated elsewhere the location given a good hover and suddenly there is this empty space this sense of calm where before there was clutter and I wonder if this is what recovery is: a slow clearing away of messy negative thoughts bringing nothing but frustration and agony until all that is left is some form of gentle clarity

CXXII

in the spur of the moment I decide to buy a shelving unit nothing too exciting just your basic four squares flat-packed of course with screws we later learn chip when met with the slightest form of resistance but my partner and I persist because it did not take long before I had done the self-assembly version of painting myself into the corner and called out for a helping hand the cat nervously peeking from behind the corner at the strange monstrosity growing in the hallway and then it is done completed with fake linen drawers except now I am left with the task of assigning purpose to this impulse buy moving things back and forth until a conversation heard elsewhere echoes once more in my mind and I decide to make it into a monument a space for everything which brings me calm from running to embroidery to drawing to that one month where I decided I needed to learn how to macrame and over the course of the day these items gravitate over to the wobbly shelving unit finding their place brought together by an empty bottle filled with dried flowers

CXXIII

dawn yawns as the sun awakes lifting the summer fog from its slumber across the fields leaving little the humming silence of a new morning and somehow I am awake without multiple alarms and multiple snooze buttons pressed without justifying delays by cuddling the cat or husband without spending horrifying minute after minute trying to convince myself it is in my best interest to get up to leave the comfort and warmth of my duvet and it feels wonderful at first almost worthy of celebration until suddenly the compass needle spins the other way and I realise how strange it is to awake with such ease how unusual it had become for my body to know when to fall asleep and awake and for a while I freeze locked in anxiety thinking about how bad it must've really been because you don't really realise do you until the fog begins to clear how truly and utterly devastating the night frost was so I take this moment to mourn the time I lost to pain and fear although they still linger around and then I get up, open the curtains and begin my day

CXXIV

it is warm too warm even as the emblazoning sun demands everyone's attention like those crowned babylonian kings and queens who once reigned beneath it meanwhile the old man walks along the pavement as if in rolling reveries reliving those bygone times some days he simply does not speak as if debating with his own inner demons in order to settle some old score while above the sky seems vast like out-bellying sails the strong unswaggering breeze our only relief from this climate change induced heat until a new thought occurs and he stops in his tracks gazes up at the sky and smiles before digging a pencil out from his pocket and scribbling a sentence or two upon his wooden leg his eyes bright with delight and I realise we are witnessing ahab not as he once was filled with that fatal pride but as he is now waiting for the winds to change so he can change sail with them

CXXV

it is one of those days at work where everything goes awry and I think about the school's superstition how the full moon somehow brings out the worst in everyone as fights break out, pots are stirred and foul words are sent flying across the room but as always before the end of the day everything falls back into place stern words are had and praise is given to those who magically managed to remain far away from today's chaos and at the end of it I think about how I am going to miss this place this house I remember admiring that instant sense of belonging while given a tour during my interview and standing in an empty common room I think about the students I'll miss the progress I will no longer be privy to witnessing the growth and changes they will hopefully go on to make because despite the chaos of my own mind this place remained a strange sanctuary a place filled with purpose regardless of how many awful names you were called that day because you know tomorrow they will come back tails between their legs sweet as the day is long and I wish so desperately that things could have worked out differently

CXXVI

while perched upon the kitchen step bowl of granola in hand I think about those whalers again imagine them lounging along the hallway some flicking through our books others attempting to lure the shy cat out of her hiding spot and then startled as some wild and unearthly cry leaves them scrambling for a source debating amongst themselves what could produce such a sound some claiming it to be the half-articulated wailing of ghosts others the haunting voices of newly drowned men and I watch as they remain transfixed listening with care as moments stretch out and float by broken only by that shrilling distant noise and I wonder if I should tell them it is bin collection day

CXXVII

here is thy new home little grey-headed pip you seem to comply with
my humour more genially than those books these folks here seem to be
hoarding at least you being here and all has given me something new to
worry about

the pigeon coos and inspects its new housing

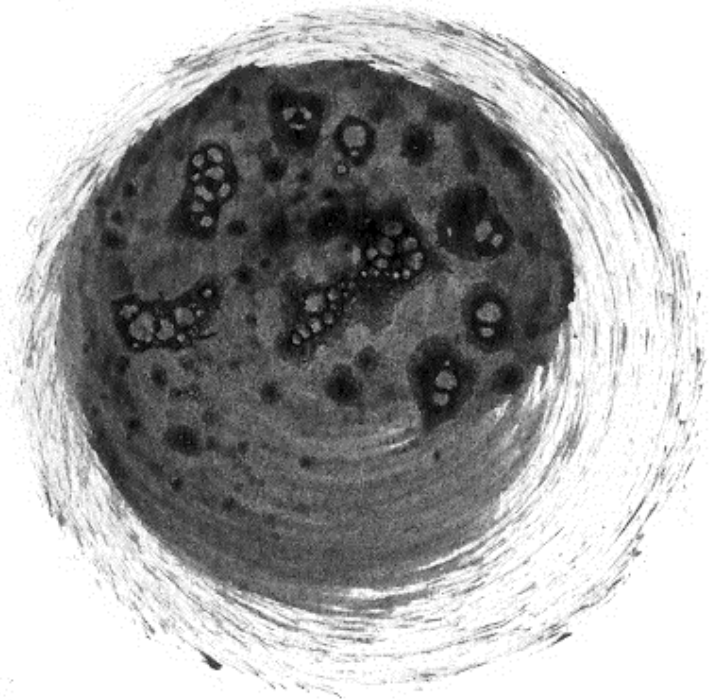
dost thou not ever sing? I am too far gone into the dark side of earth to
make merry even grave-diggers sing whilst going about their task
making music because none is to be found in their spade but old ahab
no not anymore I did once though a long time ago

the pigeon begins tapping at its box then stretches its wings and rustles
its feathers despite the awkward bandage still attached to its side

is there something thou are trying to tell me pip dancing about despite
thy injuries *I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee some
unknown conduit from the unknown worlds must empty into thee* rest
now and we'll see if we can find a new home for the two of us

CXXVIII

sometimes I wonder what he thinks when reading back on his adventure if ever that tinge of regret gets too heavy to bear if certain chapters are better left unread as I reach the story of the ship rachel and their hunt for boys lost at sea for he knew they brought nothing but bad news and yet he saw through their misfortune hopeful they might provide a clue where that wild whale of his was heading their reasonable request left unanswered despite a desperate father going down on one knee pleading for mercy speaking of ahab's son safe back at home unaware that boy was already practically fatherless



CXXIX

I tell thee thou must not follow ahab everywhere he goes firstly because the lavatory is a private area secondly the hour is coming when it will be time for me to cure my malady thou can sit in the chair as long as ye stop plucking at the seams but know that I will never desert ye listen and thou wilt often hear my oak foot upon the floor and know I am there even behind a closed door but for now come sit with me for while I am indeed down-hearted each time ye decide to relieve yourself on me I shall stay for I have many wrongs to right but I shall try even if life's stern strikes rocks and oysters come to join me

CXXX

three or four days have slid by since I told ahab I had finally managed to book him a journey with a freighter heading towards his home and since **then** ahab seems to have chased his anxiety into a corner the two debating long and hard about their hopes and fears until both such concepts seemed ground to the finest dust and power like a machine he moved dumbly about unaware of us in some wild way like time had infected him with its gliding strangeness he never spoke unless some passing unmomentous matter like dinner made it necessary it was not until today while out on our usual walk along the river that he spoke for the first time since I gave him the good news a hawk was spotted resting high in the branches of a tree soon after catching our attention it dove down and swiftly flew off with ahab's hat a minute later a minute black spot was dimly discerned falling from that vast height into the fields ahead and that's when **he** broke the silence with curses I dare not repeat

CXXXI

as rolling waves and days goes by the life-buoy-coffin still gently swinging off the side another ship is descried a whaleship so miserably misnamed the delight and as they sail upon her tomb they see clearer what has happened its splintered planks scribed with common misfortune with a trumpet in hand ahab gestured towards the wreck and spoke to his crew *hast seen the white whale me thinks* for all that remained was a lone miserable captain wandering amongst his noiseless crew picking them up one at a time and leaning them over the bulwarks the pequod not quick enough to escape the splash the corpses made as they struck the sea sprinkling her hull with their ghostly baptism

CXXXII

forty years he says for forty years I sailed the world on the hunt for whales and for forty years I fed upon dry salted fare I lived the majority of my life away from home whole oceans away from my wife and child that beautiful girl she deserved better than to be widowed upon her wedding day for towards the end I was more demon than man so furious in my pursuit I neglected everything else within my reach so look upon me he says look me in the eye and promise you will never repeat my mistakes for they are scribed right here in this blue book of yours should you ever need reminding and when you miss me and trust me darling one day you will travel to the ocean there is wisdom to be found while gazing into the sea and revel in that stillness in the sounds of the shore

CXXXIII

some days I wonder what I am going to do once he leaves how I will fill this time which up until now have been reserved for listening to his stories regardless of whether they were told while out on long strolls or while hiding away from the world where none but him could find me it is strange I think to spend such an extended time with such a character to then put them down again like a book let their life drift on elsewhere with new adventures to be embarked upon and then I wonder if not I as well am allowed to go on new journeys to change as a person to see what other possibilities exist beyond the perimeter of my mental illness for things are after all better now I am managing and though I know the battle is far from over I am better equipped to handle those unwarranted storms of emotions perhaps I am even able to deal with them alone now so I have written a letter thanking ahab for all that he has done for me for though his story was a tragedy he inadvertently become my remedy

CXXXIV

there we are at the train station the old man with his packed bag and us hugging him goodbye the whaler awkward telling us there was no need to blister our lungs with warm wishes there were no fears or forebodings no predestined tragedy waiting to take hold so he boards the train gazing back as the window view begins to move taking him to the metropolis bustling with activity where a stranger points him in the right direction another train and then the window grows blue with water and before he knows he has checked into his lodgings for the night like his crew once did unfurling into sleep with uneasy excitement like he's a young lad heading out to sea for the first time

CXXXV

the morning dawned fair and fresh as if it were a new-made world and ahab could feel his poor heart throb when he gazed upon that monster of a ship the wild morning wind threatening to take off with his hat and with a frozen calm he boarded the freighter his bones damp and stiff as the horn rang so loud he first thought the tongues of hellfire had spoken and once onboard he watched as that great shroud of sea rolled on same as it did back then for he remembers now more than before his wife and child the crew he like odysseus sailed to their deaths so he looks down at his leg that sturdy oak scribbled with the names of those he left behind



Literary Transformations & Women Who Rewrite

Chapter 1: Literary Transformations

1.1 Defining Literary Transformations

The act of rewriting, or repurposing material from, a canonical or classical text is neither new nor scandalous. Homer drew upon the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the creation of Achilles as a character in the *Iliad*, Shakespeare upon Arthur Brooke's long poem *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* for his play *Romeo & Juliet*, and Jean Rhys upon Charlette Brontë's *Jane Eyre* for her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Although this creative act has historical roots and is exponentially growing in popularity, the current terminology available is inconsistent. Rewriting, retelling, reimagining, revisioning, transformation, adaption and version are all terms which have been utilised to describe such works. It is because of this inconsistency that I propose the introduction of the term *literary transformations* under which all creative writing endeavours that reuse, recycle, rewrite or repurpose material from an existing text with the aim of producing a new work can be grouped.

The purpose of literary transformations is to challenge and expand upon existing literature, engage in creative dialogue with the original author, and provide material for new creations. Susanna Braund, in her journal article examining contemporary retellings, highlights the importance of asking 'uncomfortable or disconcerting questions about familiar stories from the ancient world.'¹ The process of asking difficult questions and critiquing older literature the same way we would a newer text allows the writer to both address potentially problematic portrayals and reflect upon what could have been done differently. Ioana-Gianina Hanes, in her journal article focusing on rewriting in postmodern feminine literature, explains how feminist rewriting encompasses a need to make corrections: 'you rewrite when what has already been written is not correct, complete or requires amendments.'² The degree of alteration required will vary depending on the perceived flaws of the source text, as well as the motivations of the

¹ Susanna Braund, "We're here too, the ones without names." A study of female voices as imagined by Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy, and Marguerite Yourcenar,' *Classical Receptions Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (November 2012) pp. 190-208 (p. 190)

² Ioana-Gianina Hanes, 'Margaret Atwood: *The Penelopiad* – Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature,' *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2019) pp. 9-20 (p. 9)

modern author. Susan Sontag, in Leland Poague's *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, reflects upon the ownership of meaning. She explains: 'I don't think the author of a work is the owner of its meaning. I think that somebody else might have a better idea of what one of my novels means than I do.'³ Sontag thereby encourages readers to be active participants in the creation of meaning, leaving room for the variety of meanings readers may derive from her work which in turn may influence their literary transformation should they pursue this. It is a form of literary transformation guided by a phenomenological reading experience rather than a desire to correct erroneous portrayals. Overall, there are numerous reasons why an author may embark upon a literary transformation, as well as a multitude of motivations shaping this venture and its final product. Once the writer has determined the elements they wish to magnify or minimise, alongside the purpose and motivation for their transformation, they are ready to embark upon their rewrite. Literary transformations provide us with the opportunity to expand upon and reshape established literature while leaving the original text intact. It in no way aims to replace the original, simply to highlight certain themes, characters or aspects worth viewing through a different lens. It is a way to engage with literature that is simultaneously creative and critical.

While any published text could be utilised as source material for a literary transformation (with some important restrictions which will be explored in chapter five), it is mainly canonical, classical and mythological texts which attract this form of rewriting due to their cultural importance and significance. These are the foundational stories upon which our understanding of literature is based, and by rewriting these we can create new, accessible and non-discriminatory versions of familiar stories. While each retelling will vary in focus, format, purpose and method depending on author and source material, they all fall within the category of literary transformations through the shared process of transforming an existing text. As Hanes describes it, these texts are 'brought into the present, discussed, analysed and given new meanings, while shaking the dust from its covers and placing it in the universe of contemporary readings.'⁴ It is a form of reading and engagement with literature which allows writers to draw parallels between issues in the text and contemporary concerns. It is a discipline ideally suited to a combination of academic research and creative endeavours, allowing critical thought to inform as well as challenge the creative process.

For marginalised groups in particular, as highlighted by Elena Theodorakopoulos in her journal article 'Women's Writing and the Classical Tradition,' it is a way to transgress into the

³ Leland Poague ed., *Conversations with Susan Sontag* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995) p. 5

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10

classical tradition, a territory historically dominated by white male individuals of influence, and make it their own. Through challenging and subverting the established texts, new writers are able to ‘uncover hitherto invisible meanings.’⁵ Literary transformations are therefore a way for conversations surrounding a text to continually evolve, giving space for emerging voices to demonstrate how the story could have been told differently, thereby highlighting how our approach to a topic has or has not changed since the publication of the source material.

1.2 The Feminist Tradition of Rewriting

Drawing inspiration from the emancipatory movements of the 1960s, the practice of feminist rewriting, or women’s rewriting, emerged as a response to a culture growing increasingly interested in memory. Their aim: to change the way the past was being remembered. In her book, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women’s Rewriting*, Liedeke Plate defines women’s rewriting as ‘a genre in which narratives of the past are retold from the perspective of new, marginal, and usually female characters in the original story.’⁶ It is a practice which encourages a plurality of points-of-view, with a specific focus on ensuring previously silent voices are now granted a chance to speak. Literary transformation as an emerging genre is built upon the foundations laid down by the practice of feminist rewriting; carrying on their aim of altering cultural memory through the retrieval of women’s perspectives while simultaneously widening this definition to emphasise the inclusion of other non-dominant identities in the retrieval process. Gender is, after all, only one of the numerous dimensions of power relations and, as Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith explain in their introduction on the subject: ‘what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up in issues of power and hegemony.’⁷ This statement is reminiscent of the familiar adage declaring history is written by the victors. A cause behind this divide could be the privilege which accompanies power, thereby providing the education and means necessary to access literature in addition to reflecting, recording and distributing their version of events and stories.

Although feminist rewritings are predominately a modern phenomenon spanning from the 1970s to the present day, there are older examples of female authors producing works with

⁵ Elena Theodorakopoulos, ‘Women’s writing and the classical tradition,’ *Classical Receptions Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (November 2012) pp. 149-162 (p. 149)

⁶ Liedeke Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women’s Rewriting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p. ix

⁷ Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, ‘Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction,’ *Signs*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2002) pp. 1-19 (p. 6)

the aim of challenging negative portrayals of women. The earliest example in western literature is a 1405 book by the Italian-French poet and writer Christine de Pizan titled *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, translated into English as *The Book of the City of Ladies*.⁸ The book was written as a response to Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, a work which, according to Kenna Neitch in her journal article 'Rewriting Mythology, Reclaiming History' on Pizan, creates 'a vehement, if unoriginal, critique of women through his writing on courtly love.'⁹ However, Pizan was also influenced by the work of Florentine author Giovanni Boccaccio. With the aid of his 1374 collection of biographies *De mulieribus claris*, translated into English as *On Famous Women*, Pizan was able to create her defence of women.¹⁰ While Boccaccio was inclusive for his time, producing the first known western text to exclusively chronicle biographies of women, some of his characterisations were stereotypical. In the entry about Eve, for example, he highlights women's fickleness and beauty as their foremost endowment.¹¹ To correct this, Pizan consulted additional sources in order to emphasize the merits of each and every woman, portraying them as strong and honourable in her fight against misogynistic gender representation.¹² Although Pizan's work is separated from the current growing movement of feminist rewritings by six hundred years, it demonstrates that there has been a sustained dissatisfaction with how women have been portrayed within literature alongside a desire to change this representation. The difference, however, is one of accessibility. While at the time Pizan would have been among a minority of privileged women educated in Latin and free to pursue a career in writing, there has over the past fifty years been a positive increase in women attending higher education as well as pursuing creative careers such as writing.

Literary transformations, as an extension of feminist rewriting, thereby function as a way to utilise what came before in an effort to both address the power imbalances of the past as well as comment on contemporary issues through a new angle. The work is therefore a simultaneous creative and critical approach to studying the past, aligning itself with feminist and memory studies' shared perception that 'we do not study the past merely for its own sake; rather, we do so to meet the needs of the present.'¹³ Whether these needs emerge from the writer themselves, the culture they live in, or from global trends such as #metoo varies from project to project. A

⁸ Kenna Neitch, 'Rewriting Mythology, Reclaiming History: Christine de Pizan and Eva Gore-Booth on Gendered Performance and Equality,' *Women's Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2020) pp. 113-129 (p. 113)

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118

¹¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (New York: Italica Press, 2011) p. 2

¹² Neitch, p. 118

¹³ Hirsch, p. 12

prominent advocate for women reclaiming their rightful place within literature and literary history is of course Hélène Cixous. In her iconic essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' she writes:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.¹⁴

Feminist rewriting allows contemporary female authors to 'put herself into the text' through the reclamation of otherwise ignored female literary or historical characters. By fusing elements of herself and her lived experiences with existing stories, the writer is able to draw parallels between past and present experiences. Literary transformations and feminist rewriting therefore provide the means to analyse historical injustices with current morals in mind in order to produce a more nuanced version of events.

Feminist rewriting has emerged as a way to encourage women to reclaim and recreate spaces and stories where they were previously marginalised. As Adrienne Rich explains: 'we need to know where we have been: we need our history.'¹⁵ Through re-entering these old tales and examining them with modern eyes, we are able to understand and put into context the struggles women have had to suffer through. Literary transformations also provide the framework for following Rich's call for revision:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can

¹⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd Edition. Eds: Vincent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurea A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, Johns McGowan, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Jeffrey J. Williams (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010) pp. 1942-1959 (p. 1942)

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago Press, 1986) p. 155

understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.¹⁶

Through examining the existing literary canon for judgemental, misogynistic and dangerous portrayals of women, in addition to rewriting these, female authors are able to address the damage caused by a patriarchal structure and how problematic assumptions several hundred years old continue to influence our daily lives. Literary transformations thereby provide us with a way to examine the past, reflect upon what should be different, and write our own stories in the gaps left behind by the original author.

1.3 Contemporary Women Rewriting Greek Mythology

The interest in feminist rewritings has continued to grow over the past decades, resulting in a rising trend of female authors producing literary transformations based upon Greek myths featuring previously ignored characters finally speaking their truth. A good example of this is the works of Madeline Miller. Her debut novel, *The Song of Achilles*, was published in 2011 with great commercial success. Her second novel, *Circe*, followed suit in 2018. However, although her work adheres to a modern definition of feminism, her debut novel does not meet women's rewritings desired criteria of featuring a female protagonist. Instead, it is an important piece of queer fiction. Throughout the *Iliad*, the relationship between Achilles and his companion Patroclus is widely speculated though never elaborated upon. It seems translators have been uncertain about defining this as a homosexual relationship. Miller, on the other hand, has no qualms about making it explicit, narrating their love from the point of view of Patroclus: 'Our mouths opened under each other, and the warmth of his sweetened throat poured into mine. I could not think, could not do anything but drink him in, each breath as it came, the soft movements of his lips. It was a miracle.'¹⁷ Considering sexual relationships between men were well established in Ancient Greece, her work is by no means a subversion of the original. Instead, it is a confirmation of what we already know: people fall in love with one another regardless of their biological sex, and likewise deserve to see themselves reflected in both contemporary culture and in the myths currently being transformed.

¹⁶ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979) p. 35

¹⁷ Madeline Miller, *Song of Achilles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) p. 94

Miller's background is of particular interest. Having completed a BA and MA from Brown University in classics, in addition to teaching Latin and Ancient Greek for over a decade, meant Miller was uniquely equipped to engage with the original material directly without the influence of potentially biased translations. Although translations serve a necessary function of allowing readers unfamiliar with the source text's language to access its content, it is not uncommon for the translator's own subjective interpretation of a source text to unintentionally shift how characters and events are perceived by the translation's audience. An example of this is Erasmus's introduction of a box, likely confusing the Greek word *pitthos* meaning 'jar' and *puxos* meaning 'box,' when he translated Hesiod's *Works and Days* into Latin in the sixteenth century.¹⁸ This linguistic shift, as minor as it may seem, introduced a perception of malice in his portrait of Pandora, as there is a degree of effort required to open a box compared to the fragile nature of a ceramic vase with an unsteady lid.¹⁹ While there is no way of avoiding the pitfalls of bias in translation and writing alike, Miller's ability to access the source material directly without needing to rely upon translations allows her produce novels which are only once removed from the original, instead of being limited by the interpretations of one or several translators. She combined this expertise with her specialisation in adapting classical tales to modern audiences, a talent honed whilst studying at the Yale School of Drama. Although literary transformations are being written by a variety of individuals for various different reasons, the high quality of Miller's writing and engagement with the source material, in addition to her commercial success, suggests that an academic education alongside a passion for the source material are key in producing transformations capable of engaging with and challenging our perceptions of the source material. This does, however, raise the issue of whether there might be an entry barrier to the practice of literary transformations as an extension of current barriers limiting one's access to education. This issue is discussed further in the fifth chapter of this thesis.

A similar effect can be seen in Alice Oswald's long poem *Memorial*, likewise a transformation of the *Iliad* and published in 2011. In an article written for the *New Statesman*, Oswald explains that the long poem was written out of admiration for this story which has inspired and challenged her ever since she first encountered it as a teenager.²⁰ This long-lasting interest in the works of Homer, combined with an education in classics at Oxford, meant

¹⁸ Haynes, Natalie, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (London: Picador, 2020) p. 8

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

²⁰ Alice Oswald, 'The Unbearable Brightness of Speaking,' *New Statesman* (17 October 2011) <<https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2011/10/homer-essay-iliad-poetry-poem>> [accessed 4 April 2019]

Oswald was similarly equipped to engage with, examine and showcase a new angle of this well-known work. An interesting attribute of this literary transformation is Oswald's decision to work directly from the source material in Ancient Greek, thereby translating as well as transforming the *Iliad*. How these two writerly processes differ and overlap, in addition to a closer examination of Oswald's *Memorial*, will be explored in the second chapter of this thesis.

The *Iliad*, is of course, not the only work of Homer's which has been transformed numerous times during the past decades. Miller's *Circe*, narrated from the point of view of the goddess and witch Circe, functions as both a companion and an extension to the events of the *Odyssey*. In addition to learning more about Circe's background, the reason she had for turning Odysseus' men into pigs, and how her story continues after their departure from Aeaea, Miller adds to and expands our perception of key characters such as Odysseus, Telemachus and Penelope, all of whom feature in the narrative at one point or another. Though, without a doubt, the most important aspect of *Circe* is the narrator's reflection upon the act of telling stories and the centrality men often play in these accounts. When describing her father, the sun god Helios, Circe explains: 'he liked the way the obsidian reflected his light, the way its slick surfaces caught fire as he passed. Of course, he did not consider how black it would be when he was gone. My father has never been able to imagine the world without himself in it.'²¹ The god's unawareness of his domineering presence functions as an allegory to the fact that women throughout Homer's work are often overshadowed by their male counterparts, their stories rarely vocalised or elaborated, meaning if you removed all men from the narratives there would be little left. It functions as a description of the damaging effect the historical hyper-focus on the adventures of men has when it comes at the cost of equally important female narratives. Another interesting reflection occurs while telling bedtime stories to her son, Telegonus, about his father Odysseus:

The stories were still in me, vivid as when Odysseus had first told them, those thousand wily conspiracies and trials. Yet a strange thing happened when I began to recite them back to Telegonus. I found myself hesitating, omitting, altering. With my son's face before me, their brutalities shone through as they never had before. What I had

²¹ Madeline Miller, *Circe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) p. 4

thought of as adventure now seemed blood-soaked and ugly. Even Odysseus himself seemed changed, callous instead of unflinching.²²

Through the process of retelling the stories which were once narrated to her, Circe finds herself altering the stories with her current audience in mind. In addition to functioning as a practical example of how myths evolve, changing as they are passed down from one generation to the next, it also displays a tendency to clean up violent accounts with the aim of presenting a male character in a heroic light. It makes one wonder whether we would still consider Odysseus a cunning hero if his tricks and violent acts were translated into a modern context. At best, he would probably be viewed as a mass murderer and a pathological liar. Equally poignant is Telegonus' lack of interest in Circe's own adventures, despite them being as fantastical and daring: 'From time to time, in those days, I wondered what I would tell Telegonus if he ever asked me for my own stories. How I might polish Aeëtes, Pasiphaë, Scylla, the pigs. In the end, I did not have to try. He never asked.'²³ Akin to the earlier description of male figures overshadowing the stories of women, this likewise depicts the problematic disinterest in stories concerning women. Similarly, when reflecting upon the future reception of feminist rewritings, Plate wonders whether or not works such as Miller's *Circe* will be considered as 'speaking to women's concerns rather than those of culture at large.'²⁴ Whether or not there exists a gender discrepancy in the consumption of literary transformations, in particular those written by women, is a question requiring further research.

Returning to literary transformations of the *Odyssey*, another prominent text produced is Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* published in 2005. As the title suggests, the focus has been shifted, instead following the accounts of Penelope and her twelve hanged slave girls. In the introduction, Atwood explains how Homer's *Odyssey* 'is not the only version of the story,' suggesting a wider reading of Greek mythology is needed in order to best address the complexity of the characters featured in the Odyssean myth.²⁵ While Atwood does consult two other texts, they unfortunately add little new to the story. In addition, Atwood does not seem to have addressed the issue of working from a single translation to produce her literary transformation and the biases which might be passed on from the translation and into her work.

²² Ibid., p. 229

²³ Ibid., p. 230

²⁴ Plate, p. 139

²⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2018) p. xviii

These concerns, alongside an analysis of key aspects within *The Penelopiad*, will be explored in the third chapter of this thesis.

The continued interest in literary transformations suggests cultural stories and mythologies have found a way to evolve now that they are being passed down in writing instead of vocally. Myths are, after all, supposed to change. In her journal article ‘There is Another Story,’ Emily Hauser offers a reflection on the nature of myths: ‘Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don’t die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings.’²⁶ Literary transformations are simply one of many processes through which these stories can double back and take on new meanings. In addition to offering writers the opportunity to imagine and address points-of-view which were previously ignored in order to produce a more complex version of events, they also provide us with an opportunity to examine popular and canonical literature in an exciting new way. By viewing these works through a creative writing lens, in addition to a feminist lens, we are able to look beyond simply what *was* written and begin thinking of what *could have been* written. After all, what was left out is equally as significant as what was included.

1.4 Rewriting Through Found Poetry

While there are no limitations on how one could go about writing a literary transformation, my approach for the creative half of this thesis is built upon found poetry. From early on in my creative writing education, I have been fascinated with the act of taking what was before me and recreating it into something entirely new – the likely origin of my interest in literary transformations. Early inspirations include Austin Kleon’s *Newspaper Blackout* and Caroline Bergvall’s *Drift*. My practice, likewise, reflects a similar shift from cut-out, collage, erasure and blackout into a more nuanced and free-flowing form of found poetry focused on taking a selection of words, phrases and ideas to then write and rewrite them into stories of my own until they emerge unrecognisable from what came before.

The history of found poetry is, of course, as varied and creative as one would expect. An early example is the work of Caleb Whitefoord, who in the 1760s during a spell of boredom began viewing his newspaper the same way he would a deck of cards, something which could

²⁶ Emily Hauser, “‘There is another story’: writing after the *Odyssey* in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*”, *Classical Receptions Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (April 2018) (pp. 109-126) p. 115

be shuffled around, deciding therefore to read across the columns instead of following them downwards to produce his cross-readings.²⁷ Then, there is Thomas Jefferson taking scissors to a King James Bible, cutting out the bits he liked and pasting them into a scrapbook, a work which would later be known as *The Jefferson Bible*.²⁸ The surrealists, of course, took this a step further when Tristan Tzara created the Dadaist poetry method of cutting up an article and pulling words out of a bag.²⁹ Brion Gysin marks the beginning of visual elements being incorporated into found poetry, transposing painting techniques such as collage into writing, and then passing the idea on to William Burroughs who went on to utilize the cut-up technique in his work.³⁰ Then, a favourite example of mine, there is Tom Philips transformation of W. H. Mallock's *A Human Document* into *A Humument* through blackout, a creative process which continued well beyond the original 1973 publication with each page gradually being re-created with new meanings and new illustrations. After this, new works similar to that of Philips' began emerging in quick succession: Ronald Johnson's *Radio Os* based upon John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Crispin Hellion Glover's *Rat Catching* based upon the 1896 book *Studies in the Art of Rat-Catching*, Jen Bervin's *Nets* based upon Shakespearean sonnets, Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* created through correction fluid erasure of an old book with the same name, and Janet Holmes *The ms of my kin* as an erasure of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

While a plethora of stand-alone poems have been created by utilising a variety of found poetry techniques, perhaps due to their educational properties when it comes to encouraging students to approach language in a new and playful way, it is the complete conversion of one book into another which forms the basis of literary transformations and which initially caught my attention. Therefore, after reading Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick; or The Whale* and growing inspired by his poetic language, it was not long before I began toying with the idea of using found words from individual chapters and rewriting them into new poems. My experience rewriting *Moby Dick* into a prose poetry collection, alongside reflections upon the practice of literary transformations and the history and reception of *Moby Dick*, will be explored in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

²⁷ Austin Kleon, *Newspaper Blackout* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010) p. xviii

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xix

²⁹ Tristan Tzara, 'How to Make a Dadaist Poem,' *University of Pennsylvania* <<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/tzara.html>> [accessed 13 June 2021]

³⁰ Kleon, *Newspaper Blackout*, p. xx

1.5 Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to lay the foundation for further literary transformation studies, as well as providing a preliminary introduction for those interested in pursuing rewriting a work. Through a closer examination of Oswald's *Memorial* we can gain a greater understanding of the boundaries between translation and transformation, as well as the creative freedoms available to the writer when those boundaries are blurred. Likewise, examining Atwood's *The Penelopiad* provides an opportunity to reflect upon the practice of women's rewriting and how literary transformations can be a continuation of this fifty-year-old tradition. In order to address the issue of translation, three translations of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been consulted to minimise any biases from a singular translator, in addition to ensuring there is at least one female translation of each text in the mix. Further on I will be talking about my own experience of rewriting Melville's *Moby Dick* as well as addressing important aspects surrounding the practice of literary transformations such as abiding by copyright laws, respecting the boundaries of cultural appropriation to avoid telling someone else's story and dissecting the metaphors of theft used to describe the act of rewriting.

Chapter 2: Alice Oswald & *Memorial*

2.1 Introduction

Alice Oswald's *Memorial* is a long poem written out of admiration for a story that has inspired and challenged her ever since she first encountered it as a teenager, a piece of literature that 'matters to her as much as the rivers that have inspired her.'³¹³² Published in 2011 by Faber and Faber, *Memorial* is Oswald's sixth poetry collection and a return to the long poem format she has been known for ever since her acclaimed river-poem *Dart* came out in 2002. *Memorial* is, as Oswald herself subtitled it, an 'excavation of the *Iliad*' and marks a different approach to the nature poetry she has predominately written up until this point. Transforming an assortment of Homer's most iconic literary devices – his lists, biographies and similes – Oswald has, through a combination of translation and rewriting, provided the reader with an alternative way of viewing the epic poem. Performing its dictionary definition of keeping remembrance alive, *Memorial* functions as a tribute to the soldiers who lost their lives throughout the *Iliad*, interweaving their final moments with Homer's nature inspired similes.

The story of the *Iliad* begins with anger and ends with grief. In particular, Achilles' anger and grief. The events take place during the tenth year of the Trojan War near the city of Troy (also known as Ilium) where the Trojans and Greeks (also known as Achaeans) battle for the return of Helen. Helen was the wife of Menelaus, a wealthy and powerful Greek man. Upon their marriage, a pact was made amongst the Greek men that should anyone attempt to lure her away from Menelaus, they would all fight together for her return. The reason for this was the sheer quantity of men who arrived at the Spartan king Tyndareus' doorstep wanting to be considered for the honour of being Helen's husband. Afraid of sparking conflict with numerous allies over this marriage, Tyndareus followed Odysseus' advice of creating a pact between all these men that they would respect and defend the rights of whomever Helen chose for husband. Therefore, no Greek would be foolish enough to risk everything by breaking this pact for a woman, even one renowned for her beauty. Except that Paris, a Trojan prince who likely had no knowledge of this pact, had entered an agreement with Aphrodite. In exchange for the golden apple,

³¹ Kate Kellaway, 'Memorial by Alice Oswald - Review,' *The Guardian* (2 October 2011) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/02/memorial-alice-oswald-review>> [accessed 15 April 2019]

³² Ibid.

provided by the goddess Eris with the intent of stirring up trouble, which marked the recipient as the most beautiful of all the goddesses, Aphrodite promised the love of the most beautiful human woman. That woman, of course, being Helen. Paris gave the golden apple to Aphrodite, finding her bribe more enticing than the bribes of Hera and Athena promising the possibility of being a great ruler or a great warrior. So, Paris visited the home of Menelaus, and while he was away on a trip, Paris seized Helen and several of Menelaus' riches and escaped back to Troy. Helen is said to have fallen head over heels for Paris, but one has to question the validity of that infatuation when the goddess of love is involved. Not long after, the Greeks rallied their troops as each attempt at a diplomatic resolution was met with rejection. And this is how the Trojan War began. They fight for ten years, and it is now, in this tenth year, that Homer's story begins.

The Greek army is currently struggling with a plague gradually killing off dogs, horses and men. The source of this disease, they later learn, is Apollo. He is angry with Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army and brother of Menelaus. Agamemnon recently came into possession of a young girl, Chryses, a priestess seized from the temple of Apollo during a raid on a nearby city. Her father pleaded for her return, offering all sorts of treasures. Agamemnon, however, refused. And now his men, dying off one by one, are angry too. Chief among them is Achilles, leader of the Myrmidons and a gifted warrior. He demands that Agamemnon return this girl in order to put an end to Apollo's wrath which eventually he agrees to, but at a cost. The cost he names is Briseis, a girl Achilles had seized during the same raid and of whom he had since grown fond. Outraged at having his war spoils taken away from him, Achilles makes it known that henceforth he and his men will no longer fight. Except, instead of sailing back home, he remains at the battle front. Using his divine contacts, he ensures that the Greeks suffer several losses in the upcoming days, hoping to pressure Agamemnon into apologising. Which he does, eventually, but not in person, and therefore Achilles remains outside of the fight. That is, until his companion Patroclus decides to aid the struggling Greeks dressed in Achilles' armour. At first, this goes well. Several men are slain, until Apollo decides to intervene in the war once more. He strips Patroclus of his armour, and as he attempts to retreat, Hector (a Trojan prince) seizes the opportunity to kill Patroclus.

Whatever anger Achilles felt before this moment is miniscule compared to the anger he experiences when he learns of the murder of his companion. While translations predominately convey the two as close friends, it has long been speculated the men were more like lovers. Prior to Patroclus' death, Achilles was made aware of a prophecy foretelling his death in war should he ever kill the Trojan prince Hector. The fear of never being able to return from battle

is another possible reason why Agamemnon's disrespect hurt him the way it did. However, without the one he wanted to survive for, there was little left to lose. After killing Hector, the body is dragged back to the Greek camp where it is left to rot, going against the war's diplomatic agreement allowing each side to reclaim the bodies of their lost ones so they could be buried and put to rest. This forces Priam, Hector's father and king of Troy, to sneak into the Greek camp in order to plead his case with Achilles. Homer tactfully drew parallels with the beginning of the story: a father offering all sorts of riches in exchange for their loved one. Thankfully, Achilles, who is grieving himself, finds himself unable to deny the reasonable request of a grieving father and allows Hector's body to be returned. The *Iliad* ends with his burial, leaving the story of Achilles' death and the Greek victory over Troy to be told by another.

Structured like a triptych, *Memorial* laments the victims of the Trojan War through three separate sections. In the first section (5-12) we are presented with a list of 214 capitalised names, an overwhelming introduction reminiscent of monuments naming those who died during a war or disaster. All of these, minus the horse Pegasus, belong to the Greeks and Trojans who lost their lives fighting in the Trojan War. The names are listed in chronological order of their deaths. The second section (13-72) is the main body of the poem, where Oswald alternates between lamenting the dead soldiers and presenting Homer's similes drawn out of their original context and repeated twice. Each simile, except for one instance on page 32, begins with the word 'like,' luring the reader out of the battlefield and into an alternative reality reserved for farmers, families and animals roaming a land and time beyond the fighting. Occasionally the biographical laments are forfeited for a list of names resembling those in the introduction, the bodies piling up 'before their ghosts had time to keep hold of their names' and identities prior to this moment of death.³³ The third section (73-84) consists of 11 selected similes, each prominently presented singularly on a page, with only the final simile repeated twice as it draws the long poem to a close.

The long poem is contemporary in style. It is rendered entirely free from punctuation, forcing Oswald to rely on lineation for voice and tone instead. Speeches, which account for roughly half of the *Iliad*, are absent. In only a few instances does Oswald take advantage of direct speech, usually depicting a character praying for their life to be spared or the unanswered prayers of parents worried about their sons. The speech is however in keeping with Oswald's

³³ Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) p. 34

unpunctuated, fragmented poetic style, allowing the free indirect speech to become one with the flow of the poem.³⁴ The modernisation of the language is also a key element, bringing the *Iliad* into the twenty-first century through phrases such as ‘came home as proud as astronauts,’³⁵ ‘now all his savings will go to other people,’³⁶ ‘like a lift door closing’³⁷ and ‘their long nightshift in the underworld was just beginning.’³⁸ In addition to the publication of the long poem, Oswald has both recorded an audio version and performed the poem from memory, a homage to the *Iliad*’s oral history. In an interview with Max Porter for *The White Review*, she explains that these performances come at the cost of repeatedly reliving the deadly narrative as a ‘line of soldiers queuing up [...] move through my head.’³⁹ This line likely refers to the mental load of having to remember the chronological order of the soldiers’ deaths, a challenge most visibly present in the first third of the poem. The resulting performance grants voice to the horrors of the Trojan War as we move through ‘a human timeline of death in action.’⁴⁰

Oswald first encountered the works of Homer as a teenager while studying Greek, a literary relationship that later deepened when her teacher allowed her to ‘ignore the Greek syllabus and just read Homer.’⁴¹ In an article for the *New Statesman*, Oswald reflects upon this initial introduction and the elements of the epic poem which intrigue her, in particular ‘an absence of authority that allowed everything in the poem to be strongly and strangely itself.’⁴² The ‘absence of authority’ which Oswald is referring to may be a reference to the impartiality and lack of judgement with which the narrator conveys the story. Although Homer may guide our gaze in certain directions and elaborate upon the action with additional biographical information and similes to put the action into context, the reader is left to make their own value judgements. It is up to us to infuse the story with our own ideas and interpretations or, as Oswald hints towards, simply observe it for what it is.

She goes on to describe how there was a ‘singleness’ to Homer’s work which her mind kept trying to unpick, wanting to recreate in her own poetry the same pattern where ‘everything

³⁴ Elizabeth Minchin, ‘Translation and Transformation: Alice Oswald’s Excavation of the *Iliad*,’ *Classical Receptions Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2015) (pp. 202-222) p. 210

³⁵ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 36

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39

³⁹ Max Porter, ‘Interview with Alice Oswald,’ *The White Review* (August 2014) <<http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-alice-oswald/>> [accessed 15 April 2019]

⁴⁰ Minchin, p. 204

⁴¹ Oswald, *New Statesman*

⁴² *Ibid.*

stood next to something else but had its eyes turned away.’⁴³ In the article, Oswald gives an example of this based on her walk home from school, observing how the trees and grass and birds might engage with one another but still existed independently from one another. She then began to question how such poetry could be composed, a curiosity which may have informed her decision to pursue a degree in Classics at Oxford. However, it wasn’t until *Memorial* that she decided to confront this fascination head-on through translating and transforming the *Iliad*. This fascination with language was partially the reason why she decided to look beyond the plot and focus on what she describes as the ‘double-life’ of the epic poem.⁴⁴ In other words, the way it kept ‘breaking in and out of simile,’⁴⁵ transporting the reader back and forth between Homer’s metaphorical realm and the actions of battle.

2.2 Homer’s Similes

When describing her approach to transforming Homer’s similes, Oswald admits to having a rather ‘irreverent’ attitude towards translation.⁴⁶ As we will see, this results in a spectrum of translation approaches seen in each simile varying from translating literally to taking a more playful and innovative approach to conveying the content. Considering Oswald worked directly from the Greek, I will be consulting three translations of the *Iliad* as a point of comparison, specifically, the translations of Caroline Alexander, Robert Fitzgerald and Richard Lattimore. These same translations have also been utilised to evaluate her approach to rewriting the soldier’s biographies in the next subchapter. In this section, I will be examining Oswald’s similes.

The first simile I will be comparing occurs when Hector is fleeing from Achilles in Book XXII only to discover all the entrances to Troy are blocked and that he is left attempting to outrun death.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 2

Like a man running in a dream
Can never approach a man escaping
Who can never escape a man approaching⁴⁷

This simile, like all others in the main body of the text, is presented twice. In performance, this repetition has an antiphonal effect akin to an echo, a vocal call-and-response allowing the listener a second chance at grasping more of the vocalised simile. Likewise, the repetition of ‘escape/escaping’ and ‘approach/approaching’ emphasise the cyclical nature of this particular simile and the dreamlike state it is referring to. In the text, Hector runs three laps around Troy while attempting to flee Achilles, meaning in some strange way he is simultaneously chasing the person attempting to kill him. Oswald’s version of this simile resembles other translations such as Fitzgerald’s:

As in a dream a man chasing another
cannot catch him, nor can he in flight
escape from his pursuer⁴⁸

Between Fitzgerald and the other translators, words such as ‘chasing,’ ‘catch,’ ‘flight,’ ‘eludes,’ and ‘pursue’ are used to translate this simile.⁴⁹ While all four use the word ‘escape,’ only Lattimore joins Oswald in using variants of the verb ‘running’ whilst Oswald is alone in using ‘approaching.’ However, considering the convoluted nature of the metaphor, Oswald has created a rather simplistic version of the simile, a fact perhaps aided by her use of lineation as pauses instead of relying upon punctuation. The grammatical strangeness of it lends the simile a dreamlike quality. Each line functions as a standalone point whilst simultaneously building and accumulating meaning when read in relation to the lines that follow. While all three translators take advantage of lineation, only Fitzgerald’s lines are short enough to come across as poetry whilst Alexander and Lattimore present the reader with long lines. Oswald’s brevity

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 58

⁴⁸ Homer, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, *The Iliad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 386

⁴⁹ Of the above examples, Fitzgerald uses ‘chasing,’ ‘catch’ and ‘fight’, while Alexander (p. 469) and Lattimore (p. 462) both use ‘pursue.’ Only Alexander uses ‘eludes.’

is an aesthetic she's developed across multiple poetry collections, always in pursuit of the most concise way of conveying an idea. However, sometimes the search for clarity requires additional lines to break up a metaphor, as seen in her poppy simile:

As if it was June
A poppy being hammered by the rain
Sinks its head down
It's exactly like that
When a man's neck gives in
And the bronze calyx of his helmet
Sinks his head down⁵⁰

In his pursuit to wound Hector, the Greek soldier Teucer fires arrow after arrow in his direction. Eight arrows are released with no result. So, he releases a ninth, but instead of killing Hector he kills another son of the Trojan king Priam: Gorgythion. This simile offers a brief pause between this victim and Teucer's next kill, comparing the tilt of Gorgythion's head caused by the weight of his helmet to that of a summer poppy made heavy with rain. Similar in wordcount, though retaining the original structure of three lines, is Alexander's translation:

his head hung to one side like a garden poppy
made heavy with seed and the showers of spring;
so his head drooped, weighted down by his helmet.⁵¹

What Oswald requires seven lines to convey, Alexander gets across equally as clear in three, although the number of words remain similar. It could be that Oswald desired to create a specific rhythm in her simile mimicking the sound of rain falling on a metal helmet. Already, one can begin to notice in this simile Oswald's tendency towards creative liberty. Lattimore, like Alexander, specifies the poppy is a 'garden poppy' and that it is weighted down by its seeds in

⁵⁰ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 32

⁵¹ Homer, trans. Caroline Alexander, *The Iliad* (London: Vintage, 2017) p. 159

addition to the rain.⁵² Oswald, on the other hand, adds additional specificity by stating that it is June and referring to the ‘bronze calyx’ of the helmet. The inclusion of ‘calyx’, a modern variant of an Ancient Greek word for a type of receptacle, lends an archaeological air to the simile. An analogous approach to rewriting the epic is seen elsewhere in the collection, reflecting Oswald’s attitude towards ‘excavating’ *the Iliad* as specified in the collection’s subtitle. While Alexander takes advantage of the sibilance offered by the words ‘seed,’ ‘showers,’ and ‘spring’ in the second line, Oswald goes for repetition with the line ‘sinks its/his head down’ used to refer to both the poppy and the head. The repetition strengthens the comparison drawn by the simile. The sentence ‘it’s exactly like that’ is used as a divider between the two elements. Through dividing the attention given to each element of the simile equally, Oswald is able to create a more vivid image of the fallen soldier for her readers. The short lines slow down our reading pace, while the reference of June summons associations of summer and calm, amplifying the surprising bluntness of ‘It’s exactly like that / When a man’s neck gives in.’ Although the poppy is specific to the *Iliad*, it is also a contemporary symbol of remembrance. Most noticeably used as part of the UK’s Remembrance Day. The reason behind this is that WWI battles created optimal conditions for poppies to flourish due to the regularly churned-up soil which brought seeds to the surface alongside scattering them across the fields. Considering poppies have been cultivated in the Eastern Mediterranean region for millennia, it is not unlikely that a similar phenomenon might have occurred during the Trojan War.⁵³

The next simile occurs in speech as Achilles is inquiring as to why Patroclus has arrived to him in tears. At this point in the story the promise made by Zeus, the Greek god of thunder, to Thetis, Achilles’ mother, has come true. The Trojans, aided by the gods, have managed to fight their way towards the Greek encampment and have now begun setting fire to their ships. Without these ships there is no possibility of return or retreat. It is with this in mind that Patroclus approaches Achilles, ready to plead for his return to war so he can aid their wounded and struggling compatriots. However, despite the genuine fear and sorrow present in Patroclus’ face, Achilles mocks him, saying he is crying like a little girl:

⁵² Homer, trans. Richard Lattimore, *The Iliad* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011) p. 208

⁵³ Kyle T. Evered, ‘Traditional Ecologies of the Opium Poppy and Oral History in Rural Turkey,’ *Geographical Review*, Vol. 101, No. 2 (2011) < <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21954490/> >

Why are you tearful, Patroclus, like a foolish
girl, who runs after her mother demanding to be picked up,
grasping her dress, and hold her back as she hurries,
and looks at her weeping, until she is picked up?
Like her, Patroclus, you let your soft tears fall.⁵⁴

Here, in Alexander's translation, the tearful girl is described as 'foolish' and her desire for comfort as an inconvenience for the mother. Word choices such as 'demanding' insinuates that the girl's request is irrational, and the 'weeping' a form of blackmail in order to get her way. This simile represents a stereotype so deeply ingrained in our culture that it qualifies as a cliché. Specifically, the ideas that 1) women use emotions in order to manipulate those around them and 2) that any display of emotions from men is to be compared to a helpless little girl. It is a notion now recognised as harmful as it simultaneously stereotypes women and significantly harms the mental health of men who grow up being told they are not allowed to cry. Thankfully, Oswald has utilised her tendency towards creative translation in order to lift this simile out of its original pejorative context and has rewritten the simile with a new focus:

Like when a mother is rushing
And a little girl clings to her clothes
Wants help wants arms
Won't let her walk
Like staring up at that tower of adulthood
Wanting to be light again
Wanting this whole problem of living to be lifted
And carried on a hip⁵⁵

The original simile's toxic masculinity is significantly mitigated through Oswald reframing the simile with a focus on our desire for security and unconditional love. While this offers a feminist approach to literary transformation, there is still scope to go further. There is no reason why the

⁵⁴ Alexander, p. 331

⁵⁵ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 19

child needs to be gendered as a ‘little girl’ and the parental figure identified as a ‘mother.’ It perpetuates the notion that childrearing is predominately carried out by women and that only young girls will seek out comfort from their guardians. The simile would have been equally effective if it was a little boy seeking support from his father, a change which would have strengthened the moment between Patroclus and Achilles, insinuating a form of familial bond between the two. Considering the simile in *Memorial* occurs after the death of Scamandrius and the last line of his biographical lament refers to his father, this change in simile would have worked both within its original and new context. In other words, there is no reason why Oswald could not have continued changing the simile in a progressive manner considering her existing tendency towards rewriting within this literary transformation.

Another interesting change in Oswald’s version of the simile is how she has expanded upon the emotions experienced by the child. This is particularly visible in the second half of the simile which describes the child looking up to ‘that tower of adulthood’, and upon seeing this, desiring to be lifted as if being carried will make ‘this whole problem of living’ easier. Although the simile describes a child, it is a sentiment many young adults might relate to. It showcases the emotions involved in navigating a complex world and the desire to turn to a parental figure for guidance. Oswald contrasts this lightness with tension, as the first half of the simile is populated with stressful words such as ‘rushing,’ ‘clings,’ and ‘won’t let’ which create a sense of urgency and fear in the reader. Through careful word choices, Oswald is able to mimic in language the desired transition from a weighted anxiety (through words such as ‘clings,’ ‘wants’ and ‘tower’) to light-hearted security (through words such as ‘light,’ ‘lifted’ and ‘carried’). None of the translations offer a similar sense of lightness towards the end of the simile, instead reinforcing the emotional duress experienced by both the little girl and Patroclus by describing, as Fitzgerald phrases it, his ‘glimmering tears.’⁵⁶

The final simile we will be looking at appears in the aftermath of Patroclus’ death. The war rages on, and adamant on bringing Patroclus back to Achilles, the Greek soldiers fight off the Trojans. Meanwhile, the horses which carried Patroclus into battle, grieve his departure:

Out of range,
the horses of Achilles, from the time

⁵⁶ Fitzgerald, p. 276

they sensed their charioteer downed in the dust
at the hands of deadly Hector, had been weeping.⁵⁷

This underlines how grief is felt by more than just those who are fighting or related to the fighting. These horses, belonging to Achilles, were entrusted with the duty of bringing back their owner's loved one from battle, a task foiled by Hector with the aid of the god Apollo. Automedon, a fellow Greek soldier, tries everything from threatening, using the whip and whispering encouragements in order to make the horses move, but they remain still, adamant on their right to grieve their rider:

No: stock-still
as a gravestone, fixed above the tomb
of a dead man or woman, they stood fast,
holding the beautiful war-cry still: their heads
curved over to the ground, and warm tears flowed
from under eyelids earthward as they mourned
their longed-for driver.⁵⁸

The horses are compared to gravestones, remaining as still as a rock despite every attempt made by Automedon to evacuate them from the chaos of the still ongoing battle. Homer through Fitzgerald's translation describes this moment as 'beautiful,' and the reader is encouraged to envision the horses' 'curved' heads and the 'warm tears' dripping onto the ground. Even Zeus takes pity on the horses, asking himself why he ever decided to give these immortal beings – 'you who never age nor die' – to a mortal man.⁵⁹ Despite having predominately aided the Trojans throughout the narrative of the *Iliad* due to Achilles' anger with Agamemnon, Zeus decides to grant courage and comfort to these horses so they could bring Automedon and themselves back to the safety of the Greek encampment.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 311

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 311

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 311

All of this context is, however, lost within Oswald's translation. Relocated to an earlier point in the chronology, the simile now appears between the biographies of Amphimachos and Othryon and says nothing more than:

Like a stone
Stands by a grave and says nothing ⁶⁰

Thirty-four lines worth of context and storytelling is reduced to two simple lines. Although the couplet is powerful, a stark reminder that each biography within the collection functions as a form of poetic gravestone, it is a shame to see the horses and their grief left out of a text so dedicated to remembering the dead. We are told of grieving brothers, mothers, fathers and wives; however, we are denied this one opportunity to witness the horses grieve. They are, in other words, erased from the narrative. Whilst they are compared to gravestones in the text, they don't 'say nothing.' Their tears, flowing earthward, speak volumes. Their decision to risk their own lives and the lives of others in order to take a moment to mourn is not insignificant. Both Alexander and Lattimore even expand upon this moment, describing how their manes were 'soiled' as a result of this grief.⁶¹ The chaos, dirt and dust so iconic within the simile and the *Iliad* as a whole is replaced with a more clinical version conveying little more than the idea of a stone silently standing by a grave. Despite her claim to use translation as a way to 'see what Homer was looking at,' she has decided to look away from the grief displayed by these horses, the panic of Automedon, the regret of Zeus, instead bringing across nothing but silent stones.⁶²

2.3 Homer's Laments

Oswald's similes function as moments of reprieve in-between her biographies. In the preface, we are informed these biographies are paraphrases of Homer's Greek laments, moments where the plot is paused in order to remember the soldiers who lost their lives.⁶³ Combined, the collection is presented as a kind of 'oral cemetery' as the deaths begin to pile up, leaving the

⁶⁰ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 47

⁶¹ Alexander, p. 375-376

⁶² Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 2

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 2

poet frantic as they do their best to ‘remember people’s names’ and the lives they lived.⁶⁴ For some, such as Dolon, there is plenty to remember: his fear, his dishonesty, and how ‘under a spear’s eye he offered everything’ to his captors if only they would spare his life.⁶⁵ While for others, nothing remains but one name among many. The word count accompanying each name in *Memorial* corresponds with the information Homer provides his readers with in the *Iliad*. Unlike the similes, Oswald’s biographies remain in chronological order – a red thread running parallel to its source text. Protesilaus will always be the first to die, just as Hector will always be the last. The result is an ‘antiphonal account’ of man in his world, a reminder of the real-life cost of waging war in the name of vanity.⁶⁶

The first biography we will look at is that of Damasos, who died during the Trojan attack upon the Achaean ships.

DAMASOS the Trojan
Running at a man thinking kill kill
In years to come someone will find his helmet
Shaped like a real head⁶⁷

Damasos is the only soldier, besides Deicoon, whom Oswald explicitly describes as Trojan. Unlike other soldiers featured in *Memorial* and the *Iliad*, we do not know his parentage, the town he is from, his unique abilities or who is anxiously waiting for his return from war. He is a soldier through and through, running at a man ‘thinking kill kill.’ The repetition of ‘kill’ highlights the singularity of this thought, the focus attached to his predominant purpose. Oswald then goes on to describe what will remain of him from an archaeological perspective: a helmet alone marking where he fell once skin and bones are gone. The reader is spared the gorier details conveyed by Homer and his translators. Fitzgerald describes how the bronze of his helmet was ‘too frail to take the blow’ of the spear, leaving it to continue ‘crunching its way’ into the skull and ‘demolishing the brain.’⁶⁸ Alexander details how the bronze helmet could not withstand the

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 2

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 33

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 2

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 44-45

⁶⁸ Fitzgerald, p. 208

strike, resulting in ‘crushed bone’ and ‘brains [...] spattered within it.’⁶⁹ And finally, Lattimore conveys how the spearhead ‘smashed bone apart’ and how the ‘inward brain was all spattered forth.’⁷⁰ Compared to Oswald’s more retrospective point-of-view, these translations perpetuate Homer’s attention to gruesome descriptions of the bodily effects of war. However, approaching the events of the Trojan War from a contemporary perspective not only resonates with the idea of Oswald’s collection as a memorial, but also highlights how evidence of war can still be found in the soil where battles were fought thousands of years ago. Its effect upon the landscape is lasting.

Although Oswald has elected to disregard the *Iliad*’s plot in her literary transformation, small echoes of it can still be found within a few of the biographies. Most noticeably, in the lament she wrote for Patroclus:

In a courtyard on a flat stone
Two children were playing dice
And a quarrel had broken out
Women rushing to the door
They saw one child kill the other
That was PATROCLUS nicknamed Innocent
Who grew up blurred under the background noise
Of his foster-brother’s voice
And borrowed his armour
In the mess of war he forgot his instructions
He kept killing and killing
Until the crack of his spear splintering
And the hush of his helmet spinning through the air
And the rare and immediate light
of Apollo with one hand
Stopped him ⁷¹

⁶⁹ Alexander, p. 247

⁷⁰ Lattimore, p. 282

⁷¹ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 63-64

This verse is a compilation of conversations and action merged into a final epitaph summarising Patroclus' presence within the narrative. The ignored instructions occur in Book XVI when the idea of wearing Achilles' armour first takes place. This is the final conversation they would have. 'You must not,' Achilles says, 'for the joy of battle, joy of killing Trojans, carry the fight to Ilium! [...] Turn back, then, as soon as you restore the safety of the ships, and let the rest contend, out on the plain.'⁷² The fight carries on, and it does not take long before Hector, with the aid of the god Apollo, takes the opportunity to slaughter Achilles' companion. Achilles' guilt is vivid in his grief, aware that Patroclus would not have entered the battlefield wearing his armour were it not for his quarrel with Agamemnon over the captured girl Briseis. The next time words are exchanged between the two is Book XXIII when Patroclus' ghost appears to Achilles in a dream. Here he alludes to their joined 'iron destiny,'⁷³ alongside the events which brought them together: 'a boy still, on the day I killed the son of Lord Amphidamas [...] in a childish anger over a game of dice.'⁷⁴ Through the inclusion of personal information, in replacement of the hand-to-hand combat which ultimately results in his death, Oswald transforms a grim and brutal death scene, where the murderer basks in the glory of his accomplishment, into a lament for the departed individual and illumines the decisions and actions which lead to this untimely death.

In the aftermath of Patroclus' death, we encounter Menelaus, the husband Helen left behind when she fled to Troy with Paris, standing over Patroclus' body. Aware of Patroclus' importance to Achilles and the value of the armour he wears, he is doing his best to prevent the Trojans from pillaging the corpse. It is here he encounters Euphorbas, intent on claiming what he sees as rightly his as he was the first to wound Patroclus. This is how the exchange comes to an end in Fitzgerald's translation:

And at these words he struck
the other's shield. The bronze point failed to break it,
bending at impact on the hard plate. Then
in turn Menelaus made his lunge,

⁷² Fitzgerald, p. 278

⁷³ Ibid., p. 398

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 398

calling on Zeus. The spearhead pierced the young man's
throat at the pit as he was falling back,
and Menelaus with his heavy grip
drove it on, straight through his tender neck.
He thudded down, his gear clanged on his body,
and blood bathed his long hair, fair as the Graces',
braided, pinched by twists of silver and gold.
Think of how a man might tend a comely shoot
of olive in a lonely place, well-watered,
so that it flourished, being blown upon
by all winds, putting out silvery-green leaves,
till suddenly a great wind in a storm
uproot it and cast it down: so beautiful
had Panthous' son, Euphorbus, been,
when Menelaus killed him and bent over
to take his gear.⁷⁵

Considering the wealth of detail Homer provides about Euphorbas, in particular the description of his hair as 'long,' 'braided,' and 'pinched by twists of silver and gold,' it comes as a stark surprise then to turn one's eyes to Oswald's paraphrased biography:

EUPHORBAS died

Leaving his silver hairclip on the battlefield ⁷⁶

His beauty, the looting, and the spear which eventually pierced his throat are all left out. Like Damasos' entry, Oswald presents the reader with the physical objects the soldiers leave behind on the battleground, in this case, a silver hairclip. The simile accompanying his death is lifted out of its original context and used elsewhere:

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 301

⁷⁶ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 64

Like a man put a wand of olive in the earth
And watered it and that wand became a wave
It became a whip a spine a crown
It became a wind-dictionary
It could speak in tongues
It became a wobbling wagon-load of flowers
And then a storm came spinning by
And it became a broken tree uprooted
It became a wood pile in a lonely field⁷⁷

In its original context, the simile of the olive tree is used to highlight the unique exquisiteness of the fallen soldier, explaining: ‘so beautiful had Panthous’ son, Euphorbus, been.’ There is a sense of loss attached to this sentiment. The readers are told the olive shoot was ‘well-watered, so that it flourished,’ which tells us that Euphorbas was likely loved and well cared for by his family. This affection is then ‘uprooted’ by Menelaus, who takes the gear off his dead body, likely leaving little behind but the aforementioned hairclip. Oswald’s version of the simile, left to take on associations of its own, is more experimental than the original. We watch as the wand of olive becomes a wave, a whip, a crown, a wind-dictionary capable of speaking in tongues, a wobbling wagon-load of flowers and, once the storm arrives, a wood pile in a lonely field. Although the simile is no longer speaking about Euphorbas, it is still utilised to convey the loss of potential. The olive tree, when tended to, has the potential to be used for carpentry and books up until the moment the storm arrives and kills it. Just as a multifaceted individual is reduced to little more than a soldier, so is the tree rendered little more than debris left behind by strong winds.

The deaths in *Memorial* methodically follow the chronological order of deaths and epitaphs in the *Iliad* until the slaughter of Hector, minus the surprising exception of thirteen soldiers who seem to have been lost in translation. These are: Dresus, Phelitus, Eioneus, Bienor, Olieus, Asius’ driver, Hypsenor, Hyrtius Gyrtiades, Pyraechmes, Sthenelaus, Cebriones, Echeclus, Deucalion, and Asteropaeus. Whether they were left out intentionally or by mistake

⁷⁷ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 31

is unfortunately a question only Oswald herself could answer considering the prominence of the missing soldiers within the epic ranging from brief easily-missed mentions to combat and dialogue spanning multiple pages as they battle for their lives. The most puzzling misplaced epitaph is that of Cebriones, Hector's driver, who fought and lost to Patroclus:

Not for long in awe of the other man,
he aimed and braced himself and threw the stone
and scored a direct hit on Hector's driver,
Cebriones, a bastard son of Priam,
smashing his forehead with the jagged stone.
Both brows were hit at once, the frontal bone
gave way, and both his eyes burst from their sockets
dropping into the dust before his feet,
as like a diver from the handsome car
he plummeted, and life ebbed from his bones.⁷⁸

In this instance there is no lack of descriptions available which Oswald could have utilised, and considering her frequent use of lists of names in places where bodies pile up too quickly for the narrator to adequately lament them all, it is curious to contemplate her decision, knowingly or not, to leave out this limited and varied selection of names.

The *Iliad* is heavy with biographical information about the soldiers as they appear and disappear in the action. Why? Perhaps to give some sense of personality and history behind the people fighting in this ancient war. What would the text read like if one man killed another man and then got killed by a different man entirely without any names, history or family information provided? It brings the people fighting to life and reminds the reader that they will be missed, they were someone's son, someone's husband, someone's brother and someone's father. It places the losses into context. It also feeds into the chaos of war through a chaos of action and information. Everything is happening at once, which may leave the reader feeling confused, stressed and overwhelmed, much like how the soldiers fighting likely felt in moments of battle. There is so much emotional information to process at once it is difficult to keep track. Perhaps

⁷⁸ Fitzgerald, p. 295

the soldiers themselves remembered bits of information about their fellow companions as they watched them die. When the end arrives, the reader is with them. Their deaths are witnessed. They are more than dead bodies lying in the dust.

2.4 Erasing Heroism

In order to arrive at her poem ‘made of similes and short biographies,’ Oswald had to give something up.⁷⁹ Namely, the *Iliad*’s narrative. While the main aim of this decision, as outlined in the introduction to *Memorial*, was to retrieve the *energeia* of the original poem, it has grown to become a defining feature of the collection. For in the act of erasing the narrative, she also erased the majority of the *Iliad*’s main characters. She erased its core conflict, its history, and the moral dilemmas it attempts to address. With these elements lifted out, she is likewise able to remove the *Iliad*’s celebration of heroism in war.

When describing her decision to strip the poem of its narrative, Oswald likens this choice to lifting off the roof of a church ‘in order to remember what you’re worshipping.’⁸⁰ Not only does this metaphor suggest that the reason for worship has been forgotten, but it also does not address the notion that whatever it is about the *Iliad* that is deserving of worshipping might vary from person to person. Oswald’s pursuit for the poem’s *energeia*, as praised by its ancient critics, comes as a response to nineteenth-century critics such as Matthew Arnold who praised the epic poem for its nobility.⁸¹ However, despite drawing guidance from ancient criticism, she still modernises the poem with similes such as ‘like a man rushing in leaving his motorbike running,’⁸² which utilise present-day visuals in order to put the emotions of the epic poem into a modern context. Therefore, while her search for what may be worth worshipping is guided by ancient criticism, she remains unafraid to utilise modern phrases and visuals in her pursuit to recreate the poem’s original *energeia* for a contemporary, English-speaking audience.

Returning once more to the *New Statesman* article, Oswald explains how she grew ‘more and more fascinated by the poem’s double-life, the way it kept breaking in and out of simile.’⁸³ This fascinating quality went on, as we’ve seen, to become a key component of *Memorial* as she alternates these similes with short biographies throughout the entire collection.

⁷⁹ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 1

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 72

⁸³ Oswald, *New Statesman*

It is through this alteration between pastoral life and the brutal nature of war that Oswald is able to hone in on the double-life she found so fascinating in the *Iliad*. In other words, she amplifies a contrast found within the original. The repetition of the similes further underlines their importance, as the reader is forced to read them twice in order to fully absorb the alternative natural world they are describing. Elizabeth Minchin categorises these similes as brief glimpses of ‘what might have been had there not been war,’⁸⁴ which suggests an anti-war sentiment running through Oswald’s collection. A similar interpretation is made by Teju Cole, who goes as far as suggesting that her short biographies and the deaths they depict are ‘as fresh and discomfiting and cruel as when they were first written down three millennia ago.’⁸⁵ The two contrasting elements of the epic poem, the gruesome war and an undisturbed poetic natural world, are highlighted and placed in direct juxtaposition to one another. This contrast, between themes of death and survival, is perpetuated by a grammatical contrast, with the acts of killing taking place in past tense while the similes on the contrary are written in present tense.⁸⁶ The aim of this temporal shift might be due to the desire to imagine war as something which belongs to the past while peaceful nature scenes is something we desire to protect in the present. The effect of this juxtaposition in the collection is that the reader is left unable to grow complacent with the ever-growing number of dead soldiers as each death is made fresh anew with the aid of nature inspired similes interwoven between each lament.

Oswald’s ‘reckless dismissal of seven-eighths of the poem,’ as she phrases it, was a bold choice in her pursuit of an alternative view of the epic poem, one existing beyond the nobility it has always been known for.⁸⁷ Her aim, in other words, was to erase the poem’s fixation on heroism by removing any possibility of glory and any possible justification for war, while retaining the death and destruction it wrought. These deaths are, after all, the only elements of the plot still remaining in *Memorial*. As Minchin writes: ‘The story of Agamemnon and Achilles, like the story of Paris and Helen, has been pushed to the background. The Olympian gods are absent.’⁸⁸ The only familiar characters remaining are Patroclus and Hector, both of whom lose their life during this tenth year of war.

⁸⁴ Minchin, p. 215

⁸⁵ Teju Cole, ‘All the names: Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*,’ *Brick*, Vol. 90 (7 January 2013) <<https://brickmag.com/1-all-the-names/>> [accessed and transcribed 6 April 2019]

⁸⁶ Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff, ‘Memories and similes laid side by side: The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*,’ *Connotations*, Vol. 27 (2018) (pp. 19-47) p. 34

⁸⁷ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 2

⁸⁸ Minchin, p. 202

In the end, Hector ‘died like everyone else’ when a spear found ‘the little patch of white between his collarbone and his throat.’⁸⁹ His end arrives after being chased around the city of Troy three times with Achilles at his heels, too ‘boastful and anxious’ to join his companions in their retreat within the city walls.⁹⁰ Aware of his impending demise, left bereft of any weapon with which to defend himself and any soldier to come to his aid, in Fitzgerald’s translation he says: ‘This is the end. The gods are calling me deathward.’⁹¹ Although his death is straightforward, his burial is anything but. Still distraught by the death of his good friend Patroclus, Achilles drags his body back to the Greek encampment where it remains until Priam arrives in disguise pleading with his son’s killer for the chance of putting his body to rest. These events, however, are not conveyed in *Memorial*. Instead, all we are left with is Hector’s yearning to return to the earth: ‘Asking only to be washed and burned / And his bones wrapped in soft cloths / And returned to the ground.’⁹² His desire is a universal one, shared amongst all the soldiers within the *Iliad* regardless of what side of the war they fought for. Therefore, while Oswald has erased the majority of the plot with the aim of erasing the heroism it celebrated, she still retains the deaths of key characters, their final moments presented with grace and fear rather than brutal bloodshed.

In the first simile following Hector’s death Oswald asks: ‘who could write a history of leaves.’⁹³ The answer is, of course, Homer and now Oswald herself. In her *New Statesman* article, she wrote:

If you put a real leaf and a silk leaf side by side, you’ll see something of the difference between Homer’s poetry and anyone else’s. There seem to be real leaves still alive in the *Iliad*, real animals, real people, real light attending everything.⁹⁴

Oswald has a fascination with leaves as a metaphor. Above it is used to describe the difference between the poetry of Homer and other poets she has read, a way of illuminating the gulf

⁸⁹ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 71

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72

⁹¹ Fitzgerald, p. 389

⁹² Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 73

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73

⁹⁴ Oswald, *New Statesman*

separating words which come across as sincere and words which come across as synthetic. In the simile following Hector's death, however, she uses it to describe the scattered and chaotic way in which the dead have been abandoned by the war, not too unlike Byron's metaphor in his poem *The Destruction of Sennacherib*: 'Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown, / That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.'⁹⁵ Through using metaphors to link war deaths to trees shedding leaves, Byron implies that war is a natural phenomenon influenced by seasons of its own. Where Oswald differs, is she likens each leaf to a name instead of a body. The benefit of this is that names can be remembered beyond the brief existence of flesh and bone. However, Oswald reminds her reader this is difficult when thousands of men compete against one another for the glory of having their name and heroism remembered in stone and song. She writes:

When you remember them remember this
Dead bodies are their lineage
Which matter no more than leaves⁹⁶

In the end, the devastation of war is overshadowed by the everlasting presence of nature. We are born to die and return to the ground, no glorious tombstones or song praising our deeds can change this fact. Everything, eventually, returns to the ground. Through focusing her poetry collection on this single fact, Oswald is able to erase the heroism the *Iliad* and its characters have over time grown to become synonymous with.

2.5 Transformation Through Translation

Traditionally, translation is viewed as the rendering of a text in a source language (SL) into a target language (TL) so that it is available for a wider audience who are unable to access the material in the source language.⁹⁷ Other acronyms, such as ST for source text and TT for target

⁹⁵ George Gordon Byron, 'The Destruction of Sennacherib,' *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43827/the-destruction-of-sennacherib>> [accessed 23 December 2021]

⁹⁶ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 73

⁹⁷ Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London: Methuen, 1980) p. 2

text are likewise used to describe this transition.⁹⁸ This, however, is a very limited way of discussing translation which disregards the influence interpretation and autobiographical input has on the final product. Charles Bernstein, in his essay ‘Breaking the Translation Curtain,’ argues that translation is a form of collaboration.⁹⁹ For example, Oswald is working with Homer’s words in order to produce something which is a combination of both of their worlds. The desire to produce a text of value to her readers is ranked higher than translating with word for word accuracy, a choice supported by Bernstein’s view of translation, who considers accuracy to be ‘the bogey man of translation.’¹⁰⁰ The reason for this belief is that translation allows for ‘new forms, structures, expressions, textures, and sounds’ to be invented.¹⁰¹ Never before has there been a translation of the *Iliad* which focused so intently on Homer’s similes and biographies, nor would there be without Oswald’s conscious decision to create *Memorial* out of these two specific elements of the source text.

Translations are produced, as explained by Edith Grossman, through a series of ‘creative decisions and imaginative acts of criticism.’¹⁰² Everything from different grammar systems to colloquial phrases require constant consideration in order to transfer the meaning of the text from one language into another. Even small shifts in wording might produce a variety of connotations and interpretations. Looking at a simile from *Memorial* and the Fitzgerald translation of the *Iliad*, demonstrates this quite well. First, the traditional translation:

As when from storm-lit heaven he bends a rainbow,
omen of war to mortal men, or omen
of a chill tempest, pelting flocks and herds,
and ending the field work of countrymen,
so, folded in a ragged cloud of storm-light,
Athena entered the Achaean host.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Clive Scott, *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) p. 1

⁹⁹ Jerrold Shiroma ed., *Towards a Foreign Likeness Bent: Translation* (Sacramento: Duration Press, 2004) p. 10

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁰² Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) p. 8

¹⁰³ Fitzgerald, p. 314

And now, Oswald's transformation of that same simile:

Like a rainbow shining a warning to the world
A bright banner of disruption hung above the fields
Meaning war perhaps or maybe just a summer storm
So that everyone stops work and looks up and the flocks
grow restless ¹⁰⁴

The first creative decision is the removal of key characters such as Athena from the plot and a shift in context. The simile now appears between the laments for Menesthius and Iphinous, rather than being used to demonstrate the meddling of gods in a war between men. The transition from 'omen of war to mortal men, or omen of a chill tempest' into 'meaning war perhaps or just a summer storm' softens the warning drawn from the rainbow. Words such as 'perhaps' and 'just' trivialise its presence, whilst 'summer storm' summons associated memories for the reader of such passing weather events in contrast to Fitzgerald's 'chill tempest.' The next line 'pelting flocks and herds, and ending the field work of countrymen' is transformed into 'so that everyone stops work and looks up and the flocks grow restless.' Oswald has constructed her sentence differently, relocating the livestock from the beginning to the end and attributing additional action to the farmers who now not only stop their work but also look up. It is this action which results in the restlessness of their animals. The connective 'and' is used twice to demonstrate the link between these separate actions. Each of these shifts signals a creative or critical decision, whether consciously or unconsciously made.

In his book, *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti argues that a translator applies a theory to their process whenever 'one word or turn of phrase or sentence construction is selected over the alternative possibilities that always exist at any one point in a translation.'¹⁰⁵ The variance between Oswald's and Fitzgerald's versions of the above simile demonstrates their differing translation theories, or perhaps more related to this examination, differing translation values and purposes. Scholars, Venuti explains, feel the need to describe, explain

¹⁰⁴ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 30

¹⁰⁵ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) 2nd ed. p. 275

and evaluate every choice that their translation is comprised of.¹⁰⁶ This is most clearly demonstrated by Emily Wilson's comprehensive introduction to her translation of the *Odyssey* where each conscious choice is detailed and explained. The reader is left with no doubt regarding her stance on alterations made in the name of readability, historical accuracy, representation and more. Oswald, on the other hand, provides the reader with little more than a brief two-page preface stating her aim of retrieving the poem's '*energeia*' and her 'irreverent' approach to translation.¹⁰⁷ She states that she worked closely with the Greek, but 'instead of carrying the words over into English,' she uses them 'as openings through which to see what Homer was looking at.'¹⁰⁸ Her aim was to write 'through the Greek, not from it,' a process she describes as aiming for 'translucence rather than translation.'¹⁰⁹ Word choices such as 'openings,' 'see,' 'through,' and 'translucence' all summon associations with clear surfaces, as if Oswald was attempting to construct a window providing the reader with a view into the world of Homer's epic. Word choices such as 'irreverent' lets the reader know that Oswald is distancing herself from a traditional view of translation more commonly seen in translation theory studies. Her purpose is not to produce an equivalent to the *Iliad*, but rather something much more personal.

Keith Waldrop, in his essay 'Translation as Collaboration,' echoes Bernstein's ideas about translation being a collaborative act. However, instead of viewing it as a collaboration between two or more authors and two or more languages, he views it as a collaboration between the translator and the text.¹¹⁰ The translator has chosen to work with this specific text in order to provide it with a kind of afterlife. It is a process full of perils, summarised in similes comparing translation to the act of wrestling a tiger. Factors such as the translator's relationship to the source language, their relationship with the target language, the time and culture in which the source text was written, the time and culture in which the target text is written, and so forth all influence the gap between point A and point B which the translator needs to travel. The bigger the gap, the bigger the burden of bringing as much as possible across. Decisions regarding what to keep are therefore vital and entirely contingent upon the translator's purpose, values and strengths. This is likely why, when creating *Memorial*, Oswald decided to focus on two elements reminiscent to her earlier works. Waldrop goes on to argue that, due to this

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 268

¹⁰⁷ Oswald, *Memorial*, p. 2

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 2

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 2

¹¹⁰ Shiroma, p. 98

difficult journey which needs to be travelled, translation is harder than writing something of one's own.¹¹¹ The translator needs to navigate the normal struggles associated with composing a text in addition to the obligation to relate it back to another.¹¹² This struggle between the new and old is a key feature of literary transformations. Regardless of whether they need to cross a language border, the writer is engaged in a similar act of collaboration between their intentions for their transformation and the source text it is made from in order to produce a literary transformation relevant to their time and culture. In this regard, there is value to be gained from studying translation and the choices translators have to make before embarking upon the production of a literary transformation.

In her book, *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman explains how translations allow us 'to know, to see from a different angle, to attribute new value to what once may have been unfamiliar.'¹¹³ Although Oswald has significantly deviated from the original text, she provides the reader with insight into the fear, bravery and bloodshed which characterised the Trojan War. Our attention is directed towards two simple elements of a wider whole, to make what might have been missed unmissable. We are given time to familiarise ourselves with the dying once the backdrop of war has been brushed away. Oswald is, in other words, using translation to explore the thoughts and feelings of people from another time. This exposure to the unfamiliar is vital as it challenges our preconceived notions of both the *Iliad* and what life was like during the time the Trojan War was believed to have taken place. *Memorial* demands empathy and imagination from its readers, encouraging them to join in the mourning of these lost souls and perhaps even to re-evaluate similar iconic portrayals of heroism during wartime.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 98

¹¹² Ibid., p. 98

¹¹³ Grossman, p. xi

Chapter 3: Margaret Atwood & *The Penelopiad*

3.1 Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* was published in 2005 by Canongate as part of their new series, *The Myths*, dedicated to 'bold retellings of legendary tales' (as described on their website) with the goal of having a hundred myths retold by 2038.¹¹⁴ Unlike Oswald who arrived at her literary transformation through a lifelong relationship with the works of Homer, Atwood arrived at hers through a publishing commission. In an interview with *The Independent*, Atwood explains that she was persuaded to participate in this publishing venture by Jamie Byng, the man behind the idea of *The Myths* series and Managing Director of Canongate.¹¹⁵ However, before pursuing the *Odyssey*, she first attempted to transform a Native American story and then a Norse myth with little success, though we are not told why these ideas did not come to fruition.¹¹⁶ It was only later, when the memory of the twelve hanged maids resurfaced, she decided to tackle the *Odyssey* and this aspect of the myth which had always troubled her.

The events of the Odyssean myth follow Odysseus and his difficult journey home after the fall of Troy, functioning thereby as a continuation of the *Iliad*. Throughout this journey gods were offended, goddesses became his lovers, and every last member of his crew were killed. This is, of course, just the precursor to his arrival in Ithaca and the subsequent slaughter of over a hundred suitors who had spent the past four years trying to convince his wife Penelope to remarry. While there exists a clear chronological order to these events, Homer elects to begin his narrative in the final year of this ten-year journey. Peter Jones, in his introduction to the E.V. Rieu translation, praises this creative decision for how it allows the events of the previous years to be 'selected by, and told through the mouths of, the characters themselves.'¹¹⁷ Instead of beginning with Odysseus' departure from Troy, Homer begins with Athene (or Athena) pleading with Zeus for Odysseus' homecoming. Once she has Zeus' approval of her plan, she pays a visit to Odysseus' son Telemachus. It is now that the reader is informed of the situation in Ithaca, the suitors swarming his home and eating away his riches. It is Athene, disguised as

¹¹⁴ Hilde Staels, 'The Penelopiad and Weight: Contemporary Parodic and Burlesque Transformations of Classical Myths', *College Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Fall 2009) pp. 100-118 (p. 100)

¹¹⁵ Boyd Tonkin, 'Margaret Atwood: A personal odyssey and how she rewrote Homer,' *The Independent* (15th August 2012) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/margaret-atwood-a-personal-odyssey-and-how-she-rewrote-homer-322675.html>> [accessed 20th March 2021]

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Homer, trans. E. V. Rieu, *The Odyssey* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. xix

the old family friend Mentos, who advises Telemachus to leave in search of news regarding Odysseus. Once this conversation comes to a close, Penelope arrives, descending down from her chamber after hearing the poet's song. We are made aware of her grief as she pleads with the poet to sing about anything else, his current tune about the Trojan War serving only to remind her of the husband who never returned. By situating the difficulties back in Ithaca at the very beginning of the epic poem, Homer is able to stress the urgency with which Odysseus was required. Without the presence of Penelope and Telemachus, Jones explains, we 'would not know what the hero was returning *to*, and why his return was so urgently needed.'¹¹⁸ Therefore, while the Odyssean myth primarily concerns Odysseus, he is not the only character of interest. This is where Atwood's literary transformation comes into effect.

The title alone, presented in Homeric style, alerts the reader to a shift in focus from Odysseus to Penelope, the first of many changes implemented by Atwood. The storyteller is no longer a bard summoning inspiration from the Muses, but rather Penelope herself, narrating from the Underworld. Specifically, from the 'fields of asphodel' – a meadow filled with white flowers where individuals who neither committed grave crimes, attained great glory nor suffered from unrequited love could rest once their days among the living were over.¹¹⁹ After centuries of being alone with her thoughts, carrying the weight of words spoken then and since about her, she is ready to tell her version of events. Instead of any drastic re-imagining, Atwood has elected to remain faithful to the events of the *Odyssey*. Penelope never voices her dislike when her son Telemachus insists on telling her what to do, nor does she decide to wander off in search of Odysseus herself. She does not decide to rid herself of the suitors, nor elect to marry one of the men vying for her attention and Odysseus' throne. She remains true to script – a grieving wife with a few schemes up her sleeve. Similarly, her maids, while granted more creative freedom to express what life might have been like for them, still end up hanged by the end of the story.

In the introduction to *The Penelopiad*, Atwood takes a moment to present the reader with a few of her creative decisions and the ideas behind them. First of all, she tells us of her choice to 'give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids.'¹²⁰ The decision to retell events from a polyphonic female point-of-view was fuelled by two questions which she felt were unanswered at the end of reading the *Odyssey*: exactly why were the twelve

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. xviii

¹¹⁹ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 15

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. xix

maids hanged and what was Penelope doing when no one else was watching?¹²¹ Instead of recasting the Odyssean myth in a new mould, Atwood creates her story from within the cracks of the original narrative in an attempt to address the ‘inconsistencies’ of the *Odyssey*.¹²² Secondly, Atwood remarks that she has ‘always been haunted by the hanged maids’ and, in an effort to address this, has written a Penelope who is likewise afflicted by this turn of events.¹²³ *The Penelopiad*, in other words, is a product of Atwood’s own reading experience and an attempt to address the questions she felt were left unanswered.

In the notes section at the end of the book, we are informed the main source consulted was the Penguin Classics edition of the *Odyssey*, translated by E.V. Rieu and later revised by his son D.C.H. Rieu.¹²⁴ Robert Grave’s *The Greek Myths* as well as *The Homeric Hymns* were likewise utilised.¹²⁵ The Chorus of Maids were created as a ‘tribute to the use of such choruses in Greek drama,’ granting the twelve maids the role as commentators ready to challenge both the mainstream and Penelope’s view of events.¹²⁶ In order to accurately examine the creative processes and decisions which resulted in *The Penelopiad*, these same sources have been consulted so that we may see to what degree Atwood has changed the role Penelope and her twelve maids played in this myth. Additionally, to cancel out any biases which might present themselves in a translation of the *Odyssey*, the Oxford World’s Classics edition translated by Walter Shewring and the more recent Norton edition translated by Emily Wilson have been consulted as well. Natalie Haynes’ examination of various representations of women in Greek mythology in her book *Pandora’s Jar* also proved vital.

3.2 Rediscovering Penelope

When we first meet Penelope, Homer introduces her with the patronymic: the daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope. The word used to describe her, *periphrōn*, can be translated as both clever and thoughtful.¹²⁷ Through the works of Homer we know she is smart, we know she is a mother, we know she can weave, we know she is grieving, and we know she has waited twenty years for her husband to return from war. This is, however, all that we are told about her. In her

¹²¹ Ibid., p. xix

¹²² Ibid., p. xix

¹²³ Ibid., p. xix

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 197

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 197

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 198

¹²⁷ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Picador: London, 2020) p. 267

book *Pandora's Jar*, Natalie Haynes describes Penelope as 'the veiled enigma of Homer.'¹²⁸ As readers we are aware of her presence, yet she remains hidden from us, her true thoughts and intentions predominately left unspoken. Haynes attributes this phenomenon to the unpredictability of Odysseus. She writes: 'we find ourselves trying to unpick how much Penelope knows or guesses about him, when and whether she is being sincere or ironic. His untrustworthiness rubs off on our reading of her.'¹²⁹ She grieves, she weaves and she waits – these are the attributes which have been celebrated for millennia. We are told she is wise, however beyond the ploy of the shroud we are not privy to how she applies this famous wisdom. All of her ideas are, after all, attributed to Athene. Even when alive, she remains little more than a phantom to the reader. It is only once we meet her ghost in the Underworld of Atwood's *The Penelopiad* we finally hear her speak her mind.

The Penelope we meet is one who is all mind and no body, speaking to us from a state of 'bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness.'¹³⁰ Through references to the invention of the lightbulb and the internet, Atwood situates Penelope's afterlife close to our current timeline, signalling thousands of years have passed since the events of the *Odyssey* unfolded. It is only now, once all her contemporaries have 'run out of air,' Penelope decides it is time to tell her version of events. 'I owe it to myself,' she tells us.¹³¹ Atwood's decision for Penelope to narrate from the fields of asphodel functions as an allusion to Odysseus' meeting with Teiresias, 'the blind Theban prophet,' and other departed figures in Book XI.¹³² More significantly, as Emily Hauser points out, this allows for a Penelope who is 'fully aware that she is telling her story after, and in response [...] to the *Odyssey* itself.'¹³³ Unlike her readers, she never would have had the opportunity to sit down and read the physical book which still lives on today. However, Atwood has found a way to ensure she is aware of how she has been perceived throughout all of these centuries. 'Down here,' Penelope explains, 'everyone arrived with a sack [...] full of words – words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you.'¹³⁴ In summary, Atwood's Penelope is a woman with no body, who has remained relatively silent for thousands of years, and who has throughout the duration of that time carried with her the ever growing weight of a sack containing the words from every translation, every analysis, every

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 285

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 266

¹³⁰ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 1

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 3

¹³² Rieu, p. 137

¹³³ Hauser, p. 114

¹³⁴ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 1-2

close reading, every hypothesis, every rumour and every speculation ever made regarding her nature. She is aware of how the dead and living alike are speaking about her, and she is not satisfied with how she has been represented.

One of Penelope's most iconic traits is her grief. She is a woman caught in perpetual mourning, her suffering heightened in Book IV when Medon relays the news about Telemachus' departure and the suitors' plot to kill him upon his return. However, it is not the notion that her son has left nor the fact that the suitors intend him harm which breaks her heart, it is the reason *why* her son left: to seek news of his father. At this point:

Grief wrapped around her, eating at her heart.
The house was full of chairs but she could not
bear to sit upright. In her bedroom doorway,
collapsing on the floor, she wept and cried.
Around her all her women, young and old,
were whimpering.¹³⁵

Not only has she lost her husband, but now she is faced with the possibility of losing her son to the same oceans which have claimed her husband over the past twenty years. Upon learning her only child has left in search of news regarding the father he never knew, she sinks to the floor and the servants join her in her grief. In this one moment, no one questions her right to cry. This form of support, however, is rare in the *Odyssey*. More often than not, Penelope is caught in the complex dichotomy between grieving too much and not grieving enough. When Telemachus sets sail, he instructs Eurycleia not to inform his mother of his absence, stating the tears would simply 'spoil her pretty skin.'¹³⁶ In Book XIV the swineherd Eumaeus declares Penelope's grief while questioning strangers for news 'rightly so,' stating 'a wife should mourn for her dead husband.'¹³⁷ In Book XXIII however, when the townsfolk pass by the palace and overhear sounds of wedding festivities, orchestrated by Odysseus' to buy time before the slaughter of the

¹³⁵ Homer, trans. Emily Wilson, *The Odyssey* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018) p. 176

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 336

suitors becomes known, Penelope is criticised for lacking ‘the strength to wait it out and keep her husband’s house safe till he came.’¹³⁸ Not only does their statement completely ignore the fact that she has been doing exactly that for twenty years, but it judges her for not putting her presumed dead husband’s needs ahead of her own. Through the eyes of Ithaca’s inhabitants Penelope’s grief is little more than one of her many wifely duties. This perception is likewise present in her husband and son. When Odysseus finally decides it is time to make his presence known to his wife in Book XXIII, despite having already been in Ithaca for several days, Penelope is criticised for reacting in a way which contradicts their perception of how a wife should behave. Penelope finds herself ‘confused’ and unable to speak or meet his eyes, all of which are recognisable symptoms of shock.¹³⁹ At this point Telemachus begins shouting at her, calling her cruel and heartless, saying: ‘No woman in the world would be so obstinate!’¹⁴⁰ Despite having grown up with his mother’s grief, Telemachus neglects to consider what this must be like for her. And although Odysseus is initially willing to give her some time to process, he too quickly voices his fury. Like his son, he attacks her lack of emotional display, saying: ‘No other wife would so reject a husband who had been suffering for twenty years and finally come home.’¹⁴¹ In that moment it seems her suffering, which she told him about the night before while he was still in disguise, pales in comparison to his. Despite doing little else throughout the *Odyssey* but grieve, this one moment of shock is enough for her entire family to brand her cold-hearted.

Despite Penelope’s grief playing such a pivotal role in the *Odyssey*, Atwood has elected to push this part of Penelope into the background of *The Penelopiad*. Although Atwood foregrounds Penelope’s perpetual grief by explaining ‘excessive weeping [...] is a handicap of the Naiad-born,’¹⁴² she does little to follow up on this. This explanation portrays Penelope’s grief as a negative, her humanity unnecessary despite her trauma. Beyond the occasional reference, such as ‘I would lie on my bed and weep, and wonder what on earth I should do’ and ‘I cried so much I thought I would turn into a river or a fountain, as in the old tales,’ Atwood does little to elaborate upon Penelope’s propensity for grieving.¹⁴³ Instead, she reduces Penelope’s desire for Odysseus’ return to little more than a way for her to ‘relieve my

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 499

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 498

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 497

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 500

¹⁴² Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 10

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 109 + p. 121

boredom.’¹⁴⁴ Through the reduction of Penelope’s grief, Atwood has created a Penelope who comes across as shallow and self-centred. In ‘News of Helen,’ Penelope utilises her supposed grief as a means to manipulate her son with little success. Atwood writes: ‘I then made the Is-this-all-the-thanks-I-get, you-have-no-idea-what-I’ve-been-through-for-your-sake, no-woman-should-have-to-put-up-with-this-sort-of-suffering, I-might-as-well-kill-myself speech.’¹⁴⁵ In place of the quiet dignity often found in Homer’s Penelope, Atwood provides us with a Penelope who has made a habit out of threatening to kill herself as a means to control her son. Her grief, in other words, is reduced to little more than a tool used to control those around her instead of remaining a very natural response to a difficult situation.

A key characteristic of Atwood’s version of Penelope is her simultaneous belief and disbelief in the Greek gods. They are cut out from the narrative as key characters, yet they remain in her thoughts. This contrast is aptly demonstrated in the chapter ‘Waiting’ where Penelope describes the ten years while Odysseus was away at war:

The sun rose, travelled across the sky, set. Only sometimes did I think of it as the flaming chariot of Helios. The moon did the same, changing from phase to phase. Only sometimes did I think of it as the silver boat of Artemis.¹⁴⁶

Atwood’s choice and repetition of the word ‘sometimes’ signals Penelope’s discontinuous view of the heavenly bodies as deities and objects. They are there, or at least she thinks they are there, however they do not pique her interest. Penelope confesses to her reader that she ‘sometimes doubted their existence,’ yet nevertheless found it ‘prudent not to take any risks’ through voicing this doubt during her lifetime.¹⁴⁷ This caution, however, quickly fades away in her death. Now that she is free from her body, ‘beyond that kind of suffering’ as she phrases it, she can speak freely without worrying about the consequences of their well-known wrath.¹⁴⁸ Akin

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 81

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 128

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 81

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 40

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 24

to Homer's Penelope, Atwood's version bites her tongue until she considers it safe to speak her mind.

However, even during her lifetime, Penelope did not view the gods in any favourable manner. She describes to the reader how they were 'never averse to making a mess' and how there was 'something childish about the gods, in a nasty way.'¹⁴⁹ Penelope even went as far as describing how she imagined them 'diddling around Olympus, wallowing in the nectar and ambrosia and the aroma of burning bones and fat, mischievous as a pack of ten-year olds with a sick cat to play with and a lot of time on their hands.'¹⁵⁰ Penelope thereby presents the gods as child-like in their cruel indifference and deceptive behaviour. The source of this obvious dislike likely lies in the god's unwillingness to help her during those difficult years. Despite both her disbelief and dislike in the gods, she, like many others, turned to them in her vulnerable moments. Throughout the entirety of the Trojan War and Odysseus's difficult journey back, she prayed for the safe return of her husband without any reply. As Atwood writes: 'Twenty years of my prayers had gone unanswered.'¹⁵¹ An additional source for Penelope's aversion to the gods can be found in the explanations bards and travellers alike provided with to explain Odysseus's continued absence after the end of the war:

'The only reason he hadn't come back home was that a god – the sea-god Poseidon, according to some – was against him, because a Cyclops crippled by Odysseus was his son. Or several gods were against him. Or the Fates. Or something. For surely – the minstrels implied, by way of praising me – only a strong divine power could keep my husband from rushing back as quickly as possible into my loving – and lovely – wifely arms.'¹⁵²

Despite Penelope's consistent indifference regarding the existence of the gods, there is both something comforting and cruel to be found in blaming them for her husband's absence. Cruel because they are continuously keeping her husband away from home despite her nightly prayers

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 84

for his return. Comforting because if the gods are not to blame that likely means Odysseus himself has decided his wife and son are not reason enough to rush directly home after a long, arduous war. And as we'll see in the next subchapter regarding Penelope's cousins, this would not be the only instance of Penelope blaming others for her misfortunes and unhappiness.

Although the Greek gods play a pivotal role in the events of the *Odyssey*, Atwood has rendered them redundant in *The Penelopiad*. While this allows for Penelope to claim her own ideas instead of crediting them to the Athene as Homer does, it also brushes aside the care and consideration Athene displays every night when Penelope retires to her bed and weeps 'for her dear Odysseus, until Athena gave her eyes sweet sleep.'¹⁵³ It is well established throughout both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* that Athene favours Odysseus, aiding him both throughout the Trojan War and on his journey home after seven years of captivity on Calypso's island. It is also Athene who prompts Telemachus to set out in search for news of his father, aids him in his journey, and ensures his safe arrival home. And finally, it is Athene who aids Odysseus and Telemachus in the slaughter of the hundred-strong suitors. Without Athene's presence, Penelope and her family are left alone in their struggles. There is no divine help on the way, no one secretly looking after and guiding them. All that is left is them and the choices they make.

An addition to Atwood's portrayal of Penelope is her representation of Penelope's marriage. Unlike Homer, Penelope does not limit her narrative to the ten years after the war was won. Prior to Penelope's arrival at Ithaca, we are told about the competition for her hand in marriage and how Odysseus, like all the other suitors who had previously expressed their interest in Helen, were competing for 'what was at best only second prize.'¹⁵⁴ Upon Odysseus' victory, as Penelope sails to her new home, she describes how the marriage transaction left her feeling like 'a package of meat wrapped in gold.'¹⁵⁵ This view, that her worth lies solely in her dowry, is likewise reflected in the treatment she receives from her mother-in-law Anticleia, whose behaviour leaves Penelope suspecting 'she would have been better pleased if I'd died of seasickness on the way to Ithaca and Odysseus had arrived home with the bridal presents but not the bride.'¹⁵⁶ However, despite the transactional nature of their nuptials, Penelope grows to care for her husband, developing 'loving and passionate' feelings while he at least 'behaved as

¹⁵³ Wilson, p. 116

¹⁵⁴ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 35

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62

if he reciprocated them.¹⁵⁷ Penelope's ongoing doubt regarding both her worth as a person and Odysseus' affections for her are both running themes throughout *The Penelopiad*, surfacing throughout each milestone: marriage, consumption, child, leaving for war, absence, and return.

Looking back at her life, Penelope is able to recognise her own naïveté, describing:

Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his – how can I put this? – his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. [...] I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked.¹⁵⁸

There is an awareness of Odysseus' less than honest nature, alongside a desire to brush away the accompanying unpleasant thoughts in preference for unfounded hope of youth. For what else would a princess raised for marriage hope for but happily ever after? In this portrayal of Penelope, Atwood is able to weave in the unspoken, dark underbelly of contemporary princess tales as viewed through the lens of a woman with nothing but time to reflect upon her choices. At the time, however, Penelope saw some of herself in her husband. She describes how she 'liked to think I had something in common with my husband: both of us had almost been destroyed in our youth by family members' and how this shared trauma would allow them to trust one another while remaining sceptical about the rest of the world.¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, it is difficult to trust someone who is known for their slipperiness. When detailing his strengths, Penelope acknowledges: 'It was a specialty of his: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away.'¹⁶⁰ Although it is never explicitly stated, there is a sense that Penelope might have unwittingly at the time been nothing more to her husband than one of his fools, forever getting away with his questionable behaviour.

In the chapter, 'Helen Ruins My Life,' Odysseus jokes that if he ever discovers Penelope has slept with another man, he will chop her into pieces or hang her from a roof beam.¹⁶¹ Although the words are delivered in a 'mock-sinister manner' whilst frowning 'in what was

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74

supposed to be a playful way.’ Although Penelope plays along by acting frightened, joking about how she would ‘never think of betraying his big post,’ Penelope admits to her reader her terror at this thinly veiled death threat.¹⁶² However, despite being at the receiving end of lot of Odysseus lies and manipulation, Penelope gradually reveals herself to not be too unlike her husband. Not only does she take delight in his wild tales, acknowledging this as a quality of hers which he highly valued, she also takes delight in his more violent nature. When describing the rumours which circulated regarding Penelope cheating on her husband, she describes how ‘he certainly would have ripped out a few tongues’ and then continues to state that ‘there’s no sense in brooding over lost opportunities.’¹⁶³ Although being the topic of these tall tales was likely unpleasant, Penelope comes across as cherishing the idea of Odysseus ripping out the gossips’ tongues. Even just within the topic of Penelope potentially betraying her marriage bed, there are two contrasts one to be found: one where she fears the consequences from her husband for her and one where she delights in the prospective consequences for others.

Upon his return, the two quickly fall back together into each other’s arms, sharing tales from their twenty years apart: him describing his adventures and her describing her tears. In the end, they find contentment in these plausible stories despite their shared tendency for twisting the truth. Penelope admits: ‘The two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.’¹⁶⁴ This acknowledgement from our narrator, arriving at the end of the novella, regarding their proficiency for spinning tall tales, leaves the reader questioning the validity of the portrayal she has painted both of herself and the events of *The Penelopiad*. Atwood’s Penelope is, in her own words, an unreliable narrator. This characteristic embodies Haynes’ perception of Penelope as slippery and untrustworthy character due to her close association with Odysseus.

Penelope is a difficult woman to define precisely because of her ability to present herself as what other’s desire to see. When Haynes reflects upon the ‘praise heaped upon her by men,’ such as her suitors and Agamemnon, she raises the question of whether they are actually describing Penelope or merely describing ‘their idealized conception of what a wife should be.’¹⁶⁵ She also goes on to question whether they are valuing her for her chastity or merely for

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 74

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 145

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 173

¹⁶⁵ Haynes, p. 283

her chastity in the face of so many men desiring her.¹⁶⁶ While Homer perpetually references how Penelope's mind 'moves elsewhere,' he never takes the opportunity to divulge what precisely it is Penelope desires.¹⁶⁷ Her hatred of the suitors and her grief for her absent husband is clear enough, but the reader is left with a sense that there is more behind Penelope's actions than this. As phrased by Wai Chee Dimock, Penelope is and always will be 'a mass-circulated linguistic effect – the world of crowds – in spite of her famed solitude.'¹⁶⁸ She is a collection of contrasting descriptions and actions, adapting herself into whatever mould the situation demands from her. Atwood attempts to address this fluidity by recreating Penelope through a form of stream of consciousness in place of Homer's reliance on metaphors, similes, speech and epithets to construct his characters.¹⁶⁹ She recreates Penelope in the image of a modern woman – one who dislikes being told what to do, who despises her own body, who competes with other women, who argues with her rebellious teenage son, who is bored, who is caught up in a potentially manipulative relationship and who is unafraid of telling her story.

3.3 The Real Housewives of Greek Mythology

One of the intriguing aspects of *The Penelopiad* is Atwood's reimagining of Helen. Through Penelope's competitive interactions with her cousin, Atwood is able to develop an 'intricate and multi-faced'¹⁷⁰ version of Penelope compared to her more muted presence in the *Odyssey*. However, by heightening the role Helen plays in this reimagining, Penelope's other cousin, Clytemnestra, is nearly erased from the narrative. In the *Odyssey*, Clytemnestra was utilised as Penelope's opposite, a warning sign of the fate which could have awaited Odysseus if it were not for Penelope's extraordinary virtue and patience. Clytemnestra and Helen both provide ample opportunities for comparison since they, like Penelope, are housewives of powerful men within Greek mythology. All three respond in distinctive and unique ways to the absence of their husbands: one runs away with a new love, another plots the murder of her husband with his greatest foe, and the third simply waits for her husband's return. By reassigning the role as

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 283

¹⁶⁷ Wilson, p. 329

¹⁶⁸ Wai Chee Dimock, 'Crowdsourcing Penelope: Margaret Atwood, the Coen Brothers, Richard Linklater', *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (2015) pp. 319-332 (p. 319)

¹⁶⁹ Gabrielle Neethling, 'Margaret Atwood's exploration of Homer's Penelope in her novella *The Penelopiad*', *English Academy Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2015) (pp. 115-131) p. 126

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 117

Penelope's opposite from Clytemnestra to Helen, Atwood drastically alters both our perception of Penelope as well as our experience of the narrative as a whole.

Helen of Argos, daughter of mighty Zeus, is a woman known for her beauty, often compared to 'Artemis who carried golden arrows.'¹⁷¹ Despite her prominent role in the *Iliad*, her role in the *Odyssey* is fairly simple. Standing by Menelaus' side she speaks of Odysseus' bravery in the Trojan War, mixes drugs into wine to ease sadness once the remembrances take a downward turn, gives a beautiful handmade gown to Telemachus for his future bride, prophesises Odysseus' return and the death of the suitors, and provides Penelope with cause for caution when she is finally reunited with her long-lost husband. Unlike Atwood's modern version, she is presented as neither smug nor a threat to Penelope. While highly spoken about by all those who meet her, only Eumaeus the swineherd in Book XIV expresses anger at the role she played in the Trojan War. In Wilson's translation he curses her, while in both Rieu and Shewring he wishes her dead. It is, however, made clear that Eumaeus believes he would have financially benefitted from Odysseus never having left, so there is an element of bias present in his opinion of her. This single, negative mention aside, throughout the *Odyssey* Helen is presented as a beautiful woman who was simply led astray by the gods. After passing Penelope's test involving the olive tree bed in Book XXIII, Penelope soothes Odysseus' anger at this deceit by explaining:

I felt a constant dread that some bad man
would fool me with his lies. There are so many
dishonest, clever men. That foreigner
would never have got Helen into bed,
if she had known the Greeks would march to war
and bring her home again. It was a goddess
who made her do it, putting in her heart
the passion that first caused my grief as well.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Wilson, p. 156

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 501-502

In this scene we are given an explanation for what Telemachus describes as her cruel and heartless behaviour. Penelope is aware of the precarious situation she is in, and while having longed for the return of her husband, she is mindful of how easy it is to be led astray by gods with ulterior motives. Not only does Penelope recognise the vulnerable situation her cousin Helen found herself in, she also takes heed from her cousin's mistake in order to ensure she does not end up in a similarly messy situation. Likewise, Penelope even displays forgiveness for her cousin's twenty-year old mistake despite it continuing to cause her grief many years after the war's conclusion. In other words, she lets go of old grievances in order to focus her attention on her current predicament.

Atwood's Penelope, on the other hand, is not as forgiving. In this modern version of the Odyssean myth, Helen is portrayed by Penelope as attention seeking and vain. The two cousins are competitive, with Helen's oft-commented beauty providing cause for Penelope's more self-conscious nature. Meeting on the asphodels, Helen describes how 'divine beauty is a burden' and makes a dig at her cousin by commenting that Penelope at least has been spared of that.¹⁷³ To her Penelope will always be her 'little duck' cousin.¹⁷⁴ Penelope's views of her cousin are likewise harsh, for example when the call for war is announced Penelope represses the urge to comment that Helen 'should have been kept in a locked trunk in a dark cellar because she was poison on legs.'¹⁷⁵ While Penelope in no way attacks the intelligence of Helen, she does criticise the use of her beauty and persuasion in order to fulfil her own selfish needs and desires. Penelope describes how Helen has a way of smiling which makes every single man 'feel that secretly she was in love with him alone.'¹⁷⁶ The wealth of Menelaus is used for access to beautiful gowns, and her decision to abandon him is due, at least through the eyes of Penelope, to his inadequacy at stoking her vanity, leaving her therefore 'ripe for someone who would.'¹⁷⁷ Atwood thereby uses Helen's own nature, her need to be desired, as an alternative explanation for her decision to run away with Paris. By shifting the blame of the Trojan War from the folly of gods to the whims of Helen herself, Penelope thereby considers Helen accountable for thousands of unnecessary deaths in addition to forcing Odysseus to leave.

A significant amount of creative freedom has been utilised in Atwood's remodelling of Helen into Penelope's rival. Their relationship is often presented as sadistic, the two of them

¹⁷³ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 154

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77

delighting in humiliating one another. By making Penelope the narrator of her own tale, Penelope is in turn able to magnify Helen's significance. In his article, 'Flirting with Tragedy,' Earl Ingersoll argues that Penelope's choice of Helen as her antagonist is part of an effort to construct herself as a 'tragic figure' through humanising the source of her suffering.¹⁷⁸ Rather than blaming it on the gods, she transplants the characteristic qualities of the gods – their 'pettiness, vanity, and vindictiveness' – into Helen, thereby making Helen the 'agency of her misfortune.'¹⁷⁹ While the theory explains the traits that Atwood has amplified in her reconstruction of Helen, it also opens up questions regarding the reliability of Penelope as a narrator. While removing the influence of the gods modernises the story, it is worth remembering that Penelope is after all telling her version of events from Hades, signifying that while Penelope may not attribute her misfortunes to them, she is still telling her story from a location which suggests that the gods do indeed still exist. We may never meet them, but perhaps her deliberate exclusion of divine intervention is part of her ploy to strengthen the blame she assigns to Helen.

The need to compare herself to her cousin evolves almost into an obsession. When Telemachus returns from his adventures, Penelope presses her son for information, asking: 'how did she *look*?'¹⁸⁰ It takes a few attempts before he realises his mother wants him to lie, eventually changing his earlier statement to saying she looked 'like an old mushroom' with wrinkles and yellow teeth.¹⁸¹ Gabrielle Neethling, in her journal article on *The Penelopiad*, expands upon Atwood's portrayal of Penelope's 'sad jealousy of Helen.'¹⁸² She suggests that Penelope has formed her character in opposition to Helen, drawing the reader's attention to her own virtue and intelligence as a contrast to Helen's beauty and seductiveness. However, Penelope still does not seem satisfied with this portrayal of herself, viewing herself as 'at best only second prize' when compared to Helen. Penelope thereby places herself in a state of cognitive dissonance, simultaneously criticising Helen for her vanity whilst envying her for her beauty and desirability.¹⁸³ Although she places herself in opposition to Helen, she does admit to having enjoyed the attention she received from the suitors, explaining how 'we all like to hear songs in our praise, even if we don't believe them.'¹⁸⁴ While Penelope might have found

¹⁷⁸ Earl G. Ingersoll, 'Flirting with Tragedy: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, and the Play of the Text', *Intertexts*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2008) (pp. 111-128) p. 117

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117

¹⁸⁰ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 132

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133

¹⁸² Neethling, p. 120

¹⁸³ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 35

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104

her cleverness ‘restraining,’ it does come to her aid when she is at her most vulnerable.¹⁸⁵ Without the characteristic cunning she shares with her husband, she would not have conceived of utilising Laertes shroud as an excuse to buy time while waiting for Odysseus to return.

The overall function of Helen’s heightened presence within Atwood’s retelling is to act as a source for Penelope’s misfortune. In contrast to Homer’s Penelope, Atwood’s Penelope does not recognise the effect the Olympian gods may have had on Helen’s actions. Instead, the consequence of these come as a direct result of Helen’s self-centred decisions which in turn negatively impact Penelope across the span of two decades. Although this is reason enough for Atwood’s Penelope to despise her cousin, her dislike pre-dates the Trojan War and is attributed to Helen’s competitive nature and need to bully her cousin. Atwood utilises the character of Helen as an explanation for Penelope’s behaviour and, ultimately, as a core influence in the creation of Penelope as a character.

The crimes of Clytemnestra, similar to Penelope’s clever trick involving the shroud, are conveyed three times in the *Odyssey*. First by Nestor during Telemachus’ visit in Book III, secondly by Agamemnon during Odysseus’ visit to Hades in Book XI, and thirdly by Agamemnon again as he greets the suitors’ ghosts in Book XXIV. While never physically present in the *Odyssey*, Clytemnestra functions as a point of comparison to the more virtuous Penelope and as justification for Odysseus to be suspicious of his wife as he returns in disguise. In Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, however, she is reduced to a single sentence concentrating on her shortcomings as a mother. Feeling self-conscious regarding her problematic relationship with Telemachus, Penelope comforts herself by saying:

even a badly behaved mother’s life is sacred – witness my foul cousin Clytemnestra, adulteress, butcher of her husband, tormenter of her children – and nobody said I was a badly behaved mother.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Neethling, p. 121

¹⁸⁶ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 111

The language is ruthless, utilising words such as ‘foul’, ‘butcher’, and ‘tormenter’ implies Clytemnestra is acting out of malice, leaving no room for any alternative motivations. It is clear that Atwood’s Penelope does not view her cousin favourably. While Homer’s Penelope never expressed her opinion of Clytemnestra, it is worth taking into account Penelope’s forgiving view of Helen’s adultery, ultimately blaming it on the gods despite the pain it inflicted on her personally, especially considering even Nestor in his retelling acknowledges the influence of the Fates in Clytemnestra’s seduction by Aegisthus. Atwood, on the other hand, offers no such form of redemption.

When Nestor first introduces the reader to the story of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon during Telemachus’ visit in Book III, we are told that while the soldiers were still in Troy fighting for Helen, Aegisthus was ‘busy charming Agamemnon’s wife with his seductive talk.’¹⁸⁷ It is made clear that Clytemnestra was pursued and, like Helen, did not decide to disregard her wedding vows until the gods intervened. In Wilson’s translation Clytemnestra ‘scorned his foul suggestions, since her heart was good,’¹⁸⁸ in Rieu she ‘turned a deaf ear to his dishonourable schemes’¹⁸⁹ and in Shewring she ‘would not consent to the deed of shame.’¹⁹⁰ All of these descriptions demonstrate both an awareness of what an affair with Aegisthus would lead to, alongside an unwillingness to participate in something she knew would have disastrous consequences.

Agamemnon’s version of events is, unsurprisingly, not as neutral. In Book XI, when Odysseus discovers his former commander has joined the dead, we are told of the murder itself. The events are reasonably identical across translations: Aegisthus invites Agamemnon to his house for dinner only to kill him with a sword, Clytemnestra meanwhile kills Cassandra, and Agamemnon bleeds out while Clytemnestra ignores him and neglects to close his eyes and mouth once he is dead. The language, however, makes this scene slightly more complicated. In Wilson’s translation, Agamemnon describes Clytemnestra as ‘deceitful,’¹⁹¹ a word often applied to Odysseus himself, while Rieu and Shewring opt instead to translate his depiction of her to ‘treacherous schemer’¹⁹² or simply ‘treacherous.’¹⁹³ Similarly, when Agamemnon declares that Clytemnestra’s betrayal, like that of Eve after tasting the forbidden fruit, will bring

¹⁸⁷ Rieu, p 34

¹⁸⁸ Wilson, p. 143-144

¹⁸⁹ Rieu, p. 34

¹⁹⁰ Homer, trans. Walter Shewring, *The Odyssey* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008) p. 29

¹⁹¹ Wilson, p. 293

¹⁹² Rieu, p. 151

¹⁹³ Shewring, p. 137

consequences to all women throughout all of time, we encounter another noteworthy variation in translation. In Wilson it is Clytemnestra's 'evil mind'¹⁹⁴ which 'poured down shame on her own head and on all other women, even good ones.'¹⁹⁵ In Rieu it is her 'villainy'¹⁹⁶ which brands women all alike with 'infamy'¹⁹⁷ and in Shewring it is due to her 'utter wickedness'¹⁹⁸ which pours 'dishonour on both herself and on every woman that lives hereafter.'¹⁹⁹ This wide range of translations and interpretations, coupled with Rieu's decision to call Clytemnestra a 'bitch,'²⁰⁰ demonstrates how dire the need for a female translation of the *Odyssey* was. It also makes constructing a single, coherent perception of Clytemnestra's character more challenging considering translators are unable to agree amongst themselves how she should be described in English. Cunning, bitch and wicked can easily be used to describe three separate women with varying motivations and desires. While Atwood only consulted Rieu's translation wherein he brands Clytemnestra a 'bitch,' which might explain Penelope's ruthless language when describing her cousin, the scattered way Clytemnestra has been translated in the works of Homer might explain why Atwood would elect to reduce her presence in *The Penelopiad*.

Despite the severity of Agamemnon's statement, he still insists on highlighting Penelope's virtue in contrast to that of his wife at the end of the *Odyssey*:

Lucky you,
cunning Odysseus: you got yourself
a wife of virtue – great Penelope.
How principled she was, that she remembered
her husband all those years! Her fame will live
forever, and the deathless gods will make
a poem to delight all those on earth
about intelligent Penelope.
Not like my wife – who murdered her own husband!
Her story will be hateful; she will bring

¹⁹⁴ Wilson, p. 293

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 293

¹⁹⁶ Rieu, p. 151

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 151

¹⁹⁸ Shewring, p. 137

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 137

²⁰⁰ Rieu, p. 151

bad reputation to all other women,
even the good ones.²⁰¹

Agamemnon's praise is aimed not at Penelope but at Odysseus himself. This is made even more clear in Rieu's translation where Odysseus is labelled fortunate to have 'won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue,' thereby placing emphasis not on Penelope's extraordinary patience but rather on Odysseus ability to have secured such a virtuous wife.²⁰² It is interesting to note, however, how Atwood and Homer alike decide to demonstrate the virtue of Penelope through tearing down other women, such as her cousins Helen and Clytemnestra, who do not abide by societal expectations and are thereby considered cursed regardless of circumstances. Penelope, it seems, can only be developed as a character in parallel to one of her cousins. Her value as a woman worth ten years of hardship, loss and prolonged journeys across rough seas is made clear in the *Odyssey* through her comparison to her cousin Clytemnestra: the woman men feared coming home to.

Although they are opposites, Penelope and Clytemnestra both share a talent in deceit and an astounding intelligence. It is how they use this, however, which varies. While one weaves a trap for her husband and plots his murder, the other weaves in order to deceive unwanted suitors while waiting on her husband to return. Perhaps their unspoken similarities contribute to Penelope's dislike of Clytemnestra in *The Penelopiad*. It is only when Penelope begins reflecting upon the ways in which her predicament is affecting her son Telemachus, and how 'the best solution for him would have been a graceful death on my part,' that a comparison is drawn to Clytemnestra.²⁰³ It is not comfortable, after all, to become aware of the ways in which one is similar to someone who is capable of premeditated murder and the ways in which your absence would benefit others. Better, then, to ignore their presence as much as possible.

Both Helen and Clytemnestra, Penelope's cousins and fellow Greek mythology housewives, have the ability to add and subtract how we perceive both Penelope and her story. They provide readers and writers alike opportunities to draw parallels as well as a chance to compare Penelope

²⁰¹ Wilson, p. 513

²⁰² Rieu, p. 316

²⁰³ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 110

against her contemporaries. Through granting Helen an increased presence in *The Penelopiad*, she assumes the role as Penelope's opposite as well as allowing Penelope as a narrator the ability to put a face to her misfortunes. Clytemnestra, on the other hand, is minimised, preferring uncomfortable comparisons to remain unspoken. Overall, Penelope is developed as a character, by both Homer and Atwood, through comparisons to her cousins, either self-consciously or externally imposed. This exasperates the fluidity of Penelope as a character, and thereby continues to challenge our attempts to truly know what was going on in her mind.

3.4 Giving Voice to a Chorus of Maids

Penelope had heard the marvellous song.
She clambered down the steep steps of her house,
not by herself – two slave girls came with her.²⁰⁴

The female slaves occupying Odysseus' home in Ithaca alongside Penelope and Telemachus are referred to by a wide variety of terms. In Wilson's translation, the source of the quote above, they are reliably referred to as slaves with few exceptions. In her translator's notes, Wilson elaborates on the difficulty of translating the word *dmoe* (meaning female-house-slave) without falling back on terms such as maid, waiting-woman and servant which would falsely imply the individual was free and had chosen her current employment.²⁰⁵ Rieu, the translator whose text Atwood based her literary transformation upon, overwhelmingly uses the term maid throughout his translation. It is likely due to his choice to render *dmoe* into maid that Atwood likewise retains the term in her Chorus of Maids, having consulted no other text which could contradict his questionable word choice. Therefore, although the term slave should be used to describe these women, the term maid will be used here purely for ease of comparison to Atwood's work.

The Homeric texts features a small number of named maids who 'make quick appearances throughout the narratives to offer heroes food, bedding, and other niceties.'²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Wilson, p. 115

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 88

²⁰⁶ Barbara A. Olsen, 'The Worlds of Penelope: Women in the Mycenaean and Homeric Economies,' *Arethusa*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2015) (pp. 107-138) p. 121

These women are here to look after the needs of those they serve and their guests, welcome or not as we see in the *Odyssey*. As Barbara Olsen highlights, they are reduced to little more than a flitting image: ‘entering and exiting scenes quietly, namelessly, and without much impact on the plot.’²⁰⁷ In *The Penelopiad* we come to know the twelve maids primarily through ‘The Chorus Line’ interludes and secondly through Penelope’s own narrative. The interludes feature a variety of genres, including a jumping-rope rhyme about their hanging, a drama criticising Penelope, a lament for the childhood they never had and a song dreaming about wealth and status. Throughout these interludes the reader is offered a playful and scathing account of their experiences, and although they are granted a greater presence in *The Penelopiad* compared to the *Odyssey*, they nevertheless remain nameless and interchangeable.

Through their interactions with Penelope, we are granted a slightly less curated glimpse into their daily lives. We learn of their task to eavesdrop on the suitors on her behalf and the late nights aiding Penelope in the unravelling of her shroud. We learn of the subsequent and repeated rapes they experience at the hands of the suitors, the order from Penelope to say ‘rude and disrespectful things’ about her and her family, and their eventual hanging when her son and husband decide to rid themselves of these impolite and violated slaves.²⁰⁸ Their lives, hard enough as they were, are worsened by their close relationship with Penelope in *The Penelopiad*. These events could suggest Penelope is an unreliable narrator. In the aftermath of the hanging, she jumps from ‘it was my fault’ to ‘dead is dead’ to speculating whether Eurycleia had them killed out of spite, suggesting Penelope was never truly upset by their murder.²⁰⁹ The complex relationship Atwood has created between Penelope and her chosen twelve slaves adds depth to *The Penelopiad* through granting the slaves a more prominent position in the narrative in addition to giving the reader cause to question Penelope’s true motivations.

One of the consequences of Atwood’s creative decision to present the maids as a coherent chorus is that they are still denied the opportunity of being perceived as individuals complete with unique names and personalities. The only named maid is Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks, a name carried over from the *Odyssey*. While Atwood’s aversion towards naming the maids might be understandable considering our knowledge of slave names from the time is poor

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 121

²⁰⁸ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 117

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 160

compared to the names of citizens, there does however exist a consistent pattern of slave names within Ancient Greek literature which could have been utilised as a template for composing names for these maids.²¹⁰ As described in Kostas Vlassopoulos' research on the topic, while the majority of names are ethnic or foreign names not found among the names of citizens, some slaves did share names with citizens and others received names compatible with desirable slave characteristics.²¹¹ Considering Penelope's tendency in *The Penelopiad* to raise any 'pretty child' produced by her slaves with the aim of 'teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant,' it would not be unlikely for Penelope to name these children based upon her perception of them.²¹² Using Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks as an example, Atwood could feasibly have created names for the remainder eleven hanged maids by combining either names or locations found beyond the reach of Ithaca with the characteristics Penelope would have likely celebrated in these girls. Drawing upon an index of names from the *Iliad* we discover Chyseis, for example, shares her name with Chryse (a town near Troy). Using this example, Atwood could have theoretically transformed Cleonae, a town in the district of Achaia, into the name Cleonae of the Blue Eyes for one of the maids. It may not be perfect, but a name goes a long way towards humanising a character and providing them with individuality.

The central criticism of Penelope in *The Penelopiad* is her involvement, albeit unintentionally, in the hanging of the twelve maids. However, it is worth taking into account Penelope's own lack of agency when it came to governing the events taking place in her home. In her journal article 'The Worlds of Penelope: Women in Mycenaean and Homeric Economies,' Barbara Olsen examines the disconnect between the importance of elite women and their day-to-day authority. Her analysis of Penelope is of particular interest:

She is the highest-ranking and most socially desirable woman of Ithaca, but her rank does not give her the power to oust suitors from her house, defend her son's economic interests, or rule Ithaca in Odysseus's absence. In short, she has status but no real power.²¹³

²¹⁰ Kostas Vlassopoulos, 'Athenian Slave Names and Athenian Social History,' *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Vol. 175 (2010) (pp. 113-144) p. 123 + 124

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124

²¹² Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 88

²¹³ Olsen, p. 128

Penelope's lack of economic autonomy is further underscored by the suitor's focus on acquiring Odysseus' political power rather than his possessions, which are agreed by all as belonging to Telemachus, as well as the need for Penelope's father to provide a new dowry should she decide to marry once more.²¹⁴ The only items a woman was considered at the time to own outright were her clothes and jewellery, which is consistent with the gifts Penelope receives from the suitors and the gift Helen gives to Telemachus for his future bride. It should then come as no surprise that Penelope had little to no ownership when it comes to the household slaves, all of which are described as being purchased by either Odysseus or Laertes. While Penelope might have had a say in the selection of slaves, such as Melantho, ownership is at no point directly attributed to her.²¹⁵ Even within the world of *The Penelopiad*, Penelope at no point purchases the twelve maids, instead they are born into enslavement and are automatically considered a part of Odysseus' property. The only influence Penelope may have had is naming them, treating them kindly and offering alternative work within the household, which in *The Penelopiad* she does.

When the ploy of the shroud is concocted, Penelope handpicks twelve of her servants to assist her with the nightly unweaving. In *The Penelopiad*, we are told these were the youngest ones, those whom 'had been with me all their lives,' were 'brought up as playmates for Telemachus' and carefully trained 'in everything they would need to know around the palace.'²¹⁶ Penelope takes comfort in their presence, describing their giggles and singing. She considered them her 'most trusted eyes and ears' in the palace, and during their work they would routinely share food and stories to keep themselves entertained throughout the long night.²¹⁷ Penelope even goes as far as saying 'we were almost like sisters,' and would 'exchange smiles of complicity' throughout the day.²¹⁸ However, doubt is brought into the readers mind when they learn that the slaves routinely run away at the sight of Penelope in the afterlife. Likely the indirect result of Penelope's request that they speak badly of the household in order to spy on the suitors, which subsequently resulted in their repeated rapes and ultimately their deaths.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 128

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 129

²¹⁶ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 113

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 114

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 114

An alternative point-of-view is presented in 'The Chorus Like: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama,' where the maids explain their deaths came as a direct result of Penelope with the intention of covering up her multiple affairs with various suitors. Upon Odysseus' return, Penelope panics, knowing 'he'll chop me up for tending my desire.'²¹⁹ Conspiring with Eurycleia, they narrow down the list of maids in on Penelope's promiscuous secret and land on twelve names, the maids employed in the duty of smuggling lovers in and out of Penelope's bedchambers. Their solution is to 'stop their mouths by sending them to Hades,' resulting in the maid's chorus line 'let them dangle, let them strangle.'²²⁰ This account of events presented by the maids naturally contradict the events presented by Penelope. According to her, the maids were killed without her knowledge, perhaps even as a result of Eurycleia's dislike of the way Penelope doted upon them. These contradicting accounts add complexity to Atwood's transformation, as it forces her readers to either pick a side or remain forever in doubt. This decision to weave in uncertainty into her reimagining likely stems from Atwood's perception that the traditional account 'doesn't hold water' and featured 'too many inconsistencies,' inspiring her to present the reader with multiple, contrasting accounts from different parties all with their individual motivations and perception of events.²²¹

While Atwood may always have been haunted by the hanged maids, the sight of hanged women does not appear to have been an unfamiliar sight in Ancient Greece. The philosopher Diogenes relayed the events of one day when, while strolling through the olive groves, he came across 'several hanged maidens swinging from the branches of the trees.'²²² The sight had such little impact on him that he would go on to make a joke about fruit. In her article 'Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece,' Eva Cantarella goes on to explain that the *brochos*, the noose, is 'the privileged instrument of female death.'²²³ Even within the *Odyssey*, the maids were not the only ones who were hanged. During Odysseus' visit to the Underworld, we are told the story of Epicaste (or Jocasta), the mother and later wife of Oedipus, who hanged herself upon the discovery of her incestuous relationship. There are numerous other examples of women committing suicide through hanging within Greek mythology, such as

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149-150

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xix

²²² Eva Cantarella, 'Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece,' *Poetics Today*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2 (1985) (pp. 91-101) p. 91

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 92

Antigone who decides this is a better fate than her prescribed punishment of being buried alive. Hanging was additionally used as a form of revenge, as depicted in the Rhodian legend where Helen is hanged for causing the Trojan War, and as punishment, as seen in the *Iliad* when Zeus reminds Hera of the time he hanged her and let her dangle in the sky for being disrespectful.²²⁴ Even the Romans considered the noose a feminine death, in contrast to the more masculine alternative which was death by sword.²²⁵ It is likely Telemachus had this in mind when he disobeyed Odysseus' order to 'hack at them with long swords.'²²⁶

The conversations leading up to the hanging of the maids begins in Book XVI. While plotting how to regain control over his house, Odysseus declares to Telemachus that no one should know of his true identity, explaining:

Laertes and the swineherd must not know,
nor any of the slave girls, and not even
Penelope, until we have determined
the women's attitude. We also must
test the male slaves, and see who has respect
and fears me in his heart, and who does not,
and who looks up to you as you deserve.²²⁷

In the eyes of Odysseus, disrespect goes beyond gender divisions. Telemachus, on the other hand, does not agree. He claims 'it would take too long to go around and test each man like that,'²²⁸ while simultaneously agreeing and stressing the importance of testing the women. It is likely this attitude which leads Odysseus to place Telemachus in charge of killing the twelve slaves who had been raped by the suitors. Although it's understandable that this conversation would not naturally be covered by a retelling narrated by Penelope and her maids, it is disappointing not seeing Atwood delve further into why Telemachus would be so insistent on

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 94

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 95

²²⁶ Wilson, p. 491

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 379

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 379

only the female slaves being punished and his choice to hang them all at once considering the question in her introduction: ‘what led to the hanging of the maids?’²²⁹

While Penelope utilised the maids to provide her with information about the suitors’ conversations in *The Penelopiad* as they were ‘well positioned to eavesdrop,’²³⁰ it is unlikely this alone led to Odysseus’ decision to rid himself of them. Firstly, because it is likely the maids would have been raped by the suitors regardless of Penelope’s instructions to win their trust as it was common practice for guests to entertain themselves with household slaves. The disrespect, in Odysseus’ eyes, is that this took place without *his* consent as their bodies at the time were considered his property.²³¹ In the court case interlude, Odysseus’ defence attorney argues:

He was acting within his rights, Your Honour. These were his slaves.
[...] They’d had sex without his permission. [...] With my client’s
enemies, Your Honour. The very ones who had designs on his wife, not
to mention his life.²³²

Although the maids point out that it was specifically mentioned in Book XXII that they were raped and that Odysseus was aware of this fact, they still lose the imaginary court case.²³³ Secondly, while Penelope might have encouraged the maids to speak negatively about her and her family to win the suitor’s trust, at no point did she instruct them to reveal either her secrets or what went on in the house when the suitors were not present. Not only does someone let the ploy of shroud slip, a significant betrayal of trust which Atwood’s Penelope brushes off by saying ‘the young are careless’²³⁴ and which Telemachus would likely be aware of, but this reversed flow of information is made clear in Odysseus’ presence. In Book XX a conversation is struck up between the suitor Ctesippus and Odysseus still in his beggar disguise. Ctesippus, seemingly following Telemachus’ order to treat the beggar with respect, says he would like to present the beggar with a gift so he could ‘give gifts to the bath attendant or some other house

²²⁹ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. xix

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 178

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 179-181

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115

slave.²³⁵ The gift, of course, is an ox-foot hurled towards Odysseus which barely misses. However, what this conversation suggests, as put forwards by John Vlahos in his analysis of these final chapters, is that the suitor has been informed about Eurycleia washing the beggar's feet the night before (an event which only Odysseus, Penelope, Eurycleia and the maids were present for).²³⁶ Regardless of Penelope's involvement in *The Penelopiad*, the maids still would have been violated and pressed for information by the suitors, which in turn leads to Odysseus and Telemachus' decisions to dispose of them alongside the suitors.

As horrific as these events are, it is worth keeping in mind who is truly to blame for the eventual murder of these slave girls. Most significantly, the fact that over a hundred men consciously and deliberately decided to rape, probably not just these twelve girls, but a large portion of women equal to themselves in numbers. Royal household were historically staffed with a much higher number of slaves than the Homeric texts suggests. Regardless of whether these encounters were violent, there would have been a significant power imbalance between the aristocratic men and the female slaves which is difficult to ignore. The focus on Penelope's involvement in their hanging also glosses over the fact that the decision and action was carried out by her husband and son without her involvement. While it is suggested in the *Odyssey* that Penelope was aware information could be passed along to the suitors through her maids, a likely explanation for her cryptic conversation with Odysseus disguised as a beggar in Book XIX, she at no point expresses a desire for their murder in the same way she wishes all forms of evil on the exploitative suitors. This is likewise reflected Atwood's Penelope, who cared for her slaves and looked after them to the best of her ability.

Nevertheless, no number of caring words and scented baths could make up for the fact that they were born into slavery and would die as slaves. In one of their earlier laments, the maids explain how they were born to the wrong parents: 'Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen.'²³⁷ The only reason Penelope even offered them these cold comforts was due to their beauty, their pliability, as she hand-picked and shaped a select few into her own personal serving women. Penelope's interest in them rested in what they could do for her, rather than what she could do for them. The maids

²³⁵ Wilson, p. 455

²³⁶ John B. Vlahos, 'Homer's Odyssey, Books 19 and 23: Early Recognition; A Solution to the Enigmas of Ivory and Horns, and the Test of the Bed,' *College Literature*, vol. 34, No. 2 (2007) (pp. 107-131) p. 118

²³⁷ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 13

explain how ‘we swayed our hips, we lurked, we winked, we signalled with our eyebrows, even when we were children.’²³⁸ Their usefulness resided in their invisibility, the nature in which they interacted with her unwelcome guests. Even these young girls knew what Penelope herself could not admit: ‘We were dirty girls. If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse.’²³⁹ And perhaps it is this powerlessness which evoked Atwood’s interest in the maids, the idea of twelve girls punished for circumstances they themselves could not control. A sentiment present in Atwood’s final chorus ballad where the girls call out:

we had no voice
we had no name
we had no choice²⁴⁰

3.5 Atwood and Feminist Rewriting

In her journal article on *The Penelopiad*, Ioana-Gianina Hanes considers feminist rewriting an ‘intertextual phenomenon’ encompassing a desire or perhaps even need to make corrections.²⁴¹ As explored in Chapter One, Hanes believes we are drawn towards rewriting when ‘what has already been written is not correct, complete or requires amendments.’²⁴² *The Penelopiad* builds upon this tradition, returning to a well-known myth in search of answers for the questions Atwood felt were left unanswered at the end of reading the *Odyssey*. Gabrielle Neethling defines the task of the feminist writer as ‘subvert[ing] myths that determine how women should behave.’²⁴³ Within *The Penelopiad*, we are introduced to women, noble and poor, who are as crass, direct and cruel as their male counterparts. There is no need, anymore, for them to bite their tongue, greet everyone with a wide smile, and submit themselves to the will of men. They are, after all, already dead.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13-14

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 195

²⁴¹ Hanes, p. 9

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9

²⁴³ Neethling, p. 127

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood compares the writer to a jackdaw: ‘we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests.’²⁴⁴ Following this metaphor we can describe *The Penelopiad* as a nest of ideas woven together with a wide variety of strands including Homeric myth, the ideals of feminist rewriting, contemporary tropes, and the impossible standards imposed upon modern women by the beauty industry. For while we all ‘must commit acts of larceny,’ as she phrases it, in the name of writing, this in no way absolves us from the physical act of writing and adding our own world views and creativity into the mix.²⁴⁵ Countless hours will still be spent with our writing tool of choice, trying to connect the dots in new and exciting ways. It takes work, after all, to pry secrets out of the dead. Atwood continues:

The dead may guard the treasure, but it’s useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change.²⁴⁶

The Homeric myths are rich with variations, both ancient and contemporary, which is perhaps why they are so popular with contemporary women authors embarking upon writing literary transformations. Our interpretation of these texts is forever evolving, so it is only natural that our retellings of them should as well.

The purpose of the term literary transformations is to broaden the scope of feminist rewriting to include a wider range of authors and topics whilst keeping alive the evolutionary spirit of myths. Fritz Graf’s *Greek Myths: An Introduction* proposes that the reason myths continue to evolve, mutating as they are passed down from one generation to the next, can be attributed to cultural relevance:

A myth makes a valid statement about the origins of the world, of society and of its institutions, about the gods and their relationship with

²⁴⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. xix

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178-179

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178-179

mortals, in short, about everything on which human existence depends. If conditions change, a myth, if it is to survive, must change with them. Its capacity to adapt to changing circumstances is a measure of its vitality.²⁴⁷

In other words, our stories need to change with our society as it progresses, otherwise they may lose their relevance altogether. Over the past century significant leaps have been taken when it comes to accepting and celebrating a wider spectrum of gender and sexuality, challenging sexism and racism, changing our perception of disabilities and mental illnesses, and investigating elements of Europe's colonial past.

In her book, *Feminism Interrupted*, Lola Olufemi argues that creativity must be at the heart of any new world we seek to build.²⁴⁸ Her argument is that when we 'engage our creative faculties, we are going against a logic that places work and the nuclear family at the centre of our existence.'²⁴⁹ Art, in other words, can be used as a medium to challenge and change the society as it is, as well as explore the direction in which we would like it to evolve. She writes:

It is our job as feminists to rediscover the histories that have been purposefully withheld from us because it is the voices that speak to us from the past that help shape our vision for the future.²⁵⁰

When we make art with the intention of raising consciousness, Olufemi argues, we are not only contributing to the feminist fight, but also 'demonstrating that feeling is a way of knowing and a powerful starting point for building a political framework.'²⁵¹ In other words, emotions can become a powerful tool for progress, especially when combined with our creative and critical faculties. It is a pursuit of change which relies upon our innate ability to empathise with the lives of others. However, it is worth bearing in mind the barriers which might stand between

²⁴⁷ Fritz Graf, trans. Thomas Marier, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993) p. 3

²⁴⁸ Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 84

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86

someone and their ability to make art. Like Virginia Woolf's essay 'A Room of One's Own,' contemporary artists require certain social and financial circumstances in order to pursue their creativity. I, for one, would not have been able to embark upon this project without the aid of scholarships and student loans, in addition to the support I have received from friends, loved ones, and the university itself. Because of these structural barriers, creativity becomes a privilege. Therefore, part of our pursuit towards political change must include addressing and tearing down these barriers in order to create conditions for a wider variety of individuals to engage.

It is also worth keeping in mind how one individual might struggle to engage with art due to multiple oppressive systems. The term *intersectionality*, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, encourages us to consider the ways in which patterns of discriminations, such as racial and gender discrimination, might overlap.²⁵² These patterns can likewise be found in our current conception of the literary canon which almost exclusively features work by male, white authors. In addition to challenging and creating using these texts, the practice of literary transformations can be utilised to revive texts which have up until now been forgotten or ignored due to these discriminatory factors. Now is the time, as literary curriculums are coming into question and readers are becoming aware of the inclusiveness of their bookshelves, to transform the canon and bring to light modern adaptations of these marginalised stories. Susanne Jung, in her article on *The Penelopiad*, end her analysis with a brilliant call for action: 'why not, dear reader, take this as a pointer: which other silenced voices [...] can *you* hear?'²⁵³ The desire to transform a text begins, after all, with a personal reading experience of a text.

And this is where Atwood began her work: writing in-between the cracks of the original narrative. The conundrum of how Penelope could possibly sleep through the slaughter of the suitors is attributed to Eurycleia slipping something into her drink.²⁵⁴ Telemachus' decision to hang the slaves rather than cut them up with a sword, as his father ordered, Atwood attributes to him wanting to 'assert himself to his father, and to show that he knew better.'²⁵⁵ Penelope's ploy with the shroud is likewise elaborated upon: now she had assistance in the form of the twelve maids. Instead of attributing the idea of the shroud to Athena, Atwood's Penelope explains how she used to credit Athene for the idea because 'crediting some god for one's

²⁵² June Eric-Udorie ed., *Can we all be feminists?* (London: Virago Press, 2019) p. xiv

²⁵³ Susanne Jung, "'A Chorus Line': Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* at the Crossroads of Narrative, Poetic and Dramatic Genres", *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015) pp. 41-62 (p. 58)

²⁵⁴ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, p. 157

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159

inspirations was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not.²⁵⁶ Penelope's relationship with Eurycleia, the twelve maids, Odysseus and Helen are all likewise elaborated upon, granting the reader additional insight into the conversations taking place in the backdrop of Homer's *Odyssey*. What is intriguing about *The Penelopiad*, is that its nuance is unique to Atwood. No other author rewriting the *Odyssey* could produce this exact version. Atwood's writing philosophy, her lived experience, her interest and inspirations all played a role in shaping *The Penelopiad*. A surprising consequence of studying Atwood's transformation was realising how I myself would have written it in a different way based upon my own ideas, philosophies, experiences and research. And perhaps this is the true beauty of literary transformations: different eyes drifting to different cracks, yet all of us drawn closer to the original as we scrape away at the edges so light can be let through.

²⁵⁶ [Ibid.](#), p. 112

Chapter 4: Rewriting *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

4.1 Why Write a Literary Transformation

I first encountered Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick; or The White Whale* during a second-year undergraduate module focused on nineteenth-century American literature. At the beginning of the module, aware that this mammoth text was scheduled to be discussed in a few weeks, our seminar leader recommended we begin reading it sooner rather than later and encouraged us to foster a personal relationship with the text. Considering our usual analytic approach to literature, being encouraged to simply enjoy reading a book felt refreshing. With that in mind, I would drag an armchair into the garden and read *Moby-Dick* for an hour or two every day in the September sunshine. Over time, I grew enamoured by poetic descriptions of the sea and compelled by the wonderful, maddening logic of Ahab and his crew. When it was time to discuss the book in class, I was surprised however to discover I was the only one who reported back a positive experience. This disparity between myself and my classmates would soon lead me to reread individual chapters of *Moby-Dick* again and again, fuelled by a curiosity to rediscover what I saw in it that others might have missed or disregarded. This act of rereading led to a phenomenon best expressed by Bainard Cowan: when 'rereading *Moby-Dick* one is repeatedly struck with brilliant passages never noticed before, as though they had been tipped into the book' at night when no one was watching.²⁵⁷ Soon I not only discovered descriptions and comparisons previously missed, but also actively began collecting these.

My first introduction to the practice of working with found material came to me from Austin Kleon and his book *Steal Like an Artist*. In this book, Kleon highlights the importance of both celebrating and actively seeking out inspiration and influence. He writes: 'what a good artist understands is that nothing comes from nowhere. All creative work builds on what came before. Nothing is completely original.'²⁵⁸ As a budding writer, this approach to creativity came across as comforting. The pressure to summon ideas out of the blue was lifted, and instead I turned my eyes to the world around me, looking for sources of inspiration. The brilliant paradox of working with found material is that even when a large group of individuals, such as an entire room of students, are presented with the same source text and the same technique they will inevitably all produce different results. Kleon attributes this phenomenon to a 'wonderful flaw'

²⁵⁷ Bainard Cowan, *Exiled Waters: Moby-Dick and the Crisis of Allegory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) p. 124

²⁵⁸ Austin Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist* (New York: Workman, 2012) p. 7

in humans which results in our inability to produce perfect copies.²⁵⁹ There is, after all, originality to be found in our approach to reworking an existing text. Contributing factors to this include but are not limited to: how we read and interpret a text, our knowledge of the text, the influence of other skills and interests, our reading list, our lived experience and our mood at the moment of writing. Even the same writer may produce different results at different points in time, a phenomenon prominent in the contrast between the first and second versions of Tom Phillips' *A Humument* and one I experienced myself while writing the creative component of this thesis.

There are several reasons why one might be compelled to transform a text. For Atwood, it was a publishing commission. For Oswald, it was a childhood fascination with Homer which followed her into her poetic practice. In her essay, 'Deconstructing Old Stories to Tell Them in New Ways,' Daisy Johnson, on the other hand, describes how her interest in retellings emerged out of her fear of the blank page. 'To write from scratch feels, to me, like digging into concrete with a spoon to make a space I can lie in without being trodden on. And – at the very least – with retelling there is half a hole there to begin with.'²⁶⁰ The half-dug hole in the case of Johnson's writing was Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the events of which she transposed to the British canals in her novel *Everything Under*. The fear of the blank page is a familiar one for most, if not all, writers. This is why, when introducing younger students to writing for the first time, I tend to begin with forms of found writing such as blackout poetry. The words are there, so all they have to do is remove a sentence here and there with a marker until something new emerges. Should they be unhappy with the results, it is easy to find a new page from a new source and try again until something feels right. In other words, there is liberation, an easing of pressure, to be found when working with found material. Throughout the course of writing my poetic sequence, I would rewrite material from the same chapter several times until the right poem eventually emerged. Every time a poem was scrapped and a new draft required, it was as simple as opening up the book anew at the relevant chapter, select words or phrases which stood out to me, and before I knew it my blank page was populated with intriguing metaphors and descriptions. As Johnson writes: 'We take some of the old building's rubble; steal a doorknob or two, use the line of a window for inspiration, make a sitting room of the ancient hollowed

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 41

²⁶⁰ Daisy Johnson, 'Deconstructing Old Stories to Tell Them in New Ways,' *Literary Hub* (25 January 2019) <https://lithub.com/deconstructing-old-stories-to-tell-them-in-new-ways/?fbclid=IwAR007gjXRjzXwwcIczszKj9izJSSOry8toZLRiDGmUJuv_qV6o2JSJQOcTQ> [accessed 28 January 2019]

swimming pool.²⁶¹ By using found material from the novel as building bricks for my own creative practice, I have been able to create unique prose poems which likely never would have emerged on their own.

There could, however, also exist political motives behind a literary transformation. In the case of women's rewriting, this act is a natural continuation of Cixous' call for *écriture féminine* and a way to highlight previously ignored female characters. For M. NourbeSe Philip, it provided an opportunity to highlight the horrors of slavery in her 182-page long poem *Zong!* The found material here was the case report *Gregson vs. Gilbert* which recounts the massacre of 130 enslaved Africans by drowning over the course of a ten-day period on the Dutch ship *Zong* in 1781.²⁶² In my own creative practice, the process of writing a literary transformation developed into a safe space where I could reflect upon my deteriorating mental health during a global health crisis which isolated me from my usual support network. Melville's words and the crew of the *Pequod* simultaneously provided me a refuge from my negative self-talk, as well as a framework within which I could express thoughts and ideas that would otherwise be difficult to voice. This practice could also prove useful for writers interested in tackling subjects such as racism, sexism, gender identity, sexuality, disabilities, health struggles, addiction, abusive relationships and more through the transformation of existing texts and representations of these topics. Considering the work currently being undertaken to decolonise a variety of media, the practice of literary transformations functions as an extension of this goal, allowing both readers and writers to envision themselves within spaces and stories where their voices were previously side-lined or excluded.

4.2 The Fascinating History Behind *Moby-Dick*

Before discovering the wonders of the sea and the written word, Melville worked as a clerk in a bank and then as a teacher while pursuing his education in starts and stops. Then in 1839, still nineteen years old, he set out to sea aboard a merchant ship called *St. Lawrence* sailing from New York to Liverpool. His first whaling experience then took place in 1841 aboard the new whaler *Acushnet* of Fairhaven. It was during his time with the *Acushnet* that Melville would become familiar with whaling history, in particular the incident which befell the *Essex* on the

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Zong!' *M. NourbeSe Philip* <<https://www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3/>> [accessed 16 February 2022]

20th of November 1820. The *Acushnet* would regularly gam – a term used to describe meetings at sea between whaling ships – with the Nantucket ship *Lima*, sometimes for days at a time. It was during one of these gams that Melville made the acquaintance of William Henry Chase, son of Owen Chase.²⁶³ Twenty-one years earlier, Owen Chase had been the first mate aboard the *Essex* when a male sperm whale struck the ship head-on twice, thereby stoving in the ship's bow so it slowly filled with water and sank. Mainland was thousands of miles away, and the nearest island was believed to be inhabited by cannibals. Therefore, the surviving crew set out in two whaleboats across the Pacific Ocean in search of the South American coast. As fate would have it, their journey was dire. Several crew members died along the way and the remaining few turned to cannibalism in order to survive.²⁶⁴ What they did not know, and which Melville would later comment on, is that their suffering might have been avoided if they simply had gone to Tahiti, the nearby island, which by 1820 was considered safe to visit.²⁶⁵ Among the few who survived this ordeal was Owen Chase, who later wrote a book about the sinking of the *Essex*. A book, which during such a gam, Chase's son William would lend to Melville so he could familiarise himself with this aspect of whaling history. While Melville would go on to travel with two more whaling ships, even becoming a mutineer aboard one of them, it was the story of the *Essex* which would go on to inspire the dramatic fate of the *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick*.

Melville's inspiration for Ahab's white whale, Moby Dick, arose from another aspect of whaling history: a white sperm whale known as Mocha Dick, named after the island of Mocha outside Chile where he was known to frequent. While some believe Mocha Dick might have been responsible for the sinking of the *Essex*, a plausible conjecture considering he was alive at the time, it is unlikely Owen Chase would omit the fact that his ship was sunk by a white sperm whale.²⁶⁶ Whether or not Mocha Dick sank this one ship is, however, insignificant considering the impressive record of historical evidence documenting the damage he caused to the whalers who pursued him and his kind. In his book, *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick*, Howard P. Vincent estimates that Mocha Dick was struck by at least nineteen harpoons and as a result destroyed fourteen smaller whaleboats and killed thirty men, in addition to sinking three larger ships as well as damaging three whale ships almost to the point of ruin.²⁶⁷ The havoc wrecked

²⁶³ Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield eds., *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1965) p. 167

²⁶⁴ Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1949) p. 168

²⁶⁵ Charles Olsen, *Call Me Ishmael* (San Francisco: John Hopkins University Press, 1997) p. 31

²⁶⁶ Vincent, p. 167

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174

by Mocha Dick would inspire many whalers to make grand declarations, vowing to put an end to this wild creature, just as Ahab later would in *Moby-Dick* while pursuing his fictional counterpart Moby Dick. It would not be until many years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, worn out by constant battle and old age, that Mocha Dick succumbed to a Swedish whaler in 1859.²⁶⁸

Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* is, based upon my personal reading experience, an intriguing exploration of our relationship with nature, madness and the pursuit of purpose. Published in 1851, *Moby-Dick* was Melville's sixth novel, following in the wake of *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn* and *White Jacket*. Despite Melville's previous literary success, the novel was considered a failure due to a large number of negative reviews it generated. Melville's experimental style, drawing inspiration from the mid-nineteenth-century's interest in natural science and the style of mixed-form novels, was not to everyone's taste and made it difficult for reviewers to classify such a blend of genres. In addition to Ishmael's philosophical reflections and the story of Ahab's pursuit of the white whale, the novel is rich in 'statistical, historical, economic, and anatomical facts' which many familiar with Melville's earlier fiction and semi-autobiographical novels considered out of place.²⁶⁹ These dissatisfactions are, however, not entirely to blame for the novel's negative reception. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* was also victim of extensive censorships and a severe editorial error. Even news of the New Bedford whaleship *Ann Alexander* being struck and sunk by a sperm whale coinciding with the novel's publication was not enough to reverse the disjoint produced between the British and American versions.²⁷⁰

Three weeks before Harper & Brothers (now known as HarperCollins) published Melville's novel in New York under the title *Moby-Dick* it was released by Richard Bentley in London with Melville's original title *The Whale*.²⁷¹ Proof sheets were sent across the Atlantic, however Bentley's editors decided there was room for improvement. Sentences and passages considered blasphemous were either rewritten or deleted, while the extract and etymology sections were relocated to the back of the book.²⁷² However, despite their meticulous attention,

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 174

²⁶⁹ Giles Gunn ed., *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 155

²⁷⁰ Vincent, p. 191

²⁷¹ Kevin J. Hayes ed., *The Critical Response to Herman Melville's Moby-Dick* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) p. xv

²⁷² Ibid., p. xv

they failed to notice that the final page containing the novel's epilogue had been lost in transit. Without the epilogue detailing Ishmael's rescue by the passing ship *Delight*, the novel ends with the sinking of the *Pequod* as a result of Ahab's quest for the white whale. British readers were therefore surprised to have encountered a first-person narrative where the narrator does not survive and, considering Melville's otherwise innovative style, presumed this had been done intentionally.²⁷³ Throughout the three weeks leading up to the release of *Moby-Dick* in November reproachful reviews were written about Melville's latest work. While his American audience were aware of the title change, they were unaware of all other changes imposed upon the British edition. While both sides reacted negatively to Melville's mixing of genres, the Americans were particularly shocked by the blasphemous content edited out by Bentley's editors. It would not be until after WWI, a time when many like Ishmael were questioning their fundamental beliefs, that the novel would gain traction to the point of it becoming fashionable for individuals to declare they had participated in the revival of Melville.²⁷⁴

However, Melville would not live to see this. Upon his death in 1892, he was considered a promising writer who squandered his literary career due to 'a streak of morbidness.'²⁷⁵ George Henry Lewes in his review, published in the radical British newspaper *The Leader* on the 8th of November 1851, describes the novel as 'a strange, wild work,' while an anonymous reviewer in the New York magazine *The Independent* wrote: 'Judgement Day will hold him liable for not turning his talents to better account.'²⁷⁶ Although these negative critiques derailed Melville's literary career, it is possible that Melville was aware this might occur and decided to pursue publication regardless. Upon the book's completion, Melville wrote a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorn saying: 'I have written a wicked book, and feel as spotless as the lamb.'²⁷⁷ He felt content with the work he had done, and secure in his choice knowing Hawthorn at least understood his book.

While readers at the time might have resisted innovation, the novel is now appreciated by readers and academics alike – though agreement in interpretation is scarce. Writers and philosophers such as Auden, Sartre, Faulkner and Lawrence have all attempted, alongside a

²⁷³ Ibid., p. xvi

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. xx + xxii

²⁷⁵ Gunn, p. 17

²⁷⁶ Hayes, p. 6 + 11

²⁷⁷ Olsen, p. 54

plethora of literary critics, to dissect and examine the novel in much the same way Ishmael breaks down the whales and the whaling trade. The resulting theories are as varied as the authors who composed them. Which is perhaps part of our fascination with *Moby-Dick*, the notion that every reader discovers something unique to them, resulting in a perpetual renewal of interpretations. In his essay 'Moby Dick, or the White Whale,' D. H. Lawrence writes of the white whale: 'Of course he is a symbol. Of what? I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That's the best of it.'²⁷⁸ The quote encapsulates a simultaneous fascination and frustration, pairing together a certainty that the white whale and the novel as a whole has a meaning, a message which it is trying to convey, with the notion that perhaps even Melville himself was not aware of the multitude of ways his work could be interpreted. It opens up the possibility that each and every reading experience is unique, that we see in the novel what we search for. Paul Brodtkorb Jr. shares a similar view, writing 'the reader is then forced to be and to project what is in himself; and one result [...] is the mountain of conflicting testimony that makes up the Melville bibliography.'²⁷⁹ And perhaps this is exactly what Melville intended.

4.3 Transforming *Moby-Dick* into a Prose Poetry Collection

A year after reading *Moby-Dick* for the first time, I was introduced to the prose poetry format through an undergraduate module. The assigned reading was simultaneously compelling and challenging, and I grew particularly fond of Michael Rosen's collection *Carrying the Elephant*. Although seeming unassuming on the page, the prose poem proved a difficult format to learn. There was a quality to it which seemed to go unnamed, a crucial element you were forced to discover on your own. My first few attempts all fell flat. I could not seem to create any tension in my poems, any contrast or puzzlement in my work. Therefore, I scheduled an appointment with my seminar leader and presented a few different ideas for my portfolio, one of which was using found material from *Moby-Dick* as the foundation for a prose poem. It did not take her long to choose. I wrote in total ten prose poems using words and phrases from various chapters of the novel. Although I achieved my goal of getting a good grade, a curiosity remained. What would happen if I wrote a prose poem for each chapter of the novel, using material from the

²⁷⁸ Milton R. Stern ed., *Discussions of Moby-Dick* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1960) p. 35

²⁷⁹ Paul Brodtkorb Jr., *Ishmael's White World: A Phenomenological Reading of Moby Dick* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) p. 3

corresponding chapter? A kind of parallel text to the original. I simply had to find out, and this is the seed which went on to become my doctoral research.

To begin with, my approach to rewriting each chapter into a prose poem was focused on the linguistic aspects of the available material. I would read the chapter, selecting words and phrases which caught my eye, and create a new image using these stolen puzzle pieces. At times an idea would emerge upon combining two different elements, and slowly by adding word after word I was able to incorporate more of the found material into a poem. Other times, I would realise the material's potential while reading. Regardless whether the idea was easily found or gradually patched together, there was joy to be found in the process of taking words out of their original context and putting them back together in new formulations. Curiosity fuelled most of this process, a child-like desire to see what would happen if I combined two seemingly unrelated fragments from the chapter. This is how I produced the original ten poems, including this one:

The Carpet-Bag

Don't you hear? So goes the story
within blocks of blackness where the
first American whale was found
stranded upon imported cobblestones.
We only catch glimpses of gods within
smoky light, these eyes of mine teeth-
gnashing ashes from that destroyed
city as flying particles sent by
Euroclydon's turbulent winds almost
choke me. Walking along red silken
streets packed with congealed frost
laying ten inches thick of which Death
is the only glazier we neglect the
connexion between our hearts. We
never asked Lazarus what he thinks.
So they sally out in canoes to give

chase to the leviathan only to find the
universe is finished.²⁸⁰

This poem was later featured in Patricia Debney's essay 'Wrestling with Angels: The Pedagogy of the Prose Poem' in the anthology *British Prose Poetry: The Poems without Lines*. It is prime example of a poem composed entirely through the process of combining various found elements based upon possible sentence structure and intrigue. However, as my circumstances changed, so did my process and the collection itself. No poem remained static, they were tweaked again and again across numerous years as my intentions for the collection shifted.

The greatest example of how the collection evolved from those first ten poems to its current form can be seen in my rewriting of Chapter 1. This is the original and current poem:

Loomings

Call me mid drizzly November a high tragedy knee-
deep among Tiger-lilies captivated by a thousand
Patagonian sights flourish throws himself upon his
sword quietly with little or nothing left on shore but
chunks of an old sea-captain and me, a salted and
peppered sailor, cherishing an insular city as it pulls
us waterward my thoughts isles among coral reefs
violating the Pythagorean maxim with perceived
horrors methodically stepping through streets like a
snow hill in air pulled towards bulwarks of ships with
green fields clinched to desks I find myself seated
upon a pierhead loitering by the extremest limit of
land – once again, bound for a dive.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ Katrine Lynn Solvaag, 'from Inside the White Whale,' Portfolio Submission for Module EN664 at the University of Kent (2016) p. 3

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

I

nightly I find myself wandering into dreams crowded by water gazers
fixed in ocean reveries watching trying to scratch that ever-lasting itch
for all things remote for anywhere but here while locked away growing
grim about the mouth hazy about the eyes over-conscious of my lungs
wanting waves to wash reason away having been told I can only be
virtuous or mad and I am irrevocably the latter a high tragedy forecasted
to knock people's hats off except whenever I find myself standing upon
that weather-worn pier ogled by those lulling dead eyes I panic thinking
there must be another way ahead so like hector I run from certain death
until a wrong step the creak of a plank throws me stumbling forward
into consciousness waking to silence splashed in three am streetlight

Firstly, a few formatting changes. The latter is more box like, while the former retained a cylindrical shape. Similarly, the latter disregards the original chapter titles in favour of roman numerals. Most of the original poems retain key elements of sentence structure such as punctuation and capitalisation, while by the time the latter was written I had grown comfortable controlling the space given to me by the prose poem to compose within it without these aids. Secondly, the purpose behind the poem has changed. I am no longer composing entirely dependent upon found material. I now have a story I want to tell. Namely, my own struggle with mental health throughout the pandemic, a shift reflected in the evolution of this opening poem. Through repeated revisits to the original chapter, I found new material worth reusing and through repeated rewrites I was able to tweak the emotions conveyed. This poem is without a doubt my favourite in the whole collection, partially because I believe it documents how I have grown as poet throughout my doctorate. It incorporates references to the *Iliad* which I was reading for the research component of my thesis, as well as a nod to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Likewise, it provides an introduction to the depression, anxiety and insomnia which have left their mark on the majority of my lived experience and the strange, dream-like state of mind they can sometimes induce. As the pandemic hit, it also grew to incorporate that sense of being stuck in place.

I always knew I wanted my prose poems to be presented in boxes. As Abigail Beckel and Kathleen Rooney write in the preface to *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry*: ‘Prose poems are little boxes that can contain big things. Or small things that mean big things. Or small things that mean small things.’²⁸² These containers could feature a variety of moments and ideas, a snapshot of life like a polaroid photo. It was actually an earlier idea of mine, back when I still thought I would be able to go whale watching, to include a series of black and white polaroid photos of my adventures. These photos could sit comfortably adjacent to the poems, a homage to the adage ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ as well as providing the reader with visual variation throughout the collection. Another intriguing comparison between the prose poem and a physical object is made by Tung-Hui Hu in his essay ‘It’s Not in Cleveland, But I’m Getting Closer’ for the above-mentioned anthology. He writes:

As with the white space of a postcard that restricts the writing surface, a prose poem is fragmentary. Nothing stops a lyric poem from going on indefinitely; the temporality of a lyric poem is endless. But a prose poem has to stop; too long and it turns into a short story. [...] A postcard is, like the photograph that hands on its side, an instant, an excerpt from a larger story. [...] A prose poem is a thought made portable. Half the time it won’t even end properly, leaving you unsure when you’ll get a chance to see another one; but this form – repetitive and too brief, all at once – produces an episodic sense of time.²⁸³

I encountered this essay during the first year of my doctorate, when I was still experimenting with the presentation of my poems and occasionally drifting away from the prose poem entirely. Yet I kept returning to this idea of the prose poem as a postcard, this blank space in need of filling. As any reader of my collection will likely notice, the majority of my poems are of similar length. A square of text fitting comfortably adjacent to my imagined recipient’s address on a postcard. It became the ideal length and shape for my portable thoughts. The format also lent itself well to a larger story, producing the ‘episodic sense of time’ referred to by Hu as excerpt

²⁸² Gary L. McDowell and F. Daniel Rzicznek ed., *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice* (Brookline: Rose Metal Press, 2010) p. xiii

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 158

after excerpt is laid side by side. Each poem in the collection corresponds to a specific moment in time and the emotions and thoughts which characterised that moment. Like a postcard or polaroid photo, they document a life in the process of being lived.

4.4 The Influence of Mental Health Issues

The first poem which grew to depict a decline in my mental health is XCII, drawn from Melville's chapter on 'Ambergris.' It was the first year of my doctorate and I was still reeling from the adverse effects of a hormonal contraceptive implant. After it's emergency removal, I was sent into a severe depressive episode with anxiety like I had never known it. I went from frequently performing on stage to crowds of strangers to hiding in my flat, trembling even at the thought of taking out a bin bag. It was in this state that I re-read the chapter in question. While Melville brushed over the horror of the sick whale in order to focus on the historical use of ambergris, a fragrant by-product of its illness, I could not get the image of that dying whale out of my mind. I could see it in my mind's eye and, in a strange way, I could relate to it.

XCII

what a curious case it is when the threshold beneath your door grows mammoth in size taking on the guise of a whale captured within its wooden frame and I pretend this isn't my anxiety conjuring up hallucinations as I sit down legs crossed and examine the creature laying before me gagging at the pungent smell alerting me to the fact it is ill suffering **dyspepsia** an illness known for the production of **ambergris** a **fragrant and spicy** essence once worn by gentry as perfume ignorant to the fact they were boasting **the inglorious bowels of a sick whale** but what can I do it would take **three or four boat loads of brandreth's pills** and a crew bolting out of harm's way as workers do while **blasting rocks** to cure this breast it is almost peaceful I think in its suffering unaware of its gradual decay like how I was I think while throwing buckets of water across the whale's pale face sick and stuck

in place and I could see it too was depressed yearning for azure seas yet stuck indoors with me so I stood up and began to push the whale out wanting to right what had gone wrong wanting to return it to where it belongs and before I knew it the whale was gone and I had crossed the threshold for the first time that week

The words highlighted in blue are the words and phrases lifted verbatim from the source material, the majority of which originate from a single, short paragraph. For while Melville goes on to combat a rumour about the odious nature of whaler's work, my eyes remained here, having found an equally miserable companion to keep me company in my low mood.

The poem ends on a positive note, because through counselling and the persistent aid of friends things got better. Things were so good in fact, that I decided I wanted to see the whales Melville wrote about in person. To travel like the *Pequod* once did, only with the aid of planes and with the sole intention of going whale watching. It would be a nice reward, I thought. To travel the world alone after months spent locked away in my apartment, isolated from my environment. As you could probably guess, these ambitions would shortly be shattered. For it was 2020, the pandemic had taken hold, lockdowns were implemented, and flights were cancelled. The loss of this journey, and the travel narrative I had hoped to write inspired by it, left me in a strange position where all I had to write about were the four walls of my apartment using words lifted from a hundred-and-seventy-year-old novel. The sixth chapter titled 'The Street' describes the town of New Bedford, the location of the Melville Society Archive. In VI, I imagine the city I never got to visit.

Due to the pandemic and the implementation of the first lockdown in March 2020, I was left with little other ideas than to transform the collection into a kind of diary documenting my days during this unusual time. That was of course back when one could be naïve and hopeful enough to believe the situation would be improved if not eradicated within the span of 136 days. The poems featured that day's total cases and deaths, numbers which now appear surreally low. I struggled with my mental health during that first lockdown, as I am sure many did. Thankfully, through a combination of counselling (again) and participating in the charity Mind's challenge to run 27 miles in 27 days things improved rather swiftly. I celebrated my twenty-fifth birthday in lockdown (poem LXV), took frequent runs to an oak I grew fond of in the hope of shaking off some of the weight and insecurity the implant left with me (poem XXXII), and revelled

when the shops were once more opened so we could walk to our local bookshop and peruse their selection once more (poem LXXXV). However, things did of course not improve after those 136 days had passed. A second national lockdown was implemented on the 5th of November and lasts for four weeks, though it did not take more than twenty-four days before the tier system placed the Southeast of England in lockdown conditions again over the Christmas holiday, followed up with a third national lockdown on the 6th of January 2021.

III

it starts with looking in the mirror and catching the eye of a stranger
deep shadows floating within dark brown irises swirling reminiscent
of a hyperborean winter scene a sort of sublimity which fills your heart
with frost perhaps you will remember this time as chaos bewitched
an accountable mass of shades and shadows the black sea in a perpetual
midnight gale or perhaps you will remember little more than mundanity
slipping in and out of cycles of sleep, tea and tv only time will tell if it
was enough to drive a nervous individual mad ever and anon pushing
against the limits of one's mind until ribs protrude skin, nails greet
muscle and half-held breaths evolve into panic pure as new fallen snow

It is throughout 2021 that the majority of the poems, like the one above, begin to focus more on themes of mental health. This poem stands on the borders between my original linguistic approach, repurposing interesting words and phrases in new ways, and my eventual dedication to documenting the strange journey through acknowledging, treating and recovering from dips in my mental health. Like other early poems, it features a higher density of borrowed material from the novel, and it is only through frequent rewriting that its purpose is adjusted to fit the final theme of the collection. It is a poem which depicts the early days of a mental health decline: when your own reflection grows foreign, thoughts are blurred, everything comes across as dark and heavy, constantly battling fatigue in order to achieve day to day goals, your breathing growing quicker like you might just choke on air, and digging your nails into your skin in order to prevent that uptake in breath to evolve into a full-blown panic attack. This

occurs before recognition, when it is still easy to convince oneself that this is only a bad day, bad week, bad month. I did another round of counselling, the third throughout my doctorate. It helped a little, but it did not take long before my wellbeing dipped back down again. Lockdown was easing, but life remained overwhelming. It was only once every remaining excuse, every temporary source of stress was accounted for, that I had no choice but to face the reality of my depression. It was time to contact my GP.

It is always a strange experience telling a stranger over the phone that you are struggling. Inevitably, I know, they will ask questions like ‘are you hurting yourself’ and ‘do you wish to end your life’ and you have to voice those deepest, darkest thoughts even those closest to you do not hear. In the end I was prescribed 10mg of Escitalopram, a type of antidepressant known as a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor or SSRI. I was also recommended a charity I could self-refer to for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) because the GP practice themselves had no remaining spaces. The charity did a couple of assessments, where it was determined I was currently experiencing symptoms of moderate to severe depression and symptoms of severe anxiety. It was strangely comforting to see those words written down in a letter to my GP. It made it tangible, my suffering no longer invisible.

The waitlist was long, so it took a couple of months until my CBT could begin. In the meantime, I had the joy of getting adjusted to my new antidepressants. Every time the dose was adjusted up or down in order to discover what quantity worked best for me, I was left feeling dizzy and shaky. My hands constantly tapping against my chest whilst I gazed numb at the TV. I did not write during this time. Extensions were granted so I could take time to recover. It would not be until many months later, beyond completing the CBT, that I would be able to revisit these experiences and begin writing about them. This is when poems such as XX began to emerge. In the twentieth chapter, ‘All Astir,’ preparations are being made before the *Pequod* sets sail. Personal items and resources are being carried onboard, overseen by Captain Peleg and his sister Charity. Ishmael and Queequeg brought their chest onboard, but decided to sleep ashore one final night. It is towards the end of this chapter that Ishmael begins question why he has yet to lay eyes on the captain who will sail alongside them. Except instead of going to sea, my new journey was going on medication. A glorious scientific advancement which allowed me enough headspace to begin the slow, tedious work of recovery.

Although the collection has come to an end, the process of recovering remains ongoing. As the poems will show, recovery is anything but linear. Many dips were had, some more severe

than others. I have tried to faithfully depict the good alongside the bad: small moments of wonder, quietude and achievements. For the colours of the world do look brighter on the other side, as if one's immediate environment is no longer placed on mute. The world is, after all, a beautiful place if you know where to look. It is also worth noting that there is no altruistic purpose behind this collection. While I hope it can become a part of a larger wave of discussions surrounding mental health, at the end of the day I did not write it for others. I wrote it because I needed to. I wrote it, because for a long time, it was the only way of coping I had. For how dire could things be if I could still revel in reading about Ishmael's strange philosophies and Ahab's perpetual quest for the white whale.

4.5 An Alternative Ahab

The introduction of Melville's characters in my apartment, in particular Ahab, was not planned. It began as a curiosity, an itch to imagine the whalers sitting before me. The first poem in which this occurs is V. After an interesting night's sleep, having awoken with Queequeg's arms around him, Ishmael and his bedfellow descend the stairs into the inn's main hall and join the other boarders for breakfast. Nearly all of them were whalers, and Ishmael begins describing them to the reader as they eat their meal. The premise of this poem is simple: what if these whalers were sitting before me? How would I describe them? In a way, I assume Ishmael's role as observer, transposing this collection of unnamed characters into my own timeline so they could join me around the breakfast table.

Like in the novel, it would not be until later that Ahab enters the stage. Chapter 30 depicts him in a moment of quietude. He is leaning over the bulwarks, pipe in hand, blowing out smoke while facing the restless wind. It is not long before the smoke is blown back in his face, resulting in a coughing fit. In the end, realising that the pipe no longer provides the calm it used to, he tosses it out into the sea below. This action is transposed alongside Ahab into my poem, XXX. At the time of writing, we were still in our first lockdown. My phone was glued to my hand as I scrolled obsessively through the news, trying to comprehend everything which was going wrong in the world. It would not be long before I decided to combine Ahab's story and mine, wondering how he would cope in my stead.

XXX

it's become an addiction really this perpetual checking of our phones desperate for any form of news to come through only to discover frantic and raging fatalism so instead I've taken to writing about him that monomaniac man and how he would act if trapped in this stale-aired one-bedroom apartment leaning out through the window scrolling across article after article on his phone while he lights his pipe breathes in the smoke and releases it back into the restless breeze with slouched shoulders and weary eyes one can see him slowly losing faith in humanity as he blows out another puff of smoke and facing the brunt of the current wind has it blown back into his lungs again his breathing soon haunted by nervous coughs akin to that daunted rasp of a dying whale and without warning he tosses the still lit phone into the street below watching as the device cracks and pops as it shatters against the asphalt and then with the pipe still firmly jaw-locked he stands up and paces the small apartment once more

The yellow highlights marks quotes which have been rewritten over time to better suit the needs of the poem, though their origin can still be found in the original chapter. Although Melville elects to have Ahab speak to himself about his dissatisfaction with his pipe, how it no longer brings him calm, I have elected to keep Ahab mute, to simply witness him as the thoughts pass through his mind. It is only over the course of time that Ahab grows more solid in this poetic realm of mine. He transitions from idea to shadow to person over the course of the collection, reappearing yet again only six poems later in XXXVI.

To begin with, it was planned that Ahab would appear in every poem where he makes an appearance in the original chapter. This way, Ahab's appearances would be sparse at first and then build up over time, ultimately ending in a cluster of poems about him. This, of course, changed over time as poems were rewritten to keep up with a growing focus on mental health. The needs of the collection as a whole were placed before the desire to mirror when Ahab appears in individual poems. As the idea of his presence grew more solid, I began to imagine what else he would do to occupy his time. Considering the long periods where he would withdraw to his cabin while out at sea, I came to the conclusion that he would likely handle

lockdown reasonably well. In one poem in particular, XXXVIII, I grow jealous of his ability to simply be. I watch as he bakes bread, solves jigsaw puzzles and propagate succulents. It is a reminder that even such simple activities when time is plentiful are difficult to undertake and enjoy while depressed.

Alongside wondering how he would respond if placed in lockdown with me, I also spent time reflecting upon his role in the novel. How he likely would have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD as a result of his work injury (XLI), which triggered his obsession in hunting down the white whale. I reflect upon what such an obsession would feel like (XLVI), what other ghostly mysteries might be lurking around considering his presence (L), and the stories he would tell of his adventures while out on long walks (LXIV). It has reached the point where my version of Ahab seems more real to me than the original, who comes across as blunt and cruel upon rereading *Moby-Dick* in the aftermath of writing this collection. Most notable was rereading Chapter 36 where he announces his hunt for the white whale to his crew, deliberately riling them up for a hunt so the more cautious Starbuck cannot stand in the way of his secret agenda. At one point he has his crew chant ‘a dead whale or a stove boat,’ which highlights a severe disregard for their safety.²⁸⁴

It is juxtapositions like these which lead me to wonder how he would respond to reading the novel. LXXI is the first of these poems:

LXXI

every now and then I catch ahab flicking through my heat burnished
edition of moby dick the blue plastic crumbling at the edges the spine
sighing with annoyance as it is cracked open once more so I watch as a
strange sense of delirium grows in his eyes a pride perhaps in having
been witnessed and scribed in such detail and I am starting to question
the soundness of my decision to allow him to borrow my written copy
of his undoing and then as he reads on I notice dull spots of green mould
growing along the edges its pages withering a fast-forward of a hundred

²⁸⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or The White Whale* (San Diego: Canterbury Classics, 2014) p. 155

years stored somewhere damp and dark and I wonder if this is Melville's fatalism brought to life a side-effect of his creation consuming a story of which death himself might as well have been the author

At first, the idea of being seen is intoxicating to him. Melville will often allude to kings when Ahab is present on deck, describing in vivid detail how he can command crowds, the certainty in his voice. It is not until further in the collection that this initial positive encounter begins to fade. However, Melville could likewise be cruel with his words. Upon rereading Chapter 87, I noticed the line about Ahab: 'both chasing and being chased to his deadly end.'²⁸⁵ This is a key example of Melville's famous fatalistic foreshadowing. In LXXXVII, I imagine how Ahab would respond to reading this line, to realising that Melville always knew things were going to end badly for him. By this time in the story, Ahab would also have had time to realise that Melville struggled to describe any other element of him than his missing leg, as well as reading the conversations which took place about him while he was otherwise occupied. The poem ends with Ahab requesting a different ending, which I oblige.

In the poems leading up to this ending, we learn that Ahab would like to travel back home to Nantucket (CXV) and that he has been scribbling something on his leg in pencil (CXVIII and CXXIV). As the final poem (XCCCV) reveals, these notes were the names of his fellow companions. Throughout the collection, as the two of us conduct our fictitious conversations about his journey, it becomes difficult for him to ignore the consequences of his actions. The ships he scammed and those he refused to aid are laid out as plain as day. The wife and son he left behind with no disregard for their wellbeing. The crew he led to their deaths. Similar to the opening poem, this conclusion alludes to a moment in Homer's *Odyssey* inspired by my research. However, he is granted the optimistic ending he requested. He is placed on a freighter heading back to the US, returning once more to the open ocean, only this time as a passenger rather than a captain.

4.6 Reflections for Next Time

In his *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (2012) Clive Scott prefaces the book by clarifying his purpose of trying to 'develop a mode, or rather modes, of translation

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 373

which could capture reading as a phenomenological, rather than as an interpretive, activity.²⁸⁶ The purpose of such an approach would be to convey one's experience of reading a text, rather than attempting to unpack its meaning. It is the act of widening the white space between each line in order to make space for our thoughts, feelings and questions. In other words, allowing us to become a part of the text just as it has become a part of us. Scott goes on to write:

What literary criticism wished to lock out of interpretation are the personal idiosyncrasies of the reader, the associative mechanisms, the memories, the unpredictable intertexts, in short, the *autobiographical* input, on the grounds that it does not transcend the anecdotal and the impressionistic.²⁸⁷

The practice of literary transformations is to allow those personal idiosyncrasies, associative mechanisms, and other forms of autobiographical input to come to the forefront of a creative critical engagement with the source text. Although my collection is a rewriting of *Moby-Dick*, it remains a highly personal text precisely because of this autobiographical input. My memories, thoughts and associations are present in every single poem. However, unlike more formal forms of interpretation, they do not claim to have unlocked some hidden symbolism. They are simply an expansion of ideas, encouraging others to likewise see what they may discover while reading the source text and my version side by side. One of my greatest joys while conducting research for this thesis was encountering interpretations from writers and academics alike which challenged my current perception of the text I was reading. It was thrilling realising my understanding of a character or scene could grow as a response to engaging these points of view which so clearly could not have emerged from any other source. They were unequivocally unique to the individuals who wrote them.

When, not if, I embark upon another literary transformation, it will be guided by this idea of autobiographical input. It is a process which encourages engagement with the source text so that it may continue to evolve and grow like a snowball rolling downhill. As long as the product is respectful of the source text, there is no reason why we should not creatively engage

²⁸⁶ Scott, p. 1

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 2

with our literary history in order to both celebrate and challenge it. For my next transformation I will in all likelihood turn my attention to Norwegian literary history in order to reconnect with my roots after soon a decade devoted to English and American literature. For there are stories which I read when I was a teenager which, like Oswald experienced with Homer, continue to inspire and influence my practice. For these stories have not remained static in my mind: they have continued to grow and taken on new shapes as new experiences and ideas interacted with them. And it is soon becoming time to allow those thoughts to overspill onto the page.

What I would do differently, however, is shorten the time period over which I worked upon this transformation. As this process chapter has likely demonstrated, my approach has evolved a lot over the six years since the first poem was written. This has resulted in mismatched poems and a struggle to create coherence as the age of each poem and the state of mind in which they were written begins to vary. Ideally, I would like to shorten the process down to one year of writing and one year of editing in order to maintain a consistent approach. I would also take some time to establish the specific constrictions of my transformation process as to avoid losing myself within panicked experimentation. During the first year of my doctorate, I explored creating a crossword out of words from one of Melville's chapters, writing a recipe for a rum-based cocktail and leaving a page completely blank. These ideas were entertained with equal vigour, though it is clear that combined they would have produced a very strange sort of collection. Therefore, in order to avoid wasting energy on my creativity running wild and on having to reel it back in again during editing, I would establish upfront what exactly I desired to achieve with the transformation in question and what it would look like.

Regardless of what text I decide to move on to next, I know for sure that my fascination for literary transformations will be a life-long one, influencing both what I decide to read and what I decide to write. I am perpetually on the lookout for them. My heart leaps in excitement whenever I stumble across one in the bookshop, or when an idea crosses my mind while reading a text. For there is a world of literary history waiting to be discovered, dissected, and rewritten.

Chapter 5: The Future of Literary Transformations

5.1 Copyright & Language of Theft

In their book, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explore the ways in which our thought process are both structured and defined through metaphors, explaining that ‘metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system.’²⁸⁸ Therefore, not only are metaphors a useful tool in writing when describing items, emotions, individuals and more, they are also a crucial element in how we perceive and talk about the world around us and our lives. Some metaphors are so ingrained in everyday speech we hardly notice they are there, such as time as a moving object, described as either ahead or behind us. Other metaphors include: theories as buildings, ideas as objects, and communication as sending. A pervasive metaphor within writing and artistic endeavours at large is the notion of inspiration as theft. Pablo Picasso famously declared that art is theft. André Gide said that we are continually repeating ourselves, caught in a cycle of retelling as a result of old ideas being forgotten or ignored. And T. S. Eliot, of course, took this a step further when he wrote:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet wields his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn.²⁸⁹

Eliot thereby insinuates that not only does all writing contains some form of theft, but that there are different degrees of theft depending on the skill of the writer and how they utilise the material they have stolen. Austin Kleon himself describes his blackout poetry as a result of ‘petty crime.’²⁹⁰ Like Eliot, Kleon differentiates between good and bad forms of theft within writing. Bad forms of theft most noticeably include plagiarism and imitation, however

²⁸⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) p. 6

²⁸⁹ T. S. Eliot, ‘Philip Massinger,’ *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) online via *Bartleby* (1996) <<https://www.bartleby.com/200/sw11.html>> [accessed 30 May 2021]

²⁹⁰ Austin, *Newspaper Blackout*, p. xiii

inspirational theft is also considered bad when it is only taken from a single artist as well as degrading the original work inspiration is taken from. Good forms of theft on the other hand honours, studies and gives credit to the original source, in addition to stealing smaller elements from a wide variety of artists and transforming these elements into something new and different. The goal of such theft, Kleon writes, is to gain insight into how the artists you admire see the world.²⁹¹ Considering the high degree of ‘theft’ involved in the production of a literary transformation, ensuring the final product falls within the category of good theft is vital.

The line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of theft, however, begins to get a little blurry when one looks at literary transformations. The author is after all stealing a significant amount of material from a single source and selling the end product as an extension of the original tale. Rewrites of Greek mythology, in particular of Homer’s epics, fall into this category. The source text has an established popularity which by association supports the marketing of the new text. However, what is more interesting, is the use of ‘theft’ as a metaphor. There is no restriction to how many authors can rewrite the *Odyssey*. The source text is in no way diminished: rather, its reputation is expanded as new readers get to engage with Homer’s story in new ways. Homer cannot sue a modern author for copyright infringement in order to get his cut of their profits, nor can Odysseus sue for defamation if he considers the new material written about him to be slanderous. In contrast to what the use of the metaphor ‘theft’ might lead us to believe, the act of repurposing older texts with the aim of producing a literary transformation is, after all, completely legal.

A key way to ensure the quality of your literary transformation and protect yourself from lawsuits further down the road is to abide by copyright laws. In the UK and elsewhere written work is copyright protected up until seventy years after the author’s death, after which it becomes public domain.²⁹² This is why it is common to see multiple editions of the same work published by various publication companies the moment the work enters public domain. Authors whose works are now public domain and legally available for literary transformations include Jane Austen, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Emily Dickinson, Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf. Authors whose work are not yet public domain and therefore still protected by copyright laws include William Faulkner, Agatha Christie, John Steinbeck, Sylvia Plath and Vladimir

²⁹¹ Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, p. 36

²⁹² *British Library*, ‘What is copyright?’ <<https://www.bl.uk/business-and-ip-centre/articles/what-is-copyright#>>
[accessed 30 May 2021]

Nabokov. Copyright is an automatic right, meaning the second a work is created it belongs to its creator, who may then decide to give temporary publication rights of the work to a publisher.

There is therefore an element of pragmatism worth taking into consideration when selecting a text for transformation. The consequences of doing otherwise are best illustrated through Pia Pera's novel *Diario di Lo*, translated as *Lo's Diary*. Pera's work is a retelling of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* from the eponymous character's perspective, thereby reclaiming control over a controversial narrative and adding a female point of view to a story about a man romantically pursuing a twelve-year-old girl. The novel was first published in Italian in 1995, thereafter translated to Dutch in 1996 and licenced for publication in five other countries. Unfortunately, *Lolita* is not yet public domain, and Pera's would-be publishers dropped her book when Dmitri Nabokov, Vladimir Nabokov's son and executor of his estate, claimed copyright infringement.²⁹³ In addition to blocking the work from further publication, Pera was labelled a plagiarist attempting to gain fame and make money by riding on someone's coattails. Meanwhile Michael Cunningham gained fame for his novel *The Hours* as a literary transformation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, even winning him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction a mere four years after the original publication of *Lo's Diary*. Both novels are literary transformations of canonical works. The key difference, however, is the copyright status of the work they decided to transform.

The legal limits imposed upon literary transformations come as a consequence of the commodification of culture, making it difficult to challenge more recent works and question the validity of their content through the act of rewriting. While Pera's work adhered to Kleon's definition of good forms of theft – the source used was clearly stated, the material was studied as part of the writing process, and it was transformed into something new and different – it was branded as bad theft due to Dmitri Nabokov's copyright claim. This restriction can in some ways be considered a creative constraint as well as a limitation on contemporary artists access to the ideas and characters prominent in recent literary history. We are legally allowed to rewrite ancient history, but nothing which capitalism in its current form has been able to lay claim to. Although protecting the rights of the original author is understandable, the end result of these copyright laws is a restriction on other author's ability to respond and react to a questionable product through the means of production. *Lo's Diary*, for example, could have become an important cornerstone in how we read *Lolita* and the discussion of inappropriate relationships,

²⁹³ Plate, p. 78

however the Nabokov estate has ensured this will not happen despite the source material soon reaching seventy years of age. Therefore, should you for example come across a still copyrighted text you wish to challenge, my advice would be to either A) challenge it in alternative formats such as reviews, journal articles and other non-literary artforms, or B) write your literary transformation, place it in a drawer and wait for the moment your source becomes public domain. Simply writing it is, after all, not illegal.

5.2 Cultural Appropriation

In his book *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, philosopher James O. Young identifies several categories of cultural appropriation. The category most applicable for literary transformations is content appropriation. Young stipulates that content appropriation occurs when ‘an artist has made significant reuse of an idea first expressed in the work of an artist from another culture.’²⁹⁴ This means that any material found in, and taken out of, the work of another culture is a form of content appropriation. In order to more accurately reflect upon the issue, Young then divides this category into two sub-categories: innovative content appropriation and non-innovative content appropriation. An artist is considered to be engaging in non-innovative content appropriation when they produce work within an existing tradition, while innovative content appropriation occurs when the artist appropriates elements from a culture to then use it in a way that would not be found in the original culture.²⁹⁵ While opinions will vary, Young concludes that neither form of content appropriation is likely to cause harm. He likens non-innovative content appropriation to learning a new language or martial art, thereby positioning this as a way to participate in a cultural practice which encourages engagement and understanding. Similarly, he regards the products of innovative content appropriation, such as literary transformations, as separate from the original material and the culture from which the material was appropriated. However, caution is advised when working with material from minority cultures and perhaps even considering whether another author with connections to the culture in question would be better suited for such a retelling.

While Young’s relaxed attitude towards cultural appropriation comes initially across as surprising, his aversion to censoring artistic activity is understandable. Young writes: ‘almost all artists engage in some sort of appropriation in that they borrow ideas, motifs, plots, technical

²⁹⁴ James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) p. 6

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36

devices, and so forth from other artists.²⁹⁶ This practice of cherry-picking elements from a wide variety of inspirations is common in writing and is considered a form of good theft. Likewise, being able to incorporate ideas from cultures unlike our own could be construed as a sign of an inclusive and varied reading list as long as these ideas are credited. This line of reasoning in no way excuses anyone from the responsibility of treating borrowed material and the culture it originates from in a respectful manner. There is a difference, after all, between elements being repurposed due to fascination and those same elements being twisted with the aim of berating the minority culture. Another element to consider is the way cultures overlap and intersect, meaning most people belong to or have connections to several cultures at once, not all of these immediately apparent. These cultures could be based upon shared identifiers such as nationality, religion, history, sexuality, gender identification, experience and more. When considering the potential harm which could be caused by cultural appropriation, it is also worth taking into consideration whether the artist and the material being appropriated belong to a dominant or minority culture. Harm is unlikely to occur when artists, regardless of background, appropriate elements from dominant cultures. It is only when artists from dominant cultures appropriate elements from minority cultures to which they have no personal affinity that harm could occur.

A significant concern surrounding cultural appropriation is harm, whether intentional or not, arising as a result of misrepresentation. When misrepresentation occurs, it can create or perpetuate harmful stereotypes which prevent consumers of the artform from seeing members of the portrayed culture both accurately and as complex individuals. The primary concern is that these stereotypes lead to discrimination against individual members of a culture, which in turn may result in limitations on their economic or educational opportunities. An additional concern is appearance, both audiences forming a poor perception of the culture as well as members of the culture viewing themselves and their culture as they appear to outsiders.²⁹⁷ While this concern includes content appropriation, it is most prominent in subject appropriation. Subject appropriation occurs when an artist appropriates subject matters from a specific culture, for example the voice of culture members and their experiences. The works of Joseph Conrad are a good example of subject appropriation as Conrad frequently wrote about cultures other than his own. However, while subject appropriation is a concern worth bearing in mind both when writing literary transformations and writing in general, it should in no way be considered an argument for not writing about minority cultures. Lack of representation is devastating, and

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 4

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 107

is an issue still being addressed in widespread media. However, there is a tricky balance to be struck between representation and avoiding harmful misrepresentation through the use of tropes and stereotypes. Although it is possible for members from one culture to understand and represent members of another culture in a respectful manner, it is often wiser and more effective to include members from the minorities being represented so they can contribute to the creative process and ensure the work goes on to support representation.

There is, however, a long history of resistance against such approaches. In her 1998 book *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law*, Rosemary Coombe examines the then recent *Globe and Mail* debate. This debate began with an article concerning the Canada Council's decision that government grants 'should not be made to writers who wrote about cultures other than their own unless the writer "collaborated" with members of the minority group.'²⁹⁸ Although Coombe recognises faults in the ensuing arguments both for and against such an approach, the arguments against come across as particularly insulting. Those arguing against claimed this a form of 'tyranny,' stating writers should be free from all constraints and any attempts to restrict them should be viewed as a form of censorship.²⁹⁹ Some even went as far as claiming they had no intention of consulting with 'salamanders or angels' before writing about them either, thereby explicitly comparing their fellow countrymen to animals and fictitious beings.³⁰⁰ What those arguing against this funding criteria fail to recognise is that they still remain free to write about whatever they desire without monetary support from a government committed to multiculturalism. They also conveniently forget the existing power-imbalances present in both Canadian publishing and politics which prioritises their voices over minorities. Ultimately, Coombe concludes, this is not a legal question, but rather an ethical one where each and every one of us need to make decisions in line with our personal moral and political commitments.

The relationship between literary transformations and cultural appropriation is one deserving of further study. Although many may disagree on issues surrounding cultural appropriation, one thing remains true: working within constraints often yields creative and innovative results and, even when avoiding appropriation works from minority cultures, there is no lack of material available for transformation. Considering my personal affinity to

²⁹⁸ Rosemary Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) p. 210

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 211-212

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212-213

Norwegian, British, European and American cultures, I could theoretically write literary transformations my entire life and still never run out of interesting texts to transform. Remaining considerate and respectful of cultural identities beyond my own does, after all, in no way limit my creative freedom.

5.3 Encouraging Rewriting

Another significant area deserving of further research within the field of literary transformations are practical approaches to both reducing barriers to entry for the genre as well as encouraging inclusivity so that a wide range of voices and cultures are able to leave their mark on our literary history. Such work would have the additional benefit of encouraging and supporting artists from minority cultures in their endeavours to create and recreate content from their culture. However, before these questions can begin to be answered, future writers must be made aware of their right to rewrite. One approach towards achieving this is through the expansion of creative writing opportunities in schools allowing students to experiment with found poetry techniques and to be introduced to the idea of literary transformations. While I have had the joy of running blackout poetry sessions with local schools as part of a six-week long book project, where the students are all encouraged to produce a piece of writing, be it fiction or poetry, I am also aware that this is a unique addition to their regular curriculum as a result of the University of Kent's outreach work. A starting point might be the creation of a similar program focused solely on working with found material and offering these workshops to a variety of schools, however I suspect sustainable change can only be maintained both through an increased focus on creativity from the Department of Education as well as an increased appreciation for the arts from society at large. Hopefully further research might yield insight into more detailed approaches towards achieving these goals. However, hope for such improvements seem frail in the current climate considering the Department of Education's current plan to cut fifty-percent of its funding to arts subjects at universities.³⁰¹ Meanwhile, engagement through outreach is always a good place to start. In my personal experience of providing workshops to young students, there are small victories to be found in helping them realise they are capable of creating something they are proud of and encouraging the continued development of these creative skills.

³⁰¹ Lanre Bakare and Richard Adams, 'Plans for 50% funding cuts to arts subjects at universities "catastrophic,"' *The Guardian* (06.05.2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/may/06/plans-for-50-funding-cut-to-arts-subjects-at-universities-catastrophic>> [Accessed 28.02.2022]

The next step would be helping future literary transformation writers access a wide variety of literature in order to discover what they would like to challenge, change, elaborate upon or write within. At the end of her journal article ‘A Chorus Line,’ Susanne Jung asks the reader: ‘Why not, dear reader, take this as a pointer: which other silenced voices haunting other texts of the Western literary canon can *you* hear?’³⁰² How we read and what we take away from books is a very personal experience, and it is vital that those interested in undertaking literary transformations pursue projects based upon books they have a personal relationship to regardless of whether this relationship is positive or negative. This can take the form of characters they consider problematic or who have been side-lined in favour of more dominant characters. Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* is an example of a character focused literary transformation. Alternatively, the project could emerge from a fondness of certain elements of a whole, thereby repurposing these in a new context. Oswald’s *Memorial* and my own creative work are examples of a found poetry approach to literary transformations. However, before such conversations can take place books need to be read.

This increase in literacy and access to texts would require support from parents, schools and society as whole. As explored in Anna Fazackerley’s article for *The Guardian* on tackling literacy inequalities, this change can be encouraged through collaborations between parents, charities and educational institutions so that the needs of disadvantaged students can be met and their ambitions both encouraged and supported. For although research has demonstrated that simple habits such as reading to one’s child daily can increase their literacy, it has also found that many children live in houses with no books due to poverty.³⁰³ This is where charities, such as Liberty Venn’s Children’s Book Project which aims to provide nearly a quarter million new books to children in deprived areas, can play a part in addressing literacy inequalities.³⁰⁴ Although it is encouraging to learn about initiatives working towards addressing current imbalances in access to literature, these inequalities should not exist to begin with.

The next step is a continued study of the practice of literary transformations. Johnson poses the vital question: ‘How do we write within the gaps? Within the spaces that are allowed to us. How do we push at their boundaries until they are enormous enough to contain all who

³⁰² Jung, p. 58

³⁰³ Anna Fazackerley, ‘Improving literacy means a book – or an iPad – at bedtime, say researchers,’ *The Guardian* (26.02.2022) < <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/feb/26/improving-literacy-means-a-book-or-an-ipad-at-bedtime-say-researchers> > [Accessed 28.02.2022]

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

are marginalized?’³⁰⁵ While both *The Penelopiad* and *Memorial* have been studied by a variety of academics, none that I have encountered have focused on the act of transforming existing material into something new. While this thesis is a start, more research is needed documenting the practice of writing literary transformations as well as comparing the final products to the source material. Only through a deepened understanding can we begin to answer Johnson’s questions. Practical instructions and genre focused writing advice may for example support new writers interested in understanding how they can write within the gaps of prevailing canonical literature. As for how we can transform and expand our current literary history to include a wider array of voices, cultures and experiences, this will require more research.

That then brings us to the issue of access to higher education which can then facilitate contextual introductions to a variety of texts as well as providing creative writing education and access to academic resources. While gender-based university attendance has levelled out to the point where there are now more women attending higher education than men, a ratio of 57% versus 43% in the academic year 2019-2020, there still exists numerous areas in need of improvement. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), a total 74% of students enrolled in universities across the UK that same academic year were white.³⁰⁶ Only 12% identified as Asian, 8% as black, 4% as mixed and 2% as other. Additionally, that same year only 15% of those enrolled listed a known disability and 18% a religious belief which was neither ‘No Religion’ or Christianity. Likewise, only 50% of students that year listed that one or more of their parents had previously attended university and only 12% came from a ‘low participation neighbourhood’ meaning districts where university attendance is routinely low. And finally, only 35% of students come from socio-economic backgrounds in which their parents were not employed in intermediated, lower managerial, higher managerial and professional occupations. There is therefore plenty of room for improvement when it comes to supporting university attendance by individuals with disabilities, non-dominant religious beliefs, from low participation neighbourhoods, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and who are not white.

All in all, while improvements in access to books, writing workshops and university education can help lower entry barriers to the practice of literary transformations in addition to supporting a wide variety of academic and artistic endeavours, a starting point is further study

³⁰⁵ Daisy Johnson, *Literary Hub*

³⁰⁶ HESA, ‘Who’s studying in HE?’ <<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>> [accessed 30 May 2021]

of the process of writing literary transformations and the texts it produces. Further immediate possibilities include the production of accessible instructions and writing advice, workshops on working with found material for schools and adults, and mentorship programs where writers from minority cultures can receive support from academics and writers during the process of writing a literary transformation. Although the establishment of these sources of support, knowledge and encouragement might take some time, they are achievable and would encourage emerging writers to engage with and create the future of literary transformations in their image.

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