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Dolly: A Voice from the Asylum



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Abstract

During my initial visit to the abandoned building of Lancaster Moor Asylum, I stood peering through the padlocked railings steadying my hands to take photographs that captured a lost world. Further research led me to the black-and-white photograph of Dolly Mabel Mountain, which initially inspired this thesis. It was taken by Ian Beesley: a photographer appointed Artist in Residence in the early 1990s. During a phototherapy session he met Dolly, just before her Hundredth birthday. Dolly gave birth to an illegitimate child in 1910, when she was sixteen, and thereafter spent eighty-four-years in Lancaster Moor Asylum.

Later in 2012, I conducted a telephone interview to discuss Ian's meeting with Dolly. His words resonated with me as I imagined: *Dolly still rocking in her chair grieving for her baby until she died*. A strong empathic response towards her situation compels me to tell Dolly's story, a story that needs to be heard. Empathy is the thread that runs throughout each section and is central to this exploration, as I reach back through time to illuminate a hidden life via creative practices, including poetry, photographic images, and art.

In this thesis, I (re)create Dolly's story and present it as a collection of eighty-four poems, one for each year of Dolly's life in the asylum, titled: *Dolly: An Innocent Voice*. These creative texts function as constructions of her life exploring authenticity through her recreated voice. The facts are springboards to the imaginative work.

Research has revealed that many women, like Dolly, were forced to give up their babies. A critical exploration reveals the experiences of women in asylums, as I engage with the work of related writers/artists. Creative research methods include poetic devices and the use of fieldwork to enrich empathy.

I also include auto/biographical insights from living with my mother's Vascular Dementia and the connections I found with Dolly. Poetry will appear in italics throughout this thesis as a link between creative and critical practice.

Key Words

Asylum, Voice, Empathy, Biographical Fiction.

Preface

Dear Dolly

I saw the message you left
within the walls, among the tower
of pigeon poop. Your black and white
photograph. A poem was scratched underneath
the desk in the schoolroom.

You couldn't face the camera, its lens contaminated,
your eyes too full.

I traced the veins down your hands along your arms
I followed the path. I felt that tug of string on a tag
between your toes.

You had waited and mourned until your feet turned black with ash.

I heard you.

I will look for answers through the red back gate, its paint chipped
and curled at the bottom like the hem of a skirt, puckered like old skin.

Scrub those floors with the donkey stone until its legs grow weary.

I will follow in your footsteps to the garden the greenhouse windows cracked
with worry, a furrowed brow.

I will sit in the parlour and catch the crumbs from your favourite scones.

I will repaint the murals in lighter happier tones to smile at the children stretching
out a hand to comfort them when nobody else can.

I will walk down those endless corridors and see the names and numbers in the laundry
folding and unfolding sheets in and out of their creases, trying on clothes that no longer fit.
A sock still hangs halfway through the mangle.

Every night they are in there daubing the walls with messages, polishing the stainless-steel
worktops with wire wool, itching their naked footprints.

It was tough to watch.

I followed you through the nursery.

So much left unsaid.

I could hear the distant cries, exposed, left abandoned your mind now wanders
free.

I saw you, your hair tied in different directions. The wind hatched a plan.
It pulled you across the moor until you couldn't feel your hands and feet,
your determination drove you there, willed you to find him.

1913 Law

The Mental Deficiency Act 1913

This act sets out arrangements for dealing with those considered to be ‘mentally defective’ ‘idiots, imbeciles,’ ‘feeble-minded persons’ and ‘moral imbeciles’ (defined in section 1). It is principally concerned with the provision of appropriate accommodation 1913. This order was enacted by his Majesty King George V and the present parliament assembled accordingly (on August 15. 1913. VI). The Mental Deficiency Act 1913 precedes the Lunacy Act (1890-1911). Power was given to the parent or guardian of the person under the age of twenty-one, rendering him suitable to be placed in an institute. Dolly was placed in Lancaster Moor Asylum in 1910; she came under the Lunacy Act 1890-1911. (Education England.org.2023).

Research Aims

This thesis aims to develop a better understanding of the 84 years Dolly Mountain spent in Lancaster Moor Asylum, after having an illegitimate child at the age of sixteen. This will be done by using poetry to imagine the experiences of women in the asylum.

Research Objectives

- 1) I will develop a collection of 84 poems.
- 2) I explore different poetry techniques and devices to enhance my creative practice.
- 3) Review literature that influences my writing.
- 4) The critical section of this thesis will discuss elements of rhetorical devices, including Ekphrastic poetry and objective correlative.
- 5) Contextualise life in the asylum through research at the National Archives.

Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to write an auto/biographical inquiry into the life of Dolly Mabel Mountain who spent 84 years at Lancaster Moor Asylum. In doing so, I respond to the research questions by imagining the impact of the asylum environment on the lives of Dolly and other vulnerable patients.

- 1) How can poets access authentic experiences when recreating a forgotten life?
- 2) How can poetry be used to represent major historical events experienced by a person committed to an asylum across a lifetime?

The answers to my research questions are rooted in historical research, imagination, and poetic considerations, as the collection of 84 poems will capture, by creating a world for Dolly. Poetry has the potential to illuminate personal expressions of lived experiences, so that the stories of women like Dolly are explored, and their voices (re)created. The critical element of this thesis discusses key poetic forms and techniques, and how they can be used to create an authentic voice.

The thesis will also unfold how drawing on my own life experiences and observations can connect on a deeper emotional level of understanding for my subjects. In turn, I argue that this will make the poetry more convincing for the readers, as real-life events enable emotional resonance for writers and their subjects. Factual and emotional research becomes embedded into each poem, displaying empathy, which is a thread that runs throughout the collection of poetry, and the thesis.

In reply to the research questions, forgotten lives deserve to be uncovered and given recognition. I know it is impossible to discuss every element of asylum life, but I can show glimpses that will engage the reader with the need to learn more about these segments of history. Writing fiction about Dolly's life allows my imagination to explore the intersections of two World Wars, constructions of madness, and the difference in gendered experience, exploring everyday life, and situations Dolly may have found herself in.

My own nursing experience enabled me to care for patients and feel empathy while working in different hospital environments. Some of the older establishments were quite daunting at times, allowing me to become absorbed into this world. This first-hand experience is a form of method writing, which I discuss later in this thesis. Dolly's life is a stepping stone into the unknown, as I have a unique opportunity to share my findings with the

reader and attempt to develop an understanding of asylum life. My experience of mental health through nursing, and the environment I lived in through the progression of Mum's Vascular Dementia has given me first-hand knowledge to respond to and reflect on these research questions throughout this thesis.

Mum and Dolly shared grief/loss, and mental health difficulties, and by observing Mum in her surroundings I began to feel Dolly was with me: I could see and hear them both. I was conscious of their needs. I understood how susceptible they both were, easily exposed to their emotions and the traumas of confinement: for Dolly in the asylum, and for Mum in a secure dementia unit. I felt the weight of their vulnerability, hanging from me like my father's donkey jacket.

A Collection of 84 Poems: *Dolly: An Innocent Voice*

I have written a poem for each year of Dolly's incarceration, starting in 1910 when Dolly was admitted to Lancaster Moor Asylum after having an illegitimate child, at the age of sixteen.

1910

...and along the path to the asylum, Dolly shuffled in her work boots.
'Ones that were built to last,' her father grunted. She couldn't speak,
she felt like a button, missing from her coat, clinging to a thread
of grey cotton. Each step she took left her bewildered, beaten by words,

and sentences, they filled her head like an attic full of the things she had lost.
Forced to sign the curl of her name, black ink she wanted to rub out with her sleeve.
She had fought him for days, until he won, taking her baby through the night to somewhere
in 'Cumbria' she thought she heard those words, tapping at her ribs as she tried to breathe.

*Childless like an ivy creeping through her body, suffocating what lies beneath her porcelain
skin.*

Dolly clung to the hem of her coat.
Sobbing into the cuff of her sleeve,
counting the number of steps in her head.
She tripped on the last one before the door
swung open. Falling to her knees.

Refraction of light
Capella's red and green flash
paints tonight's backdrop.

They flew scattering
formations of black-wing tips
across the moorlands.

Her mood changed that night
throwing the colour purple
against the skyline.

1911

Severe heatwave stunned Britain.
Temperatures rose as 629 infants died.
The country mourned; Dolly's grief raw like an onion
she couldn't peel. She cried, overhearing the news from
another patient, gathering dolls and teddies into her arms.

‘Who can play with these now, she wailed, those little faces,
those little faces.’

Back and forth she paced, asking the nurses repeatedly, ‘Was there
any more news.’ gripping the toys tightly.

Dolly sat in the shade, staring at the dried patches where the conkers
had fallen in the missed breath of a baby bird.

Nature her salvation she studied every leaf
that hung upside-down
tapping at her window.

1912

The Titanic struck an iceberg.

In Dolly's world
she heard laughter
in the school room,
but it was empty.
She sat at a desk
and wrote a letter
to her mum a plea.

Dear Ma,
I can't stay
here any longer.
I need my baby
so badly
please come
and get me.
I'll work hard
the bible says
'Suffer the little children to come unto me'
so let him be with me.
I need to hold his hand
feel his breath
upon my skin.
She had written in her mind
time after time,
the words 'help me'
etched on the back
of her head,
an institution stamp,
a tattoo, the words
dribbled down her spine
like an old typewriter.

She began to cry
tears ran between
words the lines
onto every sheet of paper
SMUDGED in the classroom.
Please help, please help.
Yours Dolly.

1913

Lancaster
Celebrated
a historical pageant.
Women spent
all night sewing
medieval costumes
jesters among them.

Dolly stumbled along the path
to the chapel, a bunch of daisies
in her hair, a clump at the front,
their stems dangled in her eyes.

She had wanted to say a prayer
for the safe return of her baby,
but the door was firmly shut.

She sat on the steps and waited,
tapping her feet to the distant music.

1914

Autumn
Radio
announcements.

World War 1.

Nerves shattered
through the darkness
spread
panic
NOISE
Loud and unpredictable.
Muddy sulphur skies
kept the patients indoors
pinched by pain and suffering.
Bruises, graffiti across bodies.

Dolly held her hands to her ears
rocking back and forth
back and forth
Vulnerable in this world.

1915

Patients' explosive behaviour
Inside the asylum, the noise
a fever struck the vocal cords

of strangers, new and old patients
weary, worn out by the war.

A collaboration of sounds escalated.
Dolly's hands trembled, turning them
over, ringing her fingers, picking at each nail.

A Soldiers stale
cigarette smoke
lingered on his breath
as he moved closer.

1916

Battle of the Somme
A million soldiers died.

War continued
patients, soldiers
uniforms of blue.
Bloodshot eyes
tears, from the
trenches.

In a foreign scrawl
somebody had drawn
twelve sheep along
the garden wall.
Dolly bent on her knees
and talked to a stray sheep
picking at the paint
she removes its eyes
and feet, her fingers
bleeding on bare flesh.

1917

War marched on,
news flashes
around the world.

While in Lancaster
lanes closed
floods.

Dolly sat twiddling
with her hair,
knotting and knitting.
Tying her fingers together
with elastic bands until
they turned a cyan blue.

The chaos in her world
continued. Trapped.
Raw grief scratched
at her bones, they ached
and itched.

The wind in her sails exhaled,
drowning under the false hope
she would see him again,
her baby boy.

1918

A white flag

Surrender.

White sheets

hang

from

bars.

Confused patients began to smile.

Out of every door and corner silence.

The sound of nature buzzed its way across

the moor. Dolly took to wearing a hat

to keep her bad thoughts from peeping

through strands of hair, seeing the outside

world shut inside trapped

between

the layers

of wool,

stitched firmly

bold blanket stitch exposed.

1919

Remembrance Day, November.

Dolly kissed the red-flowered corn poppy
folding its petals around its body
to protect it from all it had seen.
Poppy wore a red beret, remembering
the sounds of before,
of her baby crying, coughing, sneezing
in his sleep, he hiccups.

Dolly had lost time, nine years.
A tabby cat crossed her path
survived roaming the streets
and canals, living off skeletons
of birds and voles.
Meat rations ended.
The kitchens rattled
their pots and pans.

1920

Ten long years.
The wheels of the horse and cart
trudged through Lancaster.
People in workhouses since the 1800s
were now in asylums.
Forgotten numbers from the war.

On the other side of Lancaster Dolly
wore extra items of clothing provided
by local charities. Her suitcase half full, dragged
up the steps now remains at the back of her closet.
Clothes she has been unable to touch.
the faded scent of mothballs brushed the sleeves of her coat.

Dolly now wore her own creation, a sleeveless black lace dress.
A hairband of pigeon feathers she had collected from the tower.
She began to hum, a handful of notes. She nodded to Ted as he pulled
away with Bertie the shire horse after his deliveries.

1921

Dolly thought she was dying, as Isla's red patent leather shoes pinched her feet. A wasp had curled up in the right shoe. She hopped about cursing. 'I'm sorry for wearing your shoes Isla, I just wanted to see how they felt shaking her foot mid-air, to free the now dead wasp.

Isla was an occasional patient who arrived with several suitcases, always staying in the Villas, which were allocated to the wealthy as they paid to stay there. Separate buildings on the grounds of the asylum. Dolly had met Isla asleep in the garden, she covered her head with a scarf from her lap. Her humming woke Isla up with a start.

Dolly admired her clothes. Isla gave her a pair of black patent leather shoes, but Dolly had her eye on the red ones, trying them on to make them fit.

There were other girls in the villas.
Clara and Martha. Their black fringes
matched their dresses, as they hung,
dangling, like giant insect legs.
Scarfs and arms wrapped around each other
for comfort.

1922

Music brought the parlour alive
for a short time hit songs of the year.
Patients learned to dance, steps of their own.

Singing along to 'Swanee' Al Johnson
on repeat, voices echoed like China dolls
with vacant eyes.

Endless cups of tea at the afternoon dance.
Dolly spills her tea into the saucer and sips,
it slips to the floor as her hands shake.

Tapping the tables, a sugary mess,
feet slip and slide as they try to dance,
tired of the same song on repeat.

Ivor begins to sing, his voice a tenor,
the words he spits, each line a complicated
menagerie of sounds. Other patients join in wanting

to be heard. Dolly sits under the table catching the drips
of tea in each shoe, she slips her feet into them, the sudden
warmth soothes her toes; she closes her eyes.

1923

Each year smudged
into the next dragging
with it empty teacups
and dried flowers.
Dandelions...
stuck into a book
between pages
and sheets of stones
and overgrown paths.

Dolly fed the pig, her favourite
she named Hilary a black and white sow,
her body like a giant dice. Dolly twists
her tail between her fingers laughing
as Hilary's body sways. Mud splatters
her from head to toe, flirting, flaunting, rolling
in straw and mud, she doesn't care, the smell
absorbed deep into her skin, she didn't care.
Dirty face misplaced, tatty straw-like hair.

The smell absorbed into every pore. She didn't care.

1924

Dolly disappeared at night.

His smell
his blanket
taken.

Her father's
hobnail boots
gone.

Basket
an empty space
the cold shape...

His eyes.
She touched her breast
and felt a flutter
like a baby bird
trapped.

The holes in her baby's blanket
pecked/unpicked stitches
smelt freedom
unstitched
unravelling
she never slept.
She daydreamed her way
beyond the moor to the canal,
wearing odd shoes and hummed.

The holes in her baby's blanket
unpicked.

Baby sparrows, blue tits cling frozen to the windowsill outside the kitchen.

1925

Dolly heard noises
and felt somebody
shaking her. She rolled
around her bed shivering
until daylight broke.

Jack had been sitting on the back step all night.
Kitchen staff found him while swilling
the drains. His hat stuck firmly to his head
half frozen. He weighed a few stone, a small boy.
mumbling feebly, his lips gentian violet,
missing teeth, and thin scrappy hair.
He had run away from the workhouse.

Dolly held his hand until he fell asleep
in front of the fire in the parlour, swaddled
in grey itchy woollen blankets, red stitches
crawled along the edges like centipedes.

Dolly's face was red and mottled from the heat,
holding his hand, frantic to keep him with her.
She found a toy car and polished the red metal
until it shone, holding it out to him his face broke
into a smile of recognition. He carried it with him,
never leaving his side.

Matron took him to the children's ward until he could
speak, and was reunited with his father in the workhouse.

Dolly sobbed into the solitude and silence of the annexe
the steamed-up window kept the outside world a distant memory.

The holes in her baby's blanket spread into darkness.

1926

Mealtime's mayhem.
Patients fight to be served first.
Pushing and shoving to get a seat.

A meal of mashed grey-looking potato,
heavy squares of pink concrete, grainy
with fatty lumps, like corned beef.

Dolly played with chunks of bread
making holes around the centre, like
a doyley. She left the framed crust

on her plate and peeled an orange.
She liked them because nobody
had touched or contaminated them.

Farm washed greens
yellow sherbet lemons
dyed her tongue, a red stain
on her torn dress.

Open mouths, broken teeth
I hear them grinding into the night.
Bone on bone, a trickle of blood
on the pillowcase straight-line
of blood on the sheet.

I hear them grinding into the night
dribbles of sadness scrape along each bed.

1927

Dolly climbed the 220 stairs to the rooms beneath the tower, fighting the pigeons on the way. She wanted to find a peaceful place.

In an open room, she found a trunk with a broken padlock, it was full of dolls, some with missing limbs. She kept hold of one doll, fixing the elastic band between its arms, and rubbing the grubby dress between her fingers spitting on it to remove the dark stain. She called her Sylvia.

She found brass monkeys. One had a dent on its back, wrapped in a velvet cloth, the torn hem of a dress. Matching dresses of dolls, crinoline, and a rich red velvet. Families, children, old faces young shoulders, expressionless through the sepia sky, a smog that hung above the tower tormenting the pigeons.

A cloak of dust between the years faces buried beneath the layers.

1928

Soldiers scattered
borders of blue uniforms
mingled in between the minds
the enemy lines, they drift.
Die-cast, green plastic chewed
and gnarled feet, no escape.

Dolly left them alone
ambushed by the ginger cat
that scratched its way into the pantry
to steal rations, and chase mice.

She found an injured soldier
by the door of the kitchen
but turned away, following the sound
of laughter outside in the vegetable garden.

1929

She blew each one until the air became
a frieze of seeds and clocks sailing over the wall.

They stuck to her making her itch, and scratch her face,
her head ambushed, a fluffy hat. Dolly counted the trail

of seeds along the wall of the cemetery like an army of ants.
She touched them seeing double itching when one stuck

to her finger thinking it wanted to lay eggs under her skin.

She couldn't sleep that night, believing they had followed
her back to her room, crawling around her window and walls.

She swore they had multiplied in their thousands, as her skin
erupted into red weals, stinging every inch of her body.
Dandelions.

1930

Step inside the wallpaper,
the pastel flowers
wallflowers
gigantic heads
 like industrial
 mops
sweeping, swaying
into the evening dusk.

Step inside
the walls
with eyes
each one
a mystery
mind mapping
your every move.

Dolly stepped inside
the freeze on the wall
of the schoolroom
a platform of people
waiting for a train.
Potted plants overhanging
from baskets
dogs
suitcases
tags
luggage labels
destinations
unknown.

1931

It was a summer
haze of daisies
and buttercups
surrounding fields
opening their arms.

A malaise of summer scents
made Dolly sneeze into the night
her eyes red and burning. She held
a wet cloth/handkerchief to her face,

scratching at her legs with her other hand.
Sat in the middle of a field nature strangling her.
The long legs of plants and weeds, seeds

buzzing around her like an infestation
a compilation
a congregation.
They followed her, inside pockets
socks and shoes-
spread across the floor
barefoot
they created mosaics organised

and when she sneezed
aloud
they dispersed
to the other side of the room.

1932

Dolly felt like she was standing on the edge
of a cliff, like a morsel of bread waiting
to be snatched by a bird of prey, to be lifted
across clouds. The blueness of the ocean,
a glass-eyed view.

Every day she went somewhere.
Dancing on the pier in the rain
drowning every inch of her body.

Every day she went somewhere.
Shopping for strawberries, a bag
of broken biscuits and a bar of green
soap with a baby on it.

Every night she went somewhere.
Running across the moor
chasing sheep
with their young,
eating wild berries in the croft.

Every morning, she wakes to find clothes
scattered around her room like dead
animals, heavy woollen coats,
scarves and trousers like tails.

Every minute she hears voices,
quiet at first, then angry, crying,
calling her to leave,
a place in her mind.

1933

Dolly rubbed the paper, circling the flowers she had drawn, scattering crumbs from a chunk of bread, each petal disappeared. Edgar tried to stop her, pulling her hands, and grabbing the bread that crumbled between her fingers.

‘You can’t rub out your flowers, they will wither and die, I want them, please draw them again, on my paper, please Dolly, you can draw better than me.’ Dolly shoved her hands and crumbs into the pockets of her smock and began to laugh, rocking in her chair.

Edgar grabbed the piece of paper, stretching his body across the table and his drawing, of circles, inside circles, inside circles. It made him go cross-eyed as looked deep inside.

Dolly continued to rock in her chair crumbs falling around her feet.

Edgar started crying his tears filled the circles soaking the paper, smudged and blurred lines. Dolly stopped rocking handing him a handkerchief, a piece of material with a knot in two corners. He stood up taking it from her, as his nose bubbled, wiping it along his sleeve, snivelling, and mumbling.

‘I want and need a picture, I need it please, Dolly.’ His arms stretched to grab it.

Dolly began to hum, closing her eyes.

1934

Dolly clung to a cherub in the chapel and didn't want to let go.
The chill of the stone soothed her weary arms, she felt safe.
Together with the naked cherub, she was barefoot and alone.
She had left her shoes in the vestibule, preferring to walk the length
of the church and feel the coolness of the stone on her feet.

1935

It was haircut day.

Dolly hid in her closet, inside the breast of her coat,
sliding her arms through the sleeves, swinging them.

She didn't like anyone pulling at her hair, the roots
left delicate memories clinging to every strand of hair.

His hands and fists dragged her home across the cobbles
clumps of hair pulled in every direction.

Edgar wanted his hair cut at a slant down one side of his head.

He didn't know he had patches of misplaced hair and scars from
the treatments he had endured in one of his states of delirium.

Beryl liked curls and every scrap of hair shaped into a mass of mattress springs.

Meredith liked long hair in straight uniform layers.

Oscar liked no hair as he pulled at the roots until he had crop circles
growing in abundance, like baby ringworm.

1936

The staff production of Puss
in Boots, to entertain patients
with their own pantomime.

Patients were chaotically
rummaging in the boxes
of costumes for the cast

and for the patients singing
in the chorus, some dressed
as cats, swishing handmade

furry tails, chasing each other
meowing, and scratching mid-air.
Dolly had painted some scenery,

with more paint on her, than the cobbled
streets, she wanted to run down and escape
to the other side of town, to find her baby.

1937

Dolly tried to shout, but instead, she wheezed.
'Why don't you wrap me up in newspaper,
like I am fish and chips, it's stinging, take it off now.'

Dolly coughed and spluttered as the nurse
continued to dab vinegar on her wasp sting.

The nurse took Dolly into the parlour
to calm her with tea, and butterfly
cakes. With one hand Dolly folded
the wings into her handkerchief
while the nurse wrapped her throbbing
hand into a bandage soaked in vinegar.

1938

Perm less hair
shaved heads
they hold their faces
between fingers worn
free from expression

like a donkey stone
polishing the kitchen
step. They cannot stand
the NOISE
the constant buzzing
from imaginary bees

calling for help
fighting back.
Name tags
String—
Dolly felt
her world
pulled tight.

1939

2nd World War

sirens

blackouts.

Children evacuated.

A glimpse of children's faces

at the window, at the door.

Heads tapped, counted.

Old faces

young smiles

sadness etched through

dirt

and grime.

The war did that...

Tore through counties

took their children

Dolly had the children on her mind---

old faces on young bodies

rows of sombre grey faces

fighting tears and turmoil,

luggage tags, name, and number

an identity lost in the bureaucracy

of a nation

that was distracted.

Neglected children

some slipped through

the nets

and lost their way home.

1940

SCREAMS

night and day
air fills tightened
 chests struggling to breathe.
Words trapped between metal bars.

Sleep forced through cocktails
and mixtures, potions of cloud
enhancing nightmares statues
congregate, hover on the brink
of persuasion, a fighting chance.

Side effects multiply
at the doors/windows
wait for opportunities
to strike
subdue
take control
Escape...

Words trapped between metal bars
breathless
a cease-fire,
they can only dream.
I hear the crackle of the radio, the sirens in the distance
wafting on the edge as frequency and megahertz
explode into the night.

Worlds trapped behind metal bars.

They march between wards, corridors
Some shuffled
Some strode,
Some limp
their way
to lunch
for afternoon tea
and board games in the parlour
Shouting orders INTERRUPTED---NOISE
back in the desert-frontline
shoulders hunched
a patient screams.

1941

And still, they come, thick
and fast a heavy cantina of pea soup.

Side effects of the war
Nightmares
...came swallowing patients
with giant teeth, green hair
pinching their arms and legs
until they cry out in pain.
Rattling doors
to
escape the gnawing inside
hiding hands
sitting on them until numb
stumbling through the night.

Soldiers
bleeding
wounds erupt
between
disoriented sleep.
Disorders of the mind

and when they wake
they find themselves
Lost-
struggling
across the desert arms outstretched
knees burned by the morning sun.

1942

Edgar had collected
a penny black and stuck
it onto his window, so the light
showed the back of his head. He saw them
multiply through the night, reflections.
Their hinges glowed, shiny transparent
creatures like insects.

Stamps in season
stuck on his window
random birds
and butterflies
nowhere to go,
through the night
they fluttered.

Dolly heard him call
out, 'don't fly away
stay here all of you,
don't fly away.'

They multiplied, sounds grew, expanded
until the fluttering and buzzing made him lash out.
Giant teeth, getting closer,
Edgar hid under his blanket.

1943

Sink, cracks appear in a sequence of images.
In broken glass and tiles, reflection is now distorted.
Mirror of faces pointed north, she draws her
lipstick in between the cracks ashamed of the illusion.

Broken pieces, shards of glass, and misery wiped a stain
from the mirror, a face stares back, unknown, unrecognisable,
a stain down the side of a face, a burnt ear, flesh hangs, eye hidden
behind debris of skin and scars, a burnt smell lingers in the air, tangled

between the eaves and trees whose branches swipe their fingers through
the vent in the top of a window, distorted vision, screams that cannot be heard,
remain undisclosed. Dolly stands in a queue, waits for her sink to become free,
but the girl with the long name stares into the steamed-up mirror squeezing a freckle,

until the dark pigment becomes blood red, and she bites her finger and sucks her thumb until
Dolly moves her gently aside, so she can wash her hands and face. She feels the cooling
waters slip down her chest onto her hardened breasts and gasps. She throws cupped handfuls
of water over her head, letting it drip down her lanky hair, it clings to her face, and she shakes

her head, flicking water in every direction. A shape in blue stalks the mirror from behind.

1944

A glimpse through the window saw Dolly wearing layers of clothes
from the Red Cross box donated each month, bundles of clothes tied with horsehair.

Dolly wore a blue floral dress over 3 blouses and a grey pleated skirt that hung beneath a row
of cotton daises. The clothes gave her a waistband a feeling of fullness, a comfort blanket.

Dolly had worn the blue floral dress for years in and out of the laundry until the red poppies
smudged like blobs of jam on their faces as things blurred into each other, most days.

She laughed, a loud chuckle remembering her and Richard dancing at a party.
Her lucid description drew you into the sounds of feet tapping on the cobbles

a distant radio crackled into the cold night air.
They were in a good place.

1945

Dolly swallowed several pips from the heart
of a blood orange she had dipped her finger into.
She thought she was bleeding. The pips travelled
as Dolly thought to her stomach already plotting
to plant

rib to rib

an orange grove. Tiny oranges bursting their juices
and making her insides gurgle and shift like a team
of gardeners picking the fruit.

‘I am an orange,’ she announced

rubbing the peel of an orange along her arms
so they took on a hue, an amber glow.

She developed a rash after eating too many oranges
she had taken from the kitchen hidden in her shawl.

1946

The hands of the clock
rattled as it struck midnight
on a bitter winter's night.

Dolly spent most of her time
in the library, sifting through
the mounting books donated
by a local school that had closed
when children never returned
after the Second World War.

Dolly's favourite books were nursery rhymes.
She sang them out loud when she thought nobody
could hear. Richard hovered on the staircase listening.

Her voice would falter while she coughed, wiped her nose
and eyes, scratching her head. She did this every half-hour,
moving the books, opening them, flicking through each one,
and always stopping at page 92.

1947

Dolly stared at the wallpaper
lost in the large dahlias and roses.
She felt them reach out and grab
her by the throat, thorns, and sticky stems.
She closed her eyes, but still they bobbed.
Large mop heads sweep the floors.

Scared to move, she bolts upright in her chair
in the parlour as the flowers dance before her eyes.

Dolly twists her handkerchief tying knots, cursing the blooms
untying the knots, scratching at an old sore, shifting in her chair.

‘Stay away put your faces somewhere else’ she shouts pulling
a blanket over her head.

1948

One of the gardeners went missing, found dead in a shed
on the edge of farmland on Lancaster moor. His solitary
shed. Dolly trekked up the hill and sat on the rocks, pulling
the heads off dandelions, and a bunch of wild purple flowers
she had picked on the way.

Finding a pair of black wellingtons with grey socks inside
she carried them under her arm until she almost reached
the vegetable gardens. She put her feet into them, and clomped
into the kitchen, grabbing a scone cooling on wire by the window.

Dolly left a trail of mud
as water leaked through
the boots, following
her to the art room.

She splashed red and black paint onto two pieces of paper and watched
two distinct eyes
among
the blobs
and bruises
of her past
stare back.

1949

High winds
left the roof
unsafe in places.
Missing tiles
blown beyond
the greenhouse.

Workmen perched on the roof.

Dolly sat watching them from beyond
the fence. She bundled up a batch of dead
leaves, that had been cleared from the gutters.
A tiny beak peaked through balls of moss
it gave its last breath, eyes still open.
She cupped it into her hands and sobbed.
Tears mingled with soil and leaves.
A voice from behind made her jump.
She wrapped the baby bird into her scarf,
clutching it to her chest, catching her breath
between her sobs. Wearing only a flimsy cotton
summer dress, she was barefoot.

A nurse led her back inside to the parlour.

1950

Dolly collected books.
She liked to see the labels
inside. First one awarded
to George Wilson
St Barnaby's Sunday school
Highgate
(1941) 1936 13th April

A scrawled signature of Reverend Arthur Cross.

The pages turned alternative corners.
Drawings, pencil ships and stick men
drawn on the empty page. Threads dangle
from the spine like leftover spider's legs
collected in the binding.
Boy's adventures
Girl's adventures
at boarding schools, cricket, midnight feasts
an elegant slim book Dolly covered with brown paper
to protect the cover and stuck her own label inside.

She found an atlas -- turquoise, red, and orange
and thinks of the places so far away
she knew she could never visit.
She drew flowers on the lakes of Titicaca.
Drawing a cat on the mountains of the Andes'
the edges now battered like the rainforest
scorched through every page curled up in the heat.

1951

Dolly didn't want to go back.
She gripped the door handle
with both hands, her fingers
powder white, turning turquoise
veins bubbling under the surface.

She didn't want to go back to the room
where she had given birth to her baby boy.
His face still alive, fused to her, his eyes
and mouth, soft down hair, peaked at the crown.
Eyelashes sweep his delicate cheeks.

In her mind, his fingers curled
around hers like a baby elephant
trunk holding onto his mother's tail.
A close bond formed, an opening
performance in front of thousands.
Mother and Son
hold hands with the world.

Dolly had to face her past.

She shivered entering the house
overpowered by the smell.

Her mother had died 7 years after her father.
Personal possessions still hoarded the house.

Dolly stared back into the room
the ashes in the hearth
silver and black/grey
stuck in time.
She picked up the brass poker
rattling deep into the dust
an explosion of grey powder
made her cough and splutter.

1952

‘Why is Gale being so cruel? Edgar shouted, she’s mean, making so much noise in the night, kept me awake. It sounded like she strangled the old tabby cat as it wouldn’t shut up, crying and scratching, I had to put a sock in each ear.’

Dolly sat rocking in her chair, wrapped in a blanket shivering.

The weatherman says:
They marched without
warning
stomping on gardens
drowning out weeds
and flowerpots
and rusted bicycles.

They marched like soldiers
in their grey armour
battered shields.

The formation of the wind
had blown leaves onto
freshly cut grass, countless
colours and rhythm
as they fell, like fuzzy felts
stuck to the ground, bare
shoulders bronzed
by change, acorns
like nature's missing toes.

People battened down
windows, doors, as a wave
of destruction planned
for weeks to come.

1953

In the classroom
an invisible dust
settles

scratches at the lungs
of innocent children
torn from their families
now eaten inside
by this silent killer.

On the slate roof
Pigeons, dust settles
between their feathers.

A leak in the roof a sprinkle
of grey and white fibres,
magic dust on their heads
as they took to their beds.
Rolled into baubles at Christmas.

Children of the white stuff.

1954

She stirred, slurred voice,
she could no longer, linger
on a word like she used to.

Each moment her eyes opened
the fear lent on her like a hammer
from the blacksmith's shed.

Horses lined up to be shod,
swishing tails. Dolly pulled
herself from the chair, staggering

steps towards the door, the smell
of fish, and tar ointments hung
around the doorway, it was Friday.

Dolly sat at a table ready for lunch,
a curled-up chunk of battered fish
left too long, she poked its back

removing the skin underneath,
and picked at the bones, spine now free.
She shook salt from an indigo-blue sachet,

and vinegar, stung her sore lips, a sore
from chewing in her sleep, her mind
wandering through the tide at dawn.

1955

Gentian violet filled her mouth the colour purple.
She had fallen from the swing, fallen between
grass and gravel, her mouth swollen as her teeth
had bitten through her lip, resembling the inner tube

of a bicycle. She was treated with medicine,
but an allergic reaction left her skin crawling with
a million tiny insects, she hid under a blanket scratching.

The nurses covered her in a thick green ointment wrapping
bandages over her hands to stop her from burrowing underneath
her skin, to calm her, soothe the blisters, baked, and burst.

1956

Dolly tried to paint
blobs of green
around the edge
of the paper
and in the middle
 a face
with black eyes
deep sunken
 Eyes
and no mouth
her voice lost
among the crowds
of dandelions
their seeds

 Blown
In every

Direction.

You can tell the time and keep on counting before you fall into the landscape of spring and catch the flutter of nature's candy.

1957

Dolly had hidden herself in the library
nimble legs like a gazelle, even though she was 64.
She twisted herself into a corner studying a book on butterflies
and sea birds and how birds migrate in their numbers.
She loved to hear the sounds of ducks and geese and thought of their exotic long-haul
flight, how many sunsets did it take until they reached their destination, and colourful
plumage, painting the skyline after dark with a thick sable brush.

She focused on an Egret and read its description.
He stands emulsion white, still against the backdrop
of North Wales. Wings folded like sails of a dingy,
posed for the picture I never took, waiting for the bus
that never came. In March the marshland was excavated.
Sea birds
I rescued you from a pile
among the wildlife
deep into the Amazon
and oceans of tropical fish,
ordnance
paths that cross but never meet.

1958

Dolly had sewn her dress to the tablecloth whilst doing embroidery. Shreds of cotton at her feet, as bits of baby blue thread stuck to her bare feet, she became lost in their softness, shaking her head, she stared into the colours in front of her, hypnotised by them, a kaleidoscope. She closes her eyes, silently picking at her own work. She unravelled her memories through the hole in her cardigan. Hole shaped memories.

Somebody had embroidered a peacock, it had taken them two years, Dolly admired it, touching the aquamarine silks of its plumage. She remembered her grandmother's embroidery placed inside a fireguard.

1959

Dolly didn't like the smell of fish that followed her around the market. Several eyes stared back. She liked the red bus, open top, hair tangled around her mouth, twisted around her teeth like spun silk. She sniffed the tin of humbugs until they took her back to Aunt Violet's cottage. The sloped garden she slid down landing, bottom first among the brambles and bruises.

Dolly's favourite stall: Mr Boyd's biscuits. Shrewsbury ones she needed both hands to hold, giant currants, and a sprinkle of sugar. Maids of honour, jam oozed from the centre. Mr Boyd welcomed Dolly every time, sneaking a handful of broken biscuits into her coat pocket, and half-filling a brown paper bag for after her tea. Dolly stood fixed on the spot staring up towards the eaves and the pigeons that called the market home. She thought of her Uncle Billy and the pigeons, he kept, until Psittacosis struck him.

1960

Dolly still tried to leave.
At 66 years of age, she needed to find him.

Her coat no longer fits, but she wears it anyway.
It is the height of summer; she steps into the heat
and haze of summer, her pockets full of seeds
and weeds, flowers, dandelions, and daisies.
Petals stick to each other, a mixture of yellows
and white, green stems lay like matchsticks
at the bottom of the pocket in her smock.

Dolly began picking from a carpet of daffodils,
sitting them in jars around the dining room.
Some had starved in late frost. Peeling back
the green skin to reveal yellow petals.

Pressing her grubby fingers, nails embedded
with soil.

‘Open your eyes, I want to see your face,
your brothers and sisters are awake.’

Dolly jumped as a nurse touched her shoulder.
She was barefoot except for a bandage on her right ankle.

1961

Every time Dolly coughed
she thought someone
was in her room.
In her cupboard
she hummed

An echo

Someone coughed

A younger one.

She hummed again.
Someone hummed back.
These voices echoed in and out of her room, her head.
Her thoughts grasped hold of them looking inside the locket
of someone else.
A face drawn from a past that echoed into the night,
she heard them again,
footsteps on the cobbles.

1962

Dolly gathers her clothes, tying them into a bundle
with a scarf, in alternative-coloured fibres, threads,

grey
white
purple
grey
white

folds of blouses and skirts, and pleats forced into rows, pressed into submission,

between them she places a sheet of lined paper, from a red exercise book, a conversion
table on the back. Dolly didn't understand arithmetic, it hadn't been her subject at school,
but she could add up in her head.

24
plus 49
plus 126
plus 22
plus 184
plus 96

take away 42
shouts Richard
from the doorway.

She continued to ignore
his interference.

Plus 99
Richard shouts again.

Dolly turns her head
looking him up and down
noticing the baseball
boots, black and white
with a circle of rubber
at the ankle (laces missing)

he flopped about in them,
his heels slipping, rubbing
a hole.

He was wearing a tweed jacket.
A dead dandelion hung its limp head.
'Come on Dolly, I was only joking.'

She continues counting and tearing
the paper, it was getting smaller,
as each number a symbol, something

her grandmother had taught her. The spiritual meaning of each number, to survive, she remembered counting tealeaves in the chipped china teacup.

Richard remained by the door, a hole at the knee of his baggy trousers, a large dressing surrounded by bruises where he had fallen hard against a concrete post while working in the garden.
He loved the outside, fresh air and space, a mind's view.
A patient, a friend, and ally, someone to talk to.
A merchant seaman found drunk and disorderly missed his ship's departure, thrown into the asylum.
He hoped one day to leave, but to go where?

1963

Saturday morning cinema.
The sound of music played.
Children climbed onto their seats
to reach the hills and mountains.

Dolly laughed then began to cry when
a small boy touched the tartan blanket
that covered her legs as she sat in a wheelchair
by the front row seats.
A woman pulled him away scolding him.

Dolly stared after his blond head of curls,
her eyes remained with him. For a short while
she was back in the park with her baby, a toddler
kicking his ball, she picked him up when he stumbled
losing a shoe-

One of those kinds of memories that creeps up on you without warning.

She wrung her hands, shaking as the nurse wheeled her outside
and onto the bus.
She clung to the edge of her blanket, his tiny fingers,
still sticky, lingered between layers of wool.
She sniffed
the sweetness and innocence of his touch.

1964

DOLLY SHUFFLES INTO THE GARDEN HER HANDS IN HER COAT POCKETS.

LOUD MUSIC PLAYS SUMMER HOLIDAY BY CLIFF RICHARD.
PATIENTS DANCED, SHOWERING EACH OTHER WITH CLUMPS
OF FRESHLY CUT GRASS.EXCESSIVE SNEEZING AS THEY
FALL AMONG A HAZY CARPET OF GREEN TRIPPING OVER
EACHOTHER.

Dolly shouts, stopping the music.

“Play statues properly, come on Jimmy, come on
Edgar no cheating, boys be serious, start now,
ready steady go.”

MUSIC PLAYS AGAIN.

BOYS JUMP ABOUT THROWING THE GRASS OVER THEIR SHOULDERS.
GIRLS JOIN IN.

VIOLET GRABS A PILE OF GRASS, HER ARMS FULL UPTO HER CHIN
DANCING. SHE STUMBLES ABOUT UNTIL THE MUSIC STOPS AND THROWS
ARMFULS OF GRASS AT THE BOYS COVERING THEM HEAD TO TOE. THEY
LOOKED LIKE WALKING HEDGES, STAGGERING AROUND BLIND, MUFFLED
VOICES.

THEY FALL OVER, SPITTING, GREEN SALIVA DRIBBLES DOWN THEIR
CHINS.CRYING AND SNEEZING.

Dolly shouts to be heard above the sounds of chaos.

“Stop it now, it's getting silly, stop it now and
tidy up this mess, girls you too, come on, stupid
just stupid, everybody's sneezing now.”

THE BOYS LIE STILL, GRASS STUCK TO EVERY PART OF THEIR BODIES.
THE GIRLS ROLL ABOUT GIGGLING BETWEEN SNEEZES.

TO BE CONTINUED.

1965

Dolly leaned into the wind swinging her tired body backward, she grew higher, her mottled legs bare, bitten by the night frost, which stared through her window, watching her every move. She had stayed outside in the park, hiding from the others, nobody had noticed this time she was missing. She stopped swinging, listening to the children.

At night she heard their footsteps everywhere she went. They were here now, running around the swings oblivious of the dangers. They laughed for a moment before their aching voices ambled into the distance. Dolly touched the empty wooden seat, still spinning next to her, soil and leaves disturbed, scuffed against her feet, her boots damp, and toes no longer hers, but

she picked them up and ran, she ran until she couldn't see in front of her as a disguising mist lay like a tablecloth covering all that was about her. She called out, at first 'George, are you there George?' 'Thank you for coming back for me, I only wanted five more minutes in the park with the children, they were lively tonight.'

A splash of water covered Dolly until her body shivered and shook. She sat up crying, unable to see where she was until George held her hands between his smooth textured glove 'Dolly, come on now it's alright, just a bad dream again, it must be the new tablets you had last night, open your eyes now, come on.' He removed his gloves and reached for a glass of water, the tumbler was scored with several lines and shapes.

Dolly stared out of the window wishing she was still in the park.

1966

Dolly ran into the sea, discarding her clothes
shifting years of pain that scratched at her
body like a disease. She continued to float
closing her eyes, only the seagulls calling,
crying, beckoning her to follow them,
further out to sea.

Dolly floated, her arms above her head.

A figure that could easily drown.

She was taken to the safety of the beach,
coughing, spitting out a string
of bronze-coloured beads, pearls
of the sea, seaweed.

1967

Tuck shop day.
A queue of chattering
hung between layers
of body odour.

Dolly drew the shape of their lips
with a red torpedo liquorice, smiling.
Standing in line she wet another one
and circled their red cheeks.
Red and rosy lips and cheeks
high on sugar.
She scolded one boy/man
who had licked his lips
too soon, she had to redo them.
A nurse watched as they danced around
to music happy with their new faces.
Painted.

A butterfly landed on Dolly's head
its wings glowed orange and red,
it floated back out of the small
window.
Dolly stared out across the moor.

1968

Dolly itched more than usual that night.
Raspberry eruptions appeared that night.

Crusty ugly faces stretched along their arms and legs.
She itched then stopped, synchronised itching that night.

Dolly was the first patient to develop Campbell Morgan spots.
She burst into tears, scrubbing at them until they bled that night.

Naked bodies scattered around the wards, crimson in parts.
Fingers pushed clear skin; patterns of scabs emerged that night.

Hilda stood in the doorway searching for help, a familiar face.
Chaos was all around her, scraping skin amid screams that night.

Dolly sat in her chair humming, itching her thoughts across the moor.
A nurse looked back, the memory of a tune she had buried until that night.

Richard licked a layer of ointment from his arms wherever he could reach.
This made them spread as a marshland of legions multiplied that night.

The nurses applied dressings and bandages whenever they could.
Patients unravelled every inch, left in mounds around the wards that night.

My childhood memories, regular skin creams applied, intoxicating.
I itched and cried thinking about Dolly and the other patients that night.

1969

Dolly loved cake.

The ingredients of a fruit cake stuck
between her teeth, candied peel left
a bitter taste on her tongue. Her false
teeth moved back and forth as her gums
had shrunk, slipping in and out of her mouth.

Eccles cakes, scones, and tea-loaf would vanish
from her plate in a shot, shovelled up into her tissue
half-eaten squashed into pockets.

Wings from butterfly cakes lay folded at the bottom of her handbag.

1970

Dolly's Zimmer frame scratched a line across the floor with every shuffle.
She wore a pale blue crimplene tunic dress and American tan tights.
Her dainty feet in black patent leather shoes.

She hums a tune,

'We'll meet again, we'll meet again, baby we'll meet again, under the blue light of day.'

A single tear follows a stray lash.

She hums the words to Blue Moon

I saw you blue moon.

The day you left

Taken.

Dolly held a rag doll to her chest,
and a string of pearls she had found,
one was black, like a missing tooth.

She continued to rock
daydreaming
with every
shape of movement
into the night.

'Blue Moon' she whispered.

'Where are you.'

1971

Glass bottles of milk and paper straws chewed.
A choir of children sings carols
silent night
'All is calm all is bright'
but in C-ward, it was the opposite.
A Christmas scene
somebody had stolen the baby,
hidden him.
A donkey strayed away from the nativity.
Sheep had escaped and were tucking into the greenhouse salads.

A room full of cotton wool, and soap powder mixture, created a candle holder.
Christmas snow stuck to hair and fingers, beards on chins.
Peppermint creams made everyone ill, as they overdosed on the essence.
Festivities were overrun with anxieties and sugar.

1972

Dolly watched the seasons, the bulge of glass
like a lump stuck in the throat. The neck is red
when hot and blue when cold.

Its slim

body contoured against the wall, its red dot
and pulse.

Cold

frost

history

she keeps on surviving.

Two World Wars and still she survives

the claws

of her own war

with open wounds

through every season

that fall into her wilderness.

1973

Biscuit crumbs stick
like a collage to her green
crimplene dress and thick
grey tights.

Her chair moulded
a circle in-dented
where she always
sits half-asleep
a fragile bird
some days
not straying far
from her world.
Her inside world
watching bird's nest
swaying
above in sparse trees
after the leaves of winter
sink into the ground below.

1974

A young patient
sweet sixteen
sits in the dining room.

She wears a pink badge and a tiara
ankle socks and a multi-coloured dress
with puff sleeves, layers of pink and purple
taffeta, gathered lace, frayed beneath
a petticoat.

Dolly talks to her as if she's
talking to a mirror, her in the mirror

She mimics her
Same cardigan.
Same cardigan.

Dolly repeats her name.

'Bernadette, Bernadette,' the girl stares ahead blankly chewing gum.
She has dark deep-set eyes.
She has no visitors, she doesn't speak.
A lingering cough beneath her ribcage.
Whooping cough claimed her, each night,
it taught her how to whoop into the night.
Others copied her, imitated her,
keeping them, all awake.

1975

Dolly sat knitting
weaving her hands
through endless stitches
each movement hangs mid-air
like a sentence, she stumbles
on each word, casting aside.

She rests her hands on her lap
and falls asleep twitching
and shaking
her left hand.

1976

Dolly wore a green knitted dress, handmade, donated by a group of ladies who met every week. It was a rich

emerald colour, a lace stitch, see-through. She wore a petticoat underneath, it clung to her legs, static attacking

her, making her jump. A swishing sound and rustling when she walked. The long sleeves hung down past her fingers.

Norman wore a brightly coloured tank top. He showed everyone, counting the stripes until he went dizzy. Some patients wore hand

knitted scarfs, chunky wool draped around their necks and shoulders. Pink and green knitted squares stuck to Edgar's head as he showed

off his new hat. He had also stuck red and blue squares onto his chest.

'Do you like my new jumper, Dolly?' She frowned, inspecting

his colourful knitted items, pointing out he had some pieces missing. She slumped back into her chair, wrapping her blanket under her chin

and sighed. Colours swirled before her eyes, circles, and squares, knitting her a huge hat and covering her until darkness fell around her.

1977

It was the Queens Jubilee.
So, a party of cake and jelly, triangles
of sandwiches, paste/cheese/salmon.
Outside on the grass, cricket pitches, trestle
tables, hats balloons flags, and bunting.
Green pop exploded with vanilla ice cream.
Red, white, and blue excitement stitched across each
table, wall, and person. Faces painted, a smudge of red,
white, and blue, some didn't like it, red noses/ striped faces.
A swirl of synthetic cream on the top of jellies, hundreds,
and thousands sprinkled onto each one.
Fingerprints smother red jellies before they can set.
God save the Queen played until the fireworks at midnight.

1978

Dolly's Zimmer frame stands abandoned
in the parlour guarding her armchair facing

the cemetery and chapel. She grips the rail
and shuffles back to her room and bathroom,

her handbag slung over her shoulder. Overflowing
with an abundance of tired old things. Squashed

into a space, darkness surrounded each object,
that had spent a lifetime tangled together,

folded and stuffed into Dolly's bag of tired old things.

1979

Fairy lights hang along Morecambe Pier as summer closes its eyes.
Sandcastles covered in shells protected from the incoming tide.

Cockles like baby ducks gritty to bite and chew.
Paste sandwiches cling to the roof of her mouth.

Dolly bites into a cockle, pulling a face.

‘Their bellies filled with sand.’ She winces

and spits into her handkerchief, shaking her head.

‘They don’t taste like they used to.’ she gasps, gulping

down half a glass of green cream soda and hiccups.

Younger patients chase each other along the beach with cockles,
making loud duck sounds, kicking sand, and knocking over drinks and chairs.

I could feel the damp sand underfoot and taste the grit.

1980

Everywhere a sea of red.

Dolly

 itched her way
 through best part of a week
 until the red and black dots
disappeared back
to where they came from.

Like a blood bath
along every coastline
armies of ladybirds
lapped up every inch
of wasteland, shell
and barnacle.

Everywhere
 a sea
 of
 red.

1981

An afternoon of music in the parlour.
Recorders played by a small group, the sound of *Greensleeves*.
Bill played his harmonicas, notes on one, then another
working his way through a bag of polished chrome.

Dolly twirled lace covers from the arms of her chair
placing one on her head, humming, laughing under her breath,
rocking and tapping her feet. Somebody gave her coconut shells
she leaned back into her chair, tapping them together, the sound

of horses rode off into the distance. Dolly thought of Ted and his horse
Bertie, long since departed, he was a grand horse. A tear rose from her left
eye spotting the lace mat, she rubbed at it trying to remove the spot,
it became grubby from the coconut's hairy back.

1982

Dolly held her hands to her ears to the noise
and clatter of cards falling in between
breaths and spits of unrest. Shuffling,
thudding on the table, scraped chair legs.

She was in and out of her handbag, the stitching
was coming apart, split seams. The zip caught
a paper tissue between its teeth refusing to give up.
She threw it on the floor annoyed.

‘It’s broken, somebody has bust it when I find out who it was,
there be hell to play.’

She tried to stand up, wobbling and swinging her Zimmer frame
in front of her, scraping fresh lines to the garden. She was wearing
tartan slippers one had a red pom-pom, the other missing.
She was looking for Albert.

1983

Dolly sings, a hum at first rocking in her chair.
Her voice is strong, her constitution never wavers
she rocks, over and over again,

Singing

'You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,
you make me happy when skies are grey,
you never know,' her voice trailed, as her head
leaned onto her chest, a light snore, and wave
of her right hand. Dolly lay rocking as she slept.

Her dreams took her across the Moor, searching.
She heard their cries, multiple voices echoed into
the night.

1984

Whooping cough raging, rattles, and whoops on the children's ward.

A boy with a bobble hat sits coughing. He wears a red jumper and blue spectacles, he has the longest eyelashes, his name is Bobbi and he is 5 years old.

Dolly coughs in unison.

She had scratched her Zimmer frame to the children's ward.
She wanted to see how Bobbi was, his cough echoed into the night.
She saw him in her sleep, his hands outstretched, crying, his chest, ribs sinking, anxious breathing.

She was desperate to find him.

The corridors all looked the same
her shuffling slower, hands stiff
fingers twisted.

She removes her glasses, hanging from a chain of Indian beads
and tries to focus on the naked light ahead of her, following
the black lines and yellow zig-zag signs.

A cough behind made her shudder into the darkness.

1985

Oxfam visited with clothes and shoes every month.

Silk flowers, some plastic.

Dolly didn't like the anemones
the way they stared at whatever
way they sat in the vase.
Deep-set black eyes and lashes.

Dolly was given a new coat a camel one.
One patient joked about her being a camel.
Another said she smelled more like an old goat.
She wore it with a black fluffy beret with a grey bow.

'Giddy up, giddy up.' Joked a patient, as he trotted
past her, in high spirits after a tuck shop visit.
High on sugar and pills.

1986

In was dark in her room, with only the moon to cast a circle on her pillow,
Dolly hid her face, shielding it from the wind and blackness that was shading

her life and causing her to stumble and fall out of her bed. She dreamt two baby
crocodiles were snapping at her legs as she swung them out of bed onto the cold floor.

She jumped, stumbling headfirst into the wall, clanging against the trolley left behind
by the nurse, who was distracted. Dolly felt a sharp slice of something cut through her leg

and a sound she hadn't heard before, a scurrying under her bed with grunts and growls.
She screamed at the top of her voice scared to touch her foot, until a nurse appeared at the

door, switching the night light on, so it wasn't too bright for the middle of the night.
The crocodiles kept returning, every night until Dolly felt like she had only one leg

and couldn't feel her toes anymore. She hopped on one foot, thinking her leg had been
sacrificed, as it was numb the length of her leg.

The nurse wrapped a blanket around her legs calming her with tea and crumpets.

1987

Dolly sat at the end of the platform away from the children playing.

She didn't like the woman who scolded them.

An old lady had a bird cage with a Myna bird.

It spoke, making her jump.

'Hello young lady, don't look so sad.' Hopping about, tapping its bell
until the old lady threw her shawl over the cage.

It fell silent.

1988

Dolly dreamt she was sat outside the bin shed.

Dolly
stitched together
paper and empty tins
using a giant darning needle
black wool.

She woke to find cardboard people their hands joined.

1989

Dolly sat staring through the window
drifting, sand, and seaweed clinging
to the stray and stranded boat, its anchor
caught on a rock.

Seagulls flocked, multiplying, crying
into the summer swell, searching for food.

Dolly fell asleep, her shoes on the wrong
feet, she said they were comfortable like that.

1990

Dolly was wheeled past the kitchen
the heavy pots, jumping, boiling water
spilling, hissing, metal lids hiccupped
against each other. Dolly joined others

in the parlour, cursing she was tired
and had forgotten her handbag, bothered
someone would eat her toffees. Her chocolate
eclairs, her favourite, even though they stuck

to her false teeth palette, and roof of her mouth.
She closed her eyes, twiddling with toffee wrappers
between her sticky fingers, tapping her feet to the
afternoon's musical entertainment.

1991

Time took Dolly back, transported
to see the face of her baby boy.

Astonishing joy mixed with tears
that hung from her cheeks like pearls.

She was sitting in the garden when he
appeared carrying a bunch of purple

Dahlias, their giant heads stared at her
inspecting her, she cowered in the corner

of her room, leaning her head against
a cushion with silver leaves and a single

red heart.

1992

From battleship grey to a floral dress
on a summer's day, a yellow buttercup
glowing under her chin, to the shiny
bruise flowering on her skin.

I saw the sadness swing through
her hair, a softened breeze, tirelessly
wrestling mid-air, like the midges
in mid-flight circling her ankles

until a late September night.

1993

'Don't bring me lilies' they remind me of death.
Bring me sunflowers, giant glowing faces, and freesias
so, I can smell of summer.
Grow ivy and sweet peas,
flowers to climb the walls for my escape.'

I have heard you, Dolly,
for all these years
felt the weight
of your tears.
Listened to your thoughts,
your times of grief and despair.
I have been there.
So, now as I say farewell.
May you rest in peace Dolly.
Rest in peace.

Reflection after the Poetry Collection

This collection of poetry demonstrates, that by creating an empathic response to Dolly's state of mind is an integral part of my practice, which shows the internal and external worlds, contrasting elements, humanity, and the environment Dolly and other patients existed in. I am suggesting Dolly's experience throughout the collection of poems. I decided to write a poem a year, for the 84 years Dolly spent in the asylum, starting from 1910 when Dolly was admitted to the asylum. The poems then continued chronologically until the final poem in 1993.

My research began in the national archives, as I gathered information about Lancaster Moor Asylum and patient life. I also began reading *Chronicles of the 20th Century*, a rather large heavy book, I discovered: a book from my childhood. Mum used to subscribe to Readers Digest, and this book was a monthly offer. We had every book imaginable, it was a standing joke, especially when Mum got out the medical book when one of us sneezed.

I started reading about facts, and events that were happening during the early years of Dolly's incarceration and incorporated some of this information into my poems. I then allowed my poems to be free to wander through the time that may have been Dolly's experience for the 84 years she was institutionalised. Paying attention to description, themes, and forms, allows my imagination to step over the threshold of the asylum.

During research, I developed a selection of different poems I considered relevant to evoke Dolly's level of emotions, and how they could belong in the collection. I have included some of my recent poems in the collection that evolved during the editing process.

Introduction

Throughout history, women have suffered, solely on account of their gender. David J Vaughan's book, *The Suffering of Women Who Didn't Fit: Madness' in Britain 1450-1950* reveals attitudes and responses to 'mad women' in Britain. He also states, "Defining a woman and her role in the world, based on natural order, became so entrenched that declaring her mad seemed a quick easy fix for condemning and subjugating the gender" (2018, p.3).

I also discuss female authors and poets and how they write about their subjects, and those who speak from behind the walls of the asylum will accentuate Dolly's imagined day-to-day life experiences to form part of my critical reflection.

This thesis is based on original research into the life of one individual, Dolly Mabel Mountain. From the moment I saw Dolly's black and white photograph, this striking image, I felt her grief and knew I had to tell her story. It displays the harsh reality of the early 1900s when unmarried mothers had their newborn babies taken away from them.

In reconstructing the lives of Dolly and others I have been influenced by literature that examines the lives of women in asylums. The findings will illustrate social contexts and circumstances more broadly for the benefit of other researchers, illuminating knowledge and experiences that have been lost. I am writing fiction that aims to get as close as possible to the lived experiences of some of society's most marginalised figures.

Lancaster Moor Hospital is a Grade 11 listed building and was the second-largest mental asylum in the United Kingdom. It was originally built in 1816 and opened in 1889 as a workhouse. The numbers grew from a capacity of 200 to 3,500 at full capacity. The buildings extended to include a farm, set in the outskirts of the market town of Lancaster. The hospital closed its doors in 1997 and remained abandoned until renovations were completed in 2016.



Figure 1: Lancaster Moor Asylum, Image: Urban Decay (2012)



Figure 2: Lancaster Moor Asylum: Author image (2012)

Taken on my first visit before the renovations started in 2016.



Figure 3: Dolly: Image by Ian Beesley (1992)

Ethical Considerations

In this section of the thesis, I discuss in detail ethical considerations when writing about Dolly Mountain. In the realm of qualitative research, Laurel Richardson, along with other influential figures like Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, has explored the multifaceted landscape of ethical considerations. They emphasize the importance of ethical research practices and advocate maintaining respect for the subjects you are writing about. These are comprehensive qualitative studies; I have included references to them in the bibliography, for further reading.

In his studies in *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*, (2004) Thomas. G. Couser delves into the ethical dimensions of representing vulnerable individuals in life writing. These subjects are often unable to advocate for themselves, whether due to intimate relationships, lack of capacity to consent, or other vulnerabilities. Couser's exploration emphasizes the ethical responsibilities that writers bear when portraying such individuals.

Couser draws a parallel between the relationship of biographers and vulnerable subjects and that of physicians and patients. Just as medical ethics principles apply to patient care, bioethical principles should guide life writing. These principles include respecting the subject's right to self-determination and avoiding harm to the subject.

In summary, Couser's work prompts us to consider the ethical terrain when portraying vulnerable lives, urging writers to navigate with care and compassion. While not wishing to impose unnecessary restrictions on writers, Couser is concerned that those who write about the sick or disadvantaged have a special obligation to represent their subjects in a way that "resist[s] objectification" and resists exploitation. Furthermore, he argues, authors have an obligation to their readers to articulate the negotiations that took place with their subjects in order to publish. Couser writes: "What is at stake in the ethics of life writing is the representation of self and the other, which is always at once a mimetic and a political act" (V, S.p.33). By examining these ethical dimensions, Couser invites us to consider their responsibilities when writing about others' lives and the values assigned to those lives.

I didn't need reminding that Dolly was a vulnerable subject, but did I have the right to write about her life? This question sat with me from the beginning. I researched and found no definitive answers, that I could not write about Dolly.

When I attended different conferences, I asked the same question and people's responses helped me realise I was right to speak for Dolly. I received overwhelming responses, ones of empathy, and how I was giving her a voice, and that, her story needed to be told. This raised further questions as to why society allowed women like Dolly to be placed in institutions after having illegitimate children, nobody knows, as it is a long-standing question.

Illuminating Dolly's life for the 84 years she spent in the asylum, echoes that of women in other institutions from as early as the 1400s because of gender. I have always had complete respect for Dolly's situation and shown empathy throughout my writing being thoughtful and sensitive. From my first piece of writing, I asked about her life and felt an overwhelming response to give Dolly a voice, so she could speak for others. I have written in detail, handling her every move with care. I discuss "Voice" further in chapter two and why I speak up for Dolly, and why I speak for the voiceless.

When I began my research project about Dolly, I completed the ethical approval panel checklist form. My research objectives were to write a critical and creative investigation into the lived experiences of Dolly Mountain and inmates in Lancaster Moor Asylum Dolly. However, she was a real person, deceased in 1993. It also involved archival research, biographical forms, and creative writing.

My writing unexpectedly evolved to include my nursing experience when reflecting and writing creatively after seeing the black and white photograph of Dolly I was reminded about a patient called Alice whom I discuss in the statement of Poetics in chapter two.

I began writing about Mum when she went into a dementia unit a few years later as I found the similarities between Mum and Dolly, and couldn't help but write about them, as I felt close to them both, shuffling along the corridor with them.

In this thesis, I adopt poetic techniques to evoke emotions and engage my personal, lived experiences. There are infinite ways to construct each moment of her life, each breath, whisper, or sleepless night. This collection of creative writing presents just some of those possibilities. The storeroom of the asylum is never closed, allowing me to create an imaginary 'space' of the storeroom in which I find generative material for my poems, which then becomes a new landscape, through the medium of the poetry in this thesis.

In this thesis, I seek to situate my collection of 84 poems titled: *Dolly: An Innocent Voice*, as a poetic response to historical research, that explores Dolly's day-to-day life, reflecting on what it was like to be institutionalised for eighty-four-years between 1910 –1993 when Dolly died, aged one hundred. *Poetry shapes her world, stepping into the narratives*. Poetry pops up throughout this thesis to show how practice-based research informs my work.

This collection of poetry also contributes original insights by examining life in an asylum during two World Wars and considering the mental health of already vulnerable, and marginalised people. I have included poetry, written about the fragility of these patients, as speculations on tragic experiences from the past.

In the Spring 2022 edition of *The Author* Jane Rogoyska's article: Lies Matter tells the story of historical events through both fiction and non-fiction. She states that when “she tried on the clothes of memoirist they did not fit, their voices too distinct.” It was when she found the experiences of the Katyn massacre told through a young doctor, his experiences became the foundation of her narrative. She goes on to say “If you write fiction based on real events you give yourself permission to create a story that obeys the rules you impose upon it; you can explore personal themes, invent events and characters, play with chronology. You can hope that in the process you are creating something that passes an emotional or psychological truth that might endure in the reader's minds and shed light on the historical events you have depicted.”(2022).

These academic debates go on for practicing writers as a way to tell a story and are of great importance, supporting my work, creatively and critically.

Critical Reflection: Chapter One

Empathy

This section of the thesis extends my exploration of empathy, the thread that runs throughout the thesis. I am offering emotional responses that resonate with the lineage of other writers. Empathy allows identification by creating a sense of connection, through behavioural components.

Khen Lampert states in *Traditions of Compassions*:

[Empathy] is what happens to us when we leave our bodies... and find ourselves either momentarily or for a longer period of time in the mind of the other. We observe reality through her eyes, feel her emotions, and share her pain (2006, p.150).

Throughout the collection of 84 poems, I attempt to create day-to-day lived experiences, responding empathically to Dolly. Poetry uses language to express emotions as a way of raising awareness for others. There is little published research on this process, but some healthcare practitioners are beginning to acknowledge the value of empathy in healthcare settings, and to appreciate that writing poetry is a way to enhance students' understanding of themselves and others. Below, I give two examples from practitioner training for medical students.

Kirsten Jack outlines in a journal article on nurse education how she has developed an online writing community, to assist students to reflect on their practice creatively:

Our students report that writing poems prompts them to explore practice situations in creative and imaginative ways, encouraging them to express their feelings in ways they might not have done before. It helps them slow down their thinking as they consider the most effective way to express themselves through their poem (Jack, 2015, pp. 7-10).

Similarly, Speare and Henshall go on to say in their journal article on using poetry as a tool for critical reflection in medical training:

Writing poems helps us see beyond the medical model (set of procedures Nurses and Doctors are trained in) and enables us to empathise with others. It supports understanding of challenging concepts such as empathy and compassion and encourages thinking about areas we might not normally consider (2014, pp. 807-820).

Beyond the medical model, healthcare professionals are beginning to understand and value poetry as a means of accessing and articulating emotions, as they look at writing poetry to access resources they may not have used before. Stepping inside the creative world of poetry enhances their work environment, as a way of exploring empathy, which becomes beneficial to the medical staff and the patients, as it allows for a better understanding of self and others.

*They feel each footstep shuffling through the night,
searching for open eyes, and silent cries,
of the patients unable to speak, wounds, and dressings
open-hearted touch. They allow the patients to escape,
free from the pain of the unknown. Handled with care.*

Poetry allows me to step into the darkness of the asylum, and create empathic responses, giving each poem a flavour of asylum life. The perspective of a poem can create a connection as empathy offers a way into an experience that would otherwise be lost in a world where people like Dolly attracted little or no attention.

I thought about the practicalities of asylum life, entering the experience. Patients wore each other's clothes and walked barefoot; some wore odd shoes. They battled with nightmares day and night. Constantly wanting to leave, and go home, but as their words barely catch their breath, they realise they don't have a home anymore. This was the case with Mum:

*She wanted to go home, and as her voice lingered between the shadows, lost.
She shuffles, dragging her belongings tied together, trouser legs and tights
joined, thrown over her shoulder, her tights packed with underwear, socks,
and sweets rustled against the nylon. Mum wanted to go home.*

I imagined the trauma placed on women who found themselves confined to an asylum, and the emotional turmoil that led to their state of mind, unable to function. I observed women in my first geriatric ward in 1980 when I began my nurse training in Hampstead, London. More recently, my observations come from living through Mum's Vascular Dementia.

In this section of the thesis, I introduce theories of empathy through Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) and Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice* (1997). Mary-Catherine Harrison's *The Paradox of Fiction, and the Ethics of Empathy* also considers what it means to empathise with another person, and their need to emotionally connect.

In contemporary narrative theory, the term "narrative empathy" is defined as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen, 2013, p. 23). It has been a topic of discussion for American literary theorists, as they explore empathy in literature critically. The ample representation of the empathic mode of reading in those studies centres on prose, assuming that characters embody mental states with which readers may empathise with various degrees of accuracy.

Reflecting on Suzanne Keen's observations on empathy, I consider her work on narrative techniques that question the effect empathy has on us individually. Keen states that her theory of narrative empathy "elaborates the uses to which real authors/narrative artists put their human empathy to work in imaginative character-creation and other aspects of world-making, as well as theorizing readers' responses" (2007a,4). I argue that, while Keen does not deploy creative responses to empathy the way I do, she 'explores' the technicalities of narrative empathy in the novel. Rather than theorising how empathy works, I write creatively in response to empathy, showing different forms, styles, and techniques in my thesis, to reflect Dolly's life. By creating empathic connections with Dolly and other patients in my collection of poetry I can develop an informed fictionalised account of what asylum life could have been like: this gives my writing a stronger creative, and empathic impact to create speculative biographical poetry.

In June 2017 I visited Basel University, Switzerland for a conference on 'Empathy'. This was of great importance to my research as 'empathy' stands firmly within the core of my writing. I attended workshops and presented my work in the form of prose and a selection of poetry. I received positive feedback from other inter-disciplinary presenters: "Giving Dolly a voice was of great importance, allowing women to have their voices heard," and "A beautiful empathic response" was another comment, which gave me renewed focus and confidence in my work with Dolly.

In Basel I attended lectures by scientists who studied empathy and its effects on the brain. This was the theme of a lot of the guest speakers, who were scientists. While this was interesting, I found myself overwhelmed by so much discussion around atoms in the brain. Apart from the poet Denise Riley, who read from her collection on the last evening, I didn't meet any other creative writers who were using empathy the way I am.

Professor Richard Gerigg is a psychologist who studies narrative empathy in laboratory settings and the author of *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On Psychological Activities of Reading*. He states:

Poetry is good at high levels of imagery, inviting mental stimulation and immersion, that dispose readers to make subjective reports of being transported or of having left the real world behind when visiting narrative worlds (1993, p. 157).

An example of being 'transported' within my poetry is when Dolly goes 'Somewhere in her Mind' in the poem, **1931**. This poem can relate to anyone who experiences mental health challenges and allows the reader to understand when the 'mind' wanders, and how poetry has given us the ability to wander ourselves at times.

I empathise with Dolly's situation, by drawing on my own experiences (including empathy for my mum). Then I translate this empathy via poetry into an invitation for the reader to empathise with Dolly, themselves, and anyone else who might be similarly affected. It is complex and multilayered, like an onion skin.

Martha Nussbaum is one of the most ardent defenders of the empathy altruism hypothesis as it relates to the literature on empathy. Her ideas support my work by

focusing on 'the possible' and sensitizing readers to the predicaments of others, thus attuning them to appropriate ethical responses, literature not only improves perception but also invites readers to wonder about themselves (Nussbaum, 2005, p. 5).

Nussbaum suggests that when people feel a high level of empathy for others, they are motivated to help them increase the welfare of those who have less empathy.

In Politics of Empathy, Anthony M. Clohesy argues that “empathy can make us more receptive to the transformative power of art, which, in return, can make us more empathically attuned to the lives of others” (Clohesy, 2013, p.160). I agree that empathy can make us more receptive, as this kind of attunement is necessary as it allows us to embrace diversity, by inviting us to walk in another’s shoes. This is a metaphor I have used when asking people to metaphorically ‘be in her shoes’ to empathise with Dolly because shoes are the person’s circumstances.

Discussing the relationship between empathy and narrative perspective, Mary-Catherine Harrison states,

While the first component of empathy can be automatic or involuntary, higher-order empathy involves a causal relationship between perspective-taking and emotion: we imagine ‘what it would be like’ to be the other, and subsequently come to ‘feel with’ or share their emotions (Harrison, 2011, p. 256).

Both Keen and Harrison stress the importance of creating a connection to the character and sharing their emotions.

The third-person responses to Dolly/Mum/and other women allow my empathic connections. Flexibility in perspective as a poet writing in the third person cultivates empathy, as it allows me to get close as an observer and pick out the details as in the objective correlative (to be discussed later). This kind of attunement allows me to evoke empathy by placing the reader into Dolly’s world, using my imagination as a hinge between the past and the present and the opportunity to write about Dolly’s life. The use of a third person close perspective to enter Dolly’s possible experiences has been a key enabling strategy for me.

Katie Gallant and Alison Eagles consider narrative perspective in their article “First-Person Vs. Third-Person”:

It may seem that getting inside the mind of a character and experiencing a story from their perspective [first person] would produce higher levels of empathy, yet this is not always the case. Stories told from a third-person perspective may allow the reader to take on a more omnipresent role than a first-person narrative. Similarly, O’Connell (2011) argues that a third-person

narration may advance a reader's empathy, instead of reading a self-centered story, third-person narratives may offer the reader a variety of characters' perspectives, furthering their chance to develop empathy (2020).

I have found that writing about Dolly's life in the third-person perspective allows me to 'move inside Dolly's mind' giving me flexible perspectives as I appear to know what she is thinking, also with the other characters, including my Mum. I knew how she was feeling as 'I repeated her words, over and over in my head.' 'I want to go home.' 'I want to go home.'

Mum had occasions where she responded angrily. This was an out-of-character emotion provoked by her situation, and by being in the dementia unit, unable to leave. Like Dolly's freedom, taken the day she was admitted to Lancaster Moor Asylum. Harrison postulates that the "narrator plays a powerful role in evoking readers' empathy... including free indirect discourse/ narrated monologue and narrative omniscience that moves inside the character's minds" (2011. p.261). This reference to the third person close perspective of free indirect resonates my approach to writing with empathy, and the narratorial commentary to shape readers' empathy.

Geri Giebel Chavis states that "Poems form noteworthy juxtapositions between the reader's world and the world created in the literary work" (2003, 165). Chavis believes that poems can invite readers to compare and look at the different aspects of their lives to develop a better understanding of empathy, and how 'juxtapositions' are a powerful device that can make poems more interesting, as the poet creates vivid images between different elements of their poems (as will be noted in the later discussions of Hall, Dickinson, and Ali).

In *Poetry and Story Therapy*, Chavis shows an example of this is, in the poem 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' by William Wordsworth, in which the poet juxtaposes his loneliness with the crowd of daffodils he sees. She explains how the poet contrasts his loneliness with the crowd of daffodils, and how this contrast helps him find joy and comfort in nature. She also states that poems like this can lead to self-awareness and empathy (2003, p.5).

There is also a resonance and similar technique in the poem "Metro" by Pound, which will be explored more fully in a later section. Pound uses juxtaposition so that the potentially alienating crowd of commuters becomes "petals on a wet, black bough"- an appealing and uplifting image. I have felt connected to other poets who write poems that engage empathy, as I am doing, writing about situations in Dolly's life. I discovered poets who use similar approaches. Often, they adopt the genre of elegy and thematize empathy directly as their

speakers respond to the mental state of their characters. One example is in Catriona O'Reilly's poem 'Leaven' from her collection *Geis* (2015, pp. 25-30). I felt drawn to the opening images in the first three lines of her poem:

Leaven

An old lady
Wanders
A lost comet.

I thought of Dolly and couldn't resist writing in response to O'Reilly's poem. I continued writing, as I felt emotionally connected to what I wrote next, and the language I shared to describe Dolly's wanderings:

Her eyes glazed
hiding stars
behind each lid,
"Her wanderings"
In and out
between
day and night
filling the gaps.
An equator of time.
Isolation
disorders of the mind
cramped spaces
confine the elasticity
of her lungs, her heart
her voice, her throat, her thoughts.
She endeavours to speak
above the angst crowd of patients
trying
to collect their pots
of potency, prescriptions
for the night shift
carefully counted.
A combination of hopelessness
a tide
she wishes to paddle in and feel
the sand and sea, to elope to the other
side.
She sinks back
heavy under the stale breath of defeat
and returns to her chair

stares beyond the green walls
to the open space across the moor.

This is an example of how reading the first few lines of a poem enabled me to continue with my own interpretation, instinctively, connecting to Dolly, as if she was the old lady, and how she felt, wandering *a lost comet*. Something small, frail, and unimportant becomes a cosmic body, blazing through the sky. We see a poet working with scale (very small and very big) and melding the elemental with the feminine /domestic.

My writing about the lost comet shows my empathic response, an instinctive technique that answers what Dolly wants and needs, which I have captured in the additional lines of her poem. My poems and the lyrical interludes throughout my thesis form a bond between Dolly, myself, and my Mum. Autobiographical references fuse the poems by showing similarities in behaviour between my Mum and Dolly, and how my nursing experiences have enabled this connection and empathic response. Being open to these processes is the key mechanism to my writing about Dolly's life.

Keen refers to this as “an ambassadorial strategic empathy, which addresses distant others to overcome both similarity and here-and-now bias” (2011. p,370). With Dolly, I am representing her, being an ambassador to address her life in Lancaster Moor Asylum throughout this thesis, with the empathic responses my poetry creates. My poetry connects to the past, as the research permits poetic language to govern the creative process, linking poems through lyrical expression.

Novelist Arnold Zable describes what happens during his research process:

No matter how much detail the writer accumulates, there comes a point when he is depicting a place and time that he has never experienced, and he must enter the minds and shoes of the characters and allow them to take him into the unknown (Zable, 2016, p.12).

Furthermore, Keen's theory of narrative empathy elaborates on the uses to which real authors/narrative artists put their human empathy in imaginative character creation, and other aspects of worldmaking as well as theorizing readers' responses (2006, P.14). Zable and Keen confirm my opinion that inviting readers to walk in Dolly's shoes allows a stronger empathic response to be evoked through my writing. Ian Beesley also confirms how Dolly's grief was prominent until she died aged 100, rocking in her chair. I empathise with how she was

feeling; my first-hand experience with geriatric patients and then my mum helps me to empathise this way.

While there is much research needed on how empathy works, a recent article by Carolina Fernandez-Quintanilla offers a useful summary of what we know and how we can use it as creative writers. Fernandez-Quintanilla

Considers empathy as a highly flexible and context-dependant phenomenon and suggests the need for a nuanced approach that accommodates the complex interaction between textual and reader factors in reading context (2020, pp.124-146).

The above article attempts to sum up this section, as empathy is an extremely broad subject, that I could not possibly discuss comprehensively within the scope of this thesis. Instead, I have tried to summarise the most relevant points. I have discussed key theories of empathy in literature and how writing creatively has allowed me to develop an empathic response to Dolly's life in the asylum.

Literature: Women: Madness

This section discusses literature that has influenced my writing, and how I engage with these authors to evaluate their work and situate my research in a wider critical and creative context. I include authors who write about women in asylums, including Victorian women's literature, and poets who wrote from behind the walls of the asylum. I concentrate on texts that discuss women and madness.

Lucy King gives an interestingly positive account of life in an asylum, 'Of how crucial it was for the disordered and disturbed, to have the order and predictability of an asylum' (King, 2013, p. 42). Her account of Anna Agnew in *From Under the Cloud at Seven Steeples: 1878-1885* describes a path the mental health profession took in the nineteenth century. An increase in Lunatic Asylums was needed, as the number of patients requiring treatment had risen. Anna Agnew suffered a mental breakdown and had become paranoid, threatening to kill her children and husband. She did recover, and lived with her sister on release, suffered a stroke, and died in 1907, aged 63.

Mary Huestis' *Diary Written in the Provincial Lunatic Asylum* (2006) gives a true-life account of a lady who spent a short time in an asylum. The main theme was that of keeping warm. She tampers with the radiator in her room when nobody is about and takes control of the fire in the lounge when allowed; stoking the coal for extra warmth for those who wanted it. Huestis' description of her life and illness is poetic and fascinating as she inserts short biographies of the various people she meets, allowing the reader close contact with the story.

These works have had a considerable influence on my practice and offered insight into asylum life. I was reminded of a poem that I had written, that fits within this discussion. I wrote the following poem after reading Heustis's diary; I made notes, imagining Dolly in similar situations. I kept thinking about the coal fire and as a child trying to keep warm huddled in front of the fire with my siblings; this shred memory of seeking warmth connected me to her work.

Distortion

Distortion of a different kind.
A different mind.
Time changes
through the sweeping of the floor
after an escape.
Distortion
takes away the memory
the disfiguration of the way

they spent time surveying the minds
of others
an empty cup
BANGED loudly on a sterile
table
aluminium steel.

I found distinct similarities in Catharine Arnold's novel, *Bedlam* (2009). It is a fascinating journey through the cadavers of London's history that left a yearning for more information about asylums. This book shows me a different approach to writing a narrative about life in an asylum and a view of how hard times were. Arnold explores it well historically, and with the same compassion Lucy King and other female writers do because they show empathy towards their subjects.

This led me to think about themes and how important such simple ones can be, and how the authors achieved this through descriptions of the situations patients found themselves in. I imagined Dolly sitting in the parlour trying to keep warm. These resources have led me to reflect on the material conditions of the asylum, as I write instinctively, describing daily life, mealtimes, baths, treatments, activities, seasons, and much more.

I have taken inspiration from a wide range of sources, as a direct correlation between the emotional states of Dolly and the other patients. Their identification stamp is firmly impregnated across the 'Moor' of Lancaster and beyond as the *bells toll* another figure lies *shackled between the wet soils of an unmarked grave*, because 'they are deemed different' they were left 'unheard' voices, forgotten. I have attempted to create a landscape for Dolly to reside in.

I looked at other texts that document asylum life, notably Claire Dudman's novel *98 Reasons for Being* (2005) which introduces us to the question of food and what patients ate. Certain foods were of better quality for the patients who had money. The poor patients ate food with almost non-existent flavour, a slippery mush on their plates.

This made me think of Dolly and the food they had, some good and bad. I visualised a patient who was creative with his food before it went into his mouth and when it came back out. He touched his potato so much it was an avalanche melting. It became a liquid, as he tilted his plate, sucking on the metal rim to catch the juices, his teeth serrating the edge of the enamel plate.

I found the following quote after I had written the above paragraph and thought how appropriate it was. "Words form pictures in the air. I do not listen. Instead, I watch them thicken, spread out, one scene then the next, like the clouds" (Dudman, 2005. p. 9). 'Thicken'

made me think of the mashed potato, and ‘clouds.’ This brings me back to metaphors, which I will discuss in other sections of this thesis. Metaphor and imagination form a close bond with the ability to create a scene, a drama, and a description of something I was reminded of.

Hazel Smith states in *The Writing Experiment* that “Once you become used to experimenting with structures, you can start to invent your own by juggling the elements of the text and bending them in every direction” (Smith, 2005, P. 48). I agree with Smith. Once you begin ‘experimenting with structure’ and putting into practice the lessons learned, your writing will create a life of its own. I chose to structure a collection around the years that Dolly spent in the asylum after researching the year Van Gogh spent in St. Paul. Mausoleum (as will be discussed later). I thought about his ‘one year, and Dolly’s 84 years’ and felt how important this structure could be.

This made me more determined to be adventurous within my writing, by creating a narrative that *wakes up the senses, to feel the walls of the asylum see the writing on the toilet walls, see the ghosts in the laundry, folding and unfolding the sheets at night, shuffling between wards.*

In contrast, the powerful account of ‘Women of the Asylum’ *Voices from Behind the Walls (1840-1945)* depicts the asylum as a place of punishment, rather than a place of cure. Phyllis Chesler (1994) wrote the foreword and in her study, she comments about the well-known authors who had been hospitalised, to name but two: Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. These women had been psychiatrically labelled as mad. I continued to delve into the world of ‘women and madness’ as the authors write descriptively and empathically towards vulnerable women. Here, for example, is an excerpt from Sylvia Plath’s poem, “Tulips” (lines 29, 30,36,37, and 38):

Tulips

I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper, I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.

Collected Poems (1981).

Plath wrote this poem following an appendicectomy, “scared and bare”, she meditates on the medical model of health and the vulnerability of the female body. She sees the tulips as

disturbing her peace, breathing living things, they convey a mixture of emotions, a life she is trying to escape from. I discuss another poem of Plath's in the 'Observation' section, which discusses 'Mirrors' and female visual elements.

Anne Sexton is also a poet whom I have acknowledged, as in 1955 she suffered post-partum depression after the birth of her first daughter and was admitted to psychiatric institutes. In 1957 Sexton wrote her first book, *To Bedlam and Part way back* (1960). I discuss her poetry further in the 'Art in the Asylum' section of the thesis and her connection with the artist Van Gogh, who also features, as I discuss the time he spent in an asylum in France.

I have noted briefly here the poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who both suffered nervous breakdowns and spent time in Psychiatric institutions. Plath wrote *The Bell Jar*, a novel about a young woman called Esther, who is depressed, she feels like she is trapped under a bell jar. The novel is generally accepted to contain reflections of Plath's own life events, and written in response to the treatment for her mental health. Her account shows her struggling with the leftover scars bubbling to the surface.

Other literary resonances include *The Snake Pit*: a novel by Mary Jane Ward inspired Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey (1975). There are striking similarities where, for example, 'patients wear each other's clothes'. I acknowledge these works, but make it clear I reached my material via personal experience, when nursing I witnessed patients' behaviour, and in the dementia unit, other residents would wear Mum's clothes, and those clothes would then disappear in the laundry. Triangulating my work with these published works enables me to put it into context.

Another account of a young woman in a psychiatric institution is Susanna Kaysen's novel, *Girl Interrupted*. (1967). This is based on her own depression and personality disorder, where she spent two years in McLean Hospital, renowned for famous patients such as Sexton and Plath. These works link together to create a context for my writing and highlight mental health and the problems women face.

I discuss later the 'Fallen Women' but note here for context that part of my research involved discovering an exhibition at the Foundling Museum, London from 2015-2016. It focused on the myth and reality of the 'fallen woman' in Victorian Britain. Another exhibition, 'Threads of Feeling' showed the tokens women left with their babies when they had to give them up. These will be discussed in a later section of this thesis, as I attempt to show the connection between these women and Dolly, through the shared loss of their babies. I was affected by the stories of the women, and the tokens influenced by the painting that

depicts a young woman throwing herself off Westminster Bridge. I have created several poems that show my empathic response that are discussed later in this thesis.

I have included women authors/poets who wrote to highlight the oppression of women in the nineteenth century. Because Dolly was admitted to the asylum in the early 20th century, I needed to understand the histories, attitudes, and precedents that led to her situation. Groundbreaking authors including C.P Gilman who penned “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Elizabeth Gaskell with her novel *Ruth* are acknowledged here.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is a short story, that was first published in *The New England magazine* 11.5 (January 1892): 647-57). It was published again in 1973 by Small, Maynard, Boston. The narrative is a first-person account of a young mother’s mental deterioration as she suffers from postpartum depression, after the birth of her son. It suggests her mood swings, and inability to cope with the sadness. She moves to a country house with her family and is prescribed a rest cure, of cruel solitude in a room that had once been a nursery. She is unable to see her young son and begins to see patterns and the shape of a woman that moves behind the yellow wallpaper.

The narrator, who is imprisoned by the male-dominated culture of 19th century, middle-class America, and by the confines of the isolated upstairs bedroom of an isolated country estate, projects the image of a prison onto the design of the wallpaper in the room that serves as her physical prison. In her furtive writings, the narrator states that “it is the pattern that keeps her so still” (Kirsznner & Mandell, 2010, p.467). The circles and shapes, along with the woman, creep about at night, trying to escape. In turn, she tries to remove the sections of wallpaper she can reach, as she wants to set the woman free. She believes that once the wallpaper has all been removed, the woman is free.

In another study on “The Yellow Wallpaper” in *Arizona Quarterly*, Greg Johnson explains that:

This story also addresses how physicians, specifically world-famous neurologist S. Weir Mitchell, viewed mental illness in female patients at the end of the nineteenth century. Psychologists frequently dismissed serious illness like depression as nothing more than hysteria or a ‘case of nerves’. He believed that any form of intellectual activity was detrimental to women’s health (1989, Vol.47. pp.81-93).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is an example of psychological realism because it attempts to portray the mental torture of the woman, while the complex symbolism leads readers to consider the thematic depths of the woman’s suffering. In 1926, Gilman makes a statement, regarding her work in general, “One girl reads this, and takes fire! Her life had changed. She becomes a power--- I write for her.” (1926). Gilman supports women’s agency by making this statement.

The novel *Ruth* by Elizabeth Gaskell was first published in three volumes in 1853 and is set in London. Ruth is a young orphan girl, who works as a dressmaker’s apprentice. It is a passionate portrayal of a ‘Fallen woman’ and displays the stigma attached to having an illegitimate child. Ruth didn’t have to give up her child, but her life was not an easy one. The front cover image used for the edition of *Ruth* by Penguin Classics (1998). It was also used as the front cover of the programme for the exhibition at the Foundlings Museum (2015-2016). The image is reproduced in a later section.

We will never know fully how these women felt on the streets of London, or how they coped and if they found refuge, but it came at the cost of giving up the only precious gift they had: their babies. Many never survived on the streets. These works hold prominent positions in 19th Century women’s studies, along with other literature already mentioned, regarding women in asylums.

Chapter Two

Statement of Poetics

This is an exploration of and reflection on the use of poetry in my thesis, and what poetry can achieve as a research method. As a concept, poetics is how creative writers talk about their practice within an academic context. In *The Necessity of Poetics*, Robert Sheppard states: “Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and others, speculatively casting into the future” (Sheppard, 2011). I am reflecting on the process of representing Dolly’s life through a collection of 84 poems. A poem a year shows, through the interpretation of events, poetry’s potential to illuminate personal expression of lived experiences. Marginalised women like Dolly were institutionalised through no fault of their own. The raw grief and loss of their babies, taken from them, held tight to Dolly, through each emotion, mental and physical as she rocked in her chair, crying out for her baby, hearing his footsteps at night.

Finding the black-and-white photograph of Dolly stimulated a memory from my own experience as a nurse in London. I was reminded of a lady called Alice, who had been a patient in the geriatric unit of the small hospital, next door to the tube station at Hampstead Heath, London. It belonged to the newly built Royal Free Hospital where I did my nurse training. Alice would escape from the ward, and be found searching the underground at night, looking for her brother. This prompted me to write the following poem:

The Last Train

I had seen her before
at a station in Hampstead.
The lift shaft dropped into

a blackened pit of rattling cogs
and rat holes. Her floral nightdress
fluttered beneath, breezes baring her legs
to the commuters late home from work.

The last train. She carried a handkerchief
edged in pink with a nursery rhyme
and the lost sheep, as Little Bo-Peep
turned over in her hands, bruised shiny
skin crept along her arms towards her wrists.

‘Harold, where are you?’

her voice sharp, 'get back here now,
Mother will tan yer hide.'

The static from her pale blue nylon
quilted housecoat crackled as she
shuffled her feet along the platform.
The heels worn down on her once
crushed velvet slippers, tapping

to break free from the people
crowding her, talking non-stop
and pushing her. She twisted
her body, a coldness wedged
in the corners of her eyes.

I touched her arm, feeling
the agitated bones beneath
the material. She let me link
arms with her, taking her back
up the hill.
Her name was Alice.

This transition in and out of poetic modes of expression has become a key feature of my reflective and critical practice. Connecting to a memory from my past allows me to access an emotional space where I respond poetically to other lives. The above poem was the precursor to the methodology for my PhD as my first experience of this mode of writing. I felt the need to respond poetically to Dolly and the lost experience of a marginalised individual, as my collection of poetry attempts to represent Dolly's life.

Gillie Bolton, in *Reflective Practice*, comments that

Poetry is an exploration of our deepest and most intimate experiences,
thoughts and feelings and insights: distilled, pared to succinctness, and made
music to the ear by lyricism, gaining insight from the image, particular
metaphor (Bolton, 2014, p.95).

The exploration and expression of poetry is paramount, as I make use of metaphor to highlight the hidden life of Dolly, and women in asylums lost for all these years. Also, sharing my experiences of living with Mum's dementia is of great importance, as it brings my writing to the present day.

This type of first-hand experience is a form of method writing, where I try living in the world of my character. The Urban Dictionary defines a ‘method writer’ as “an author who uses a technique of *writing* in which he/she identifies emotionally with a character in the story and assumes that character’s persona in the telling” (1999-2021). Thomas Hodgkinson set up a method writing group to promote this approach to writing. When he began writing his novel *Memoirs of a Stalker*, he hid himself in a cupboard at home to experience feelings of confinement, estrangement, and isolation (Method Writing: Hodgkinson, 2016).

Method writing is something I have been doing instinctively from the beginning of this project, as I have experienced the physical elements of embodied research, shuffling along corridors. I visited the abandoned Lancaster Moor Asylum; although I was unable to enter the buildings, I was able to imagine myself inside, which enabled me to pick out the finer details of historical research and present them creatively. These details are communicated through the following poetry:

Under Construction

I hear and smell the pigeon’s feet rushing up the stairs, their tail feathers tapping at the metal rungs of the spiral staircase.

I touch the roughly rendered walls and wonder what is hidden underneath.

What gaping holes and paintings have been kept are preserved beyond the internal walls.

The murals, the figures now have their coats on and are leaving, surely you can’t demolish something so historical.

I smell hope with a tinge of sadness, that’s creeping around me every moment it can.

Pear drops and aniseed balls linger above the spot where I stand.

I feel an escape route is planned for some time soon.

This is an excerpt of a longer piece of writing about a visit to Lancaster Moor Asylum.

In *The Writing Cooperative*, Marta Brzosko discusses how:

Poetry is the only form of writing that touches primarily on the emotional spectrum of human experience, rather than communicating via mental constructs. It enables the writer to share her emotional message directly with the reader, without having to rely on the intermediary form of an intellectual argument or a story (Brzosko, 2019, para.14).

I agree with Brzosko: writing poetry is an effective way to connect emotionally, which supports the way I am writing about Dolly's life in the asylum. Poetry can connect empathically with Dolly as I attempt to reconstruct asylum life, throughout my poetry collection, and in the poetry that erupts in my thesis, italicised.

My poems are made from untold tales, missing shoes, and unravelled thoughts, like a button that has fallen from your coat.

During the time I was at Liverpool John Moore's University doing my creative writing degree, one of the first modules that opened my imagination was 'Observation and Discovery.' Walking around the Victorian quarter in Liverpool enabled the beginning of some interesting writing, and something I grew to develop everywhere I went. There is a section of the thesis designated to 'observation' because it is an important element of my writing, in all areas, especially when writing poetry as I observe daily life, which allows me to experiment, through imagery and sensory details.

I am writing poetry because it allows me to use metaphors, similes, and forms that wander freely. Poetry gives an explanation in a particular way, that evaluates events through description and detail. This enables me to show how I can use poetry to create lost experiences by offering an imaginative solution to a knowledge gap, as originality lies in the combination of research, content, and poetic technique.

Poetry has the ability through use of language to convey the emotions behind their last footsteps, trodden on the ground that holds histories of war, and secrets of the past. In making the collection about Dolly's life, the following poems did not fit, so I have chosen to include them here to emphasise their subject's vulnerability and how the process of creating Dolly's possible lived experiences might work for other silenced subjects.

In a Soldier's Pocket

The paper folded grew tired
read over and over, the same
words crawling around his head
like an out-of-date dictionary
repeated consonants repeated
numbers, dates, and times of when
he would be going home. His ticket
hidden beneath his best-recycled memories.

Underneath

He hides underneath his bed, jet black tufts of hair
catch on the metal springs of the bedstead. A smoke-filled sky,
gaps of streetlights, smell of sulphur, and ringing in his ears.
His reddened face, skin crusted and sore, his lips bleeding.
Scorched, burning, he had been in France at war, now his own battle
in Lancaster. The effects of the war-scarred his face and torso. Shell shock at just eighteen a –
fallen soldier. Dolly had seen him at the main gate being led into a room, his body shaking
frantically between his sobs, he wouldn't look at anyone or speak, just sobbed.

‘I tried to stop the noise, the smoke, the banging in my head. Make it stop. They are torturing me, inside my head rattlesnakes are rummaging.’

Dolly heard a scream before silence spread like a coldness.

Droplets of dreams fed through a straw, a slow measure of life holding onto the strands of hair twisted around the brass buttons of his uniform.

The finer details of historical research, atmosphere, place, and language are working to enable the effects that I create in the above poems. The first poem, “In a Soldier’s Pocket”, was prompted by thinking about when my dad used to write to my mum when he was serving in the army in Egypt in the 1950’s, before they were married. It also made me think about all the letters Mum wrote to my brother when he was around the world with the Royal Navy; he always looked forward to Mum’s letters. I also received letters while I was away in London, nursing; they were my lifeline.

The second poem, “Underneath”, was prompted while researching shell shock, and how Mum told me about my grandfather who had also been in the Army. He had suffered from shell shock, which badly affected his skin. Sadly, I never met him. ‘The brass buttons of his uniform’ gave me the image of my grandfather, and then in civilian life, as a station master on the railways. The ‘brass buttons’ Mum said she used to love to polish.

The third poem, “Stone in his Shoe”, I consider to be relevant, through the use of the ‘small’ detail.

Stone in his Shoe

He carried it with him for miles,
too many
to remember
within each step
he took.
It had joined him at the first border
like a spy,
drawing blood and watching
his every move.
He stumbled and almost
lost it,
but it clung to the roof
of his shoe
carving its initials on the rough
leather.
And through the heather
a purple
breath of air joined it rolling

together
they continued. At the second
border he was forced to stop.
The stone in his shoe,
grew silent,
still, now a prisoner like him.

I have included the poem ‘Stone in his Shoe’ in my poetics because the small details are relevant to my writing. Creative biographers talk about the “revelatory details”; a technique I use within the collection of poetry.

In *Creating a Spiritual Legacy: How to Share Your Stories, Values, and Wisdom*, Daniel Taylor states that:

A revelatory or significant or luminous detail provides immediate insight into a person or situation or event. It may seem small, even insignificant, but for the perceptive reader it reveals something (Taylor, 2011, p. 129).

Taylor’s point connects to my poetic practice when he discusses ‘revelatory detail’ providing an instant image of events, as a poetic image is not just visual but an activation of the senses, evoked by physical details, as with the brass buttons, letters, and stone in his shoes, as examples.

The writing in this thesis breaks new ground because no one has written about Dolly’s life before, as my poems inhabit a selection of perspectives, interpreting a broad source of material in response to history, and chronicling people’s possible lived experiences. It seems as though I am creating possible experiences and characters for Dolly to respond to. In order to give Dolly these imagined experiences, I imagine those people and their lives, moving beyond Dolly’s own life story to give her a populated world in which to exist. I have been doing this by including Dolly’s grandfather and mentioning his cat, Majestic, at the theatre. Dolly interacts with patients in poems in the collection, this adds to creating the community she resided in.

My poems speak explicitly about Dolly’s experience. Some are like jigsaws that have the corners missing; the biographical researcher can never know enough. My poems can point to what we don’t/can’t know by outlining the missing pieces of the jigsaw. Are these missing pieces part of the research I couldn’t pursue? Dolly’s medical records? But would finding her medical records have changed the way I have written about her life? Yes, it would have

certainly changed the way I write because there would be more facts, instead of the way I have written imaginatively.

Because I have used my nursing experiences, living with Mum's dementia, and through research, my imagination has enabled creative writing, as a hinge to the past. Imagination has given me so much, surreal at times, and the opportunity to interpret diverse research material, as well as to bridge gaps in the evidence. In his book chapter "Biography and Research Method" (1998, p11), Michael Erben cites Kant on imagination:

Imagination is the vehicle the researcher employs to aid the recognition of significant moments in the data, to relate these to each other and to the overall lives of the subjects under study. In other words, imagination very often both fills the gaps within, and develops an architecture for, the research data. [...] It is unfortunate that the employment of imagination has been played down or ignored in works on social science method. This is a profound mistake because it lies at the centre of qualitative interpretation and is so implicated in epistemology as to be of its essence: 'without it', says Kant 'we have no knowledge whatsoever' (Kant, 1963, p. 103).

I agree imagination is overlooked in many fields of research, and yet imagination is key to writing creatively and developing empathy.

This section of the thesis has delved into the poetics and my reflection on relevant poetry, including poems that did not fit into the collection. I have focused on locating specific details through imagination, and how writing a poetry collection has allowed me to connect emotionally and empathetically. The next section of the thesis explores the use of metaphor in poetry and how it enhances each poem.

Poetic Devices: Metaphor

Metaphors appeal to the senses by the direct use of language and can have an emotional effect, creating empathy. By bringing two unrelated elements into a comparison, metaphors can add creativity and clarity to my writing. David Ritchie discusses the way “Metaphor” has been variously defined in terms of substituting one word for another word with a different meaning, comparing one idea to another, or creating an implicit analogy or simile. For example, the *Oxford English Learner’s Dictionary (unabridged)* defines metaphor as both transfer and analogy: “the figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different form, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable” (Ritchie, 2013, p.4).

Going beyond the more traditional definitions, Kenneth Burke (1945) defined metaphor as “a device for seeing something in terms of something else.” Yanow (2008) defines metaphor as:

the juxtaposition of two superficially unlike elements in a single context, where the separately understood meanings of both interact to create a new perception of each and especially of the focus of the metaphor (cited in Ritchie, 2013, p.6).

These precise elements in poetry are what adds texture to the writing, creating perspectives that sit distinctively within each piece of writing.

I discovered other women writers who also use metaphors distinctively as a way of expressing their experiences. The poet Hazel Hall, born in Minnesota in 1866, wrote from the confines of her room. During her short career, she became a poet whose compelling poetry has been compared to that of Emily Dickinson. John Witte, editor of Halls’s poetry collection states: ‘Hall’s writing conveys the dark undertones of the lives of working women, while bringing the focus into her reclusive life - her limited mobility, her isolation and loneliness, her gifts with needlework and words’ (Witte, 2020, p. xvi). Confined to a wheelchair since childhood, Hall viewed life from the window of an upper room in her family's house in Portland, Oregon. To better observe passersby on the sidewalk, she positioned a small mirror on her windowsill. Her use of metaphors is precisely crafted into a set of poems.

While Hall sewed, she began to write poetry, using metaphors to convey the emotions she felt, from the windows she stared out of. From *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall* (2020), I have included excerpts from three of her poems to demonstrate this technique in detail.

Two Sewing

The wind is sewing with needles of rain,
with shining needles of rain
it stitches into the thin
cloth of earth. In,
In, in, in.
Oh, the wind has often sewed with me.
One, two, three.

(Hall. p. 68)

I have included the first seven lines of her *Two Sewing* poem, because of how her poetry connects with my use of thread/cloth. Hall's use of metaphors suggests that needles of rain take a very small, domestic tool and meld it via metaphor with the elemental non-human rain. Something tiny becomes something huge. The 'wind sewing' feminises the wind. This feminisation of the elements may speak to the physical confines of Halls's world and how metaphor allows her to expand into a much bigger space.

Heavy Threads

When the dawn unfolds like a bolt of ribbon
thrown through my window,
I know that hours of light
are about to thrust themselves at me
like omnivorous needles into listless cloth,
threaded with the heavy colours of the sun.
They seem altogether too eager,
to embroider this thing of mine.

(Hall. p. 58)

"Heavy Threads" is a poem Hall crafted from behind glass, the reflection of a mirror, and her window. Her use of metaphors shines, like the powerful sunlight forcing itself on her, the 'omnivorous needles' feasting on the cloth, 'eager' to sew her with its heavy thread.

I felt emotionally connected with the 'human' need to connect to the past as the metaphor of *fabric* goes back to the Latin word *faber* for human contact. *Dolly unravelled her thoughts through a hole in her cardigan*. By commemorating Dolly's life, I am connecting intuitively, stitch by stitch as Halls's poem "Stitches", seems appropriate to how I am unravelling Dolly's life, *stitch by stitch*.

Stitches

Life-threaded hours.

Purpose that wraps

fine stitch on fine stitch-

then ravel...and snaps.

(Hall. p. 45)

I write back in response to Hall's words, with the following poem:

The years tick away like the grieving fingers of a clock, as I feel her presence, and sit watching the stitches fall at her feet.

Dolly

dropped

stitches they fell between

the red cotton bleeding,

she misjudged the hole

falling backward and beyond

the bookmark

each cross marked

her fingertips

ruby red.

My poems make use of threads as metaphors, like a backstitch, or a blanket stitch keeping me warm. Discovering women poets like Hall creates a link with my own poetry, and how I make use of metaphors in my poems. 'Unpicked' is an example. This was written several years ago before I thought intentionally of metaphors to create an embroidery of words.

Unpicked

She gathered the hem of her smock
carefully unpicking any stray strands
of grey and blue feline cotton. Her twisted
fingers

touched

each stitch of embroidery,

blossoming floral tribute.

She unties the last piece of unborn thread

and lets go of the cloth, it falls beyond

her knees crowd the top of her ankles.

A curtain beyond the stage, now a backdrop

to hide, and cultivate, each daily coloured

contour, scratched and itched into submission.

Carved into an ordnance of creations.

I have found that writing about Dolly's life is more than facts and figures, or diaries of events. It is about feeling inside the pocket of a person's life and pulling out their story piece by piece. As Norman K. Denzin suggests:

A life, it is assumed, is cut of whole cloth, and in its many pieces, with careful scrutiny, can be fitted into proper place, but this writing of a life, Sartre suggests, like Stein, is constantly being created as it is written. Hence the meanings of the pieces change as new patterns form (Denzin, 1989, p. 27).

It has been my intention to unpick Dolly's life and piece it back together, as I discuss everyday life, themes of cloth, stitches, and unborn thread, which feature in the poem 'Unpicked.' I imagined Dolly sitting picking at her smock. I also mention stitches/sewing/knitting in other poems, connecting my poems in response to other poets.

I was interested to then discover *Weaving Metaphors from Textiles*, by Wendy Anderson (2015). Anderson argues: "There's no escaping dress and textiles. From birth to death, they are the literal fabric of people's lives" (2015, p. 45). There appears to be a lineage of women writers using the metaphor of threads and fabrics, that I am identifying and drawing on here, as I examine their poetry and use of metaphor.

This refers back to my statement about 'fabric' and how it lends itself to the need for human contact. It is a huge part of what I am writing about with Dolly, it is the internal 'dialogue' because of my initial writing about her baby's blanket, which she kept hidden, until it was stolen, and lost. Something of those fibres, threads she could no longer hold resonated with me, the loss, and emotions she clung to instead:

*Her hands and fingers twiddled mid-air,
twitching through the night as Dolly
knitted him a new blanket. I watched her loop,
spinning her hands around in circles, between
rocking and humming, each stitch was a message.
I felt entwined within the layers of her past.*

I felt knitted/sewn into the fabrics worn by the women who were confined to asylums, as the comparative study *Women of the Asylum: Voices from Behind the Walls 1840-1945* provides chilling accounts of women who had been incarcerated against their will, gives an insight into their lives, influences my thoughts to reflect in my writing. It is the year of 1861 that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton reflect on, as they write:

Could the dark secrets of the asylum be brought to light...we would be shocked to know the countless number of rebellious wives, sisters, and daughters that are thus annually sacrificed to false customs and conventionalisms, and barbarous laws made by men for women (1994: xvii).

I felt so close, a stitch, a breath away, as these traumas unfold the experiences, to clarify aspects of women's lives in the asylum, and their day-to-day drudgery. My imagination is a hinge between the past and the present, as I attempt to construct glimpses, to paint a picture of asylum life. The following poem is one of my early works, an example of imaginative research, and how it can evoke life in the asylum. *Name/number/lost/behind/walls/losing themselves in the noise*.

Barefoot

Wings clipped.
Shoes lost.
Name stamped across every item--
Ripples through their perm-less hair
cuts through them like a craft knife,
they cannot stand the NOISE.
The constant buzzing
from calls for help
ears ringing, lost aids,
they fight back,
wrapped in an envelope without
a window
brown paper
Tight string-
Dolly's world
how tight, she felt that pull of string.

The wings in this poem could be described as a metaphor for the restrictions the patients felt, behind the walls of the asylum, clipped wings, and confinement.

Emily Dickinson was one of two leading 19th-century American poets, alongside Walt Whitman, between 1830-1886. Much of her writing, both poetry and epistolary, seems premised on a feeling of abandonment, as she tries to overcome and reflect on a sense of solitude. I have introduced Dickinson here, because of her links to my writing, through her use of metaphors, and the strong themes of confinement, and abandonment.

I have previously mentioned female poet Hazel Hall, who has been compared to Dickinson, through her style of writing and strong elementals. There is a definitive connection between these women and my own poetry, and other poets I discuss in this thesis. I have chosen to quote the first stanza of “Hope” because it demonstrates Dickinson’s belief that hope is the metaphor for the inhabitation of the human by the more-than-human.

Hope

‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul---
And sings a tune without the words
And never stops at all—

Emily Dickinson. (1999, p. 96) *Complete Poems*.

Dickinson uses metaphor by likening the concept of ‘hope’ to a bird that resides in us, it is not captive, nor free, it perches.

In *Flight and Fall*, L. Shannon discusses this metaphor in more detail: [...]

Although it is resilient “in the chilliest of land” and “on the strangest sea” it merely perches, being neither in captivity nor tame. The possibility remains, however, that if it does fly away, it may return. By having the hope-bird never ask for crumbs and implying the speaker supplies them out of love, Dickinson demonstrates her belief that the tiniest amount freely given can keep hope alive [...] (2010, pp. 46-54).

I agree with Shannon, as she conveys the way Dickinson displays emotions through the tiniest crumb of hope. This observation connects with different poems I have written about birds and Dolly. I refer to the last two lines of the poem “Hope”:

*Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.*

I had written a poem for Dolly before I read Dickinson's poem 'Hope'. As I mentioned, the word 'crumb' links to Dolly and the poem in the collection, in the year **1973**: 'The crumbs on Dolly's dress and tights stick to her like a collage.' I also use the word 'crumb' in other areas of my poetry, along with birds, allowing metaphors to convey vivid imagery and emotions, activating the imagination. There is also a resonance here as Dolly sits rocking in her chair, hoping for her baby to be returned to her.

This tiny domestic detail of a 'crumb' is a metaphor that resonates with other female poets, as they use these tiny details to convey huge emotions. As in Hall's poem quoted earlier, we see again the strategy of using a small inconsequential thing (a needle, or a crumb) to carry the meaning of something enormous.

Dolly's vulnerability made me think about a poem from my collection: **1932**.

Dolly felt like she was standing on the edge of a cliff like a morsel of bread waiting to be snatched by a bird of prey, to be lifted across clouds.

I could say it is purely coincidental I have used metaphors the way Dickinson has done because I had written these metaphors before I had read Dickinson's poem. On the other hand, I could be subconsciously tuning into a feminine poetic tradition, that develops shared metaphors and locates strategies for expressing hidden feminine experiences. Metaphors feature throughout this thesis as I use them instinctively to recreate the environment Dolly was placed in.

Writing Responses

In her blog, *What Creates Good Writing: Instinct vs. Skill*, romance and fantasy writer Jami Gold asks: "Is a writer's instinct always right? I think some aspects of writing seem like instinct, but they're really skills" (Gold 24/02/2011). Writing poetry over the years has allowed me to develop a natural impulse, to respond automatically to a writing prompt, or from something in my research. This sparks my imagination, allowing intuition to guide me through how I write poetry for Dolly, and writing poetry in general, as this practice and experience has enabled what now feels like an instinctive response.

Karolyn Schindler recounts her experience of being called to write about a marginalised historical subject:

It is very curious, this process of how biographers choose their subjects, and it is still a mystery to me. Perhaps it is a sort of instinctive recognition, that something in this yet scarcely known other person's character, profession, fate, or circumstance triggers an almost visceral response. That, at least is what happened to me (Schindler, 2005, p.1).

Schindler confirms that the way we write can open the mystery of where intuition comes from. With my writing, it was the black and white photograph of Dolly that instigated my project (see the later section "Ekphrasis" for a more detailed discussion on the visual prompts in my work). The first poem in the collection is set in 1910 and is the opening scene as Dolly enters the asylum. I decided to write the last 3 stanzas of the poem as an example of the haiku form, because it shows her feelings through colour and light, illuminating her mood, and how the sky looked that night.

It evoked emotions in me for how Dolly could have felt. It had a significant effect on me, emotionally, as I was writing the poem. It was as though I was feeling on her behalf. It could be, therefore, that the minimalism of the Haiku form has provided a container for my/her overwhelming emotion. Recently, an unexpected poetry prompt appeared in the form of an email, from the Haiku society. The word 'barefoot' gave me an instant connection with Dolly: as she was running away from her father after she had given birth to her baby boy.

Dolly Kept on Running

Across cobbled streets
she ran barefoot, her feet
shredded on broken glass.

Things seep into my poetry, unconscious notions, discussions, and pieces of writing that explore asylum life; as Dolly's life unfolds through my poems, we are drawn into her world. The next poem appeared after reading about medical treatments some patients would have endured. Electroconvulsive therapy is one of them: used to treat seizures, depression, and schizophrenia. It is rarely used now, as medications replaced these treatments. I thought about patients standing in a queue. The word 'queue' prompted this response, as part of my process. Poetry prompts can appear organically, as I have previously discussed, allowing me to write intuitively, as part of my empathic process.

They Formed a Queue

There was a queue,
a subdued queue
of patients, brains delayed,
heads and bodies dazed.
Their bandaged heads, faces
frozen with fear, eyes stare,
eyes glazed. Some could no
longer hear the churning,
buzzing, humming inside,
their fears collide. A soft
glow, and we will never
know, how, and why the world
stood still against their will
and never heard them cry.

The above poem emerged as an example, that historical research can create prompts, allowing me to generate explorations of possible experiences. These historical facts combined with imagination form a bond and create new work, as part of my creative process. For some of the poems in this thesis I cannot always explain ‘how’, or ‘where they evolved from.’ I have so many thoughts, research, quotes, underlying elements, and questions, going around in my head. Sometimes some poems are experimental; I leave, and on return, they could become something else. It can be an endless work-in-progress.

Writing poetry for me is an instinctive process, in this thesis, and in general. I feel I have been pulled along through corridors, my unconscious imagination getting lost at times, opening up a surreal world that I have not previously explored until now. I am making a focused attempt to inhabit Dolly’s world imaginatively.

She could not find

*him among
the debris
leaves
and wild seeds.*

Summer

we blew dandelion seeds, mid-air memories of midges in summers long gone.

I am drawing on my own childhood memories by creating this image, *dandelion seeds of summer, brought us to life, to blossom on the outside, an escape from the indoors.*

The following poem, “Battleship Grey” is a work-in-progress as I attempted to create a fourteen-line poem that could become a sonnet, as the theme links to my previous work on

stitches and threads. In a sonnet the relationship between form and content is a way of expressing emotions and thoughts, it is a challenge to convey the message through this form. There is movement in the poem, an almost rhythmic beat, as I hear knitting needles, clacking until dawn.

Battleship Grey

Etched across the faces of women
the distinct colour of sadness
they weep stealing afterthoughts
like dropped stitches on the endless

yarns of battleship grey.
Slipping in and out of their dreams
knitting until dawn awakes the day,
life is never as it seems.

I swallow my dreams tasting
only uncomfortable thoughts
sadness etched, dropped stitches like years
that roll and fall into a tangled retreat

never neat. Faces linger at the bottom of the stairs,
so many cares, chime-like grandfather's clock.

*The silence
between
us
fell
like
subsidence
along
the cliffs
on the coastline.*

In this section of the thesis, I have introduced other poets through their effective use of metaphor, which enables a connection to my practice. I use childhood memories to create examples of metaphors, spreading these seeds throughout. I have explored my writing in response to prompts, and my writer's instinct, to develop new poems.

Poetry Forms

Ghazal

The ghazal is one of the forms I felt appropriate to contain my material on Dolly. During my initial archival research, I discovered an article in a medical journal, that led me to write a ghazal, the poem “1968”, which is part of the collection and is discussed later in another section of the thesis. During further archival research, I was prompted to write the poem “Abandoned” from images of abandoned asylums, in the form of a ghazal. I felt this form suited the needs of my poem and what it was trying to say. The use of the repeated end word signifies ‘abandonment’ and how, importantly, it describes Dolly’s admittance at the age of sixteen into the asylum.

Abandoned

At just sixteen, a young girl, baby taken, grief remained you were abandoned.
I searched for the keys to unlock your past from the day you were abandoned.

Restless nights and endless days of multi-coloured seasons reflect your mood.
The heavy boots that scratched at the soles of your feet, stand abandoned.

I squash my feet inside them, holding each step between my toes, flesh torn.
I hold your thoughts between my fingers, catch your breath abandoned.

The outbuildings of the asylum are now renovated after all these years.
The woods and farmlands overgrown with weeds and thorns remain abandoned.

I think of a treasured life you could have had if they had not taken your baby boy.
I reach out to you; 84 years have passed since the day you were abandoned.

The Ghazal form is originally from Arabia in the 7th century evolving from the Qasida, a much longer form of poetry comparable to the Ode (Poetry Foundation 2003). Due to its long lineage, it is considered one of the oldest forms of poetry in use. According to the Poetry Foundation:

It [the ghazal] consists of syntactically and grammatically complete couplets, the form also has an intricate rhyme scheme. Each couplet ends on the same word or phrase (the *radif*) and is preceded by the couplet’s rhyming word (the *qafia*, which appears twice in the first couplet). The last couplet includes a proper name, often of the poets. In the Persian tradition, each couplet was of the same meter and length. The Ghazal was known to English writers by the mid-19th century, 1850 (2014).

According to Mehr Afshan Farooqi,

The word ‘gazelle’ is not directly related to the poetry form ‘ghazal’. However, some word etymologists believe that ‘gazelle’ is a derivative of ‘ghazal’, which means ‘love poem’ in Arabic, as poets throughout history have compared their beautiful women to gazelles (Farooqi, 2015).

Contrary to the male gaze evoked here, female Persian poets embraced the ghazal, through the challenges they faced and explored by writing in the ghazal form of poetry. I established a link to Persian women and poetry when I discovered Simin Behbahani, one of the most prominent figures of twentieth-century Persian literature, who started her unique poetic journey before the 1979 revolution. Her early poems were free verse; she then went on to write over 600 ghazals and became known for her criticism of the Iranian Government’s violations of human rights. She challenged the regime and opposed violence. This earned her recognition as “the Lioness of Iran” for her outspoken nature. Her poetry collection- *Footprint* (1950) was difficult to find, but I did find *The Mirror of My Heart, A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry for Women* (2021), which included some of her poems. Here are the first 12 lines of her longer poem:

The End of Waiting

I have a thousand hopes, and all of them are you
The start of happiness, the end of waiting’s you

Those past springs that I have lived through without you,
What were they then but autumns since the spring is you?

My heart is empty now of everything but you
So, stay still where you are, be permanent and true

A shooting star’s a matter of impulsive moments
The star that mocks the darkness of the night is you.

If all the people in the world desire my blood
What should I be afraid of? my loving friend is you

My heart’s a jug that’s overflowing with desire
I have a thousand hopes, and all of them are you.

(Behbahani, 2021, pp. 169-170).

This poem resonates with me, linking Behbahani's poetry and that of other women, to my poetry. Many seasons changed, yet the loss between them remains the same. Dolly could be saying these words 'my heart is empty now of everything but you,' 'the end of waiting's you.' Persian female poets use the ghazal to articulate taboos/hidden experiences, just as I write in my collection of poems about Dolly's life in the asylum, hidden histories. I have discovered a feminine vocabulary of loss, through the use of and research into the lineage of the ghazal.

I link emotions when writing about Dolly and the women who were forced to hand over their babies, confined to asylums. Like Dolly, Persian women wrote about their experiences, their lives. I have included Simin Behbahani to give her a voice in this thesis, and her poem, as an example of the ghazal.

I experienced first-hand rules around women abroad when I lived for six months in 1982 in Bisha, a small village in the southwestern Saudi Arabian Province. I was the only Western woman there, and encountered several challenges on entering the country, and during my three-month stay. I had been visiting my husband who was working as a fireman, training locals to be able to provide emergency fire cover at the airport. I witnessed how women were treated as second-class citizens after being made to sit in the back of pickup trucks with goats and sheep, while their sons sat in the front of the vehicle. This experience deepened my insight into the ghazal as a voice for oppressed women.

Researching the ghazal form further I discovered that Kazim Ali, born in the U.K. to Muslim, Indian parents, is a poet who is comfortable writing a ghazal, his poetry feels content within its form and surroundings. In Ali's ghazal poem 'Rain' the first line shows a clever use of language that creates a painting almost, with: 'The thick strokes of ink, the sky fills with rain.' (1).

This prompted the following poem:

*The black ink
Runs
Slick and fast
Brush strokes
Stand out in the rain.*

In my opinion, Ali's poem has a visual, rhythmic quality, as he moves through the sightless rain. An invisible force he connects to spiritually, feeling cleansed by the rain, he becomes the rain. The poem's final words are: 'I am the rain.' This poem resonates with me, as I think back to Halls's poem about 'needles of rain'. Ali, too, feels connected to the rain, in the way

she does. They are both emotionally invested in their feelings about the rain, creating closer links with the poets I am discussing and how they are situated in a community of practice.

In his poem “Ali makes use of metaphor and simile. These two forms of figurative language are utilised by Ali to recreate the storm making it feel alive” (Poetry Foundation). In line 7 ‘The sky is a bowl of dark water’. This is the same technique that we see in Hall and Dickinson: a bowl of water (small, domestic) becomes huge and elemental, as the night sky. It is a metaphor that allows these striking shifts in scale and human/elemental melding, opening an emotional connection with the reader.

I seek to use the same techniques to recreate the ‘storm’ of Dolly’s life, making Dolly feel alive to the reader, by being able to convey her emotional state of body and mind, during the 84 years she spent in the asylum. The following excerpt is from a poem in the collection:

*Dolly wades into the sea discarding her clothes,
shifting years of pain that scratched at her like a disease.
Floating further than she should, she closed her eyes
drifting, only the seagulls crying, calling, beckoning her to follow.*

There is something here about the sea and humans, women, and the moon. I mention Dolly singing Blue Moon, another connection, from a poem in the collection.

In his essay “Genre-Queer: Notes against Generic Binaries” in *Bending Genre* (Singer & Walker, 2013), Ali argues for poetic form and structure as effective strategies for communicating ideas and experiences. Ali states:

If writing is a way of thinking, the poem itself offers the best form of structure. It invents its own rules in the making. Neither line, form, diction, or syntax is taken for granted by the writer. It is an anarchic piece of text that lives between the boundaries (2013, p.27).

Ali enables my methodology through his use of the ghazal and his essays on writing poetry, his use of the senses inspires forms of emotional constructs within my poetry.

This section of the thesis has allowed me to explore the use of the ghazal and my own poem ‘Abandoned’ alongside the chance to create a link with female Persian poets and their hidden experiences. I have discussed how I seek to use the same techniques Ali uses in his poem ‘Rain’ and how I intend to recreate the ‘storm’ of Dolly’s life.

Voice

This section of the thesis attempts to discuss/respond to the question of voice while representing Dolly as authentically as possible, as I speak up for her, using poetry to tell her story. Poetry is also used to speak up for other women, through their experiences, which then leads to present-day, and mum's dementia, a disease originally called 'senile dementia.' Sharing my nursing experiences and living through Mum's dementia allows me to develop and reflect in the body of this thesis, through the use of rhetorical devices in my poetry.

The following article attempts to differentiate between voice and style in poetry:

What is meant by 'Voice' in poetry? I don't think it's easy to distinguish between 'Voice' and 'Style'. Both are abstract terms that are concerned with the overall piece of writing rather than any specific technique, so both are the sum of all the other parts of the writing craft. In both fiction and poetry, 'Voice' and 'Style' are created from word choice, tone, use of punctuation and grammar, rhythm, choice of subject matter, choice of point of view, and use of imagery. In poetry, specific poetry techniques also contribute to voice, including line length, line breaks, use of stanzas, rhyme, and meter. It helps to think of voice in terms of its everyday meaning - is, how someone speaks.

The Writers' Voice: Part 1-Poetry- (oca.ac.uk). (2020).

In response to the above article, 'Voice' and 'Style' are both developed by the writer through the use of specific poetry techniques and experimenting to create elements in poetry that contribute to finding a voice and your own style of writing. The voices that I have created seek to echo that of the women from the asylum and women who were forced to hand over their babies to the foundling hospital.

Writing from the perspectives of voices from the past allows me to explore different historical contexts, and Dolly's life in the asylum enables me to engage with the reader, to imagine themselves there, and be empathic towards the voices I have created. I have an obligation as a writer to be accurate with the facts, writing them into fiction, so they help create a world Dolly could have lived in. I let the following poems in italics speak for themselves:

Her voice was one of many innocent voices lost, hidden, minds strayed and forgotten into the past. Black and white memories like scuffed shoe polish on newspaper. The lives left behind

to weep, once held captive, institutionalised, drawing blood in a world that gave them little or no choice.

*Marginalised life stories
Asylum versus the streets
Workhouse versus*

to die.

Penniless and pinched by the wind and ice that sailed through the night capturing its next victim. The slightest infirmity deemed them unacceptable to society, castaways.

The noises outside her world were those of war. The noises inside her world.

She twisted

strands of auburn

hair into coils

of confusion.

*Can you ever
stabilize the mind
can you ever sweep
away the leaves
that curl up in the corners
until they crisp and fold
into nothing but despair?*

Dolly kept her baby's blanket hidden, the only thing she had to remind her of him, until it became lost.

Dolly was also kept 'hidden' for eighty-four-years, behind the walls of the asylum, with nobody speaking out, until now. I respectfully declare my intentions, when writing about a person who is no longer here. I am addressing this through the academic research I am doing to underpin the biographical writing, exploring ethics within my writing.

In his journal article "Who Will Speak for the Voiceless?" Kline cautions that

Before we attempt to speak for others, we must listen carefully, whenever possible, to the weak voice of the oppressed, and we must develop empathy for them and for the truly voiceless, who literally cannot speak at all (Kline, 2009, p.11).

Dolly's voice is among those lost in the archives, hidden histories, so by bringing her story to life, through my empathic response I am speaking up for her and allowing her to be heard,

which Janet Burroway describes as “an imaginative leap into the mind and diction of another person” (Burroway, 2007, p. 42).

My research has taken me beyond the gates of the asylum and the literature I have read, as I listened for the voices from behind the walls, that evoked a sense of time and place. I amassed a sense of what it might feel like to inhabit Dolly’s world, linked with my own experiences. Working in a nursing environment gave me first-hand experience that I could not have gained just from reading/research. I used the senses, the smell of ether, the walls I brushed against, and the corridors I walked down.

I have previously discussed my experiences in this thesis, along with the research that has helped piece together asylum life. I have stepped into Dolly’s world and given her some of my memories in the poems, which hold elements of my childhood. *The seasons, dandelions, and midges in a summer haze. The frozen sparrow on the windowsill in the backyard.* The conscious elements I have included, yet unconsciously I was able to write, surprised at times, at what appeared on the page in front of me.

In 2012 I visited the abandoned Lancaster Moor Asylum, the place where Dolly had spent 84 years. I walked through the cemetery adjacent to the asylum. Walked the cobbled streets on the Upper Lane, that led to the asylum. I have felt close to Dolly from the beginning, as in my poem ‘Abandoned’ I couldn’t help but place myself inside her boots, as the following two lines show:

‘The heavy boots that scratched at the soles of your feet, stand abandoned.’
‘I squash my feet inside them, hold each step between my toes, flesh torn.’

This poem has been discussed in the ghazal section of the thesis. It has been part of my writing process, feeling my way through the shadows, inhabiting her world to create a compelling account. By inhabiting Dolly’s life, I opened a space and encouraged the reader to imagine her voice, even though I know it was mine. I will never truly hear her voice, but I can imagine, as Dolly is a woman who cannot tell her own story, but I can do it for her.

The following proverb feels appropriate for what I am trying to say and supports my approach because it asks us to speak out for the ‘voiceless’.

Speak out on behalf of the voiceless,
and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.
Speak out in order to judge with righteousness
and to defend the needy and the poor. (Proverbs 31: 8-10).

I am speaking for Dolly through the use of imagination in each poem: *Bringing in the senses to scabble about on the page and fight about what needs to be said*. In my writing process, I employ similes, metaphors, and other poetry forms to capture the reader's attention, carefully building experimental structures, in an attempt to create a world for Dolly.

This approach opens new writing, using my own experiences and observations as a foundation, alongside archival research, and literature to support my writing. I have written about Dolly showing emotional empathy, and genuine concern for her feelings, and those of the women in asylums, and the 'fallen women' that I have mentioned in a previous section, linked to art, and writing from the asylum. I will continue to ensure that every element of my writing is done with complete respect for Dolly and the other women, who suffered the traumas of asylums, and the disadvantages of becoming fallen women.

I have always had complete respect for Dolly's situation and shown empathy, being thoughtful and sensitive throughout my writing. I am guided by my nursing experiences, working on my first ward of the geriatric hospital in Hampstead. I have previously discussed this as I refer back to Alice, a patient that I was reminded of when I saw Dolly's photograph and it prompted a poem, which was an empathic response to Alice. I have drawn on knowledge and experience when writing about Dolly to create a body of work that preserves Dolly's integrity. Careful representation is evident in the emotional encounters in my poetry. I would not write anything that would cause distress to others. *It is the simple things*

*a cup of tea
a biscuit dunked
as the crumbs
remain at the bottom
lost...*

Observation

Observation is an ongoing part of the writing process, as I am aware of the details required to write this thesis and the collection of poetry. I discuss literature and incorporate factual research into my poetry, combined with imagination, creating a sense of empathy for the fragility of the women patients. The use of poetic technique relays these qualities to the reader as I expose their vulnerability.

One of the poems from my collection describes Dolly waking up to find ‘clothes scattered around her room like dead animals.’ This poem, **1923**, I had originally titled ‘Confusion’ before I included it in the collection of 84 poems.

Dolly opened her eyes
to a pile of clothes
scattered around the parlour.
They looked like dead animals
in a field, lumps of flesh coloured
with dark patches, trousers, scarves
like tails. She cupped her hands to her face
and whispered.
‘What’s going on here?’
‘What are all these doing here?’
Her voice grew louder becoming hoarse.
‘Is anybody listening to me?’
Dolly was wearing a straw hat
with flowers poking through the top.
Her glossy eyes not flinching.
She wore a hospital gown and wellingtons
Dolly stumbled into the garden mumbling,
swearing to herself.
‘Nobody ever listens to me.’

This poem creates effects via associative imagery and describes what the mind sees; an experience for Dolly. I must have been hallucinating for her. Examples of this behaviour form part of the collection of 84 poems as I describe different situations, surreal at times. They are moments and memories I can relate to bringing Dolly to life through my own experience, as I lived through experiences of hallucination with Mum, at home, before she had to go into a Dementia unit.

They were still with Mum like shadows, her ancestors following her to every room, with the woman who stole her teddies, ate her sweets, and wore her favourite scarf around her neck like a noose. Mum’s initials E.F.M.B embroidered. I couldn’t escape her; she waited by the door for me.

These experiences allowed me to write freely, because conversely, I had no escape either. The constraints were those of being unable to escape living through mum's dementia, and the emotions associated with seeing my mum, my best friend traumatised by everyday situations. One example, having a bath, still haunts me, hearing her cries.

These constraints stimulated creativity, as I was compelled around every corner to write, reflecting on everything, down to the hole in Mum's sock, ladders in her tights, and odd slippers. The beautiful rose-pink velour slippers had vanished and now she wore men's odd ones, two big smelly old slippers. I too was trapped, inside their world. *It was my world now, these objects and emotions.*

The next poetic interlude reflects on an observation of women in the nursing home, and through watching Mum, who would fall asleep with her hands in the air. I imagine Dolly sat twiddling her fingers, knitting mid-air, eyes closed.

*It's called the knitting phase
but without the needles
or wool.
Fingers gathering
looping
and threading
weaving hands through
endless empty stitches.*

While Mum was a resident in a Dementia unit of a nursing home, I watched a DVD, *Darkness in the Afternoon/The Red Dress* (2016). It was about a woman who saw her younger self every time she looked in the mirror. It was a training video to help staff and relatives understand how the residents were affected by dementia and Alzheimer's. It heightened how raw the emotions were, and how crucially my experiences with my Mum informed the process of writing about Dolly, because of what I observed with Mum, carried back to what Dolly may have experienced, and a reminder of the loss of her baby.

I witnessed women sitting in chairs with dolls, thinking they were their own babies, rocking them, touching their toes, kissing them constantly, brushing their hair, dressing, and undressing them. I do not know how I smiled through tears and laughed when Mum did. I do not know how I will ever forget those women.

In my poem 'Trapped' Mum wants a cup of tea 'like she used to make'. It was a simple request, but it meant a whole lot more. The full poem is in a later section of this thesis.

This poem 'Trapped' is also about me living in the moment with Mum, a dramatic monologue to capture her point of view, yet from a distance an almost ethereal point of view. These poetic interludes propel the use of empathy within my writing, as emotional responses. Situational empathy responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstances, and involves imaginative role-taking and more recognition of my own experiences.

My real-life experiences create a catalogue of emotions, that I have drawn into my poems. This writing process may be described as method writing, previously mentioned, in which I draw on my own life experience to inform my portrayal of Dolly's experiences. I had written the following poem before I had watched the *Red Dress* DVD, as Mum talked to herself about all manner of things. I have written other poems, to support this process, which I have not included because they exceed the scope of this thesis.

The Mirror 2/3/2015

To the woman in the mirror
I have a cardigan like that.
It's a nice colour
I like your earrings similar to mine.
Did you see Emmerdale last night?

Mum
'Where's my pink cardigan?
somebody has taken a button off it.
Look at the state of my hair,
I don't like the way she cuts my hair...
[To be continued...This poem is a work in progress.]

In Mum's 'Mirror' poem she sees an identical woman talking to her, not acknowledging her own reflection, except to say 'Look at the state of my hair'. This poem is based on real events, when Mum was in her flat, sadly as her dementia progressed, she stopped looking in the mirror.

I discovered the poem 'Mirror' by Sylvia Plath after I had written Mum's poem. I have included 3 lines, that I felt resonated with my poem:

Whatever I see I swallow immediately (line 2)

Each morning it is her face that replaces darkness. (Line 16).

In me, she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman. (Line 17).

Sylvia Plath. (1961). *Crossing the Water*.

In Plath's poem, the mirror insists that it reflects the truth, a truth that greets the woman who looks in the mirror every day as a 'terrible' reminder of her own mortality. Plath struggles to accept what the mirror says it sees, her face, aging. This reminds me again about the DVD *The Red Dress* where the older woman with dementia sees her younger self.

In my poem **1943**, from the collection of 84 poems, I locate similar concerns:

Sink, cracks appear in a sequence of images
broken glass, and tiles, reflection now distorted.
Mirror of faces pointed north, she draws her
Lipstick in between the cracks ashamed of the illusion.

I had written this poem before Mum's 'Mirror', and before I had read Plath's 'Mirror' as I felt a connection, not just because of the mirror, but the way they discuss underlying trauma, and what is seen, and not seen. In this section of the thesis, I have drawn out the similarities in my poems when I discuss Dolly and Mum, and Plath's poem. These women are troubled and traumatised. Dementia and asylums both take women's identities and, through poetic practice, I attempt to preserve or return these identities. Observation is an important element of everyday life, so having had the experience of observing Mum in the dementia unit, and what my nursing experiences have given me, has enabled me to write first-hand accounts of what asylum life could have been like, through an empathic response.

Objective Correlative

This section of the thesis will emphasise the importance of the objective correlative which 'correlates' to the emotion of the object or event, an effective representation of the power of emotion. In my creative writing, the objective correlative stands out within my poetry through the descriptions and actions that surround Dolly's daily life in the asylum. I had not realised I had been using this technique until I came to reflect on my practice.

According to T.S. Eliot, a poet cannot convey their emotions directly to the reader, he or she must find an object suggestive of the emotion, as his theory of 'objective correlative' asserts. His is one of the most important critical concepts which supports my work. T.S. Eliot influenced the critical temper of the 21st century in his essay on 'Hamlet and his Problems' where he conceptualises the objective correlative. Eliot goes on to discuss in *The Sacred Wood*

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative,' in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that 'particular' emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (1997, p.92).

An example of a poem rich with imagery is Ezra Pound's two-line poem which demonstrates sensorial aspects of a literary work and conveys emotions to the reader. I consider how Pound's poem allows the imagery to convey the experience, in just two lines. The commuters are more than faces in the crowd, they request you think beyond this. Pound effectively utilises T.S. Eliot's concept of the 'objective correlative' through his imagery:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Pound, 1913)

Pound produced this poem before reading T. S. Eliot's idea on the objective correlative, so he was doing it instinctively. In the essay "Vorticism," which originally appeared in *Fortnightly Review* in September 1914, Pound again narrates his Metro experience and talks of the difficulty of finding "words that seemed ... worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion." In

this essay, Pound extends his discussion of the poem's evolution and, rather than focusing on "rhythmic units", writes more theoretically about the relationship of a visual and emotional reality reflected in the poetic form he discovers. He talks of finding an "equation... in little splotches of colour," a "'pattern,' or hardly a pattern, if by 'pattern' you mean something with a 'repeat' in it," a "language in colour" (Chiltern, R., & Gilbertson, C, 1990).

Eliot's concept of the objective correlative, and Pound's example, allows me to access the emotions implied in Dolly's situation. For example, my poem 'Monkey Nuts' shows her likely pain, a baby metaphorically in the shape and shade of a 'nut' cradling her past. The following poem illustrates how I generate an instinctive emotional quality by using an incidental and plausible domestic detail, monkey nuts. I create a metaphor that links to Dolly's lost baby, as the nut is 'birthed' when cracked open. The use of metaphors builds across the collection to sustain and resonate the sadness that the loss of her baby must have caused. The objective correlative technique locates one of the tiny details that are implicit in a situation, illustrated here:

Monkey Nuts

Dolly shakes the monkey nuts
babies in pods, wrinkly old men.

She picks at their shells until a soft brown
skin appears, shiny and new.
'A baby nut,' she cries, clapping her hands
to the sound of Edgar singing his version
of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.'

She opens more monkey nuts and lies them in a row,
draws faces on each shell (a boy) nut rolls on to
the floor, a crack appears, she begins to sob, and bends
on her knees, cradling it in her shaking hands.

The 'monkey nuts' are a clear example of an image, a metaphor the skins of the nuts create, to give an account of how 'nuts' are used to show her emotion in a specific way. This poem evoked a childhood memory, when mum bought monkey nuts for myself and my brother, although I thought they tasted bitter. I now buy them for my young grandson to feed the squirrels in the park. Turning this tiny detail from my own domestic life into a metaphor creates a striking image, and my memories act as a prompt to imagine Dolly's experience.

By sharing my memory with her, my experience, in addition, acts as a conduit, allowing me to connect with Dolly to open an emotional space and by including Mum in this space, it

becomes her memory too because Mum has been involved in the process from the beginning, through her association with mental health and my personal circumstances when researching and writing about Dolly's story.

We stand alone amidst the chaos and churning of words, reflecting memories that erupt when we look back into the past, it's always there waiting, these memories cling to us like a tidemark in the bath, as grief does.

Creating an objective correlative in a poem works on a deeper level of understanding, as the asylum seems to transfigure from a literal to an emotional space within my writing, as the following poem exemplifies: the grouting, tiny particles, like spies, watching, in the asylum are the objective correlative, as the emotion is written all over them, evoking empathy, down every corridor. "Restless" is one of my earlier poems, where I felt like I was talking to Dolly, giving her instructions, or was she instructing me?

Restless

Scrape the emotion from the walls of the asylum

ground deep between the grouting

Echoes

like strange tools

like dark circles

of empty stares.

A defining moment

the appearance of Dolly on screen

the images from outside the building her eyes

drew me inside

to walk the corridors

to find the key to her life locked away for 84 years.

Her eyes, hands beckoned me, to write and become part of her life.

I knew in a heartbeat

I would write about her

scrub the floors with her,

bruises like giant wall flowers

dandelions

devils' weeds.

I knew I had to pick up the leaves

fallen in autumn

outside the abandoned

building-

collect fir cones and acorns

click away at history

left behind in a building
listed,
persisted
like the rain.

Today it was dry
just a mist across the moor
A baby's breath exhaled.

I steadied myself to take one last photograph
and walked away for now.
I wondered why she had not been found until now,
and by me?
I can't sleep, restless like she was for all those years.

“Restless” highlights how I have felt from the beginning of this project, and the many sleepless nights that followed. I have previously mentioned my exploration into *art in asylums* after finding images of murals along the corridors leading to the children's wards at Lancaster Moor Asylum. I have been unable to find the artist. However, I did find out from the site manager during renovations of the asylum in 2016, that the murals were boarded over, to preserve them.

Reflecting on the murals has allowed me to move in-between the representation and the reality of the inmates by studying the hands and feet of the murals. Although these poems are ekphrastic, they are also linked directly to objective correlative. I had written them in response to a concrete detail because it connects me back to Dolly. This has prompted several poems, that show my writing process. The structure of the following poem highlights a distance between the women and children, and the spaces made to create a disjointed type of poem.

Reaching out to you.

Children's arms
ballet shoes-tiny
seaside flags
children's faces
picnics

clowns on tired stilts

kites
women's

faces
lost among
the layers of paint.

Murals

Who created these murals, and walls of painted faces?

Some smudged

some hypnotised,

expressions that drift between each form.

A state of consciousness

beyond each wall.

Pearls, and ribbons like serpents scale the walls

calling to the children with a lisp, enticing them with an apple from the picnic.

If I could re-paint the murals:

I would wake up the women in their Sunday best

remove the clowns on stilts from the doorways, and replace them with freshly painted sunflowers, daises, and forget-me-knots.

Give each child a brush and let them paint each other's smiles...



Figure 4: Murals Lancaster Moor Asylum: Urban Decay: (2012)



Figure 5: Murals Lancaster Moor Asylum: Urban Decay: (2012)

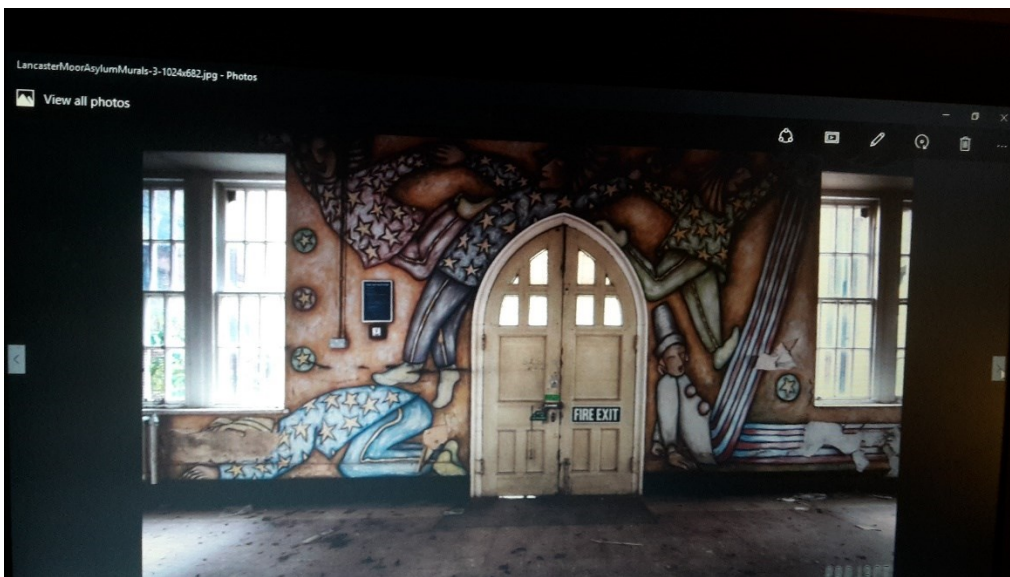


Figure 6: Murals Lancaster Moor Asylum: Urban Decay: (2012)

I felt the above images reached out to me, asking me to respond. They connect with the unpacking of experiences behind the walls of the asylum. The actions of the women and clowns, calling out to the children from beyond the corridors led to the children's wards of the asylum. In my second poem, I ask to 're-paint the murals', asking questions, as I want to

understand more about the children and the women who reached out to them. My poems are ‘wanting’ to be explored, excavated to every word and smudge of paint.

Drowning shapes misplaced
Dislodged-out-at-sea
Dialogue missing.

These ‘Murals’ cry out, require undoing, and request to be repainted as I suggest in my poem, as they echo from behind the walls.

Lines
Bodies
Half-dressed
Stifling heat
The tarmac
Melting beneath/between their toes on the road outside the gates on Westminster Street,
Lancaster.

Imagine the faces of the children
stricken, running away, fear
chasing them down corridors
eyes stare
 so loudly
What is not in the picture (the women’s picnic)?
‘Telling them to leave’
It is forbidden fruit.
Fear walked those corridors.

A poem doesn’t always describe the image but accompanies it. I am creating an intervention, taking matters into my own hands, combining language and image.

I have discussed the importance of the objective correlative in this section of the thesis, and how I have explored this device through examples of my own poetry, some of which were prompted by the murals of the asylum. T.S. Eliot’s concept of the objective correlative has shown the effect of using this rhetorical device. I have also discussed Ezra Pound and how he creates a 2-line poem to convey strong emotion; and how the objective correlative enables a more detailed exploration of how we access empathy.

Chapter Three

Ekphrastic Poetry

This section of the thesis explores elements of ekphrastic poetry, focusing on photographic images and art that are of historic value. These images play an important role in my research because without the black and white image of Dolly, and images of the abandoned asylum, I would not have begun researching Dolly and Lancaster Moor Asylum, nor would I have this body of work.

The word ‘ekphrasis’ comes from the Greek language to describe a work of art produced as a rhetorical exercise, often used in the adjectival form, ‘ekphrastic’. According to the Poetry Foundation, ‘an ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly a work of art’ (2015). In his journal article, “Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis”, Peter Barry writes:

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there has been a proliferation of ekphrastic writing in art criticism (important examples include the work of Ruskin, Pater, and Hazlitt) and in literature (in poetry and the ekphrastic descriptions found in prose fiction). The ekphrastic poem has nearly become a requisite part of contemporary poetry collections, with some books given over completely to an ekphrastic project, focusing on a particular artist or art of a particular period (2002, pp.155-165).

Furthermore, in his journal article, “Why Ekphrasis?”, Valentine Cunningham suggests the reasons for the enduring attraction of this approach to writing poetry:

Which is to say that ekphrasis grants a demonstration of literature’s persistent resurrectionist desires—the craving to have the past return livingly, to live again, to speak again. Ovid’s narrative weavings, his weavings about weaving women, Arachne, say, or Philomel, live again as they are woven again into the narratives of Dante, or Spenser, or T. S. Eliot. The old texts are made audible again; out of the silence of the historical and text past come these voices, heard again, voices granted to the silent, voiceless object, in the act of ekphrasis, literally a speaking-out, an audible speaking out now in the present text, a speaking made out of the silence of the past, and of the past and very

silent aesthetic object, the painting, the sculpture, whatever. The ekphrastic precisely rejoices in the oxymoronic noisiness it celebrates in its old silent objects. (Cunningham. 2007, 102 (1), p.64).

This is what I have been doing with some of my ekphrastic poems, bringing these voiceless objects from the past to life. For me, writing ekphrastic poetry allows me to explore visual art, to create new interpretations, that enable me to express fresh perspectives and bring the art/image to the present. It offers challenges, asking the reader to look closer themselves, to focus on the image. Ekphrastic poetry has allowed me to experiment with different forms and styles of writing, to interrogate, and imagine life inside the painting and see beyond the first coat of paint.

Writing ekphrastic poetry is of great importance to me because it was one of the first poems I wrote after a workshop at Lady Lever Art Gallery. I had viewed the painting: Doges Palace (1862). It stood out for me, as an instant memory, from the first cruise Mum and I took, leaving Venice in late July 2011:



Figure 7 Doges Palace: James Holland Artist: (1862)

This painting still stands in Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight. Wirral.

The following poem is an example of how writing ekphrastic poetry can blend with history to create a contemporary poem, evoking the memory of then and now:

A little bit of Venice

We stood on deck drifting away from St Mark's Square,
as buildings and history slipped from view, our first voyage.
So different from 1862, landmarks only blobs of paint, oil seeped
under its skin. Stains on the outskirts of the city our fingertips
had touched. The sound of the ship's engine, calming, whispering
to the waters tide. A celebration that we could still linger in the painting
framed by the past.

I also discuss ekphrastic poetry in a later section of this thesis, considering Van Gogh and the photographs I took when I visited San Remy, France in 2016. Photographs play an important role in my thesis, including the poems that sit alongside these images. I see this collaboration as a dialogue through time.

Christopher Payne's *Asylum, Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals* (2008) is a book of photography that brings life to an empty world. It opens doors long since closed, through visual materials. The resources within this book have given me valuable information that enhances my research and writing. The photographs/art and the writing were not conceived at the same time as part of the same project, so I am writing back across time in response to them.



Figure 8: Patient ward, Buffalo State Hospital: New York, *Asylum*: (2008, p 61)



Figure 9: Toothbrushes, Asylum: (2008, p 93)

These images hint at a world I need to explore, unique places that have been ‘abandoned’ *stories that breathe through the walls, bricks, and mortar like a second skin*. I become part of these photographs, visiting these places poetically to create an exploration of emptiness and abandonment, among the rubble and remains. I give poetic voice to the images through the details and descriptions of their narratives, using the senses to create atmosphere and a unique experience for the reader. The following poem was written after seeing an image of a green chair. I indulged myself in the luxury of the velvet, that was once somebody’s armchair.

Green Velvet

...crushed like dried peas
smothering the armchair
holding the frame, covered to keep it warm,
like flesh holding the arms, hugging it tight.
Deeper and deeper the cushions sink
its body weighed down by people’s needs.
Vacant stares
the empty feelings
of despair.
Books surround their feet
dust covers faded from the sunlight
through bare windows

open pages
titles withheld
and torn.



Figure 10: Image: *Asylum*: (Payne. 2008. p.145)

In Payne's *Asylum* (2008) Oliver Sacks describes how

Payne's photographs are powerfully elegiac. The desolate spaces evoke the lives that once filled them, so that, in our imaginations, the empty dining rooms are once more thronged with people (2009, p.145).

These images have been used to construct lost realities, waking up those patients who are still sleeping in the lounge, and colouring in their past. Reinhabiting what has been uninhabited for so long brings new identities to the faces. To re-create a world Dolly had lived in, these images also help me to locate and describe the "revelatory details" I have mentioned earlier.

Investigating further, I discovered Matthew Christopher Murray's *Abandoned America: Age of Consequence* (2014), a book of photography that also *takes us through every doorway and asks us to look through the broken panes of glass until we hear the stories, and cries throughout the night*. It is packed full of images that seek attention to engage creatively:

By exploring the remains of these symbols of social infrastructure and presenting the photographs of their remains, *The Age of Consequences* is a eulogy, not just for the abandoned shells of past losses and failures, but for

our current culture and the losses and failures that we are sustaining (Murray, 2014, p.18).

These images reached out to me, asking me to interpret the story beneath, and the people left behind.



Figure 11: *Abandoned America: Age of Consequences*. (2014, p 23)

My research into abandoned asylum buildings continued, as I discovered an image from a library in the USA. It showed the floors covered in books, derelict and deserted (see Figure 12 below). On closer inspection I was able to focus on the book: *Nobody's Boy*. It is the story of an orphan boy, Remi, set in France, first published in 1916 by Hector Malot. I found a copy of this rare book belonging to a woman called Marianne who lived in the USA. She inherited the book from an aunt who travelled the world with her wealthy merchant husband, collecting books on her travels. The image of the book sparked an initial response, as I felt like I was having a conversation with the book, prompting a poem that asked questions, as a series of events unravelled between the pages.

Nobody's Boy

A book in green its spine bent like an old man
lay on the floor, a pile of books surrounds it.

Nobody's boy.

Among the rubble
torn and dusty
pages and pages
empty spines
tickets missing
library.
Who wrote these masterpieces?

who was the boy
who climbed onto the piano stool his velvet trousers worn thin.

What happened to all those books
flung to every corner of the globe
dog eared
Stained
A thumbprint on the back page.

What happened to all those books?
Where is Nobody's Boy?

Among the dusty book covers
amidst the cockroaches and chaos
you appeared to me
your green cover still intact

Nobody's Boy

I traced you across the Atlantic
found you in New York
bundled together with books rarer than you.
You had been travelling with a merchant and his wife
shortly after your publication in 1916.

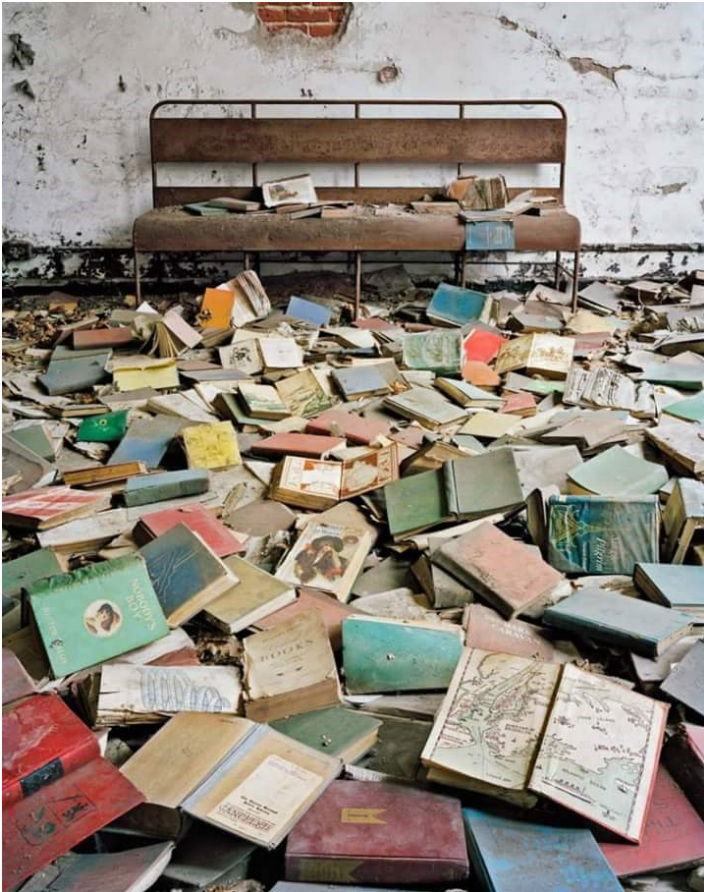


Figure 12: Image Asylum: (2008, p,76)

Nobody's Boy was one of my early ekphrastic poems and one that asks questions, discussing the story behind the image.

Without the paint, on occasions, the scrabbling among the cobbles on Upper Moor Lane, waiting for the gates to open, letting in visitors. I wanted to walk towards the steps to the asylum and witness Dolly's admittance, and glimpses of her life until she slipped away.

In ekphrastic writing the poet writes what is seen, an image, a colour that already stirs emotions, unpicking what the artist has shown, delving beneath the layers of paint to unravel the artwork, following the brush strokes of horsehair, filtering, recovering words trapped, a reaction, and reflection, to find fresh perspectives. At the 'edge' of the poem, more is waiting to be said, the image waits to be revisited. The poem offers its own vernacular.

This is how I am framing Dolly's life through a collection of poetry. Photographs make things visible, a narrative embedded in the image, that allows me to use this creative practice to enhance my creative writing.

*An essence
patterns of life
images
themes
connect
us to Dolly's life.*

Ekphrastic poetry is an important section of this thesis as I have explored the images and art that support my process, and created poems, recreating the inhabited images. The following section continues with the theme of art in the asylum, as I explore other art and poetry and respond creatively.

Art in Asylum

In this section of the thesis, I continue to discuss art in the asylum. From when I first discovered the murals on the walls of Lancaster Moor Hospital, my interest in art, graffiti, and the architecture of old buildings grew extensively. I discovered anonymous art, drawn by patients. I have included some examples of asylum art.



Figure 13: Anonymous Art: (2012)



Figure 14&15: Anonymous Art from the Asylum: (2012)

The above art is anonymous and by people with mental health problems. These sketches display their emotional state of mind. I chose to include them as examples.

My mum's art developed when we attended an art class, and she started drawing. It was at the beginning of her dementia, when a pattern began to form in mum's behaviour, as some of her drawings became child-like when she drew at home, as I encouraged her to continue drawing after the art class. The following sketches are drawn by my Mum.

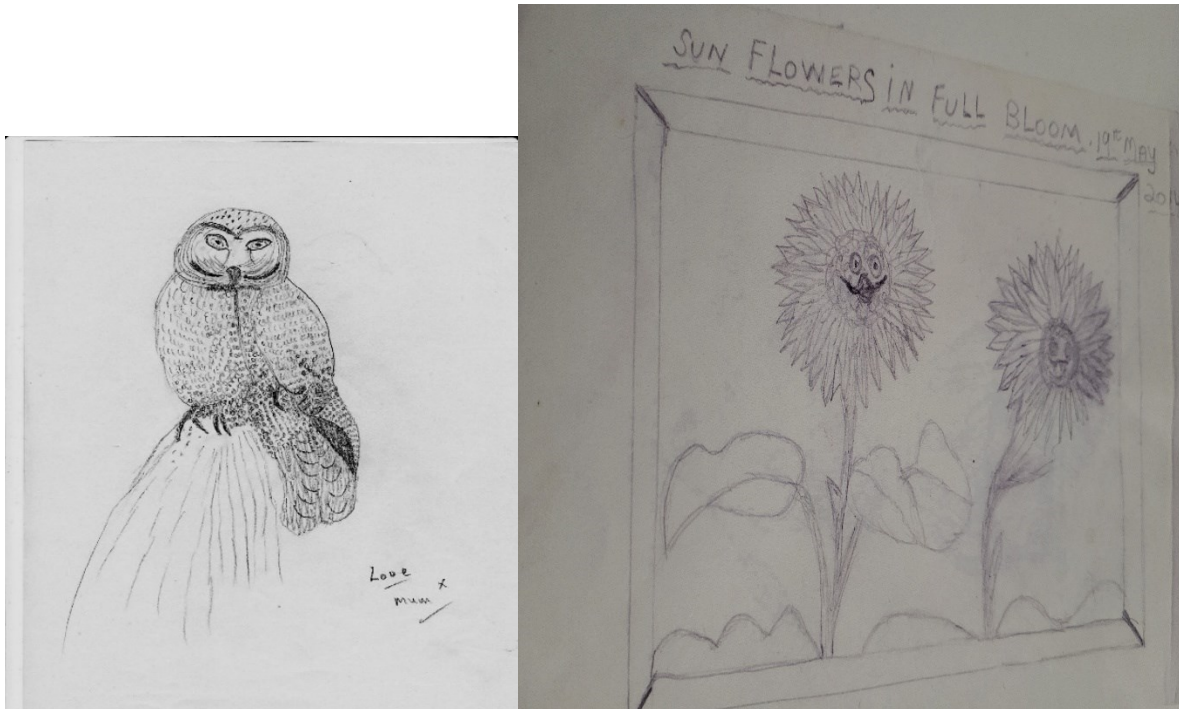


Figure: 16&17 Images: Drawn by Edith Florence Muriel Buckley (2014)

During my research on art in asylums, I discovered a book written about Vincent Van Gogh: Edwin Mullins' *The Asylum Year* (2015). He describes the year Van Gogh spent at the mausoleum in France, in 1889.

It made me think about the year he was 'confined' to the mausoleum; in comparison to the eighty-four-years that Dolly was 'incarcerated' in Lancaster Moor Asylum. I decided to go there and spent a week in San Remy, Provence, France in July 2016. I visited Saint Paul Mausoleum; it was a beautiful place. I imagined the mental anguish Van Gogh must have suffered, sat in his room, staring through bars on his window onto fields of lavender. I reflect in the form of a poem to examine these emotions.



Figure 18: St Remy France: Author's own image (2016)

The above Image was taken from the window of the room where Van Gogh spent a year in St. Paul's mausoleum St. Remy, France, during my visit.

I had written a poem: 'Dolly's View' early on in my research, where I imagined Dolly looking through a window, and the significance of the bars on the windows. I had written this poem before I discovered the place where Van Gogh spent his year of confinement. This created a connection to Dolly and her incarnation of 84 years in Lancaster Moor Asylum.

Dolly's View

From the workhouse
to her room with a view

of the farmlands and woodlands.
Branches tapping at her window

like new neighbours, bars blackened,
soiled by time. Dolly withdrew

Back into her world again, minus
the one thing she had left of him,
her baby's blanket. For four years
she had kept it hidden; dirt lingered through
every stitch of wool, starched grey with grime.

Now it was lost. Dolly was lost and alone.

Van Gogh had a different view, of lavender fields, still growing strong today as I discovered
during my visit.



Figure 19: St Paul Mausoleum, France. Author's own image: (2016)

Reflecting on the image, the ‘fields of lavender’ like ‘wild hair parting,’ I wanted to run my hands through it, comb it, keep it preserved. It continues to grow in abundance long after his departure as in ‘starry starry night’ we can still see the same stars like the lavender. The stars still comb the sky at night. I couldn’t help but write an ekphrastic poem, thinking of the comb, a domestic tool to comb the fields and sky.

Lavender

Fields of lavender
like wild hair parting
on a summer’s day
in San Remy Provence.

Sadness
crawled through
streaks of paint
beneath his fingernails.

Vincent	Van Gogh
painted	stared from
sunflowers	his window
ochre	until the moon
faces bright	turned amber.

He painted
until his
fingers
turned an ash colour.

The layout of this poem is to reflect movement, as Van Gogh stares from his window, watching the stars, as paint *crawls beneath his fingernails*. It is also my response to the visual image taken when I visited the St Paul Mausoleum in France. I included the poem ‘Lavender’ to demonstrate my technique/writing practice.

To me, the use of sensory detail and embodied experience is a strong element of the poem and a way to access a lost history, to speculate what it might have been like, and invite the reader in because we all share that sensory information (the method writing again) that I have previously discussed. Visiting the location in France, I imagined how he created his paintings. Walking around the buildings and grounds of the mausoleum I felt connected and emotional being in such a beautiful place: a stark contrast to the asylum where Dolly spent 84 years.

The poet Anne Sexton also knew the traumas of mental anguish, in the form of post-partum depression, which continued through the time she spent in Westwood Psychiatric Hospital in 1956, in Massachusetts, USA. She also spent time in other asylums and was

encouraged to write poetry, influenced by reading the work of W.D. Snodgrass, for example “The Heart’s Needle” (1959). Sexton offered a link to my poems and the images I had taken. She identified with Van Gogh and wrote a poem about his oil painting; just the word ‘oil’ means something when talking about the physical elements, as it ‘oozes’ from the painting, how his oily rag smudges out paint to create shadows, that move between the stars, as again I use the same device: the oily rag and stars. The small domestic and the elemental.

The image of ‘a starry night’ was painted by Van Gogh while he was a patient at St. Pauls mausoleum, Saint- Remy-de-Provence, France in 1889.



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-ND

Figure 20: The Starry Night: Image Vincent Van Gogh. (1889)

Anne Sexton’s “A Starry Starry Night” is an interesting accompaniment, as she identifies with the painting, and how she wants to die, “to split / from my life with no flag, / no belly, / no cry” (1981. p.64). Like her, I feel “that rushing beast of the night” (ibid.), *it breathes fire into the sky, lighting it with his stars, that share the night.*

I had written a poem during the first Covid-19 lockdown before I discovered Anne Sexton’s poem, and I was surprised to see and feel the connection between her poem and mine. We had both written about ‘Stars at Night’ thinking of Vincent Van Gogh and his painting.

A Starry Night

A starry night, we can all now see
as the world lies in the shadows.
Nature rearranges the landscape
an abundance of new life swims free.
Let us colour in the clouds, cover
the bruises from the war, and sing.

This poem has different connotations from Sexton's and belongs here as an example of my writing process. The word 'starry night' was a prompt that opened my poem, and it went from there. *We could only lie and watch the stars at night, only nature was allowed to escape.* When Dolly spent 84 years in an asylum, and Vincent Van Gogh spent a year in a mausoleum, his work, his actions exposed through the portal of his famous paintings, the 'oil' *seeped from the corners of his room, ochre and ash-night sky lingered through the fibres of his heart (being).*

I let Dolly watch the 'stars' like Vincent did as I gave her a memory, to lie and watch the stars at night. Something I did as a child. I used to love sitting on the swing with my sisters, squashed together, in the garden at night, watching the stars, dragging our feet back and forth, a sunken scuff mark on the bald grass, and the toes of our shoes. The contrast is stark, but emotions are constant.

I am arguing in my creative practice that emotions are experienced in similar ways by people separated by time and place. This is one of the ways in which poetry can work to retrieve lost experiences. I also felt a connection with Mum, and the sunflowers she drew in an art class:

*worlds apart, but
she drew
her concentration
the world she daydreamed about
like Dolly, the world she found
I see them. I still hear them.*

This shows the personal effect art has on me, unfolding my predilections, the elusive details, the moments, and the movements of the images. I am connecting with poets, analysing their poems, and linking the artists back to the poets. I have connected with poets who understood the traumas within the walls of the asylum, and artists, who painted from the confines of an asylum. This thesis shows a developing body of work, through the research I have discovered and uncovered to reveal their links within my research and the life I am creating for Dolly.

In 2010 Mum and I attended an art class with Age UK. It was there mum discovered her love for drawing, something she had never had the opportunity to do before; she excelled. Mum's first drawing was a sunflower, and I wrote a poem in response. From then on, I wrote about each drawing she did. I now have a collection of Mum's art and my poetry, titled:

Mum's Wilderness.

This was a milestone as Mum had just been diagnosed with Vascular Dementia, so to see her immerse herself for two whole hours into this 'new world' was wonderful, yet emotional. I was inspired to write a poem about Vincent van Gogh's sunflowers and combine it with Mum's, a poem about two people who both suffered mental health disorders.

Sunflowers

The pencil created a new
life born on a winter's day.
Hand steady, her head bobbed
as her tongue peeped a fraction
between her lips, a sign of concentration.
Nothing distracted her flow, curving the stem
so gracefully it blossomed strong and bold, petals
appeared forming the head, still bent in anticipation.

I never knew Mum could draw; her artistic skills hidden beneath
her apron, at home or work, her fingers gracefully sifting the flour.

Approaching 80 years of age, her memory fading, I took her to an art class.
Today Mum's sunflower has grown into a garden full of sketches.

Vincent Van Gogh's sunflowers abandoned bedraggled, cast aside.
The second time he painted them in a vase, several alert and curvaceous
others crumpled.

May they meet along the way
their sunflowers become one.
Two souls troubled.
Their creations
exposed wild fever.
Wild blooms
lost in a world that didn't understand them.

Again, we might understand this poem as preparatory work, that helps me to define my practice by evoking the emotions connected with Vincent Van Gogh and Mum. The last line: '*lost in a world that didn't understand them*', also connects back to Dolly and mental health and is part of my creative process.



Figure 21: Image Sunflowers: Van Gogh: (1889)



Figure 22: Mum's Flowers. (2014)

This section of the thesis has discussed art in the asylum, from anonymous art to Van Gogh, and my mum's art. The images and poetry I created when I visited San Remy in France, create stronger connections to Van Gogh, and the poet Anne Sexton. This creates further links to the next section of the thesis as I explore further writing from the asylum.

Writing from the Asylum

In this section of the thesis, I have chosen other poets, who I can relate to, and who have written about life in an asylum, after spending time themselves committed to an institution. This is first-hand information and important examples of lived experiences in an asylum.

Daniel J. Lutz graduated with an English degree from the University of Iowa, he went on to complete a master's degree in nursing and now works in a hospice. His second collection, *Poems for the Asylum* (Lutz, 2021) was written during the time he spent in and out of mental health facilities, during emotional breakdowns. They record his desperation as he tries to understand and *find* himself. His poetry is rich and emotional, on a painful journey through the mind, and body. I quote the first 6 lines and last 3 lines of the following poem:

My Icarus Ideations

There is you,
there is me
and the skeletons that hold us
together under skull moon,
the soundlessness of spirit
and the draw.

I want to climb
into your sad,
sad song that I've written.

(Lutz. pp 51-52)

This poem is both emotional and haunting. The use of language evokes sounds, yet remains silent, an internal silence, with its skeleton spirit, soundlessness inside a sad song.

Lutz's use of simple language creates a deeper meaning, recording his thoughts and experiences, his desperation conveyed through *black cement, dust and pain, and very little light* are all powerful images. I felt a strong connection between my poems and Lutz's.

Further research uncovered Martha H. Nasch and her anthology *Poems from the Asylum* (2021). The poems in this anthology are both harrowing and insightful: written from behind the bars of St. Peter State Hospital for the insane, USA, between 1928 and 1932. She was committed after a "case of nerves" against her will by her husband. She spent almost seven years in the hospital as inmate # 20864 and tried to escape twice. Nasch's poems capture details that create an atmosphere of the place, as she includes eyewitness accounts. She wrote

poems for other patients at their request while longing for her young child, whom she was forced to be separated from. The introduction in this book is written by a direct descendant of Martha who goes on to say, ‘When I read through eyewitness testimonies, Martha’s account of a patient being force-fed spares no gruesome detail in her poem, “Mary”.’ Jodi Nasch Decker (2021, p. 49).

The pages of the introduction are filled with photographs of her family, and show quite a challenging account of her life in the asylum, which illustrates how Martha was greatly influenced by the seven years she spent there, as the last lines of her poem show:

If (you’re) not insane when coming in,
it won’t be long...
you’ll see. (1932).

The experiences of both these poets resonate, although Nasch is much further away in time than Lutz. One hopes the more recent experience was at least intended to be more compassionate. I have included these poets because these first-hand accounts of asylum life expose the traumas in their writing: these voices from the asylum. I hear these voices, and their direct connections to my writing about asylum life.

Archival Research: The Foundlings.

This section of the thesis links to Dolly's experience and the loss of her baby, and the women who were also forced to hand over their babies to the Foundlings Hospital, in London. In January 2020 I discovered an article about 'The Fallen Women Exhibition' at the Foundlings Museum in London, which had been on between 2015- 2016. The article and image gave me insights into 'the fallen women' and their connections with my work. Initially, I had only glanced at the image, as I was engrossed in reading the article, and how the women must have felt.



Figure 23: Painting: The Drunkard's Children: George Cruikshank: (1848)

The above painting led me to write a poem about a 'fallen woman' **In That Year 1848 London**. I didn't know her name, so gave her the name of Bessie, which was pure instinct, and the first name I felt connected to that appeared on the page.

I enlarged the image and saw her hands pressed against her eyes, her small frame swirling, mid-air. The bridge looked like charcoal and ready to crumble, ready to smudge her into non-existence. I felt the pain surge through her body, shifting into the darkness of the Thames. The black and white sadness- reflecting on the image again, I saw the details surround her, I still see her.

In that Year 1848 London

Babies taken, their young mothers
slept in doorways, afraid of the light.
Bessie clutched the sleeve of his shirt
its tiny buttons move between her fingers.

His voice still lingers, as the words grate through me.

‘Drown yourself, I will help you.’
His voice strangled me, wrapping its chord around my throat.

‘Drown yourself, I will help you.’

He follows me down to the Thames, across Westminster Bridge, bilious beyond
the foggy night.

The words
‘Drown yourself, I will help you.’
Push me to the water’s edge
I am barefoot and empty.
A distant foghorn, streetlights forced sleep
my knees were in deep.

I can do it myself, I told him.

‘I can do it myself.’
‘I can do it myself.’

I left a space below this poem to allow the reader to reflect as the last line echoes ‘*I can do it myself.*’ These echoes continue throughout my thesis, as the spirits of women who fought for their babies, as Dolly did. This poem is an example of my writing process, as the image prompted a poetic, empathic response. I chose to put myself in the poem, in her place, hearing the voice of the person who pushed her to do it, to jump off the bridge. I gave back her voice, ‘I can do it myself’ I repeated, taking control. Or was I speaking for her, repeating her words for her?

I have learned from the process of writing an ekphrastic poem, from the image, that I can experiment with the form, and look beyond factual research to respond poetically.

Echoes drift between the air, breathed upon, spat out among barrels and cobbles on the streets of Lancaster, but before that, the streets of London and the earth beneath each cobbled stone.

These voices are echoes, which as a writer I cannot ignore because I heard them. I heard their cries, and responded, answering their calls to write: to inform those who did not know about Dolly or the women who were forced to hand over their babies. They all deserve to have their stories told, and their voices heard.

I then discovered there had been an earlier exhibition at the London Foundlings Museum called ‘Threads of Feeling’ (October 2011 to March 2012) based on research led by Professor John Styles (University of Hertfordshire.) The museum displayed its paintings alongside ‘pathetic scraps of cloth, buttons and little coins the tokens mothers left with their babies in the desperate hope that one day they could afford to claim them’ (Howell. 2010). The ‘Threads of Feeling’ create a direct link to the discussion of ‘fabric’ and ‘sewing’, ‘scraps of cloth’ in my thesis, and my poem ‘Unpicked’ along with poets who sewed from behind walls *of confinement*, which I have previously discussed.



Figure 24: Images of Tokens from the Exhibition: (2010)

Images: Tokens: Exhibition

The Foundling Museum was formerly part of the Foundlings Hospital. Writing about the women and the tokens validates the reasons why I feel they are important to be included in my thesis, because of Dolly, and their strong emotional connection with objects. This takes me back to the ‘objective correlative’ which shows the tokens as a specific example of how

“Tiny details imperceptible to us decide everything” (Sebald, 2016, n. p.). These retrospective discoveries affirm my instinctive writing process, with the following poem articulating further my understanding of tokens and their importance in accessing past experience:

A Child

I see his face, an open smile
wide eyes.
A token linked you to the past, nobody
knows, a life nobody knows.
I see his face, a blue shimmer beneath
the grime of cobbles past.
I feel him stirring
holding out his hands, reaching out
to strangers past.
His face still lingers underneath the token,
a memory
held within the piece of copper, stored inside
a stranger’s heart.



Figure 25: Token: Foundlings Museum: (2012)

I have been writing different poems, after discovering images of the tokens. I was drawn to the one above, in which I could see the hidden image. This goes back to my earlier suggestions about threads, cloth, and buttons, being associated with women’s auto/biographical practices, as the tiny details seem to enable my work. Five thousand infants had a token carefully attached to their admission billets. Many of these tokens survived and

form part of exhibitions and collections of work, now permanently available to view by the public, at the Foundlings Museum, London.

I felt emotionally affected by the actions, and feelings of desperation these women must have experienced. I couldn't help but write the following poem, another poem that took hold of my hand as I was writing, emotions I found hard to control. As well as enabling a deeper understanding of my process, these corollary poems help me practice self-care, when discovering the lost experiences of these women and children.

I Cried but No-one Heard me

I did-
biting the last section of my lip
that wasn't bleeding
'I cried but no one heard me.'
their silence
overcame me
melting me into a mess
that nobody could help.
Their silence
deafened by the thud
of me falling
deep into an unconscious
state.
A fibre of light dimmed
to blindness, but I heard 'you.'

I 'heard you' seems to be the foundation of my project as I 'heard Dolly' from the beginning. My first piece of writing was a letter to Dolly responding to her. I heard her voice. This poetic response to historical facts wraps empathy strongly in its grip: holding the hands of the women and their babies in the Foundling's Hospital. Writing directly about these women illustrates my creative process, and evidences preparatory work, thinking my way into the situation.

Their voices are clear, they echo down cobbled streets.

'I heard you'

I cannot help but be drawn into their world as I am with Dolly. I initially felt a strong sense of loss. I could not walk away from finding the black and white photograph of Dolly, I had to find her, and as a mother myself, my heart breaks, because all I can do is write as I think of those babies and their mothers.

I hold onto their tiny hands and never let go. I can never let go of the images in my head, their tiny fingers, their stolen whispers, their eyes, my heart breaks.



Figure 26: Painting: Found Drowned: George Frederic Watts (1848-1850)

This painting belongs to a group of four Social Realist paintings, that hang in the Watts gallery in Surrey. I discovered this image after I had written my earlier poem *1848*. Watts was inspired to paint this dramatic composition of an unknown woman, her feet half in the water on the bank of the river Thames, after reading: ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ by Thomas Hood (1844). I have included the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, as they resonated with me more, as I thought of Dolly: *as her wet nightdress clung to her leaking breasts, as she ran away from her father, after the birth of her baby boy.*

Look at her garments
Clinging like cerements;
Whilst the wave constantly
Drips from her clothing;
Take her up instantly,
Loving, not loathing.

Touch her not scornfully;
Think of her mournfully,
Gently and humanly;
Not of the stains of her,
All that remains of her
Now is pure womanly.

The Bridge of Sighs: Thomas Hood (3:4:1844).

In Hood's poem, 'the waves constantly drip from her clothing' is significant, you almost feel the waves and movement of her wet clothes. Hood feels empathy towards her, instructing the reader in a very directive tone as if he is channelling his grief and indignation into these demands of the reader/viewer to treat her humanely.

Towards the end of his life, Hood wrote several poems on contemporary poverty; this was one of them. It concerns the suicide of a homeless young woman who threw herself off Waterloo Bridge. This connects me to the *fallen women* and the poems I had written before I knew about his work. The foundling's connection and Hoods' poem is part of my creative lineage because I can see/ feel the atmosphere supporting my intuitive response, creating strong links. I felt resonances from the outset when I first discovered the article about the fallen women and researched further. In this section, I have written poems in response to the paintings and the plight of the women who like Dolly suffered through the loss of their babies.

Archival Research: Writing Practice 1

This section of the thesis shows archival research as part of my methodology. I am exploring the process of writing fiction through historical evidence, specifically from an article in the *British Medical Journal* (1970; 1: 408) which references an incident at Lancaster Moor Asylum in June 1968 where an ‘*Outbreak of Campbell de Morgan Spots*’ was discovered, affecting over 1,000 patients. The spots appeared suddenly and in large numbers, developing angiomaticous legions in the older patients. The warm weather didn’t help the patients from being exposed to the sun, sitting in the gardens, or working on the farm.

This article evoked childhood memories of the skin problems that haunted me from an early age. The rashes exploded into blisters along my arms and grew worse during the festive season when I ate too many tangerines. They would arrive in tissue paper from an exotic destination and sometimes wrapped in red cellophane, which I would keep. This led me to write a piece of prose, which I later took extracts from to create a poem for the collection.

This is an example of my writing process, embedding historical and medical research into the core of the poem. I chose to write a ghazal, which is the poem **1968**. Using the ghazal form of poetry allowed me to put myself into the last two lines because I understood how Dolly and the other patients felt. *As I lingered in the poem like an afterthought, this poem itched its way forward*, as these “tiny details” (after Sebald) erupted.

Again, I am splitting subjectivity, writing as myself, but also as Dolly. In this case, thinking my way “under her skin.” I have not found any evidence that Dolly had contracted the disease at the time, but I felt by including her in this situation I could create a more personal response through my poem.

After the Spots

...came the scars
patterns of skin
that grew, deserting
the old wasteland
overgrown weeds
didn’t need to be watered,
wilted for a day until new life
wandered across enemy lines
raised its arms and proclaimed
victory. Survivors of normality.

I could not resist writing about the aftermath the ‘Campbell spots’ had brought. The lingering of disease under the skin, and eruptions of bruises from itching every night, are real-life scars. My imagination has allowed me the privilege to write, and create vivid pictures of asylum life, descriptions that convey emotions, transporting the reader into Dolly’s world: walk down the cobbled streets with me. It has been an honour to have the opportunity to write about Dolly’s life and I feel grateful to share my experiences of living with Mum through her dementia.

Archival Research: Writing Practice 2

During a visit to the National Archives in Preston I discovered that patients from Lancaster Moor Asylum visited the Winter Gardens in Morecambe. This archival information was in the form of receipts from the bus companies, and letters of confirmation to attend the performance of a pantomime. I was interested to know how the public behaved towards patients sitting among them during a performance. Did people's reactions cause the patients any distress, or did members of the audience show any degree of empathy? I speculated on their possible responses through my writing.

This led me to write a poem about a visit to the theatre which touches on the behaviour of patients, and how their surroundings affected them. This is just one example of creative practice in terms of how my imagination combined with factual research creates an informed exploration of what it might have been like. Historical research can stimulate poetic responses by providing sources, contexts, and perspectives, and this can challenge me as a poet. The following poem is another example of my writing process, as it reflects on a day in '1936' (also a poem in the collection) as I imagine the wind blowing the bus along the coast road to Morecambe, on a winter's day:

Theatre Trip

It was December 1936
An unwelcoming wind
drove
the bus through
the gates of the asylum.

42 females
and
42 males
patients
to spend an afternoon
at the Winter Gardens
Theatre.
Dolly hid inside her coat
as the rain lashed against
the windows of the cream
and chrome bus.
Sharp slices of ice and hail
forced them on their way.

Panic among the patients
as the lights went out

before the heavy fringed
curtain swept the stage.

Some audience members
didn't like the disturbance_
hushing and groaning.
Ernie, a teenage patient
began to remove winter
layers, announcing
he was 'much cooler now.'
A nurse halted his performance
covering him with her coat.

A man in front of him with a dark feathery beard
put a finger to his mouth in a bid to silence him.

Dolly sat with Richard as a group of pensioners
passed along a bag of barley sugars, a rustling sweet sound
lingered in the auditorium like instruments waiting
to be played.

Dolly began to relax
laughing at the cat on stage.
Her thoughts drifted to her grandfather's cat, Majestic.

Patients and staff visited the Winter Gardens in Morecambe every year to see a pantomime. The rest of the details, for example, 'barley sugars' are one of my memories I gave to Dolly, from a memory of boiled sweets when I went to see a pantomime as a child. I use my imaginative reconstruction, being mindful of how I see things to create an atmosphere.

At times, I have gone beyond the archive and brought Dolly's grandfather's cat Majestic into the poem. When I chose Majestic as a name for his cat, I was thinking about the huge red velvet curtains at the theatre and how regal they were, so majestic flowed naturally as a name. I have written about Dolly's grandfather in other material that has not been included in the thesis, but it is work I will be revisiting in the future.

Again, I use the 'objective correlative' to describe the trip to see a pantomime and use the smaller details of the barley sugars. Writing fiction from a place of facts, and my memories creates empathy placing me there with Dolly, watching the pantomime as I step into her world, taking the reader with me. There is a shift from archival research to imaginative research or searching the "archive of the self" to find memories that I could give to her.

To develop writing techniques, I completed exercises in books on the writing craft. In Robert Graham's *How to Write Fiction (and Think About it)* (2007, p. 58). I used a poetry prompt 'She doesn't live here anymore' as I felt this was appropriate in conveying the

confusion in Dolly's mind, her world. This poem seeks to pull out the emotions and events that she lives in a world beyond, that which we can only imagine:

She doesn't live here anymore

She lives in a fuzzy cloudy speckled
world that sometimes hems her in, stitches
her to a quilt of mixed-up verbs and disadvantaged tales,
and at night
it hails
heavy showers
of rain soak
through her tea-stained
shawl.
The tears begin to fall
as always, the clock
In the hall
cries out in pain
Its hands ache to hold
her fold her up and make
the buttons fasten up her cardigan,
and keep her safe.

I felt this poem was appropriate for Dolly and Mum, as their worlds became trapped. The experience of living with my mum's vascular dementia has given me the tools to reflect on Dolly's life, her behaviour, and how her grief mirrored Mum's in a way: as Mum had grieved from the age of nine for the loss of her mother.

Writing about someone so close to me has been hard. I saw through her eyes a glimpse of how trapped Mum was, just like I imagined how trapped Dolly could have felt. This instigated the poem 'Trapped' written in first-person, a dramatic monologue: living inside the poem.

Trapped

Fingers, cold grasp of my arm
to hoist me from my bed
for breakfast
from my chair
for lunch
from the chair in the corridor. I find myself lost, and some comfort missing, but a kind voice brings me back to the dining room for tea, a cup of tea, a bite of a sandwich, or a spoon of soup that dribbles more on my clothes than in my mouth.
Food, but all I want is a cup of tea, not a cold one, or one that is too hot to sip. I want a cup of tea that is just right, the way I used to make it.
I can't focus on who is there, I go by voices, but I can't always hear.

This poem appeared instinctively and, although reflecting was difficult, it shows how I lived through the experience of my Mum's Vascular Dementia and how the last 18 months of her life were spent in a Dementia unit of a nursing home, where I too 'shuffled' along the corridors with my Mum and felt Dolly's presence. I shared their slippers, sat with them in random chairs, fell asleep alongside them, and drank cold cups of tea.

It was easy, yet hard, to put myself into my writing, but I knew this, the day I decided to write about Dolly, I was also writing for Mum and the trauma in her life, and the importance of feeling her presence.

The colours of trauma, that unravelled like the washing on the line when the wind ceased to exist.

Graffiti

...stretches wall to wall,
stains the asylum. Brush
strokes from the war. Painted
red, green, black, and blue
colours blend into brick,
bruised memories spread
onto the streets at night.
The courtyard and cobbled
secrets, lanterns lit.

The colourful images I portray about life in the asylum evoke empathy, light, and movement simultaneously. So, in fact, I am combining this with the dusty archives, to bring them back into the light: 'Art washes away from the soul the dust of every day' (Pablo Picasso, 1964).

During research, I discovered *The Lives They Left Behind* by Darby Penney and Peter Stastny (2009, New York). This book discusses suitcases found in an attic belonging to patients at Willard State Hospital after it closed, and the patients had died. It made me think about what was left behind for those at Lancaster Moor Hospital. Finding these photographs and text contributes to my work through the visual effect of a photograph of a person's life before they were patients in an asylum. The revelatory details paint a real-life picture, of what perfume they used, the stockings they wore, a sewing kit, a ration book, and a cherished framed photograph of a loved one, all left in a storeroom, never to be seen by the patient again. Looking through these items brings the people alive. This idea of suitcases and their contents had me thinking of doing something concrete, and art related.

In January 2016 I was accepted to attend an artful prose course at Manchester Metropolitan University. It was for 6 weeks and included field trips to the Science Museum as a source of material to write creatively. I loved every minute of it as it allowed me the freedom to express my work in a visual way. On completion of the artful prose course, we created a handmade book, a collaboration of art and prose, in groups of four.

I wanted to continue doing something else visual that would showcase my work. I had the idea to use an old suitcase, a theme that had been running through my head since I had read about abandoned suitcases and the lives they left behind. I felt that doing something unusual and original would represent Dolly's experience innovatively. I purchased a small suitcase and covered the outside with copies of newspaper cuttings and photographs from Lancaster Moor Asylum, that were available in Lancaster Library. Inside I hung 84 luggage tags: each one with a line from a poem, or a haiku (see appendix: Images).

Conclusion

This thesis experiments with poetry techniques, and rhetorical devices, such as objective correlative, ekphrastic poetry, and poetic forms to explore the lives of Dolly and the women in the asylum. I focus on demonstrating how empathy throughout the collection of poetry can create an emotional response as I continue to unravel the life of Dolly, exploring mental health, and creating an at times surreal world.

This collection of 84 poems has aimed to clarify relevant aspects of Dolly's life and to try and understand what it was like to be institutionalised for 84 years. The collection creates an individual response to Dolly's life and how she may have dealt with the environment she was confined to. This unique collection of poetry is the first of its kind, written about a marginalised character, which interrogates history and literature to expose and listen to the voices left unheard, unknown.

I include my own experiences, in an attempt to show my empathic response, along with creating a better understanding for the reader about dementia and what the parallels are between Dolly's life and Mum, and their reactions to situations they were in, as I shuffled along the corridors with them both. I have attempted to answer and develop my research questions, using my imagination to explore the intersections of Two World Wars, madness, and the difference in gendered experience, of life in an asylum.

I am addressing the vulnerability of the patients, as poetry picks out the finer details of archival research and huddles them together, giving a sense of place, using the senses to create a world that had been lost. I have included poems in the body of this critical accompaniment, as lyrical interludes. I have included poets who have written from behind the walls of the asylum, which adds an extra layer of empathy.

Repetition in poetry emphasises Dolly's life and the mental health problems that are addressed: dementia and care/my Mum and her link with Dolly. Archival research has brought forth images and information, that I have been developing into creative work. Empathy is a thread that stitches Dolly's life together. I offer a final poem:

They

Stare eyes
transfixed
to a far away
object
In their minds
A
Light

blue ocean
rolls
inside their heads.
They fight at midnight
strolling through
corridors—
green interiors
paint
their
destinies.

Dolly had left
before the last
patient woke
her soul
undisturbed
she slumbered
free
she slumbered
quietly, she slumbered silently.

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APPENDICES

Contents

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**Checklist Form for Learning Agreement
for use by postgraduate research students to accompany the
Learning Agreement**

Office use only
Ref No:

Who should complete this form?

This form should be completed by all students studying for a postgraduate research degree. This checklist forms part of the Learning Agreement, which must be completed within 3 months of commencing the study, and must be updated annually.

Ethical approval must be obtained by all students prior to starting research with human subjects, animals or human tissue. The student must discuss the content of their checklist form with their supervisory team. A final copy of the checklist form will then be agreed and the student and the main supervisor will sign it off. The student must attach a copy of the completed form to their Learning Agreement, which must be submitted to the College Research Office within 3 months of commencing the study and updated annually.

This form must be completed electronically; the sections can be expanded to the size required.

SECTION A – to be completed by ALL students

Family Name of student: Wood

Given Name(s) of student: Lorraine Jeannette
Student Roll No: @00410157

Programme of study: Phd

School: Arts & Media

Supervisor: Dr Ursula Hurley

1. Title of proposed research project

The Life Of Dolly

2. Research Summary

Researching medical records, archives, will provide me with the information to be able to fictionalise her life.

Oct 2014 v1

http://www.pg.salford.ac.uk/page/progression_forms

Ethical Checklist Form: (2014)

3. **Project objectives**

A creative and critical investigation into the lived experiences of Dolly and inmates at Lancaster Moor Hospital.

4. **Summary of Research Methodology.**

Archival research, biographical forms, and writing creatively.

Ethical Checklist Form: (2014)



Image Lancaster Moor Asylum: Flicker.com. (2014).

Puddles

Rain brought tear-shaped puddles, scattered around the grounds.

Dolly dreamt she was walking through a muddy puddle, she couldn't see her reflection, just enormous moles sat in a circle eating, twitching and digging. Dolly's feet sunk further into the water. She felt a pull, an unexpected tug. These moles were sifting through leaves. The puddle became clearer as she stared into the eyes of three rare albino moles.

This is an additional ekphrastic poem I have included.



Image: Lancaster Moor Asylum. (2016)



Aerial View Lancaster Moor: Image: National Archives. (2016).

Parlour: Image Lancaster Moor Asylum: National Archive. (2016).

XMAS 1936-7

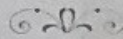
The
Lancaster County Mental Hospital
Musical Society

Present the Pantomime

The Babes in the Wood

Written by Mr. Walter Roberts, High St., Wrexham

Produced by Rev. L. C. Davies



January 4th at 6-30 p.m.

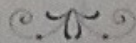
„ 5th at 2-30 and 6-30 p.m.

„ 6th at 2-30 and 7 p.m.

„ 7th at 2-30 and 6-30 p.m.

„ 8th at 6-30 p.m.

„ 9th at 7 p.m.



Dances arranged by
Miss Betty Gallimore

Musical Director:
Mr. W. S. Webb

Image: Pantomime Programme. Lancaster Library. (2015).


HOSPITAL'S CONGREGATIONS COME TOGETHER
UNDER ONE ROOF



Part of the interior of St Michael's, Lancaster Moor Hospital.—L12

Newspaper cuttings: Lancaster Library. (2015)

Handwritten notes at the top of the page include: "Mrs Doreen Bindless", "Mrs Maureen Webber", "W10/32", "W10/32c", and "1962".



A resident tries on a top hat. -W10/32

Maureen Webber, the recreational services manager. They are used to get the mainly elderly long stay patients, some of whom are confused and others very dependent, talking about and sharing their memories.

A typical conversation in the room begins: "When I was little we used to get bathed in a tin bath like that."

Treasure trove

"We used to put the cold water in first so the metal didn't get too hot. It was always the first one to get bathed."

"But before that, you had to go outside and get the bath from a nail in the back yard."

It's just like going back in time, when you walk into the washroom/kitchen and then move on into the parlour with its piano, fireplace complete with iron grate and accounts desk. People stand and stare and say: "It's just like my mum's was."

Maureen does a whistle stop Marcel waves. Look at the cheese dish. People often say they couldn't afford a piece of cheese big enough to go in it these days.

"This little cape here was sent in by a lady in her 90s. It's all hand-made and it was here as a child. The parasol is 60-years-old and it's not got a break in it. This here is a silk top hat given by someone who was in the theatre."

"These are Winter Gardens programmes for 1945. Look at this - bed and breakfast in London for 12s 6d - a Hillman Minx for £160 in 1940 and a 1967 demand for general rate and water charges, £10-12s-6d. Here's a clothing book. It's still got stamps on. Have you ever seen a tin birthday card before?"

People get very excited when they bring back memories and by you're sharing with the others.

Patients from 13 wards at the Moor Hospital use the centre. It's like Mrs Doreen Bindless, an occupational therapy helper, staff off memory joggers like bath, morning washdays, games, used to play holidays at the seaside or wartime and air raid shelters.

Nursing staff are often amazed at the responses they draw from patients. Even people with Alzheimers disease, who have lost their present day memory, will remember things that happened long ago, as they sit in the reminiscence rooms.


Maureen has begged, borrowed and purloined the amazing collection in the four years since she started the room. Staff have brought their own things in, strange objects arrive through the post and carrier bags and suitcases of treasures are regularly sent in, as people get to hear about the centre.

Extension


What Maureen would like most is to get the piano working or to get a new one. She has tea chests full of music, which no-one can play at present. There are stacks of old 78rpm records, and an original gramophone would also come in handy.

Maureen also runs a community club at the Cartmel Centre, Morecambe, one evening a week as an extension of the Littledale Centre. She is hoping this year to set up a loan service from the reminiscence rooms. Various groups would be able to borrow bits of the collection for a nominal fee, which would go towards extra amenities and little treats for the patients.

Her byword: "The quality of life is raised as much as possible for them. We give them as much stimulation as we can. As long as they enjoy it, we enjoy it."



Mrs Doreen Bindless and a resident at the Moor Hospital make use of an old sewing machine. -W10/32c



Recreational services manager, Mrs Maureen Webber (right), and occupational therapy helper Mrs Doreen Bindless, seen in the mirror on an old mantelpiece.

Newspaper cuttings: Lancaster Library. (2015)



My Suitcase. (2016)



My Suitcase. (2016)



**Inside my suitcase, 84 tags to represent each year of Dolly's life in the asylum.
This will be available on the day of the Viva to view.**



The following images were taken on my visit to San Remy, France. (2016)



San Remy. (2016)



Inside St Paul Mausoleum. (2016)



My Grandfather: John Buckley: In the Army.



My Grandfather: John Buckley: Station Master West Kirby Wirral.



My Beautiful Mum. Taken at Art Class.

Additional Creative Work

The Life of Dolly

Dolly kept on running, her legs dragging at the cobbles on Victoria Street. She couldn't hear the dogs or police whistles, as she slid against the mossy wall, to catch her breath. Her thin arms touched her leaking breasts. Almost unconscious, a voice grunted into her ear.

'Get home before you drag our name further through the mills. You're a disgrace. Are you listening? A disgrace.' He kicked at the ground, her body jerked, as he grabbed her small frame, twisting the pale skin of her wrist, forcing her home.

Her mother sat at the kitchen table, eyes black and distant. She patted the table for Dolly to sit down, pouring some tea. Dolly's head hung onto her chest and wet nightgown. She stared into the bowl of sugar. It looked so pure white and innocent.

She stumbled up the narrow staircase, stripping from her sopping nightdress, she flinched at the coldness of her bedroom. Grey bobbed skin erupted down her bruised torso. Climbing into bed, she sobbed into the night. Grief made her fight, hammering on her door, scratching to get out of her room. A pool of blood coated the soles of her feet. Her father stripped off his belt, challenging her until she lay solemnly, alone.

Her parents deposited Dolly at the asylum, without a word of comfort. She whimpered continually, as she sat watching the outside world, without a flicker of life through her eyes. She envied the leaves outside, curling and flying away to freedom. Heavy clouds hung like bats, in the eaves above her room. She'd wail and scratch her wild body until it bled in petal shapes, onto the slate-tiled floor. She never had any visitors after being admitted to the Lancaster Moor Hospital.

Next door, Meryl, an older lady cursed and spat. Her straw-spun hair scratched at the walls as she ran searching for an exit half-dressed in a torn nightgown, revealing purple flesh, and blackened bare feet.

Dolly held the grey mottled crochet blanket, breathing in the smell through the holes in the wool and, gaps between the missing stitches. A tap at the door made her break free from rocking, as she shoved the blanket into the sleeve of her cardigan, folding her arms tightly she closed her eyes.

Meryl banged repeatedly on Dolly's door, facing the gardens, but she remained in her chair, shouting.

'Go away it's my room, get her out of here.' Dolly pushed Meryl to the door, as Dolly's blanket slipped to the floor Meryl picked it up, hugging it to her chest.

'It's my blanket.' Dolly tried to grab it, but Meryl quickly darted from the room. The door caught Dolly's eye, she screeched, holding her face, and shaking her head. She sat back in her chair rocking and crying, the last thing she had, was her baby's blanket, she felt like a cold chill had dipped her in darkness like the nib of Indian ink.

Words

Every night
the words

skipped

across
her heartbeat
like a piano tuner.

Every night
the words
played
hopscotch
on the bruises
of her torso.

Every night
the words
became
angry
drew
blood
behind her ears.

Every night
the words
became
explicit
shouting
profanities
from the train.

Every night
the words
hung letters
on the washing line
to dry out
from the storm.

Every night

the words
scribbled
in silence
falling
in-line
to command.

Every night
the words
became
friends
lending
each other
syllables.

Every night
the words
became
bold
approaching
new territory.

Every night
the words
drifted
to sleep
with
the bird song
closed their eyes
the world
became silent.

Every night
I heard your voice
put thoughts in my head
words on the page your heart
in mine you gave me a sign.

Under Construction

Wednesday 16th September 2015

I felt an urgent need to go to Lancaster and visit Dolly's home.

My son drove me, and lots of anticipation followed.

The renovated section of the building had a sales office but closed that day.

The untouched part of the tower was still under construction, so after a visit to the site manager's office and a discussion, I found out I would be able to do a tour the following week.

I needed to be able to do this, to feel the atmosphere inside the building.

With or without the renovation, seeing inside a place that Dolly had lived for 84 years will fill me with so many more questions, I will need to find the answers to.

The manager said the tower was just full of pigeon crap and feathers, sticking to the side of the walls as you try to climb the spiral stairs.

I want to climb the spiral staircase and look across the moor.

I need to find answers hidden among the walls and floors of the old asylum building.

Dolly's old home.

I need to climb those stairs and see through the eyes of those pigeons, and those who hear the cries at night, and the last lorry leaves for the quarry to deposit stone and stories from the asylum.

With each piece of stone and rubble is a story, a lick of paint smeared across the quarry floor, gripping to the last piece of human faeces, hair, and bones, a gown, and a newspaper.

Ink emptied from wells and pencils with the lead removed, hidden in the groove of a desk.

Dolly's name is carved deep.

My Visit

I walk through the doors of Lancaster Moor Asylum: like Dolly did in 1910.

I feel the air snatch my breath, like a web wrapping itself around my throat.

I cling to my scarf as if I need protection from myself or who?

I hear and smell the pigeon's feet rushing up the stairs, their tail feathers tapping at the metal rungs of the spiral staircase.

I touch the roughly rendered walls and wonder what is hidden underneath. What gaping holes and paintings have been kept are preserved beyond the internal walls.

The murals: the figures now have their coats on and are leaving, surely you can't demolish something so beautiful, and something so historic?

My feet scrape sand and concrete, stones stick between the grooves on my boots wanting to follow me home.

I feel a breeze from the window in the tower, a curtain hangs not freely but caught in a trap, a hand holds it still day after day.

I feel the air grow heavier as we walk towards the great staircase, the sweeping one that takes us to the first floor.

I smell candy, sugar, and toffee apples.

I smell cinnamon and ale, apples and pear confit, and a stew with dumplings.

I smell freshly laundered sheets and stale berries.

I smell freedom for some, and isolation for others.

I smell hope with a tinge of sadness, that's creeping around me every moment it can.

Pear drops and aniseed balls linger above the spot where I stand.

I feel an escape route is planned for some time soon.

She

... grew tall, hanging her slender neck over the high walls of Upper Moor Lane.
She grew small hiding in the smallest trunk she could find, in the store cupboard,
She chose the one with the plush red satin lining, with a frilly pocket to hide things.
She grew wide, filling the gap in the classroom wall where the plaster had fallen, crumbs of it
stuck in her hair.
She grew round, rolling down the laundry chute, collecting the missing socks that lay lost
together in a basket.
She grew tired, falling asleep standing in the queue for tea, dropping her tray in a clatter
while she snored.
She grew too big for her clothes, buttons forced to break free from the edge of her blouse, the
smock split sides, frayed cotton.
She grew scared that she couldn't live with the noise anymore.
She died alone.

A Coat for Dementia

I am knitting a coat for dementia
one which is bright with finny addy
borders. Large pockets to carry around
extra handkerchiefs and stray objects
that get lost on the way. I am knitting
a coat for dementia casting on stitches
that are extra strong to keep in emotions
when so greatly needed, a thread that forms
a bond with the person wearing the coat.
A pair of arms to wrap around a snug fit.

I am knitting a coat for dementia
Hoping the length will cover
the important parts and keep them warm.

Mum's Birds

Mum preens their feathers with her pencil, and curves each tail,
one hops off the bench, he begins to warble, happy with his new coat.

Calm and precise she marks each colour with her brush,
scared to let the lines run, as they flutter on the page.

She draws a Robin, but he takes flight from her picture,
leaves a red trail before she finishes the last stroke of paint on his breast.

Sweeping her brush over the heads of the Swallows she opens their eyes
to be sharp, and alert before they fly south for winter.

She makes the Blue-Tits smart, staring from the picture, mouths and earthy beaks
searching for scraps of bacon fat, and nuts from the bird table, they can see through the
window.

The Geese are too large to fit on her easel, so she takes over the kitchen table,
their plump heads and bodies waddle to the kitchen door. She hooks them back

with dad's old keepers net, and lands them back on her canvas centre stage,
white paint dripping down beneath the stone floor. She has them firmly in her grip,
yellow beaks and petal shaped eyes, draw you in.

Mums last painting of the day.
Tomorrow she will forget,
until she sees it hung on her wall
and inquires 'Who drew that?'
'Can I have one?'
'My dad used to draw.'

Mums World

Writing about dementia and my mum is like writing about a stranger who came for tea and stole my heart. Living with mum's dementia makes me feel like it's not really her who has it but me, and the rest of our family. Mum doesn't know she has it, instead she lives in her world, like a woman on a hill watching and waiting, like in a snow-globe, with her mind swirling, and when the snow settles, she laughs, amidst biscuit tins, and crumbs that scatter on her carpet and leave a trail to the bathroom.

The decision to attend an art class in Sept 2012 grew from a seed I planted with Mum, and as I watched it grow, she thought I went along for the ride, tagging along for something to do. I had plenty to do, but for Mum, this was something new. At first, she was apprehensive, doubting each week her ability to draw a leaf and paint it so delicately. It became a reality, as each week mum's flowers grew, extending to birds, who also spread their wings, their tiny beaks pecking for more, as mum's concentration for two hours on a Monday morning became a special treat, I was up in the clouds, so proud, my mum could draw, her talent so unique, I craved more.

My first poem was a sunflower that smiled at me, drew me into the centre of its stamen, and whispered inspirational words to carry on. Mum's garden full of sketches flourished as the birds, kingfishers, robins, and ducks joined the fun. I carried on, as Mum's pencil carved and curled each tail, her brush tickled the badger's feet, who came in from the cold.

I was on a mission; I was under her spell. Animals woke me in the night, scratching at my notebook, wanting to come in, words formed each one, as I saw them alive on the page before mum had time to draw them. I had a list of animals queuing to be met and drawn by mum.

Mum was happy and always remembered a Monday was for art, followed by lunch, but sadly, she would forget within the hour what she had drawn, but I won't forget, as each picture and poem stare back at each other, in mum's world.

Winter brought the snowman with his green and red striped scarf, as I folded him into each envelope carefully delivering them before he could melt. He brought smiles to us all, mums keepsake snowman, who will stay with us each Christmas. Each picture signed 'Love Mum XX'.

Mum's hips caused her severe pain, but she won't miss art whatever the weather. Yesterday she brightened up the class with her butterflies and giant moth, she began talking to him, gave him extra spots and a chubby body, 'too much eating my father's socks,' she announced and laughed.

Home

Frozen beaks like ivory coated on the windowsill outside.
Glass beads stare back. The frozen metal bucket of tadpoles
waits for spring. Black and white memories like scuffed shoe
polish on newspaper. A tide mark in the bowl.

Chipped paint replaced with PVC, blinds and shutters block out the light.

The sound of the trains still lingers into the sidings. Coal trains long gone. Dust hangs like
midges in the air. Moggies squat on the back wall waiting for bin day to fight over scraps and
bones, wail and hiss until they've had their fill. Mum chases them with the yard brush and a
bucket of soapy water.

I keep walking back to the same street with its black and white paintwork and door.

10 H***** Street.

A heart scratched into the red brick.

I see three brass monkeys: bald heads shine from my constant polishing. My fingers thick
with the smell of Brasso seeped into their bodies, melded together, lingered under their noses.

Bleach. Disinfectant. On floors and in our bath, sanitised us.

But this was home.

I see the cord mat where my brother grazed his chin, falling from his chair after rocking back
and forth. The coal fire in the back kitchen of the terraced house where I was born.

*I grew accustomed to the feeling
of the cord wrapped securely
around my neck. Colouring
me a tingling shade of blue.*

*The midwife's safe hands
detached me, blade swished
cold steel tugged my wired
lifeline. The door slammed*

*firmly shut, rattling the letter
box as Dad left for work.
I gave an awkward cry
drowned out by distant fireworks.*

Crackling spitting wood and objects Mum positions between firefighters ignites new flames,
burning orange embers sink deeper into the night. I see Mum's strong hands shield us from
the flames as she pushes yesterday's newspaper up the chimney. I could hear the siren close
by. The little brush I loved to sweep the fallen ash, remnants of the past lay lifeless by
morning.

The red back gate, paint curled at the bottom like the hem of a skirt puckered like an old skin.

Echoes from the tin bath as the train leaves its sidings, replenished with coal and nutty slack. My hands dig deep searching for the tiniest speck of gold, my fingers half-bitten by the dust of kings. The water drains, splashing the yard and neatly edged moss. Milky grey water from the bath where my brother had left the soap in too long, holding its breath as a stream of bubbles floated and popped.

Home, the house where I was born and belonged. 10 H***** Street. Birkenhead. Wirral. United Kingdom.

Mum the centre of our universe, but she was more than this.

Her eyes sparkled like indigo smudged on my watercolour palette.

Her hands strong as if a sculptor had left behind some clay, they warmed and moulded me.

Her bubbly permed hair kept reminders of her past neatly rolled into curls.

Her glasses scattered with stains that only she could see through.

Her laugh I grew up with, a string of harmonies, an infectious cure for any ailment.

Her crimplene dress I left an iron shaped tattoo.

Her cocktail gown, silk, I'd get lost in the colours of the world.

Her rules she stuck to like treacle toffee apples she made for the street.

Her ability to sew, knit, create a world for us, a childhood without any spare change.

Her grief for her Mum from the age of nine was a raw onion she couldn't peel.

Her scent, perfumes that followed us to adulthood, heavy drops of memories.

Her courage was oceans teaching us to swim deep and far.

Her sense of humour she had borrowed from her dad. A funny blend she gave us like bags of sweets divvied out on a rainy day.

Her devotion was priceless, she loved unconditionally, clung to us through every pore.

She was the needle in a sewing machine whizzing through every corner of the garment of our days.

She suffered like the pleats of a skirt pressed into submission. Heat exposed the fibres of her heart, her body ravaged, savaged by a disease too raw to imagine, stripping her emotions bare like the red flock wallpaper that sat above the fireplace: nobody home.

How do you belong when Mum is taken?

Your family drifts, exists, travelling but going nowhere.

Roots still linger under the cobbles in the alleyway.

I can't take the bus without seeing into the eyes of strangers a painful lingering of something I cannot reach. I almost touch their hands holding on tight as the bus veers around a sharp bend, and over the railway bridge. Passengers hold their breaths among shopping bags of cans and bread squashed within nerves, a baby sighs.

I cannot take the bus without a song on my iPad reminding me, surrounding me with a pain so deep it suffocates me, churns me up and spits me onto the pavement at my destination.

The beach.

A bucketful of sand and water, remnants of the tide.

Colourful summers. Sunday best.

A place to exist for the day.

Your feet sweated and blistered in plastic sandals but 'they were to stop you getting stung by a jellyfish.' Mum would say.

I loved the sand, but not the sea, nor the seaweed wrapping itself around my ankles, like brown beaded bracelets.

Sand-filled, paste-filled sandwiches and little ducks, our cockles.

The Wirral Peninsular has several beaches on our doorstep.

The things we once had, now lay hidden, misplaced in the ottoman at the bottom of the bed, filled with crisp white sheets and embroidered tablecloths.

Lives unpicked, threads of nature, stitched to repair the wounds of skin open hearts of the war.

A battle to belong.

Loss.

... is like emptying the bath while your world is struggling to escape the suds and the tide marks that your brother left after his mechanical job, leaves an oil residue, and the leftover curry and chip trays and 'My Way', he sings as he falls asleep at the kitchen table.

What I would give for 'War of the Worlds' to be beating its wings against the net curtain of the open window of the lounge, and Mum letting him turn the volume up, because she could, but I liked 'Delilah' Tom Jones crooning to his heart's content, and Mums 'Porgy and Bess' when nobody was listening.

Loss

Memories

A tide mark

A loss too heavy to hold

The missing button on your coat when you were five.

The missing button on your coat now.

The rest of them belong, in a uniform way.

Finding the way to belong is like searching for your button among the cobbled streets of your childhood.

Returning home.

Soldiers in Blue

Institute- patients
distinguished between the blue shirts of the soldiers.
White bandages-red stains-
The rest is the same-
A number not a name.
A story, description, injury, wounds
buried beneath-
loss
lost
ferocious frost
flags- folded- coins
fingernails-
shell shock-rash.
Stones
generations
Record office-
Military-
Piece together the lives they had before, and the lives they have now, spent in beds, chairs,
staring at the tiles, counting the rows, grouting in between.

Walls
picking at insects lodged, or that found a hole, an escape.
Distinguished-
Poetry as punctuation.

Your Shadow

I draw in your shadow
the dark space in between
and fill it with leaves
and dead prey, limbs
stretched as if to escape.

Brown pelts hidden among
the shades of autumn.
Golden shapes of a new season
before your return and swallow
whole the shape of a winters coat
of ermine dragging footprints
from the past, echoing cries
into the night as the bell tolls.

The Poetic Landscape

...of Lancaster Moor.
Adapted to suit the climate,
the fog, wildlife, wind, no escape.

The landscape dances to the sounds of the moor,
the crying each night, I never escaped. I fought to turn a blind eye,
to ignore the noises that disturbed my sleep. Birds lay in wait, flying south
to retreat from the bitter climate, that biting wind. The air incomplete from nature's
past disturbing the complexion, the naked earth beneath the feet of strangers.

Earth renewing her vows

Arranging autumn leaves

Reciting spring sonnets

Together we can listen

Hugging all the world's children.

Glowing

Yellow
Smiling faces
Preserved through winter
Snow-covered bodies buttercups
Golden.

Forgotten

Daisies
Chains no longer
Visible wrinkled stems
hidden under stones and moss
lost links.

Windmill

drags soil and stones
with every turn heavy arms
writing in the dirt creaking wind
swirling.

Bitter

winter blew cracks
In Dolly's heart shaking her
hard until the grief lingered
frost bite.

Snuff

Let me die among the tar and smoke
of my last cigar lingering over the ashtray.
My breath hanging by a thread of hand-knitted fibres,
clogged beyond repair, the last few remaining stitches.
I shuffle the last few steps. My granddaughter sits
in my chair, her eyes wild, long hair in two neat plaits.

She watches me, alarmed at every cough and crimson
Face until the oxygen hisses into life sending me to a faraway
Place, I'm almost there.

I give her a book the *Poetic Works of Robert Burns*.
Its jacket is tattered, but the gold pages remain smooth.

She reads aloud, her voice soft, her accent clear, it carries
memories, the words scratch at my lungs like a pinch of snuff.

Nothing

Nothing could replace the spark
She held
Pigments in her oval ring
Now dull
The room dimly lit
No candles
How can she put the flames out in her mind
The endless sparks
The dull limp hair
Now hangs
A reminder
Charred, brittle and broken
Left to die
Nothing can replace the spark
Nothing.

Normal

The inability to breathe
outside
in a world
that doesn't cope with
us.

We wear odd shoes
and clothes
don't match
my bag,
but

It's alright
I've

survived
two wars
and

another
one on the way.

The tabby cats
hiding
in laundry again
but

It's alright
this rain
won't
last.

I've pink ribbons for my hair
and Elsie has made a dozen
scones for tea.

He will come back
you know.

HE WILL.

Thank you for reading.