

**UNIVERSITY OF CHICHESTER**

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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

Department of English & Creative Writing

**‘The Blood-Self’:  
Reflections on Prison Writing**

**David Swann**

**Thesis to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

PhD by Publication, featuring a Reflective Commentary  
upon selected extracts from a Body of Original Research

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

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**ABSTRACT**  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & CREATIVE WRITING  
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This thesis analyses the development of an original body of creative work written in response to experiences gained during the 14-month period when I was employed by the Arts Council of England as a Writer-in-Residence at HMP Nottingham Prison (housing mainly lifers and long-term inmates).

The creative work arose from a specific jail environment, described in the thesis as being formed from an uneasy combination of punitive, managerial, and rehabilitative concepts. The thesis argues that the creative work owes a direct debt to the ideas and practises that confronted me while I was attempting to build literacy skills in the prison. However, jail is stultifying for both teacher and student – and, ultimately, the thesis goes on to identify the additional, unexpected imaginative prompts that were necessary before the creative work could cohere into a collection.

As well as offering analysis of the work’s slow evolution, the thesis incorporates a selection of 23 creative pieces that emerged. Many of these were collected, a decade after my residency, as a hybrid of prose, poetry, and wood-carvings, entitled *The Privilege of Rain* (Waterloo Press, 2010), shortlisted in 2011 for the Ted Hughes Award.

The creative work was fuelled by a growing desire to pay witness to the ‘Prison Works’ programme, which transformed the jail. This desire was influenced by my journalistic training, but the thesis describes how I began to discover poetry’s potential, and analyses a transformation from reporter to poet. In tracing this transformation, the thesis considers ways in which journalism and poetry differ from, and resemble, each other. Further, it considers the beneficial ‘aura’ (Parini, 2009: 89) of writers who proved influential in the transformation, including Smith, Colburn, Parker, Liardet, Robison, Swift, and Lawrence.

The thesis holds out a measure of hope. As well as discussing poetry’s vital part in my own ‘human flourishing’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 17), it considers the role that Creative Writing may play in the rehabilitation of offenders. First-hand instances of rehabilitation, and verbal evaluations of the efficacy of my residency, are combined with inmate writing to suggest that it *is* possible for individuals to develop imaginative paths through the jail’s ‘forest’. However, fear and inertia are identified as two pressures upon the incarcerated imagination. And the thesis argues that these pressures are connected to societal attitudes and policies that are adding to, rather than diminishing, our problems with crime.

Underlying the discussion are three main questions: (1) What pressures does jail exert upon the imagination, and creative expression? (2) What forces operated to create the specific prison environment I encountered? (3) Can writing help in the rehabilitation of offenders?

‘Fear of crime is closely related to fear of strangers.’

– David Garland,

*The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, p. 153.

‘It is the hour of the stranger. Let the stranger now enter the soul.’

– D.H. Lawrence,

*Fantasia of the Unconscious*, p. 105.

‘We the old, the young,  
The sons of all tongues,  
We, the strong, the weak,  
The sleepers, the wakeful,  
We the poor, the rich,  
Alike in misfortune,  
The good, the bad,  
Whatever we have been,  
We men of many scars,  
We the witnesses of those who died,  
We, the defiant, we the despondent,  
The innocent and the much accused,  
Deeply tormented by long isolation,  
Brother, we are searching, we are calling you!  
Brother, do you hear me?’

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

*Prayers from a Prison: Prayers and Poems*, p. 20.

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## Author's declaration

I, David Swann, declare that the thesis entitled *The Blood Self*, and the published book whose evolution it discusses, *The Privilege of Rain*, are both wholly my own work, and that they were generated from my own original research.

I confirm that:

- This thesis was wholly completed while in candidature for a research degree at the University of Chichester.
- No part of this thesis, or the published book, has been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution.
- Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed.
- In the thesis, where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, the thesis is entirely my own work. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.
- An early version of Chapter Nine was published as an article in 2012. The article's title was 'A Choir of Trees': Discovering the 'Voice' of a Poetry Collection'. It was published in *Poetry and Voice: A Book of Essays*, ed. S.Norgate & E. Piddington (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2012). An enhanced version of the article forms Chapter Nine here. The article was based upon an informal talk given at a conference in 2010, and intended as the first step in my PhD, which began that year.
- A section of Chapter Eight have been adapted for a book chapter titled 'Mary Robison's Signs of Absence'. The chapter will feature in *Critical insights: Flash Fiction*, ed. S.D. Emmert & M. Cocchiarale (Amenia, NY: Grey House Publishing: 2017).
- None of the other work has been published, with the exception of creative pieces from *The Privilege of Rain: Time among the Sherwood Outlaws*, and *Beyond the Wall: Words Set Free from Prison*, all used to illustrate wider points, and always attributed.
- The total word-count of the thesis is 78,500 words, including all quotations and references within the body of the text, but excluding the final list of references (5,000 words). The thesis itself is 66,000 words in length. An additional 12,000 words are extracted from my books, *The Privilege of Rain* and *Beyond the Wall* (from which a total of 23 creative pieces are included, at relevant points, in the analysis). Of those 12,000 words, approximately 8,000 words are made up of prose, and 4,000 of poetry.
- A copy of *The Privilege of Rain*, and a CD recording of the tape-recorded interviews that my brother conducted with inmates in 1997, are included with the submission.

## Introduction

This thesis, submitted as a PhD-by-Publication, contains extracts from my book, *The Privilege of Rain: Time Among the Sherwood Outlaws* (Hove: Waterloo Press, 2010), interwoven with critical reflections on the pressures, influences and processes that coalesced to create new prison literature. The thesis is rooted in my experiences as a writer-in-residence at HMP Nottingham Prison from 1996-7, when I was contracted by the Arts of Council of England to build literacy skills in male lifers and long-term prisoners.

Initially, I worked in a dilapidated single-wing prison, built in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century at the brow of a low moor in Sherwood. But this stagnant backwater was soon to alter in dramatic fashion, for I had crossed the prison's threshold at a time when the Government's 'Prison Works' programme was intensifying, and momentous changes were afoot.

In reflecting upon my fourteen months in the jail and the decade afterwards when I wrote about my experiences, the thesis explores what writing can do for a prisoner, and what prison does to a writer. It questions how imaginative thought and moral rehabilitation can hope to flourish under the punitive conditions of Victorian and 'warehouse' jails – and it proposes that the suppositions underlying national prison policy often work against the aim of provoking imaginative thought in prisoners.

The thesis addresses the violent light that jail throws upon conflicts and dangers inherent within the writing of fiction and poetry – and within the writer's role in jail. What moral responsibility do writers bear towards their human subjects, and to the truth, particularly when the subjects are marginalised and vulnerable, and when the truths may be ugly? Is it possible to write the 'real', and if so, using which tools? How many of the following can a writer be, at the same time: poet, journalist, teacher, witness, fiction writer, rehabilitator?

Here, in the introduction, I will go on to present a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the thesis, and explain the structure of the thesis, and my methodology. But first there follow a few preliminary thoughts on rehabilitation, the issue which was at core of my daily work (since I was employed by the Arts Council to build literacy skills in the prison population).

I entered my residency believing that society's edges tell us more about the health of our political and economic systems than central positions of privilege and power, and so I carried a desire to find out more about the state of our democracy. What I found left me fearful and depressed. The specific prison that confronted me was a Category 'B' institution (housing 'those inmates for whom escape must be made very difficult' [Leech, 1999]). HMP Nottingham was described as:

another ageing Victorian jail... [holding] around two hundred prisoners including sixty lifers. It could be fierce living. Some called it the Wild West, others called it Beirut. Burn-outs, juggings and the occasional stabbing kept the tension high (James, 2016: 317).

This description was written by Erwin James, once a student in my class at HMP Nottingham, and today a journalist making his living as a free man. His rehabilitation is one example of how writing may play some small but important role in facilitating 'the return to competence' that Mathiesen (2006: 27) identifies as the underlying meaning of rehabilitation.

For James, rehabilitation in HMP Nottingham was hindered by an environment rife with 'cell fires, scaldings, self-mutilation, ambushes, six suicides in two years' (2003: 146) – and where, more generally, throughout the prison service, there was 'a record number of 83 self-inflicted deaths in prisons in England and Wales' (James, 2016: 324) during 1997.

Having gained an education while serving life, James was a model prisoner by the time he joined my class, where he was twice mistaken by visiting writers for the Governor. James describes jail as a place that 'teems with opportunities' (2003: 194), and where education classes allowed him to overcome his struggle with Tressell's *The Ragged*



*Trousered Philanthropist*. What's more, James speaks in favour of a class in 'enhanced thinking skills' (53), where he learned 'conflict resolution by negotiation; cooperation and mutual advancement; logical problem-solving; consensus through discussion; cost-benefit analysis' (53). However, the lifer who later became a *Guardian* journalist, quickly qualifies his belief that 'prison has the potential to be a genuine community service' (43) when he maintains that 'how to survive... remains the primary concern' (118). He says: 'Prison can work, but not if the system is overloaded and under-resourced' (77). For James, the system is:

designed to disempower... It is when prisoners feel that they are not being afforded respect as people that the cynical prison culture – the culture of... the nonce-beaters – thrives (77).

As far as the concept of 'rehabilitation' goes, I think of it rather in the same way as the poet Judith Tannenbaum, who taught for many years in American prisons. When people asked her whether her students had been changed by their studies, Tannenbaum suspected that 'my questioners assumed that the purpose of sharing poetry in a place like San Quentin was to transform men from criminals into productive citizens' (Tannenbaum & Jackson, 2010: 172). For Tannenbaum, it was only the prisoner himself who could enact the changes required for rehabilitation. Her role was to 'provide a space in which... qualities of compassion, intelligence, and joy... had room to live and grow' (173). To that extent, she shared her student, Spoon Jackson's, belief that 'all rehabilitation is self-rehabilitation' (172). As Carol Bly says, 'reading science and reading literature... do not in themselves bring about new insight and changes of heart' (Bly, 1996: 210). Rather, in Bly's view, the literature must be integrated into 'the development of ethical consciousness' (211) through a process of psychological development – and that is difficult to achieve in jail, where there are so many pressures on self-improvement.

By offering a connection to their better selves, I believe that literature and writing have roles to play in allowing the offender to become 'capable of reflection, of seeing himself

in the frame of reference of the surrounding universe' (Lorenz, 1967: 255) – the quality that Lorenz sees as 'the best definition of man' (255). I agreed with the poet Blake Morrison, in his analysis of issues around the murder of James Bulger, that my approach contained the potential for 'liberal goo, moral relativism' (Morrison, 1997: 243). But I shared Morrison's suspicion of 'a denial of shared humanity' (243), and went on admiring Ken Smith's vision of 'a decent society where vision and growth are commonplace' (Smith, 2004: 55).

Hence, I continued to be moved when I read about, and met, teachers who believed that literature had a role to play in rehabilitation. John Cheever, for instance. He went to work in Sing-Sing jail after learning that 2,000 inmates could count upon only six teachers (Donaldson, 1988: 262). Later, when dying, Cheever wrote: 'Literature has been the salvation of the damned; literature has inspired and guided lovers, routed despair, and can perhaps... save the world.' (Cheever, 1991: 393). Although I was moved by Cheever's hope, I wasn't harbouring a huge number of illusions about the power of literature to save the world. In Malcolm Braly's memoir, *False Starts* (1976), there's a memorable moment when he scans a list of prisoners who left San Quentin to become writers, and realises that all twenty have since returned to jail. When it comes to prison, caution is usually advisable.

Still, I wanted to believe in 'the possibility of growth even amongst the damned' (1990b: 18), as the poet Ken Smith put it. Generally, I was interested in rowing against what Hoyle calls 'the punitive tide' (2010: 33), and wanted to work towards the creation of a society where an engagement with literature and writing has the potential to create meaning and dignity (rather as in Sapphire's novel, *Push* (1997), where the abused, diseased protagonist ultimately exclaims: 'I think how *alive* I am, every part of me' [1997: 137] after discovering the written word).

Without knowing the phrase at the time, I was interested in using literature to achieve 'human flourishing' (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 17), defined as 'well-being and a life with

dignity' (19) – a life which includes 'social justice' (19), 'a rich set of aesthetic experiences' (19), and qualities identified by Nussbaum as 'liberties *to do or to be* something' (65):

*Senses, imagination, and thought.* Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason... being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice... being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression... (33).

These hopes and desires led me into a labyrinth I was ill-prepared to face: not only the physical world of the prison, but the creative maze that confronted me later when I tried to develop techniques and forms that would represent my experiences, and bind disparate fragments into a coherent book.

If my own attempt to achieve 'human flourishing' was fraught with difficulties, then how much harder must it be for an incarcerated person to keep his/her mind open so that s/he can grow and change? In prison, where restrictions on freedom are manifold, there are only a few places where an inmate can flourish, or bring himself to life. One of these is the prison-gym, where muscles are badges of pride and warnings to predators, and where physical exertion may give access to states of mind that verge on the mystical. Other men flourish through their inter-actions with family on prison-visits, or the paths opened by education-classes, the prison-library, or hobbies. For some, there is also the act of imagination made possible by writing and art (achievements discussed in Chapter One when I quote from inmates' creative responses).

Otherwise, an inmate's struggle to acquire cognitive and emotional skills is likely to be frustrated by many overwhelming obstacles. Having witnessed these grave challenges at first-hand, it felt wrong in this thesis to simply discuss my own work and its gestation. Instead, I have tried to balance analysis of my endeavours against a more general account of creativity under pressure – and to use the thesis to focus on problems facing an inmate who

wants to use Creative Writing as part of the ‘return to competence’ (Mathiesen, 2006: 27), and to achieve ‘human flourishing’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 17).

The thesis includes extracts from the body of student-work produced during my residency, some of which appeared in an anthology, *Beyond the Wall: Words Set Free from Prison* (published in 1998, after my residency ended) and some which appeared in books later published by my students. Two of my students in HMP Nottingham, Tom Shannon and Erwin James, went on to publish books. Both were serving life-sentences when I taught them, so it’s a source of joy to see James living beyond the wall, working as a professional writer – and to know that Shannon gave his name to the Trust he established with the farmer Christopher Morgan. The Shannon Trust was responsible for setting up the literacy initiative, ‘Toe To Toe’ (discussed later), and an exchange of letters between Shannon and Morgan was published as the book, *Invisible Crying Tree*. Writing by both Shannon and James is used in the thesis to analyse the rehabilitative challenge facing prisoners in UK jails.

In total, the thesis contains nine chapters. Chapter One (‘The Spiral: Prison and the Failure of the Rehabilitative Imagination’) opens by describing the unexpected discovery of a cassette-tape featuring interviews with men whom I taught in prison. After summarising the inmates’ experience of Creative Writing during my residency, the chapter considers the role that Creative Writing may play in the rehabilitation of offenders who have been incarcerated within a system that largely discourages initiative and creativity.

Chapter One summarises how I organised my working day, as a means of combating fears about the prison environment and of maximising the educational impact that I hoped to achieve. Teaching in jail, I encouraged students to aim for flow in their writing, through attention and concentration – and to search for flow in their reading, too. As well as bringing balance and peace, I told my students that reading would have an osmotic influence on their writing – or, as the poet Terry Gifford once told my university students: ‘The quality of your

reading will show itself in the quality of your writing' (Gifford, 2005). Using fiction by writers including Ernest Hemingway, I encouraged prisoners to discuss feeling and perspective. Watching men wrestle in our evening class with the story, 'Hills Like White Elephants' (in which a female is thwarted by a controlling male), I gained a sense that we shared a common endeavour. By this, I mean that we were all – teacher and students alike – using art to 'deepen and refine our sense of what it means to be alive... to give birth to some kind of insight, some kind of wisdom' (Abbs, 2003: 67). The men frowned as they analysed the story's relationships between landscape and character, and some grew frustrated by the author's gaps. 'Why didn't Hemingway just say 'abortion'?' one of them asked, irritated – and afterwards there was an uncomfortable silence in which I thought we were reflecting upon our own evasions and denials.

Workshops like this yielded unmeasurable outcomes, yet go on resonating in my memory for the sense that students were learning *through* writing – as well as learning *to* write. It's a distinction made by Abbs when he compares educational philosophies that privilege 'a general learning process related to... psychological development' (2003: 49) to those that favour 'the transmission of skills – all of which are seen as measurable, all of which are deemed to be transferable to other tasks' (60). I don't want to argue against measurements *per se* – since numerical instruments may be very useful when assessing levels of illiteracy and dyslexia, etc. However, I share Abbs's suspicion of philosophies that seek to apply numbers to the complexities of the human soul.

In Chapter Two ('The Black Flower' – The Impact of 'Prison Works upon 'Human Flourishing'), the focus of the thesis shifts to specific imaginative strategies that may allow prisoners to survive the jail's fear and inertia, and approach the challenge of rehabilitation. The chapter describes how HMP Nottingham started to change in response to political ideas, including the 'Prison Works' programme. As an intensive re-building programme

transformed the Victorian institution, a concept of the ‘warehouse’ jail took hold, creating a new set of challenges for the imagination, and for the rehabilitation of offenders. Here, I will summarise salient aspects of the ‘Prison Works’ programme, in order to supply an immediate sense of important pressures during my residency. In essence, ‘Prison Works’ was:

... a 27-point programme to toughen up the criminal justice system... including restrictions on bail and cautioning, the building of six new private prisons, compulsory tests of prisoners for drugs, and new rules to make community service more punitive (Cavadino & Dignan, 2006: 67).

‘Prison Works’ is described by Wilson & Ashton as a ‘philosophy... borrowed from the US, where its most influential advocate is Charles Murray’ (2001: 16), in whose ‘influential and simplistic analysis, crime is in effect controlled by the threat of imprisonment’ (16). Murray’s belief in ‘the principles of retributive justice’ (Murray, 2005: 20) led him to reject justice as ‘successful therapy’ (21) and concentrate on ‘just deserts’ (21), an interesting noun, given the nature of the environments he helped to create. Murray adds that ‘being a retributivist does not mean you must give up on rehabilitation’ (21), but that ‘the purpose of a sentence is punishment’ (21). Those punishments were simplified in the UK by the Criminal Justice Act, which allocated a standard sentence-tariff to each particular crime, ‘no matter what the circumstances or the background of the offenders’ (Graef, 1993: 191).

Cavadino & Dignan (2006) report that Howard’s ‘reforms’ had the effect of lifting the prison population from 40,600 in December, 1992, to 65,300 in 1998, ‘a spectacular 61%’ rise from the December, 1992, figure’ (2006: 68) – and up again to 88,179 on 2 December 2011 (Berman, 2012). The explosion in numbers was a relatively new phenomenon when I worked at HMP Nottingham, but the increase has continued in the years since, at great public cost. ‘The average cost of imprisonment is £41,000 per year’, according to Podmore (2012: 195) – and yet ‘58% of all adults... re-offend within two years’ (Ramsbotham, 2003: 145). It’s easy to despair at this bewildering waste of potential and money. Yet, when I reflect upon my residency, I remember a few isolated seeds of hope, all connected, in various ways, with

the notion of rehabilitation – and the thesis’s central concern is with those seeds. Above all, it seeks to identify the benefits that Creative Writing may bring to the lives of offenders who are actively seeking rehabilitation.

I feel it important to note here that, although the jail I encountered was daunting for its inertia, and frightening in its architecture and folklore, it was more than a monolith of inhumanity driven by a single ideological aim. For all its violence and fear, HMP Nottingham was, too, a workplace employing some constructive members of staff, doing their best against all odds to create a healthier environment. This included not only teachers and librarians, but the Governor, a likeable and enlightened man interested in ‘human flourishing’, and several empathetic prison-officers. Erwin James mentions teachers in HMP Nottingham ‘who gave us hope’ (2016: 317) and guards ‘who tried to make it safer whenever they could’ (317). Nominally referred to as a ‘training’ prison, HMP Nottingham also contained a gym and a sports-field, and some sheds where staff trained prisoners in electronics and woodwork.

Having suggested potential paths towards rehabilitation, and remarked upon some positive elements, I must emphasise that all creative activities were hemmed in by routines and restrictions, and by the mind-numbing boredom and violence that permeate most UK jails. If he is to survive, the prisoner must focus on the here-and-now, and is likely to view the imagination as a distraction or threat. Hence, ‘human flourishing’ is so rare that it seems miraculous when one has the privilege to see it.

The pressures on rehabilitation increased as my residency progressed. Although I began my job in a decaying Victorian structure, the Government’s emphasis on incarceration over rehabilitation ensured that two brand new wings rose with dizzying speed. It was on these new wings where I first heard men complain of being ‘warehoused’, after spending 23 hours in their cells, and where I sensed the presence of a new kind of prison. This new prison was difficult to make out within the labyrinth of overlapping visions of what a jail should be,

and how it ought to relate to the society that it serves and protects. Glimpsed through the veil of Government rhetoric, it was a prison governed by ideas that privileged storage over transformation. Industrial factories had lent their metaphors to concepts of rehabilitation, but the metaphors of this new jail were drawn from the post-industrial warehouse. Rather than seeing inmates as a raw-material that could be moulded, the new philosophy conceived prisoners as volatile substances that must be stored separately, to prevent contamination.

By the time I entered the second half of my residency, the jail's population had almost tripled, and the few open spaces were vanishing – a process that involved the destruction of the jail's swimming-pool and the uprooting of most of its trees. Hemmed in now by Government policies and by dwindling living-space, the inmates faced new pressures arising from the 'Prison Works' philosophy and by the concept of the 'warehouse' jail.

Chapter Three ('The Legend on the License: First Attempts at Poetry and Nonfiction Narrative') considers the imaginative turn that occurred when I realised that the transformation of the jail had placed me in the role of a witness, and that a creative response was increasingly necessary. Here, the thesis explores the influence of my journalistic training, and its role in attempts to write as a 'witness' about the jail and its transformation. I analyse how engagement with contemporary literature informed my attempts to bring 'news' from prison's closed world. This chapter contains analysis of Capote's 'nonfiction novel' (Tynan, 1966: 131), *In Cold Blood*, as a means of assessing literary experiments that fuse fact and fiction. In addition, I describe the two-pronged 'cross-training' (Colburn and Petersen, 2010) between journalism and poetry that under-scored my creative response.

I entered jail as a teacher who was shedding his journalistic skin. But I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the jail turned me into a poet – and part of the thesis's aim is to analyse that transformation. As such, the middle chapters of the thesis explore common-ground between literature and journalism – as well as ways in which the disciplines differ.



The transformation from journalist to poet was long and twisting – and Chapter Three explores a determination to observe what John Hersey called ‘the legend on the license’ (Fisher Fishkin, 1988: 209), i.e. to stay true to the factual imperative promised by the labels ‘reportage’ and ‘journalism’ – and to resist any temptations towards invented detail.

In Chapter Four (‘‘Life after Life’: The Influence of Tony Parker’) and Chapter Six (‘‘The Great Mask Project’: The Influence of Ken Smith’), the emphasis falls on the work of Tony Parker and Ken Smith, writers who fed and challenged my work. Here, I combine textual analysis with consideration of the first prison-poems and -prose I wrote, partly in response to Parker and Smith’s influence.

For me, the question of influence is described most effectively by Jay Parini, who says that ‘the influence of the precursor is subtle and almost invisible... Poets find a source of energy in a prior body of work and attach themselves to it: not unlike cables to a battery’ (2009: 89). Parini borrows the term ‘aura’ from Walter Benjamin to explain: ‘often there is no specific poem from which a new poem arises; rather, the poet’s aura... against which the new poet struggles to superimpose a competing aura’ (89). The thesis follows Parini in arguing that influence works in the aggregate as writers connect in osmotic fashion with the ‘aura’ (89) of inspiring creative practitioners. I hope to demonstrate that a ‘flow’ of sometimes puzzling and frustrating creativity becomes possible when a person’s ‘attention is completely absorbed’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002: 53) by a holistic process of reading and writing. This is what I tried to teach my students in the jail: to read and write simply for the sake of reading and writing.

I wish to avoid any suggestion that inspirational texts are merely instruments which contribute to the ultimate goal of the writer’s work. Instead, I see a continuum between reading and writing that does not necessarily possess any in-built linear logic or ‘progress’. To my mind, reading is most useful when the writer/reader has gone beyond notions of

‘usefulness’, and is deep in the trance of reading (just as early drafts usually issue from a creative trance that has no object other than to prolong itself). On occasions, a specific type of reading *can* produce a specific type of writing, in students who are hard-wiring basic techniques. But, generally, I agree with Francine Prose (2007) that the writer absorbs his/her influences osmotically. Not only that, but the work we produce influences our choice of future reading, so it’s perfectly possible to look upon the end of creativity as not more writing, but more reading – although that statement, itself, is probably equally reductive, since it separates a holistic activity into separate parts.

The first of the thesis’s chapters on ‘influence’ makes a link to my ‘cross-training’ in poetry and journalism, particularly when discussing Tony Parker’s interview techniques and writing procedures. Here, I describe my interviews with prisoners who lacked literacy skills. The interviews were a means of both familiarising inmates with the written word and of encouraging my own sense of usefulness. I discuss how one of these interviews evolved into a written piece called ‘Jamaican Childhood’, which featured in *Beyond the Wall*, a collection of inmates’ writing that I edited after leaving my job. The process behind these interviews is compared to research into ‘life narratives’ by Maruna (2001) and McAdams (1993), whose concern with ‘meaning, unity, and purpose’ (McAdams, 1993: 6) is deeply connected to storytelling and its role in rehabilitation.

The chapter on Ken Smith explores his deployment of ruins, fragmentation, and dramatic monologues. It shows how I took energy from Smith’s ‘aura’ to investigate the sort of trapped wanderers who attracted him. In the process, I analyse the drafting of several poems written about, and from the perspective, of people on the margins of society.

Smith worked as the UK’s first official writer-in-residence at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, from 1985-87. His underlying belief was that ‘poetry by its very nature is subversive of established order, which only deadens’ (2004: 55). This view echoes Viktor Shklovsky’s

argument that a ‘peculiar displacement’ (1990: 61) becomes possible when art resists ‘atomisation’ (5) of perception and creativity – and aims, instead, to make ‘a stone feel stoney’ (6), or to achieve ‘a ‘vision’... rather than mere ‘recognition’ (10). In starting from a similar belief in literature’s power to de-familiarise, Smith hoped to use writing as a vehicle not only for self-knowledge but as the means towards building a better prison and society.

Several critics have expressed suspicion of Smith’s deployment of jail, and jail-voices, particularly for the dangers he ran of ‘emotional tourism’ (Barry, 2000: 101) and of becoming an ‘ambulance chaser’ (Kennedy, 1996: 224). But, whatever the perils of his fascinations, Smith insisted upon his aims as ‘a propagandist’ (2004: 55). He said: ‘I want others to see, I want loneliness to end, and want a decent society where vision and growth are commonplace’ (55) – an aim that continues to inspire me whenever I consider Smith’s legacy and the role he played in my creative response to prison. The challenge, I felt, was to go on working in the manner of Smith, who maintained empathy for the men’s plights while continuing to appraise their deeds with a clear eye. Jail, Smith said, ‘is an evil place’ (1988: 344), home to men like those described in ‘Bodies’:

Some whose eyes I don’t meet,  
hands I don’t shake, one that cut  
NF in a man’s back and left him  
choke on his testicles, the knife  
still in him and ran with the video (Smith, 2002: 124).

I shared the misgivings expressed in these lines, and agreed with the writer Richard Shelton, who worked as a prison teacher in the USA: ‘Somehow I can deal with people who have committed hideous crimes, but not with those who brag about them’ (2007: 118). It’s an insight that came home to me one evening during association when I joined two giggling young men who had been convicted of ram-raiding. High on prison-hooch, they joshed about their crimes. But there was also an older man in the cell, and his silence was eloquent.

Although his crime had been much worse than ram-raiding, his reticence impressed me, since it isn't easy to resist peer-pressure in jail.

I thought of the silent man, later, at a Tate Modern video-installation by Gillian Wearing. In the 36-minute *Confess All On Video. Don't Worry You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian Version II*, participants confessed to wrongs while protected by masks. The participants who moved me were those whose eyes welled with sorrow when describing minor acts. But, in some cases, the eyes gleamed when describing nasty behaviour, and then the confessions became boasts, as if the masks had revealed identities rather than disguising them. Those gleaming eyes became a preoccupation. I wanted to believe that literature had the power to do more than simply pass on techniques and improve language skills. I wanted to believe it could also release offenders from patterns of cruelty, and foster the capacity for empathy, or what Humphrey calls:

... feeling simultaneously with others: not just imagining at one remove another person's state of mind but experiencing that very feeling in one's own person right now' (1993: 57).

Chapter Five ('A 'Cross-Training': Working as Both Poet and Journalist') extends my investigation into my 'cross-training' by tracing the development of the dramatic monologue as a creative response to prison. By allowing me to inhabit new perspectives, the monologue granted imaginative freedom, but this caused confusion as well as excitement, since I felt that prose-works were constrained by Hersey's 'legend on the license' (defined on p. 17). Put simply, it felt to me that the prose-pieces must stay true to the facts that are expected of 'journalism' and 'reportage', whereas my poems felt mysteriously open to experiments with invention and viewpoint. In seeking to explain this contradiction, I draw specifically upon the example of Don Colburn, another writer who came to poetry out of journalism, and benefited from a 'cross training' (Colburn and Petersen, 2010) in both disciplines.

Parker, Smith, and Colburn helped to release my imagination, and, in Chapters Seven and Eight, I show how my influences coalesced and took on their own life, helped by the influence of writers including Mary Robison and Joan Swift. Here, I use case-studies of individual pieces to demonstrate how my imagination responded to prison. Chapter Seven focuses on the evolution of the poetry, Chapter Eight on the prose.

In the thesis's final section, Chapter Nine, I analyse how I eventually assembled *The Privilege of Rain*, fortified by the influence of D.H. Lawrence and Tim Liardet, and discuss certain principles that guided me. In addition, I discuss the artist/writer dialogue that brought the book to completion, and explore living links that developed in my imagination, particularly between jail and wilderness.

Translating acts of witness into writing proved frustratingly difficult. At first, I was simply exhausted by jail, and later I became lost in a creative maze. As I explain in the final chapter, it was mind-opening encounters with wilderness and with the work of D.H. Lawrence that eventually helped me to discover links between the disparate individual pieces – and to shine a light into the jail's dark corners (even though I knew the light would be frail, and seen by few). These wilderness-encounters near the only home that Lawrence ever owned were the catalysts that allowed me to assemble the pieces into a collection bound by the metaphor of Sherwood and its trees – and, ultimately, led to the book being published in 2010 by Waterloo Press as *The Privilege of Rain: Time among the Sherwood Outlaws*.

The collection itself features a rather unusual mixture of poetry and prose, accompanied by wood-cuts by the artist Clare Dunne. In the sense that it mixes poetry and prose-memoir, I'd identify *The Sunset Maker: Poems/Stories/A Memoir* (1987) by Donald Justice as a text belonging to a similar field (as the subtitle suggests). Justice's poems are written in both given-forms and free-verse, and the book accommodates both poetry and memoir. I gained additional encouragement from *An Acre of Barren Ground*, a novel by the

former prison-tutor Jeremy Gavron, which makes hybrid use of fiction, the graphic novel, journalism, history, and poetry to capture the plurality of its setting, Brick Lane in London.

Before going any further, I will provide a sense of the eventual shape of *The Privilege of Rain* so that the thesis rests on strong, clear foundations. Structurally, the collection is split into three sections, each bearing sub-headings ('Seed', 'Sap', and 'Stump') drawn from the lives of trees. The three sections are arranged chronologically, taking me from my first day in the jail to my last. So much for the 'forest'. As for the individual trees, they are made up of several species. The prose consists of creative non-fiction, mainly reportage and what I regard as 'non-fiction narratives' (Conover interviewed in Boynton, 2005: 7), a term discussed later in the thesis. The poetry consists of free verse and given-forms, including villanelles, sonnets, ballads, and hybrids.

When it came to 'planting' the trees, I distributed them throughout the 'forest', aiming for variety and tension in form and subject matter. Hence, I counterpointed autobiographical pieces against those that concerned the lives of prisoners. Elsewhere, objective third-person reportage was challenged and/or echoed by monologues voiced by first-person personae. Additionally, after watching ducklings and foxes in the prison-yard, I incorporated 'the more-than-human world' (Dunkerley, 2012: 217), in an attempt to speak 'in some measure to the condition of muskrats and skunk-cabbages, as well as... men', as Thoreau put it (1961: 23). Ultimately, my aim was to create 'a choir of trees', i.e. a compendium of voices and perspectives from within and outside the jail.

Finally, I collaborated with the artist Clare Dunne (as discussed in Chapter Nine) to arrange her wood-cuts. Accordingly, it became necessary to chop down, or dig up and re-plant several poems and prose-pieces. The collaborative process was fascinating and absorbing, and helped me to locate lines of gravity that would otherwise have eluded me. Consequently, the individual trees grew into a forest – and, although (or maybe *because*) its

cross-generic nature made it difficult to categorise, the publication was shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, a prize that recognises experimental work.

This outline of the book's structure is as skeletal as a tree in winter – and describes little of how the seed came to reach its territory, or fight through stones to gain the light. Hence, there now follows a note about my personal and professional circumstances when starting the job, so that the work's personal foundation is immediately clear.

Before working in jail, I'd been employed mainly as a journalist, and had hardly any serious experience of writing poetry. I had recently gained an MA in Creative Writing, specialising in fiction, and had listened carefully when the MA group discussed drafts of poems. But I never imagined I'd write *anything* about jail, let alone poetry. If I had a calling, it was to teach. Newly installed as a writing tutor, I was seized by the heat and passion of that role, and by my desire to do something useful after years of hack-work.

My working-life in journalism began in 1979 when I was employed as a part-time sports reporter for *The Accrington Observer*, a job I pursued at weekends and during the two summers while studying A' Levels. In 1981, I became a full-time cub-reporter on the same newspaper, covering current affairs (including the local magistrates' court, where I gained my first, fascinated glimpse of the criminal justice system). I left the job in 1984 to take a BA in Film & Literature at Warwick University, and later worked as a tutor in Media Studies (1988-91), focusing on film and newspapers. However, journalism drew me back, and I spent the early 1990s as a freelance journalist, editor and project-manager on trade and in-flight magazines in the Netherlands (1991-94), and on the London newspaper, *Tonight* (1995-6). Between those last two jobs, I made a life-changing decision to move back from Amsterdam and take the MA in Creative Writing at Lancaster University (1994-5). After graduation, I was offered a position there as a part-time tutor on the undergraduate programme in Creative Writing (1995-7), my first experience of teaching the discipline. Hence, between 1995 and

1997, I shuttled on trains between London, Lancaster and Nottingham, patching together a freelance life from an awkward mixture of teaching and journalism, in several towns and institutions. Normally I spent the middle of the week in Nottingham, arriving on Tuesday and leaving again on either Thursday or Friday. On other days, I was either teaching in Lancaster or working in a London newsroom.

The residency's first six months were a test. As well as struggling to acclimatise to prison, and to balance my residency against other jobs, I was too poor to afford pleasant lodgings, since travel and rent demanded most of my cash. Consequently, I often found myself exhausted and on edge. I had not realised how dark my path would prove. When I first expressed an interest in prison, my MA tutor, the poet David Craig, asked why I thought jail gripped the collective imagination. While he shared my bewilderment at the Government's attitude to incarceration, he argued that the number of men in jail amounted to only a tiny fraction of the general population. My answer then was that it was maybe the tiny nature of this fraction that created the interest. With so few people in jail, and all of them hidden, there was a vacuum that the imagination longed to fill.

Lately, I've come to doubt my answer, since the fraction of criminals isn't as small as I'd suspected. According to Roger Graef, 'one in three British males is convicted of a non-motoring criminal offence by the time he is 30' (1993: 1). Not all these men go to jail, of course – but plenty *do*. Indeed, there are more lifers in UK and Wales prisons 'than in the whole of Western Europe added together' (Ramsbotham, 2003: 221).

Despite the UK's fixation on serious crime, its jails are mainly home to a revolving cast of short-term prisoners, almost a third of whom serve 'less than four years' (Podmore, 2012: 61). Between October and December, 2010, 22,881 prisoners left our jails and 28,000 replaced them (Podmore, 2012: 61). To picture this, consider Podmore's astonishing



observation that ‘at any one time some 160,000 children a year will have a parent in prison. More children are affected by prison than divorce’ (250).

It’s not only the children who are affected, of course, but the inmate’s partners and parents, their relatives and friends. Not to mention, the partners and parents of the prisoner’s victims. For every prisoner, there is a vast web of invisible suffering beyond. Often in disbelief, I have contemplated the statistics gathered for this thesis, and tried to balance my despair against a frail, residual faith that books can save lives. This faith was tested by prison, and by the punitive impact of the ‘Prison Works’ campaign, as I will explain later.

I want to emphasise that this is a thesis written by a creative writer, not a critic or a literary theorist. Richard Ford reminds us of Eco’s belief that ‘what we can’t theorize about, we must narrate’ (Ford, 2011: xi), and that we ought to go after ‘the grainy, interesting, unexpected bits’ (xi) that theory struggles to access. Like Ford, I chose grainy narration. But when I consider my attitude towards literary theory, I remember the crooked, hectoring father in Bellow’s story, ‘The Silver Dish’: ‘Pop wanted no relation to theory, and yet he was always pointing Woody towards a position’ (1985: 217). Literary theory may not help when writing poems, yet our poetry is likely to be full of the stuff, whether we like it or not.

Throughout, I have tried to remember ‘the main goal of academic life: to enhance knowledge by providing a rigorous examination of difficult issues’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 5), particularly when those issues connect with Creative Writing. In summary, this thesis offers a ‘poet’s criticism’. Caplan highlights ‘academic divisions between ‘creative’ and ‘scholarly’ work, which inspires [sic] members of the same profession to write very different literary histories’ (2005: 90). One result, he says, is a ‘poet’s criticism’ (90), obeying an ‘almost wholly different set of professional standards and conventions’ (90). He describes these forces as antagonistic, but I teach in a department containing writers, critics, and theorists, and have been offered generous assistance, including tutorial support on Foucault. Hence,

this ‘poet’s criticism’ does not denigrate other approaches. Instead, the thesis simply follows the principles that guide my daily duties as a writer who is employed to guide others through the many stages involved in creative work. Although I have found the theoretical input interesting, it would be dishonest to suggest that Foucault’s work (for example) affected my poetry. Rather, it has stimulated me retrospectively. In what follows, I have tried not to ‘improve’ my process by applying ideas that played no role.

I haven’t justified or evaluated the creative work. Rather, I have described pressures that blocked and fed me. In analysing ‘process’, I was wary, since I had spent a decade writing the book, and there is danger in obsessive retrospection, especially when its object is as unpleasant as jail. Similarly, there are problems with metaphors used to describe drafting. Like the word ‘process’, terms such as ‘evolution’ suggest planning and forward direction, and thus fail to convey the full complexity of activities that may include ‘unplanned, fortuitous and seemingly unsystematic’ elements (Harper, 2010: 88). Harper reminds us that ‘process is defined as “progress, course”, “a series of actions or steps towards achieving a particular end” (62), and argues that the word fails to describe the combinations of instinct and intelligence that are demanded of a writer. Instead of ‘process’, he opts instead for terms such as ‘acts and actions and activities’ (60), which ‘are not always linear in direction’ (64).

I was similarly mindful of questions that Harper asks about a writer’s description of her ‘process’: ‘Is this how she works, or how she finds it best to imagine her working, or how she chooses to present her working?’ (36). I have aimed for the first of these – while trying not to be ‘neat’ in my retrospection, i.e. of implying that the book was inevitable and all its processes explicable. Etymologically, the word ‘mystery’ means to ‘close the mouth’ (Hyde, 1999: 280), and writers do well to remember this when discussing their output. That said, it can be equally narcissistic to treat one’s work as a sacred mystery, so I have done my best to steer a course between two extremes.

Nearly two decades after the residency ended, and six years after the publication of *The Privilege of Rain* (2010), I am still searching to understand many baffling prison experiences. Hence, while working on this thesis, I set myself two challenges. The first was not simply to reproduce my experiences, but to try to understand them. If it was to engage me, I knew the thesis must teach new things rather than simply recapitulating old discoveries. Accordingly, the thesis forms an attempt to identify the forces that coalesced to create the prison environment. Without offering this retrospective dimension, I believe the thesis would fail to adequately explain the roots of my creative work, and lack any real sense of the challenges faced by my students in jail. The other challenge was to describe creative strategies and working methods that helped me to navigate the maze. By describing these, I hope to spark lines of thought that fortify and encourage those facing similar challenges.

My aim is also to demonstrate how the work represents original research, particularly by synthesising my training in journalism with an evolving commitment to poetry – and by ultimately taking unusual shape as a fusion of poems, prose, and art.

Methodologically, the thesis moves back and forth between analysis of my creative work and the influence of writers, thinkers, and artists. Contextual material has been inserted to demonstrate that I never worked in a void (even though the jail often felt like one). Some contextual work takes the form of documents or extracts from books on sociology, criminology, anthropology, etc. Some is anecdotal. At other points, given that this is a PhD-by-Publication, I quote extracts from *The Privilege of Rain* and from an anthology of prisoners' writing that I edited. The first half of the thesis contains a smaller sample of this published work than the second. I chose this design to imitate my book's evolution, which did not get going until six months after the residency began, and then flickered periodically, until finally accelerating two years before *The Privilege of Rain* was published.

Whereas a PhD-by-Publication usually consists of published work, accompanied by a 20,000-word paper, I have chosen to insert published work into a longer critical paper, totalling approximately 78,000 words (including the creative segments). I saw this non-conventional format as a necessary step in my ongoing attempts to reflect upon the prison and its pressures. For an inmate, those pressures are immense. Yet the writing by prisoners in my class, and their skill and tenacity in producing it, are reminders of what becomes possible when one operates on the poet Ken Smith's principle 'that the men I worked with were seeking help in figuring out who they were, their crimes, how they came here' (1990b: 8). If it is chosen as a path, this task of 'figuring out' is likely to be a long and arduous. In his study of primal human forces, Lajos Egri describes humiliation as 'universal and timeless' (Egri, 1993: 23). 'We never forget unkindness, embarrassment, neglect or cruelty,' says Egri (23) – and there is much unforgettable material in the lives of the violent offender and his victims.

As well as withstanding the assaults of the past, a prisoner must deal with the brutal fact of the current moment, where forces of 'demolition' and 'attrition' (Braly, 1968: 190) deny 'the present, the time of his own life' (Braly, 214). The writer James Campbell, who chose to live for a time in HMP Lewes, observed that these frustrations can lead to four varieties of violence: 'take it out on a screw, on another prisoner, on himself, or on the cell, which is like a second self' (Campbell, 28: 28). Given the nature of these pressures, I am grateful to, and still impressed by, the inmates who accepted the creative challenges I set them. This thesis is dedicated to my students in the jail, and to the teachers, librarians, and other staff-members who helped, consoled, and inspired me.

The title of the thesis was supplied by D.H. Lawrence, and is intended to echo the title of Tim Liardet's prison-book, *The Blood Choir*, as a means of acknowledging two of the many influences that fortified and encouraged me, and supplied the collective 'aura' that lit my path.

## **Chapter One:**

### **‘The Spiral’: Prison and the Failure of the Rehabilitative Imagination**

In this chapter, using the contents of a cassette-tape that belatedly came into my possession, I set out benefits that Creative Writing may bring to a prisoner – and identify risks that may confront an incarcerated person who attempts to open his/her imagination. I also consider the wider context within which I worked, and describe conditions and policies that made rehabilitation difficult, using insights by Podmore, Ramsbotham, Mathiesen, and Foucault to point up the scope of the challenge. Where relevant, I describe how I organised my time in the jail, and refer to writing exercises designed to encourage imaginative expansion.

Throughout this chapter, the governing image is the ‘spiral’, which I have borrowed from Mathiesen (2006: 49) to capture not only the bottomless, self-generating nature of much criminal activity – but also the vertigo and horrified fascination that I experienced while working in jail and, later, when considering attitudes towards incarceration.

The analysis of the benefits and risks of teaching Creative Writing in jail is rooted in a cassette-tape posted to me in April, 2015. Recorded on an unspecified date in 1997, the tape had been made by my brother, who visited the jail to make a feature about Creative Writing, as part of his studies for a BBC training course. Never broadcast, the tape had lain neglected ever since, an analogue throwback that my brother now lacked the technology to play. Hence, I was the first person in almost two decades to hear its contents.

There they were again, the men I had taught: nine of them, their voices as fresh as when captured on tape. The experience of finally listening to the interviews was like receiving long-delayed feedback on the general value of writing in prison, and of the efficacy of my specific residency. I was impressed again by the articulacy of the men, and moved when language broke down, as it did when one inmate bit his lip as he came to the final line of his poem about an absent father, or when another struggled to describe his belief in the

value of self-expression. The question mattered, you could hear that in the delay. Faith in the power of language required him to formulate the answer with great precision.

*Dead-time*, they call it on the radio when language fails – and there is plenty of that in prison. But the man's pause allowed me time to catch my breath while I adjusted to the shock of hearing the voices that had echoed in my imagination.

It came at last, the man's avowal of creativity – the credo that had sustained him. Writing, he said, was 'the social act of a confined person' (Swann, S. 1997 – the references in this chapter are from the same source, unless attributed to others). The prisoner said he had 'never understood the concept of creativity' until his words began to 'expand and grow': 'the most wonderful feeling of being alive and actually creating something'.

I hit rewind on the tape, and played back his silence, remembering how our classes had pivoted around such moments, as some yearning for knowledge or transformation became apparent. Of course, there were bad days too, and ordinary ones, just as in any job... except this wasn't quite like anything I've done before or since – and I still sometimes catch myself wondering whether I *did* once walk, unsupervised, around a high-security prison, with more freedom than any other job has allowed me. In that respect, my brother's tape was reassuring. It *had* all happened. What, though? And how exactly did I spend my days? Perhaps it would be helpful if I pressed pause before discussing the tape at greater length – and provided a concrete sense of my duties in the jail.

Being employed by the Arts Council of England, I had no immediate boss – simply an attachment to the jail's Education Department, itself out-sourced to a distant F.E. College. Those were also early days for the Writers-in-Prison Network, which was starting to work with the Arts Council to oversee jail residencies. Hence, my training consisted of an away-day and a chance to sit in on a few hair-raising education classes. Afterwards, I was given two keys that opened any door in the jail (except the new staff-room), and sent off, with

encouragement to reach out to the lonely and vulnerable. There was no structure or path, except that I should spend two or three days a week in the prison, and however much time was necessary reading my students' work and preparing lessons.

Operating outside the Education Department, and freed from the classroom and a syllabus, I knew I'd need to establish a personal connection with my students. Ultimately, this became my favourite aspect of the job, but on that first day I stared at the suicide-netting, and imagined myself falling. Frightened, I wandered landings and yards, trying to work out what to do, where to go. Sometimes banged-up men taunted me, or threw nasty-looking missiles from windows. And, in the first real test of nerve, an inmate demanded I hand over my leather jacket, which I'd borrowed from a friend, apparently to look imposing.

On that first morning, I experienced the 'Four Poisons of the Mind – fear, confusion, hesitation, and surprise' (Gonzales, 2004: 280) that Laurence Gonzales says the Korean martial art Kum Do teaches its practitioners to vanquish (by developing an ability to 'watch, clear and calm, and then act decisively at the correct moment' [280]). Immediately, I sensed that failure to create a structure could cause problems, particularly if those four poisons entered the vacuum. Back then, I was troubled by superstitious anxieties, like those described in Rupert Thomson's novel, *Death of a Murderer*, where the protagonist's wife worries about the 'contact with evil, the soaking up of some dark influence' (2008: 7) when her husband stands guard over a fictionalised Myra Hindley. Thinking of the hacks who crave 'contact with the famous child-killer' (13) in order to gain access to the 'power, the horror... a direct line to the unknown' (13), I worried I'd been drawn to the jail for unhealthy reasons.

The solution, of course, was simply to get busy – especially by using my training in interview techniques, which I discuss in Chapter Four, and by structuring a teaching schedule. Consequently, Wednesday evenings became the focus, with a writing workshop

attracting about a dozen inmates, where I used poetry and prose as stimuli for writing exercises, conducted in an informal environment.

While I saw the potential of writing to become therapeutic (if practised deeply and extensively), I never approached it as therapy. Instead, I taught writing as a craft. If, through writing, we began to discuss other issues – well, I would muddle through. But the writing came first. I wanted my students to write for the sake of writing. This was a desire that intensified as I acquainted myself with the trap where my students spent their days.

Mostly, I was a free-agent, unescorted by guards, with open access to almost all areas (which is how I came to socialise in a cell with the ram-raiders mentioned earlier). I was encouraged by the Head of Education to find men who needed help, and to spread myself widely. Hence, I gave tutorials everywhere, not only in classrooms but on landings and cells, in workshops and gardens, in the gym and the playing-field. Once, when the inmates were banged up to prevent a riot, I teetered into a roaring wall of abuse and shouted advice about the ghost in *Hamlet* to a man who wanted help with his Shakespeare exam. On another occasion, I was called to the Segregation Unit to discuss autobiographical writing. There, I sat on a chair made of cardboard while a man dressed only in his underwear lay on a bed made of compressed paper and explained how he had punched the Governor and ended up here, in a cell where there was nothing left to break.

In tutorials, I returned the work I'd marked, and we discussed improvements. Sometimes these discussions were detailed and stayed close to the prisoners' writing. More often, conversation veered off. Whatever happened, I tried to go with it. It seemed more important that I was present and listening to the men rather than simply giving feedback. My aim in tutorials was always to encourage reading. Literacy levels or a lack of interest sometimes frustrated these efforts, but I hoped my students would deepen their imaginations, and extend their resources as writers, by reading good books.



Generally, I agree with the late poet William Stafford that ‘poetry comes from a life, not a study’ (1978: 44), and that acquired technique can’t compensate for a lack of authentic feeling or ability. Or, as Stafford puts it: ‘In my area, the coyotes are still the best poets’ (48). For him, then, ‘literature is not like a relay race, with a changing baton...’ (38). Rather, Stafford sees inspiration as being rooted in an ecology of intangible connections, many of them non-literary: ‘The one-to-one encounter with materials is much more important than having a place in a sequence of writers’ (38). I agree that there is more to literary influence than a ‘changing baton’, and am likewise wary of mechanising the connection between writers and their forebears. That said, I believe reading can make readers aware of the ‘internal resonances’ (44) that Stafford values. What’s more, an ability to see where one’s work fits within the bigger picture is valuable, I think. For me, this sense of literary interconnectedness has the potential to build not only craft-skills, but humility and wisdom.

As well as encouraging my students to read, I helped with the prison magazine by soliciting and editing stories, poems, and articles, and I persuaded the authorities to fund an anthology that was published after I left. Plans for the anthology created a sense of direction, and gave our classes a common purpose. This sense of coherence was probably just as important to me as it was to the prisoners, given the way I was drifting around the country.

These personal circumstances came back, too, while I was listening to my brother’s tape. During the first six months in Nottingham, I moved through a series of lodgings in boozers and knocking-shops. Always broke from travelling on trains, I struggled to afford an environment conducive to the ‘tranquillity’ that Wordsworth deemed essential for creativity (Crehan, 1965: 36). However, I was at least familiarising myself with the rootless existence that many students described in their writing.

For most on my brother’s cassette, writing was an ‘escape’ (Swann, S. 1997) – a ‘release valve’, or a means to ‘get away’ from those terrible backgrounds and from jail’s

pressures. But there was more to it than that truism, for if jail makes a natural home for the homily, it also frequently plays host to the wilder thinking that wells up from enforced solitude. As an example, I remember visiting a lifer who liked to fool around. It was a brilliant winter night, and I found him in his cell, staring through the bars, pointing at the moon. When he turned, his eyes were circled by dark lines but his eyes were electric-blue. ‘If you dream about other planets,’ he asked, ‘does that mean you’ve been there? That you once lived in space?’ He was so high, there was no point reasoning with him. But he kept quizzing me, fuelled by drugs that had given him this dream of freedom. Later, I came to understand his crazy questions as a cartoon version of the prison-mysticism that emerges from hours of isolated introspection. In some, this breeds wild conspiracy theories. In others, it fuels the ‘scholastic monastic experience’ that Erwin James discovered as his route to rehabilitation (2005: 46). Wherever it strikes, prison-mysticism acts as a startling, and maybe inevitable, counterpoint to the mundanity of incarceration. With its towering walls and clanging doors, the prison presents itself as a solid fact. But most prison-life consists of solitude, so the environmental facts are in tension with an extreme interiority. Forced into intense alone-ness, prisoners’ thought-trails can cross strange, unpredictable territory. Consequently, prison’s long stretches of prose may sometimes be broken by flashes of poetry – an odd mixture, and one that was on my mind when I conceived of a book that would contain both.

Remarking on the prevalence of ‘memoirist fiction’ (Oates, 2014:15) in most prison-writing, Joyce Carol Oates suggests that ‘there is no need for fantasy-horror in a place in which matter-of-fact horror is the norm’ (15). Yet her anthology *Prison Noir* contains one story, ‘Bardos’ by Scott Gutches, that explores ‘Samsara, the cyclic experience of being and becoming’ (Gutches, 2014: 62) – a reminder of jail’s inadvertent fostering of mysticism.

No-one advances an overtly mystical claim on my brother’s tape. However, the hushed, intense tones used to describe the impact of writing hint at the ‘strangely heightened’

(Crehan, 1965: 15) perceptions that Evelyn Underhill is said by Crehan to have categorised as one of the three key characteristics of a poet's mysticism.

One inmate, who wrote 'at night, and quite late on, when it's quiet' (Swann, S. 1997), said that writing made him 'part of the universe' again. Elsewhere, a lonely man said that our writing workshop was the week's highlight. It provided 'friendship', he said, and gave the men 'something in common, instead of talking about prison'. As for the man who lamented 'a bad childhood', he wrote 'to say things on paper that I can't really say to people's faces for fear of getting laughed at'. His writing would, he said, be 'seen as black to other people, but that's what I'm getting rid of, out of myself. That's where it's come from – from bad experiences'. Hence, writing might open up a confrontation with tormenting emotions as well as offering an escape from them, and I remembered my brother's warning that he would explore the dangers of creativity, and look for tension, as storytellers must. Hence, the tape contains a deeper seam, one with the potential to challenge my belief in writing's rehabilitative capacity. Did writing have a dark side, he asked? Were there perils?

Yes, some of the men agreed – there were risks. In jail, all information can be used against you. Plus, there were issues of confidence and self-worth – as well as the pains of recognition. 'I ask myself: am I getting these characters from me?' says one man. 'And I see it's me, and it embarrasses me. Sometimes it's frightening'. Yet that man, like all the others on the tape, declared himself undaunted. Before writing, he'd suffered an anger that 'seemed to fester, to accumulate'. But, through writing, he had 'learned a lot about myself, and how to combat it, and get over it'. As for the reformed alcoholic, he saw the worms as proof he was digging in the right place: 'That's when I really enjoy the writing,' he said – 'when it's painful, when you've actually lost... or gained something, from it'. This last statement, expressing an understanding of both catharsis and the dynamic nature of creativity, reminded

me that rehabilitation is rarely accomplished without struggle – but that the pain may be productive if the student manages to move through it.

Another articulate man told my brother that he had learned, while young, to suppress ‘feelings and emotions’, and that this ‘may even be a contributory factor to my situation now’. He agreed writing carried dangers, but insisted: ‘A lot of things that are worth doing involve an element of risk. It would be easy to say nothing, and not write anything at all, but I certainly feel that to write is to give of yourself to yourself really, as well as for other people’s enjoyment, hopefully’. The man concludes by reading a poem (eventually published in my anthology of prison writing), which describes the men who ‘bawl their anguish with the flicker of an eyelid... the parade-square noise of nothing at all’ (Swann, D. ed. 1998: 54).

The tape includes an interview with the Head of Education, and he too considers the risk-factor. ‘When you teach people to write more creatively, or even if you educate them,’ he says, ‘then there’s always a danger you’re leading them to the mountain-top and leaving them there, but I still think it’s a risk worth taking. If people can articulate their feelings to a greater degree, I think they’ll be a lot better for it.’

That word again: feelings. In nearly all the interviews, there is some mention of the connection between writing and emotion. One man said he enjoyed ‘analysing what you’ve written against what you really feel’ – and his insight forms an intelligent summary of a desire commonly expressed in prison-classes and tutorials. As well as reaching out to an audience, the men were hoping to make contact, through their writing, with that distant part of themselves which had become, or had always been, a stranger or an enemy. They were searching for clarity, and there was a thirst for emotional accuracy.

It wasn’t only emotions, but abstract thought. The prisoners wanted to express their thinking more clearly, in order that they could understand themselves better (and be understood better by others). For some, this quest was connected with the parole-board,

which prisoners tried to feed with evidence of reform, and I came to understand that a fair percentage of my students were channelling their writing in that direction (just as a fair percentage of my students in University are channelling their creativity towards grades). However, there was more to it than self-promotion. Crime and prison had gouged wounds, and many were searching to understand and repair the harm they had done to others and to themselves, as Erwin James makes clear. He went through years of ‘chaos and the fear’ (2016: 317) as a lifer, but felt that ‘the majority of my fellow prisoners had the desire to change for the better’ (337).

This yearning for change is checked by the jail, and by the system that governs it. But a prisoner’s struggle towards rehabilitation also takes place invisibly, on the inside, within the conscience and soul. As James puts it: ‘It takes a long time to change a whole life’ (2016: 320). The deepest struggle is waged with one’s own identity. Those in denial must eventually look deep into the mirror. By contrast, an innocent man goes on protesting for years. Yet, whether guilty or innocent, all inmates face the narrowing effects of a system based on numbers, routines, and straight lines – even more so since the 1990s when the ‘Prison Works’ philosophy, proposed by the Conservative Home Secretary, marked a new punitive turn (as discussed in Chapter Two).

Lord David Ramsbotham was appointed HM Chief Inspector of Prisons at around the time I began my residency, and wrote ‘a really disturbing’ (Ramsbotham, 2003: 103) report on conditions in HMP Nottingham. Hence, his views on incarceration and rehabilitation are relevant here. Ramsbotham begins by asserting that the prison-system is charged with balancing three requirements: security, control, and justice (2003: 74), i.e. preventing escapes, maintaining internal discipline, and ensuring ‘humanity and fairness’ (74).

John Podmore, a Governor who was part of Ramsbotham’s team, expands upon Ramsbotham’s list by identifying three kinds of security: physical, procedural, and dynamic

(2012: 35). The first is achieved through walls and bars, and the second is dependent upon processes and systems, including counting and checking.

For Podmore, the vital third variety – *dynamic security* (my italics) – is achieved through establishing and maintaining strong relationships, both within the prison, and between the prison and society. Podmore identifies four elements within the ‘dynamic’ category of security: safety; respect; purposeful activity; and re-settlement (40). In practical terms, this means that prisons should prepare inmates for release by helping with: ‘accommodation (top priority); education; training and employment; health; drugs and alcohol; finance, benefit and debt: children and families; attitudes... and behaviour’ (250).

The work by Ramsbotham and Podmore is valuable for prison-tutors. As well as contextualising rehabilitation, it identifies pressures that educational efforts will endure. A prison-tutor’s work occurs within Podmore’s ‘dynamic’ dimension, and therefore aims at securing both prison and society by preparing inmates for successful release. In my case, this meant using literature to build better inter- and intra-personal relationships (not only within and between prisoners, but between inmates and their families, and between inmates and society).

Of course, any attempt to build better relationships will be tested by the psychological states of disrepair in which the majority of men enter prison:

... three-quarters of inmates are unemployed, a third are homeless, 65% of all adult males have a reading age of less than 8, and more than half the prison population has no educational qualifications of any kind (Ramsbotham, 2003: 85-6).

These statistics make bleak reading for educators, but they become even bleaker when set alongside Podmore’s estimation that ‘25% of prisoners meet the definition of psychopaths, with some 75% passing the tests for having some kind of personality disorder’ (2012: 136). To compound the problems, these troubled individuals are then concentrated, in isolation from society, and placed in poor environments where drugs and alcohol are rife (137).

Podmore believes that ‘prisons have to be primarily about relationships, mood and tone’ (2012: 98). However, these relationships are notoriously difficult to measure (39), and are therefore often neglected by what he calls ‘the demands of the new penal managerialism’ (245). By this, he means the set of practices that Ramsbotham refers to as an ‘exact compliance with rules and regulations, and the achievement of a myriad of targets and performance indicators’ (2003: 218) – many of which Ramsbotham describes as ‘useful management tools when sensibly designed and used... However, their value is degraded if they tell you nothing about the quality of the activity that is being targeted’ (2003: 83).

Because dynamic security is difficult to measure, the attention of managers is drawn instead to the maintenance of physical and procedural security, both easier to gauge. The effect, says Podmore, is that prisoners are ineffectively prepared for release, which leads him to suggest that ‘the concept of prison serving, and being part of, the community has been traduced’ (2012: 245). Despite this, Ramsbotham continues to believe in education and ‘the creative arts’ in prison (2003: 29). As an example, he cites the impact of Toe by Toe, a literacy scheme facilitated by The Shannon Trust (named after my student, Tom Shannon, who was discussed above, and who will be referred to again in Chapter Two).

In Toe to Toe, prisoners teach fellow inmates how to read. For students, there are new communication skills. For tutors, there is purpose and self-respect. One student, a 46-year-old man, ‘tearfully’ (103) tells Ramsbotham: ‘For the first time I can communicate with my 9-year-old daughter... She writes me stories and I am writing one for her. I now know what I missed’ (103). Such breakthroughs are rare in prison, where men often describe the staleness of their lives, and where ‘Gloom, misery and [a] general sense of hopelessness’ (James, 2016: 277) contribute to a narrowing of the imagination.

In response to this staleness, and as part of my interest in encouraging empathy, I devised writing exercises aimed at deepening and widening the prisoners’ imaginations, and

providing opportunities to explore the senses. Through these activities, I discovered that inmates liked to imagine other worlds, minds, and bodies (the last of these words earned a chuckle). The most popular classes were bound up with shape-shifting, in which writers considered, or inhabited, the lives of animals, objects, landscapes, people (as an inmate did when adopting the viewpoint of a black slave, whose grave at Sunderland Point in Lancashire was the subject of one evening class).

I tried to encourage another form of imaginative expansion – namely, that my students should think of themselves as writers rather than merely as prisoners. It was another risk, I knew – particularly because some offenders are likely to be in denial, and many lack literary skills. But I wanted the men to experience the same sense of ‘shape-shifting’ that writing had allowed me, and so I pressed ahead. On the tape, one of the men praises the ‘added dimension’ (Swann, S. 1997) my tuition has given the workshop’s members: ‘No matter where we are, or what our circumstances are, the writer-in-residence has taught us, and allowed us, to believe in ourselves as writers,’ he tells my brother.

Almost two decades on, I’m unsure how to react when I hear that. If freedom is founded upon the right to say no, then I’m pleased to have helped men to refuse the narrow identity enforced by the word ‘prisoner’. Yet my brother also records a moment when an inmate pesters me about the detailed procedure for submitting work to literary magazines. He isn’t ready for that yet, and probably never will be, and it’s painful to listen to my evasions. Apparently not wishing to encourage his disappointment, I turn him from dreams of publication to the act of writing. In doing so, I ask the class to fill in blanks that I’ve created in phrases from books. The strategy is surprise – as another antidote to predictability. I want my students to stumble upon a phrase they hadn’t anticipated – and then to explore it.



But jail always had a way of defying my expectations – and, of course, it's the tape itself that ends up surprising me, 18 years later. As I'm trying to explain my latest game, one of the men interrupts. 'What about a silence?' he asks, apparently amused. 'That fills a gap!'

It's clear from my response that I've no idea what he means. The man has a reputation as a joker, and it seems another of his harmless subversions. Yet, listening years later, I realise the joker had learned something I was still groping to understand. In jail, where self-expression is so important, and so loaded with problems – where 'men bawl their anguish with the flicker of an eyelid' (Swann. D. ed. 1998: 54) – silence is a presence rather than an absence. It fills a gap. It means something.

Some meaningful silences were provided by the jail's laconic men – those who had decided that words were a luxury or a threat or a lie. And whatever my opinion of these individuals' silences, whether they were born out of courage or cowardice, there was another kind of silence that I craved in the jail's frightening environment, and which normally proved almost impossible to achieve: the collective silence that contains the potential to provide peace, contemplation, and/or healing. For prison has its own rough voice, constantly audible throughout the tape, whose interviews take place against a hard, echoing soundscape. It's a voice lacking in all nuance and comfort, and I hear it again in several minutes of ambient noise, recorded by my brother at the close of the day. Here, individual voices give way to a fizzing din, pierced by tinny, metallic sounds made by kitchen-staff and cleaners. You hear the clacking of pool-balls, several humourless laughs, an exaggerated yawn, and the return of a persistent whistler. It's impossible to make out what anyone is saying, but there's a sense of weary banter – and of men filling time, as they might in a pub or a bookie's or a train-station. Near the end, a louder, more authoritative voice rises from the scratchy din, followed by a thickening trudge of feet over floors and stairs, and then the startling thud of a cell-door.

It wasn't only the startling volume of the slam, and its sense of finality, but the frilly tinkling of the key that followed the dead-locking. Together, those sounds instilled a dread that made me reach out to stop the tape, almost as if I were stuffing a hand over a mouth.

A lot of what you need to know about prison is there in that dreadful medley. The criminals who silenced, or failed to hear, their victims' voices have surrendered the right to a voice of their own. No matter how loud they shout, they are like the occupants of the notorious Newgate Prison, which in 1714 was described as a 'Tower of Babel, where all are Speakers and no Hearers' (Grovier, 2009: 95). Today, most of the world goes on ignoring those cries – and herein lies another of the challenges facing prison-teachers. With so few meaningful links between jail and society, it's understandable that many prisoners should give up on efforts towards rehabilitation, as one inmate clearly had when he told me that education was counter-productive, precisely *because* it offered the prospect of change (when change, he said, was so rarely delivered).

I don't understand *all* my reasons for wanting to work in a place of such claustrophobia and stasis, but the tape reminded me of some of my hopes and motivations. I wanted to enter a secret world, and gain the privilege of listening to its voices. If I listened, I might learn something, and I hoped others would learn too. I hoped some might tune out the din, and listen at last to that part of themselves which stood for something better and more meaningful, the part that either they or the world, or both, had attempted to silence.

When people ask me now at poetry-readings if writing benefited the prisoners, I describe the silence we shared in workshops when we wrote together (while banged-up men roared from cell-windows all around us). If my residency succeeded in one thing, I believe it was this: a strange collective trance, perhaps not dissimilar from that shared by Quakers or adherents of Zen. I also go back to the wisdom of the Head of Education. On the tape, when my brother asks him to respond to criticism of educational initiatives, he states that the cost

of this activity takes just 0.3% of the prison budget. ‘Prisoners are sent to prison as punishment – not *for* punishment,’ he declares. ‘We should do what we can to improve someone’s chances, when they are eventually released, of rehabilitating themselves. If that works... I think, in the long run, we are saving the country a lot of money’ (Swann, S. 1997).

Half a century ago, writers were still celebrating ‘the infinite worth of [jail’s] ultimate purpose – the reconstruction of the human personality’ (Klare, 1960: 90). And while the same writer was despairing enough to describe jails as ‘miniature totalitarian states’ (94) in which ‘powerful, forbidding, desolate’ buildings (18) served as sites of ‘expulsion and banishment’ (14), he had the optimism to argue for ‘small prisons, and small groups within small prisons. Small enough groups to be able to relax discipline and to introduce some democracy’ (95).

Even 18 years ago, when I started my residency, that optimism felt like it existed in the remote past. Yet I couldn’t help wondering why the UK persisted in its punitive tendencies, particularly as they seemed to make such little economic sense. Throughout prison literature, one encounters the same bewilderment. For one thing, jail doesn’t even seem to offer deterrence, as the former inmate Frank Owens makes clear: ‘you’re three times more likely to back to prison once you’ve been inside’ (Owens, 2012: 104). Indeed, one could imagine that the system has been *designed* to re-house the same people over and over. If prisons encouraged inmates to learn valuable human and vocational skills, wouldn’t that shrink the tax-bill? And create economic energy? Isn’t it always about the economy, stupid? Why, when it comes to jail, does the punitive impulse so often overpower the financial?

According to Thomas Mathiesen (2006), Professor of Sociology at Oslo University, and a founder of the Norwegian Association for Penal Reform, the problem begins with the failure of ‘the rehabilitative imagination’ (2006: 53), which has, for 400 years, focussed on four areas of self-improvement: ‘work, school, morality and discipline’ (40). These, says Mathiesen, are the ‘core elements in a bourgeois, ‘Protestant’ ethic’ (53) that has ‘never

rehabilitated people in practice' (46). Worse, 'the prison does not rehabilitate... it *dehabilitates*' (53). That's because the core elements were always 'determined by system-interests attached to the prisons rather than any interest in the actual rehabilitation of prisoners' (53). Mathiesen says this ethic has put the blame for crime on the individual rather than the 'context of complex social forces impinging on the individual' (28). As a result of the failure in 'allocation of major resource' (28), jail has become a 'crime school' (48), where inmates take on 'folkways, mores, customs and general culture of the penitentiary' (48).

Mathiesen's analysis puts him broadly in line with Foucault, who, in his characteristically calm, startling manner, argues that prison isn't supposed to work in the sense that liberals require:

Perhaps one should reverse the problem and ask what is served by the failure of prison... one would be forced to suppose that the prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offences, but rather to distribute them, to use them... The 'failure of prison is to be understood on this basis (1979: 272).

This is the sentence from Foucault's book that has been most powerful in my retrospective attempts to understand prison. '*What is served by the failure of prison?*'

In Mathiesen's view (2006: 141-143), the failure of prison serves five ideological functions: 'Expurgatory' (141); 'Power-draining' (141); 'Diverting' (142); 'Symbolic' (142); and 'Action' (143). Summarised, these functions refer to how power is drained from 'the unproductive population of late capitalist societies' (141) by removing them from circulation. As prisoners, they are then used to divert 'attention from the dangers flowing from those in power' (142), who use the prisoners to demonstrate they are addressing society's fears. The free population, meanwhile, gains a symbolic outsider against which to define itself.

Seen in this bleak ideological light, prison is not a failure but a success. Yet Mathiesen offers more than a counsel of despair, and remains hopeful that left-wing groups may challenge the system, using ideas of '*solidarity and compensation*' (146), i.e. by acting

together in channels beyond those provided by the mass-media to give ‘emotional support’ (146) to those lower on the social-scale, and to ensure that ‘weakness is compensated’ (145).

Part of the problem, according to Erwin James, is that ‘For many, sending people to prison is not enough – they must suffer while there’ (2003: 75). He reports upon a conversation in which a governor says: ‘“We have to be careful about allowing too much rehabilitation.”’ (165) – a statement that James describes as exposing ‘the weeping sore that has been festering at the heart of modern penal philosophy’ (165).

‘Too much rehabilitation’ – James reported this phrase while I was teaching him, and it haunted me, too. Watching the men turn circles through the exercise-yard, I began to see jail as that most vicious of circles, the snake eating its own tail – a place operated upon, as Foucault observes, by a ‘great force of inertia’ (1979: 305). If there is any motion, it follows the path of the ‘spiral’ (2006: 49) evoked by Mathiesen, who identifies ‘prisonization’ (49) (‘through which the individual becomes continually more involved in the inmate subculture’ (49)), as a specific failure of the ‘fiasco’ (173) of prison).

The human dimension of that spiral is evoked in Roger Graef’s illuminating interviews with young offenders who ‘see themselves as outside society, and therefore excluded from its rules and obligations’ (1993: 261). As well as encountering inmates who have found ‘a positive relief from the pressures of the street’ (255), Graef meets prisoners who use ‘time... to plan revenge’ (158). One of these young men, ‘Sunny, is ‘safe [in jail] from responsibilities and dangers he was struggling with unsuccessfully on the outside’ (161). Instead of gaining perspective on his mistakes or learning skills, Sunny obsessively plots against his enemy, ‘Tommy’, whom Graef believes he has made a symbol of his difficulties, so that he is free ‘from taking final responsibility’ (158).

Mathiesen’s ‘spiral’ (2006: 49) feels appropriate when I remember individuals who shared Sunny’s resentments and yearnings. As well as describing my bottomless fascination,

the spiral conveys the vertigo I experienced in the face of swirling pain and anger. And it evokes the jail's dizzying landings, where I was free to walk. Incredibly, a student with cerebral palsy had been placed high on the 4s (the prison's highest tier), and whenever I climbed to his cell, I stared through three layers of wire-netting. From that lofty point, the jail's swirling 'spiral' was itself imprisoned within the straight lines of a grid.

I took books to my disabled student, and they acted as antidotes to the vertigo, giving me a sense of purpose that I hoped to pass on to my student, who had written movingly of his struggle to deal with the disability, and of his discovery that crime could cure loneliness (a possibility that occurred on his first night in prison when he watched drunken girls baring their chests under the streetlights opposite the jail). In his best writing, carved out in capitals that cost him pain, the prisoner wrote with honesty about his 'diversion-burglaries' (in which he limped to people's front-doors and asked for a glass of water while his partner robbed the house from the back). Once, the prisoner submitted a tender account of his first love, a woman who accepted his disability. It was a poignant, unguarded piece, written with self-deprecating humour, and I worried that its publication in the prison-magazine might leave him vulnerable. However, my colleagues agreed with the inmate that it should be published, and I was glad to see it in print, since it challenged prison 'typecasting'.

I helped the disabled prisoner by incorporating excerpts from tape-recorded interviews I'd conducted (a technique described in Chapter Four), and he seemed pleased with typed-up pages combining the two versions. Hence, it seemed we were making progress. However, I began to understand what Erwin James meant when he said it took 'ten years to make the changes necessary for me to become who I believe I should have been' (James, 2016: 320). One pressure was the disabled prisoner's life-experiences and self-identity. A cheeky chap persona made him popular. However, this 'joker' identity had been devised as a diversion from, and compensation for, a physical condition that the man yearned to transcend.

The man's longing for connection also made him susceptible to peer-pressure, and he suffered esteem-issues that led to periodic violence. On top of that, there were his physical difficulties. Usually he coped bravely with his seizures, but it was hard to see him limping down the skinny ladder from the highest landing, and infuriating to hear rumours he'd been housed there as a punishment for petty offences. To make things harder, the act of writing could be physically painful. Equally damagingly, his literacy skills were limited, so he came to depend on my tape-recorded interviews – and, after a few months, it became clear that his plan of writing a long memoir was doomed.

Often, I witnessed his dejection. Once, he spoke bitterly about being transported in chains to hospital. There was a pallid, exhausted expression on his face as he described the fetters. Another time, I went to visit him in the segregation unit after he'd punched a wing governor. Fearing the worst, I found him full of life – exhilarated by his antics, and acting the joker. And I sensed he was caught in a spiral from which writing alone could not free him.

It was hard not to be discouraged by policies that stranded a crippled man high in the eaves of a dilapidated jail, and by frustrations that made violence more attractive than creativity. Yet I went on placing my faith in the 'school' option which Mathiesen includes as one of four suspicious core components of the 'rehabilitative imagination' (2006: 53). Generally, I concentrated as much on the imagination as on literacy. I believed that literature and the act of reading might bring peace and reflectiveness, even if the books themselves troubled and confounded. I was glad when prisoners reported that books had burned up a portion of prison-time, but I wanted to go beyond that and achieve the kind of breakthrough that Erwin James reports after reading Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*:

Before that I had put little thought into my reading. It was a pleasure, sometimes I learned things... But I'd never read specifically to learn or to enhance my thinking. Up until then I used reading to help me not to think (2016: 296-7).

In my more optimistic moments, I dreamed of creating a small ‘community of sorrow’ (McCarthy, 1993: 238), made coherent by the shared experience of literature – and offered as an alternative to the subculture of the ‘spiral’.

At times, the spiral seemed bottomless. Many species of human pain had been concentrated in one tiny space, where each day was the same as the last. There was a constant sense of waste, and repetition. Several men described their lives sliding away from them, like water into a drain. And for those who had committed violent crimes, the ‘spiral’ of waste seemed to reach depths of pain and repetition that I could barely imagine.

If you tuned into the jail’s frequency during the dead of night, you would hear stories on a loop: regrets, recriminations, doubts, boasts, lies, rumours, threats, and confessions. These voices would orbit the men’s crimes, in endlessly repeated fragments and litanies. That’s what jail is: a trap not only for bodies, but for words and thoughts.

And a trap, too, for time. I lost count of the ways in which I heard time described. For some inmates, it simply wouldn’t pass. These men knew there was an infinitely bigger prison than the one made of bricks and mortar: the jail inside their minds. Yet there was a worse fate: the fate known by those who had given up hope. Time had fled from these men, and they were old now, and their lives had gone.

Discussing a prison that she visited in America, the poet C.D. Wright said that ‘the extra-realism of the peculiar institution caused me to balk’ (2007: ix), and I knew immediately what she meant. The jail was so utterly real that it seemed more like a nightmare, or a cubist painting. Time had refracted and condensed, and space had bent.

Although writing about a different context, Herman (2001) helped me to understand another strange aspect of prison-time:

Thinking of the future stirs up such intense yearning and hope that prisoners find it unbearable; they quickly learn that these emotions will make them vulnerable to disappointment... They therefore consciously narrow their attention... The future is reduced to a matter of hours or days... The past, like



the future, becomes too painful to bear, for memory, like hope, brings back the yearning.... Thus, prisoners are eventually reduced to living in an endless present. (2001: 89)

The stasis of 'an endless present' is a source of profound boredom for most inmates, but I sensed the terror it may also provoke, especially through repetition and claustrophobia. And I was scared, myself, when I made those first encounters with the landings.

In the chapter that follows, I describe my early attempts to navigate this intimidating 'spiral', where pressures including fear and boredom make 'human flourishing' a very rare phenomenon.

## Chapter Two

### **‘The Black Flower’ – The impact of ‘Prison Works’ upon ‘Human Flourishing’**

In this chapter, the focus falls on social, political, and institutional pressures that contribute to the problems of fear and inertia in prison, and which restrict the potential for creativity and imagination. I hope to demonstrate that ‘human flourishing’ *is* possible in jail – but that the drive towards rehabilitation is a legacy of an old ideology now threatened by neo-liberal and neo-conservative forces. As such, prison has become the site of an uneasy mix of humanitarian, managerial, and punitive ideas.

I will identify specific ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes, 1958: 82), and show how these were re-shaped by the ‘Prison Works’ philosophy. As well as putting pressure on rehabilitation, ‘Prison Works’ is discussed for its impact on the geography of HMP Nottingham, which altered in rapid fashion. The historical roots of ‘Prison Works’ will be analysed, using research by Garland (2001) and Maruna (2001).

The chapter draws upon research by Liebling, Garland, and Christie, to describe the jail’s environment, and to analyse the changes that were afoot as ‘Prison Works’ took hold. In analysing the retreat of reforming ideals, the chapter describes the ‘habitualization’ (Schklovsky, 1990: 4-5) created by conditions in jail, and considers ways in which writers, including Viktor Serge, and my students Erwin James and Tom Shannon, have cultivated their imaginations while incarcerated.

The jail in which I began my residency was hugely different from the prison I left. Initially, HMP Nottingham consisted of one mouldering Victorian wing. During the residency, two brand new wings were built, and the jail’s population more than doubled. One of the new wings was for lifers, and the other for prisoners on shorter sentences. The original wing was now reserved for prisoners on remand. Without these rapid and momentous

changes, I am not sure my creative work would have developed as it did. Hence, my intention in this chapter is to examine the specific ground from which my writing emerged.

I want to begin in the hills, though – because that’s where I’ve learned to go when life gets difficult. That’s where I empty my mind and attempt the ‘return to competence’ (2006: 27) that Mathiesen defines as the underlying meaning of ‘rehabilitation’. Easy enough when you’re free... but what about people with nowhere to go? How do they cope? People in prison, for instance? What can they do to break the cycle of bad thinking, or to gain contact with the ‘larger selves’ that C.D. Wright (2007: xiv) insists we all have the potential to reach? For Wright, it’s not ‘in dispute... that people in prison are apart from’ everything (xiv). The challenge, she says, is ‘to reunite the separated with the larger human enterprise’ (xiv).

That is no easy task. In his novel, *The Second Prison*, Ronan Bennett (a former prisoner, and a man credited by Erwin James with ‘precious and timely’ support [James, 2016: 342]) portrays jail as a surprisingly stable environment, where inmates gather for solidarity – although many of the alliances are ‘prison illusions... friendship most of all’ (Bennett, 2000: 135). Physical harm is a possibility, as when convicts and guards conspire to abuse a blind paedophile. Similarly, the psychological toll is acute. But the terrors extend beyond the walls, into the world outside, where freed men go on struggling to escape. This is the ‘second prison’, described in Bennett’s novel as ‘the real challenge... Everyone gets a chance, one chance to escape from the second prison. Trouble is, hardly anyone takes it’ (90).

Bennett’s work reminds us that prison can be a state of mind as well as a place – and that its claustrophobia is not limited by bars. I found this a frightening thought, because it evokes the vastest imaginable confinement. What hope can there be for a man whose world is prison? Where do you go if there is no outside?

While I still don’t understand all my motivations, I’d guess a love of ‘wilderness’ and open space is one of the things that drove me to the jail – a certain fascination with the fate of

those who have become ‘apart’, as C.D. Wright describes them, and who are now trapped in a confined, man-made area, whether through crime or ill-fortune. I can only speculate that this fascination stems from bad memories of school, where any bullied pupil knows the longing to break free. In my case, I was fortunate I had friends and family to offer sanctuary, and acres of Pennine moorland to roam in peace and solitude. Hence, the door to the trap was open.

Prison allows no such escape. In its claustrophobia, a high-security jail is as close as I can imagine to hell. There are many bullies within its confines, and some, if not all, of these tormentors are themselves the victims of bullying. In an area about the size of a shopping centre, within which movement is restricted to circumscribed floors and precincts, the bullied man must face his enemy wherever he goes. There are no hills to take refuge in, and, for many of the men, no loving friends or relatives beyond the wall.

The sociologist Gresham M. Sykes argues that ‘pains of imprisonment’ (1958: 82) stem from deprivation of ‘social acceptance, material possessions, heterosexual relationships, personal autonomy, and personal security’ (106) – pains intensified by the need to abandon ‘bonds of mutual loyalty, aid, affection, and respect’ (107) in favour of ‘personal aggrandizement’ and survival (107). In this environment, where survival take priority, Sykes observes that ‘the real man’ (102) is capable of ‘endurance with dignity’ (102), ‘somewhat aloof, never complaining’ (102). But – and there’s always a ‘but’ when you’re discussing jail – even the archetype of the admired ‘real man’ can itself become an obstacle to change:

it is the man who can stop himself from striking back at the custodians that wins their admiration and thus their image of the hero functions wittingly or unwittingly to maintain the *status quo* (102).

Sykes did his research in a maximum-security facility in New Jersey during the 1950s, observing ‘what went on day-to-day between prisoners’ (Crewe, 2016: 77). He established that ‘total dominance over prisoners... was something of a fiction’ (78). Rather, ‘order was negotiated, and it functioned through the inmate hierarchy, via those men at the

apex of the prison community' (78). Discussing this body of sociological research, Ben Crewe, a UK prison Governor, argues that Sykes's work made its 'clearest theoretical contribution [in] its assertion that the inmate culture was determined by the inherent deprivations of prison life' (2016: 80) – a theory that has been challenged by those who argue that prison-cultures are 'imported' from outside rather than determined by any intrinsic qualities of deprivation (81).

Whether or not he was right about the origins of prison-culture, I came to see Sykes's observations as perfect illustrations of the jail's pain. Methods for easing institutional pressures were usually part of the jail's double-bind. In gaining approval as a strong, silent type, you surrendered your capacity to speak out and try to ease the jail's pains. It's sometimes argued that these pains are justified, in that they represent punishment – and deter wrong-doers. And I have heard it said that the 'pains of imprisonment' force criminals to change their ways. It's the principle of the 'short, sharp shock', I suppose – although a 'long, dull grind' probably never changed anyone for the better.

The question of pain's relationship with rehabilitation has been considered by Nils Christie, former Professor of Criminology at Oslo University, and Chairman of the Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology. 'Pain makes people grow' (1982: 11), he concedes – but it also 'brings growth to a stop' (11). Ultimately, then, Christie prefers other questions: 'I do not quite know what pain is, or how to grade it' (9). Instead, Christie says this: 'Sorrow is inevitable, but not hell created by man' (11), a view that is evident in his proposal for justice-systems that prevent victims from being reduced 'to a nonentity and the offender to a thing' (Christie, 1977: 5).

In his call for 'a court of equals representing themselves' (1977: 11), Christie dreams of a restorative justice system in which all affected parties participate in the conflict created by the crime, so that there is 'a continuous discussion of what represents the law of the land'

(1977: 8). Restorative justice is rooted, says Farrant, in ‘narrative exchanges between victims and offenders’ (2014: 127). These exchanges, she says, have the potential to illuminate ‘what has happened, what harm has resulted, and what should be done to repair the harm in order to prevent further wrongdoing’ (127). According to Carolyn Hoyle, this approach contains the potential to assist offender and victim in negotiating a settlement, and to ‘to recast communities and reverse the process of their atomisation’ (Hoyle & Cunneen, 2010: 95) through a ‘dialogic process’ (7) that focuses on ‘how the harm caused by the offence might be repaired’ (7).

Hoyle’s vision is challenged by Cunneen, who sets restorative justice within a neo-liberal context that ‘rejects a key role for the state’ (Hoyle & Cunneen, 2010: 107). He dismisses the idea that restorative justice is more democratic than conventional justice: ‘Rather than challenging state power, it allows for new modes of governance’ (125), and creates a ‘strongly moralising framework for dealing with offenders’ (125). Similarly, Cunneen casts scorn on essentialist arguments that position restorative justice as a universal system practised by tribal groups.

Cunneen’s argument that restorative justice has the potential to de-politicise complex social matters, and re-cast them as individual moral questions, is powerful and intelligent. But, while accepting the need for caution, I don’t see why, in essence, restorative procedures couldn’t be anchored within ‘conventional modes of justice’, and made part of the existing social and legal apparatus (although I appreciate that this may be pie-in-the-sky thinking, given the current direction of travel in UK politics). At any rate, my experience of prison made me sympathetic towards Christie and Farrant’s arguments for a system that promotes reflection in wrong-doers rather than reducing offenders to ‘things’, and for a system which wants to repair damage rather than adding to it.

Looking around HMP Nottingham, any desire for ‘approaches, based on peace as opposed to pain’ (Farant, 2014: 127) seemed far from fruition, and I found it hard to disagree with Alison Liebling that the penal system is increasingly characterised by ‘what Garland has called the ‘expressive’ function of prison – as a site of public revenge’ (Liebling, 2004: 484).

But there is more to it than that, as Liebling makes clear – and her analysis of prison conditions between 1990 and 2003 is enlightening when I try to understand the jail I encountered. Liebling argues that the ‘punitive turn’ (2004: 455) of the mid-’90s happened at the same time as ‘a concerted managerial effort to improve the performance of, and to modernise and regulate, the prison’ (455). Thus, she says, prison has ‘grown, deepened, and been re-shaped’ (488). In Liebling’s analysis, the managerial culture that established itself within jails has ‘an inbuilt tendency towards instrumentalism and qualification... so that what can be measured becomes important’ (377). The result, she says, is a prison environment described by one inmate as being ‘safer, in a tense sort of a way’ (485). To illustrate this, she describes the anger-management courses that have emerged from managerial and humanitarian concerns, but then asks how useful these courses may be in a prison whose punitive tendency ensure that ‘prisoners are continually frustrated or intimidated’ (166). Although Liebling confesses to fears that her own attempts to reform prison conditions can be likened to putting ‘pink curtains on the bars’ (492), she maintains an underlying belief in shaping ‘much less prison, of a more palatable kind’ (492).

According to both Liebling (2004) and David Garland (2001), the contemporary prison is a confused site of ‘tensions and oscillations between bureaucratic-managerial, punitive, and humanitarian values’ (Liebling, 2004: 456). Consequently, a jail is home to three different, competing visions of what a prison should be. For Garland, the infrastructures of the old welfare state have been ‘overlaid’ (2001: 174) with ideas rooted in a combination of new neo-liberalism (‘the re-assertion of market disciplines’) (98) and neo-conservatism

(‘the re-assertion of moral disciplines’) (98). Garland says both of the latter ideologies have withdrawn from ‘the old welfare state belief that, for society to work, solidarity must extend to all its members’ (183). And both, says Garland, derive energy from a ‘fear of strangers’ (153) represented by the ‘dangerous, undeserving poor’ (182). Although the two ideologies overlap in their mutual desire to control rather than to reform, Garland otherwise sees ‘a clash of irreconcilable principles’ (191). While neo-liberals view crime as a risk that needs to be logically and economically managed through measures such as ‘warehousing’, neo-conservatives are more likely to adopt a rhetoric of ‘outrage and anger’ (145) – and to press for prisons as sites of punishment.

The economic priorities of neo-liberalism are informed, says Garland, by a ‘criminology of the self’ (137), whose aim is ‘to routinize crime, to allay disproportionate fears and to promote preventative action’ (137), while the ‘criminology of the other’ (137) found in neo-conservatism aims to ‘demonize the criminal, act out popular fears and resentments, and... promote support for state punishment’ (137). In this, he is echoed by Liebling, who argues that ‘there has been an almost complete depoliticization of explanations for crime and the position of prisoners’ (2004: 483).

While Garland’s analysis is easily attacked for its broad brushstrokes, his grand perspective allowed me to make sense of certain confusing aspects of prison-life. Seen from his aerial position, teachers in HMP Nottingham (supported by a Governor who believed in rehabilitation) were remnants of an old belief-system that was now being ‘overlaid’ by an approach that favoured risk-management. But this new idea of containment was itself in conflict with a punitive model that prioritised punishment and shame.

As a means of solving these tensions, Liebling calls for a system based upon ‘principles, as well as rules’ (2004: 269) in which process is more important than managerial ‘outcomes’ (269). Liebling praises the Woolf Report that was ‘published only nine months



after the riots' (Player & Genders, 1995: 3) that ripped apart jails like Strangeways in 1990, but she says that important physical advances (e.g. basic sanitation, slightly smaller wings, and telephone access) need to be underpinned by crucial improvements in 'less easily quantifiable features... justice, fairness, safety, order, humanity, trust, and opportunities for personal development' (50).

For Liebling, the jail's central process is bound up with the dynamic relationship between staff and inmates (since 'staff embody, in prisoners' eyes, the regime of the prison and its fairness' (264)). If a prison maintains order in that relationship, then there is a chance of achieving an environment that is stable, 'but stable for the right reasons, just as societies should be' (289). A moral prison environment, for Liebling, is achieved through the dynamic processes identified on page 38 of this thesis by John Podmore.

She summarises these dynamic processes as a matter of 'how staff approach prisoners, how managers treat staff, and how life is lived, through talk, encounter, or transaction' (Liebling, 2004: 50). These daily inter-actions vary significantly between jails and across time, she says – but they are 'at the heart of prison life... central to the prison's nature, functioning, and quality of life' (462). Ben Crewe, Governor of HMP Grendon, agrees: 'It is at the level of staff-prisoner relations that the prison's everyday moral climate is determined, and its pains cushioned and crystallized' (2016: 94).

The 'dynamic' processes described by Liebling, Podmore, and Crewe face intense pressure in jail, where stasis is usually seen as proof that the security measures are working. Very often, I heard the phrase: 'security and good order' offered as the reason for a refusal of an activity. New activities were regarded with suspicion by most officers. If the thing was new, that could cause change – and if order is stasis, then change is bad. So the proposal was refused. Faced by these loops of logic and by the suspicions and double-binds already described, it's no wonder that imaginations grind to a halt in prison.

How much could I hope to challenge these enormous forces, armed with only a few biro and books? If I had a role in rehabilitation, what did the role consist of? Was it really possible to dream that books, and literacy skills, might help inmates to find jobs, and to develop better relationships with their children, families, and partners?

Slowly, as the weeks passed, I established a working rhythm (described in the previous chapter). If things got tough, I fell back on discussion of craft as my ‘get out of jail’ card. While I hoped we’d have fun, I emphasised I was serious about teaching. Thankfully, the jail was also serious about teaching me. Once while wandering dejected through the ‘sterile zone’, an area forbidden to most inmates, I chanced upon a beaming yard-cleaner. He’d spent the morning disposing of shit-parcels thrown down by angry, cynical prisoners. When he described his struggle to unclog a drain, I started sympathising – until he put me straight. Staring into the drain, he’d understood that every drop of prison-water joined up with seas and rivers... and, for a few seconds, he’d been free.

I admired the prisoner, not least because he’d succeeded in overcoming the ‘automization’ deplored by the literary critic Viktor Schklovsky: ‘If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic’ (1990: 4-5). For Shklovsky, ‘automization eats away... at clothes, at furniture, at our lives... it’s as if this life had never been’ (1990: 5). He craved art that leads us to ‘a ‘vision’ rather than mere ‘recognition’ (10) by ‘describing things as if they were seen for the first time’ (63), a process of estrangement that would ‘make a stone feel stony’ (6).

Easier said than done. The prison I encountered was cramped and dirty, and dismal even on sunny days. Having barely altered since it opened as Bagthorpe Prison in 1890, it seemed typical of a system described by a former jail-governor as suffering ‘unbearable pressure on already limited resources’ (Wilson & Ashton, 2001: 38). I was confronted by ‘prison’s distinctive qualities – pain, deprivation, inequalities of power, social compression’

(Crewe, 2016: 77). My immediate impression was of stagnancy and torpor. I watched the inmates shuffle in circles around the exercise yard, their energy blocked and frustrated. If nothing ever changed, and each day was always the same, then surely only the imagination could create meaning and variety? But how would it survive? Who could cultivate the imagination when nothing in their environment encouraged hope, or freshness, or flow?

An insight into habitualization is provided by Victor Serge's *Men in Prison*, described by its translator Richard Greeman as 'a kind of epic simplification' (1969: xv), owing to Serge's refusal to see the book as a memoir:

I emphasise that this is a novel... This book is not about me, but about men. I don't even want to stick too close to things I have actually seen. I mean to be freer than that, in order to reach, through creation, a richer and more general truth than the truth of observation (xxv).

*Men in Prison* was based on Serge's imprisonment in France between 1912-17 following his flirtation with anarchist groups. Observing that 'prison tries to stultify: to mechanize all movements, efface all character, desiccate the brain' (149), the narrator seeks imaginative release in 'a row of old poplars' (153):

The wind bends their dark branches back and fills them with a sound like waves beating against a beach... I have dreamed poems to these trees, wild and sullen in the cold November rains like helmeted heroes fighting against destiny... I know they line the bank of a lazy river which I have never seen, yet could trace in my mind... (154).

Serge's trees reminded me of my favourite feature in HMP Nottingham, a cherry tree near the main-gate. I often gazed at that tree, particularly when it frothed into bloom, yielding a drift of pink flowers, swept back by a lifer. I understood Serge's need to animate the tree with wind. It was good to see something moving. But how did Serge bear it? How does anyone in jail stand those reminders of other places? Of course, most *can't* stand it. Serge's narrator categorises four obsessions that 'haunt those dungeons' (190):

the horror of injustice (the obsession of the case: “I’m innocent” or “I’ve been punished too hard, it’s unfair”); carnal desire (sometimes jealousy); the horror of death (the death of loved ones, transformed by the darkness into a certainty); the fear of dying. You don’t get to choose your obsession. (190).

I met all four obsessions in prison, which was why I liked the cherry tree, or anything beyond blame, sorrow or rage. The jail’s drabness had generated what Serge calls ‘an obsessive desire for colors’ (65), and the same need to believe in books, which I believed had the potential to ‘make a stone feel stony’, as Schklovsky argued (1990: 6). Serge’s narrator describes a pugilist who recovered the sensation of life through books, and later wrote: ‘I’m no longer just a brute’ (148). But Serge knew the difficulties: ‘The regulations could be summed up in three peremptory words: *living is forbidden*’ (53).

The nihilism of that turn of thought is captured in another book about jail that I found illuminating while working at HMP Nottingham, Tony Parker’s anthology *The Man Inside* (1973), where a fraudster identified as Malcolm, J. describes jail in the following terms:

I don’t think you could say being in prison is like anything because being in prison you’re a big nothing in the middle of a big nothing, and that’s not ‘like’ anything (Parker, 1973: 20).

This rebuttal of the imagination is common in prison. Rather than being seen as a key to freedom, education is often perceived as another method by which authorities penetrate and colonise prisoners’ minds. Although it is one of the few places where adult-males turn to poetry for self-expression, prison is also home to many who reject metaphor as an evasion of the here- and-now, the place where prisoners must focus their energies in order to survive.

Yet for all its bleakness Malcolm, J.’s rejection allows a measure of hope. In contesting the notion that prison can be ‘like’ anything else, Malcolm, J. uses similes and metaphors to forge comparisons to two nothings and two negatives. And these figurative terms allow Malcolm J. to reject his interrogator’s game of eloquence, while vividly evoking the blankness where he exists. In the process, he extinguishes place, personality, language, and the act of communication itself. The result is anti-poetry that Parker describes as:

ill-formed incoherence... [that] can be more expressive than a carefully thought-out statement which has no spontaneity: the mastery of a technique sometimes blurs the genuine feeling it attempts to convey (Parker, 1973: 6).

This notion of ‘ill-formed incoherence’ excited me, particularly for allowing a spontaneity with language that might make ‘the stone stony’ (Schklovsky, 1990: 6). In de-familiarising prison clichés, perhaps inmates could free emotions blockaded by jail? There were several prisoners who attempted these de-familiarisations, including a student who, memorably, tore up photocopies of the prison rule-book and then rearranged the phrases in the cut-up style of William Burroughs, so that they sat on the page in weird new formations. (When he showed the work to his classmates, the consensus was that the cut-up version made more sense than the original rule-book!). I wanted to believe that this playfulness and ‘ill-formed incoherence’ could create the spontaneity that Erich Fromm thought essential to meaningful life:

The inability to act spontaneously, to express what one genuinely feels and thinks, and the resulting necessity to present a pseudo-self to others and oneself, are the root of the feeling of inferiority and weakness... there is nothing that gives us greater pride and happiness than to think, to feel, and to say what is ours (Fromm, 2001: 225-6).

‘To feel, and to say what is ours.’ What a beautiful phrase. But how difficult those achievements are in jail, where language is as stale and second-hand as the air, and where the pressures create a breeding ground for ‘pseudo-selves’. Faced by the scrutiny of guards, prisoners, and their own minds, it’s little wonder many inmates take refuge in denial and self-deceit, or choose numbness above feeling. The sense ‘of ‘inferiority and weakness’ described by Fromm was evident in several suicides that occurred during my first months at the prison – and which continue every week in institutions all over the country:

The number of suicides in prisons in England and Wales is at its highest for seven years, new figures show. Eighty-two inmates killed themselves in 2014, up seven from the previous year, according to statistics compiled by the Howard League for Penal Reform (BBC News, 22 Jan 2015)

Behind the individual threats posed by bullies and the more abstract forces of fear and boredom, there is an additional pressure, perhaps even more formidable: it is ‘the very body of the prison’ (1979: 30), to borrow Foucault’s phrase. I was rarely threatened by inmates, but I never lost my fear of the rotting Victorian architecture, and I believe its constant threat played a role in encouraging the despair I felt around me. Here, ‘space is... never neutral’ (Matthews, 1999: 27): ‘it defines and redefines behaviour. It sends out messages. It provides the basis for the construction and dissemination of ideologies.’ (27). If that is true, then the message I received from the crumbling wing at HMP Nottingham was that a powerful neglect was in operation, maybe as a means of means of encouraging apathy and stasis.

Noel Fellowes, a policeman wrongly accused of murder, connects the brutality of an ‘archaic system’ (1986: 317) to ‘the Victorian prison buildings and cells [which] reflect Victorian attitudes’ (316). In arguing for a system that ‘is not a punishment but an opportunity for rehabilitation’ (317), Fellowes describes the Open University course in which he studied ‘the Renaissance in art, Kafka in literature, philosophy, logic, and history’ (147). Yet there was a cost: Fellowes was paid only a minimum wage, given that he wasn’t producing anything regarded as useful. The inertia described by Fellowes – so all-pervading that it feels like an active force – continues to scare me whenever I recall the purposelessness of inmates whose imaginations had been crushed. It is difficult to spend time with those who have lost hope, and even harder to spend it with those who have apparently never known love, but these were the fates of some of the prisoners I encountered.

Not only the denial of love, but natural beauty. For some men, raised on lives of crime in urban areas, the countryside was a mystery. When setting writing exercises aimed at freeing imaginations, I needed to remember this. For some, the obsessive concern with the outside world had nothing at all to do with fresh air, as I discovered in the following incident, which forms the basis of the first extract presented from *The Privilege of Rain*:

## No need for rivers

All that year, the lifer had written eagerly. But the river stumped him. His pen wouldn't move.

"Okay – any water," I told him. "Call to mind the sea or a lake. Imagine you're staring upon it, or swimming. Then let go. Describe it without thinking."

His frown deepened into a mid-ocean trench. "But I've never *seen* a river," he said.

What I recall now is the greyness of his hair, the dry nature of his skin, a man younger than me, who had lived much longer.

"The thing is," he said – "before I came here, I never went outside much, never needed to."

Others in the prison writing group were nodding slowly, looking at their pencils as he spoke.

"Most of my work," he said, "I did indoors. The deals, the hits: indoors. It isn't like you see it in the films. *You don't flounce about*. You go where the Old Bill can't see. You drive to people's houses in the dark. And do the business. And come back out. And go to the next joint. Like that, see? All night. Over and over. In the dark, where no-one can see."

I tried to nod wisely.

"That's what people like you don't get," he said. "Work like that, you need eyes in the back of your head. Because it takes up all your energy. Pressure, see. A lot of pressure. And there ain't no time for fancy day-trips, mate. Nor any need for rivers."

No need for rivers. I wanted to tell the man he'd never valued his freedom. I wanted to explain that this was also true of me, that prison was our teacher, and could perhaps somehow set us all free.

But he was still in the flow, explaining his former life, a series of rooms connected by street-lights and roads, rarely a meadow or a hill, nowt at all that would stand in the way of his purpose.

Across the yard, dark shapes stood at the windows of cells and spilled their voices into the night, the only part of themselves they could free. The yard echoed with their roar, a wave always breaking.

"Except this one time I scored a deal in this park," said the lifer. "Trees everywhere. Branches and twigs and that. Creepy as fuck."

"Probably full of criminals too," said the joker across the desk.

The lifer rationed out a smile. "Some park in Birmingham, I think it was. And don't ask me why, but I ended up by this lake or pond or whatever. And there was something in the light; I noticed the water. So I put

my arm in up to here, up to the elbow, and I looked at it under the water. My own fucking arm. Just staring at it like a gobshite, how white it seemed. And the water and the light. And then this thought came in my head.”

“First time for everything,” said the joker.

“This thought,” said the dealer, hypnotised by his memory. “I mean, they’d probably bang me up if I said it out there...” He stared over the flat surface of the desk as if it was the vast, mystifying expanse of his mind. “See, there was something about the water that I noticed. It looked thick, very thick. And then this thought came to me: I’m here. That was it. Nowt else. It struck me, like: how thick the water seemed. And me with my arm in it. This is me, I thought. I’m here.

“I ain’t nowhere else, except here.” (Swann, D. 2010: 98-9)

This piece was written years after leaving prison, and rooted in an experience during our weekly workshop. In it, I hoped to capture the casual surrealism of prison-life. It amazed me that a fully-grown man could claim he’d never seen a river, and that I’d end up having to justify the value of natural beauty. But the piece also records what I came to think of as a characteristic prison-inversion – that moment when jail’s deadening vice collapses and the prison suddenly, weirdly, frees an inmate’s mind (and his teacher’s). In experiencing a river like a poet, as if for the first time, the man opened himself to wonder, and I hoped that this would demonstrate how far his imagination could travel, beyond any walls and bars.

There’s a hunger for transcendence in jail, as Carnochan observes:

Prison stories commonly share a hope of transcendence, as represented by the overcoming of limitation or degradation, whether by the exercise of the mind or by interventions of providence’ (Carnochan, 1998: 382).

Not surprisingly, I met many inmates interested in writing’s capacity to lift them from day-to-day pressures. However, this yearning for transcendence from jail is involved in a constant war with inertia, which acts as an active power. The inertia brings blankness and depression. It is also cruel, and capable of mockery. A wonderful journey into the imagination ends with



an inevitable return to the cell. Those who encourage transcendence in jail have to remember this, for their own good and for the good of others.

One reason prisoners choose inertia is that ‘joy is rich in fears’, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it (1977: 15). Hope can strike like sorrow, with deadly suddenness, and leave those who touch it ‘stricken among the fragments / of their colourless, usual lives’ (15). As well as inertia, the imagination must also somehow survive the onslaught of fear, a force equally deadly. My student Tom Shannon writes:

It’s almost 4 o’clock... I write these on my knees in bed, hence terrible writing. I have to have a blanket round my shoulder – cold, cold cells. I better get that sleep. I hate putting the light out. The dark mingles with my conscience, scares me. Childish, what do you think? Some tough guy! Sleep! (Shannon & Morgan, 1996: 43).

Shannon’s book, *Invisible Crying Tree*, co-written with Christopher Morgan, consists of letters exchanged between himself and a farmer whose social conscience prompted him to start a prison-correspondence. The men are strangers (as Morgan confirmed when I spoke to him by telephone) – hence, their friendship exists only through the letters. Their exchange gains poignancy from the tension between Morgan’s descriptions of his farming-life and Shannon’s of the jail, ‘covered in excrement, toothpaste and goodness knows whatelse [sic]’ (121). Shannon reveals he ‘was taken out of homes when I was thirteen, and put out to board with a farmer’ (27). The rural bliss that he discovered there was lost after he killed a man: ‘To do a murder really eats at the soul. You can be eating a meal, then suddenly think of the person you killed. The food turns to shit, in your mouth’ (96).

When I first met Shannon, he was sitting alone on a landing, facing away from the vast vault of the jail, as if swept against the wall by a brush. I don’t think I’ve ever met a man so lonely and apart, but there was something compelling about his presence too, a quality I’ve never forgotten, and which I’d guess was something to do with an inward honesty about a crime he knew no way to explain.

Shannon complains to Morgan that ‘this pen writes in lumps’ (127), an image that reveals his ability to summon the ‘ill-formed incoherence’ identified by Tony Parker (1973: 6), and this quality is reinforced by the book’s awkwardly poetic title, provided by Shannon’s letters: ‘Thank you for being there, for hearing my bleets, my invisible crying tree’ (1996: 60). While I was teaching him, Shannon wrote ‘Miracle’, an account of his youth that struck me as honest and beautiful. It described a ‘tired and starving’ boy (Swann, D. 1998: 67) who ‘kept moving, getting lifts on lorries, in cars, or I walked’ (67):

All sorts of things were going on at places somewhere different from where I was. I just had to get there. There was nothing going on when I got to where it was all happening. That’s because it was happening somewhere else (67).

I wanted Shannon to go on the writing with this honesty and spontaneity, but he yearned to become more fluent with language, and wanted me to correct errors that caused him shame. I think of him now, thrown like wastepaper onto the landing, and remember his fearful words:

Can you imagine how it must be for a soft youngster, not knowing what will come through his cell door next, the horror, the terrible horror. The sheer mind blowing, cut wrenching debilitating exhaustive existence. Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it (Shannon & Morgan, 1996: 192).

The dread that Shannon evokes can never be known by those like me who visit prison as outsiders, yet I still sometimes suffer nightmares that I’m trapped in the old wing, and therefore at risk from ‘the pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes, 1958: 82). Those fearful pains are evoked by Shannon, a man who endured years in Victorian jails.

But the imagination of Shannon and men like him was soon to suffer an entirely new set of pressures as the jail’s authorities responded to ongoing shifts in Government policy. In a re-building programme that proved startling in its speed and intensity, the jail altered almost beyond recognition. By the time I left, the original Victorian wing had changed function entirely, and was housing inmates on remand. Elsewhere, the jail’s same tight confines had become home to two brand-new wings, one of them housing lifers, the other populated by an

assortment of inmates, many of them reputedly imprisoned for sex offences. I was told by several prisoners and officers that this attempt to integrate sex offenders was part of a policy to prevent scapegoating, through a principle of ‘safety in numbers’. Whether this was true or not, I never discovered – but the rumour persisted.

When they opened, the new buildings proved to be far cleaner than the Victorian wing. However, the new buildings had been crammed into the existing grounds, so there were now many more men crowded into the same space, and work had also started on a segregation unit, which provoked ire in those who believed it was intended for paedophiles.

Erwin James was warned of the change by a chaplain: ‘Mark my words, in the future imprisonment will be about warehousing’ (2003: 77), an effect James witnessed at Nottingham, where ‘within two years that jail doubled its population, but had its education budget slashed’ (77) and where ‘staff and prisoner morale collapsed’ (77). This deterioration is linked by Garland to changes in ‘distinctive patterns of social, economic and cultural relations’ (2001: viii) that he identifies as being determining features of late modernity:

The open, porous, mobile society of strangers... has given rise to crime control practices that seek to make society less and less mobile: to fix identities, immobilize strangers, quarantine whole sections of the population, erect boundaries, close off access (165).

Garland perhaps fails to consider the new freedoms granted to minorities like gay people when he contends that the ‘economic control and social liberalism’ (100) of post-war social democracy have now been replaced by the exact opposite: ‘economic freedom and social control’ (100). But his attempt to link the immobilization of prisoners with the wider incapacitation of the poor certainly set me thinking.

For Shadd Maruna, working on a crime desistance project in Liverpool during roughly the same period when I was at HMP Nottingham, the tension between these overlapping visions was emblemised by ‘a prison counsellor encouraging inmates to “take responsibility for your behaviour” while they are kept in an environment that essentially takes

all responsibility and choice away from them' (2001: 155). In David Garland's analysis, this kind of confusion happens because of the position that the jail occupies in our society:

... precisely at the junction point of two of the most important social and penal dynamics of our time: risk and retribution... Imprisonment simultaneously serves as an expressive satisfaction of retributive sentiments and as an instrumental mechanism for the management of risk and the confinement of danger (Garland, 2001: 199).

In angry, anxious times, the old theories that linked crime to social injustice have been overwhelmed, says Garland, by theories 'not of deprivation but of inadequate controls' (2001: 15). And 'warehousing' can be seen in precisely this light, as a means of incapacitating those who cannot otherwise be controlled:

The basic idea is that the offender is to be incapacitated by being taken out of social circulation... the theory of incapacitation is, in its pure form, stripped of humanitarian ideals emphasizing help to the incarcerated (Matthews, 1999: 85)

The emphasis on containment is summarised by Matthews as aiming 'not to reform, rehabilitate or to confront the values of offenders, but... [to] monitor their movements and regulate their activities' (255) – a 'shift towards deterrence and incapacitation' (257).

Garland is fascinated by the far-from-inevitable 'collapse of correctionalism' (2001: 54), and identifies the turning point as that cultural moment in the late 1960s when penal policy was attacked by liberal artists keen to save individuals from authority. He identifies *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *A Clockwork Orange* as examples of literature that emphasised 'the importance of individual integrity and the autonomy of the subject' (57), and played an influential role in the campaign against harsh measures such as fixed penalties (the original primary focus of prison criticism in the US during the 1960s).

A protest that started among liberals, socialists, and anarchists, was gradually co-opted by the right, as the crime desistance expert Shadd Maruna makes clear. He identifies the crucial cultural moment as being the 'paradigm-shifting attack on rehabilitation' (2001:

166) that occurred in America in 1974 when the researcher Robert Martinson's influential paper, 'What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform', was published.

Garland argues that Martinson's reactionary paper emerged from conditions created by 'a progressive critique' (2001: 73) – and ultimately resulted in 'the spread of the failure model' (61), according to which 'nothing works' in jail, least of all 'prison-based treatment programmes' (61). For Garland, this paradigm-shift couldn't have happened without monumental transformations in the economy, technology, and family and social relations that were clearing the ground for 'the reconfigured field of crime control' (72).

Although 'the author of the "nothing works" thesis committed suicide soon after writing an apologetic retraction' (Maruna, 2001: 166), the damage was already done, and 'a hard-nosed cynical 'realism' has characterised the study of social science in general' (166) ever since, in both America and Britain. The fruits of this 'realism' became visible in the 'Prison Works' scheme, described at the Conservative Party conference on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1993, by the then-Home Secretary, Michael Howard, as measures designed to protect society 'from murderers, muggers and rapists' (Nicholls & Katz, 2004). Howard said: 'This may mean that more people will go to prison. I do not flinch from that. We shall no longer judge the success of our system of justice by a fall in our prison population' (Nicholls & Katz, 2004).

The 'Prison Works' programme was given impetus by the murder of James Bulger at the hands of two ten-year-old boys in February, 1993. In the moral panic that followed this shocking event (the subject of a sober, indignant chronicle by David James Smith [2011]), the UK Prime Minister John Major was quoted as saying: "'We must condemn a little more, and understand a little less'" (Morrison, 1997: 239), a statement that set the tone for the hardening of punitive attitudes.

For Erwin James, the 'Prison Works' philosophy led not only to an increase in incarceration, but to new attitudes within jails. In the mid-1990s, he says, the first allegations

of serious assaults were made as it became easier ‘for unscrupulous key men to abuse their positions’ (2005: 110):

... the sense of disillusionment was almost overwhelming as we felt ourselves becoming even more detached from those on the outside. Efforts made to get out there and function properly seemed wasted... To bring us back into line, prison life needed to be more rigorous... the most worrying development was the change in attitude of the prison staff (James, 2005: 109).

Howard’s office defended its scheme in a widely-reported press release:

Locking up persistent and dangerous criminals stops them committing further crimes... That's why 8,500 new prison places will be made available by the year 2000... Prison should be, and is, reserved for the most serious and persistent offenders. (PR News Wire, April 29 1997).

This statement stokes public anxieties about law and order while travelling as a message of reassurance. Its casual mention of ‘further crimes’ addresses *imagined* offences, ones that have not (yet) taken place, but which are projected as likely, given the nature of the offenders-to-be. However, Howard tells us not to worry about this future threat – because we are locking up the ‘persistent and dangerous criminals’ who *would* be guilty of those offences if they *were* free. Here, ‘prison works’ not through methods of deterrence and/or re-education, but as a place of confinement for those who cannot be altered.

Under their parliamentary remit, members of the UK’s Prison Inspectorate, led during my residency by Lord David Ramsbotham, were obliged ‘to concentrate on the treatment of, and conditions for, prisoners’ (Ramsbotham, 2003: 218). Thus, inspections covered ‘how prisoners were received, whether they were in work or education, whether they felt safe and whether they were being prepared for release’ (58). Ramsbotham found several jails wanting. However, when he suggested to the architect of ‘Prison Works’ that conditions ‘were clearly and unacceptably punitive’ (64), Michael Howard simply repeated an earlier statement that prisons should be ‘decent but austere, with a positive regime for tackling re-offending, based on opportunities for work and education’ (64).

Undeterred, Ramsbotham concluded that ‘imprisonment, as currently conducted, is failing both its prisoners and the public it is required to protect’ (240), with the result that ‘lack of preparation for release contributes to the appalling rate of male re-offending’ (145). Ramsbotham states: ‘Surely the question that has to be asked about whether prison works is, “In what state of mind will prisoners be when they come out?”’ (70).

I arrived at the jail just before the physical effects of these philosophies began to surge through the system. When the re-building programme began, I think the scale of the change surprised even the authorities. HMP Nottingham altered in shape every day, and workers violated the only two features of beauty: a cherry tree, skewered by the pole of a camera, and the disused swimming pool, where wild ducks reared their young, which the builders drained and then used as a dumping ground for trash and saplings. The destroyed pool became emblematic when I thought about the jail, embodying so much of what felt wrong: the overcrowding and waste, the denial of beauty and creativity.

Foucault (1979) likened prisons to factories (producing delinquents) – but the warehouse-jail is a new metaphor that fits with post-industrialism. Just as heavy industry has given way to an economy based on trade and financial services, so the vision of prison as a place of transformation (either through punishment or education) has now shifted to an emphasis on storage and distribution. For the poet, Ken Smith, ‘prison consists of punishment and detention, segregation from society’ (1989: 111). This, he says, is like ‘temporarily burying our waste, like so much toxic overflow that re-emerges elsewhere’ (110).

*Temporarily burying our waste.* That phrase returned when I found rubble in the jail’s swimming-pool. There had been water there once, and wild birds. And even now, around the pool’s edges, men continued to report seeing foxes. My imagination clung to those vestiges, reminders of the ancient moor that the warehouse-jail stood upon. As an ex-journalist, I was

standing at the heart of an historic change. When I stared at the rubble, I was seeing a shift in ideology – a shift that I felt was being misrepresented as a moral crisis.

According to Tom Douglas, investigative journalism becomes necessary when the public interest is threatened by ‘cheating and... dishonest activity’ (Douglas, 1995: 48) – and I was thinking along these lines during the second half of my residency when it was clear that I’d been cast in the role of witness. I preferred not to become a crusading reporter, but to operate rather in the manner of Denis Johnson, who visits troubled zones of the world as a ‘confused American’ (Johnson, 2004: 232) and sends back impressionistic dispatches. Johnson admits he isn’t a ‘real journalist’ (108). Rather than conducting background research and extensive interviews, he simply leaves himself open to experience.

Accordingly, I started making fragmentary notes on my experiences. Ultimately, the jail’s onslaught took years to process and re-imagine. Although fear and inertia were to become my subject matter, I had to struggle for the forms that would carry them. In time, my ‘cross-training’ (Colburn and Petersen, 2010) as both poet and journalist proved helpful, and this concept is discussed in a later chapter, where I describe a ‘flourishing’ that echoes the development of the poet and journalist Don Colburn.

It is unsettling to talk of myself ‘flourishing’ in an environment so saturated with pain, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that the transformation was easy or pleasant. My creative response was often an attempt to exorcise nightmares and bad memories. When creativity failed, and catharsis proved elusive, I feared the jail was trapping me in a maze of retrospection. As Hesmondhalgh (2013) says, though, there is more to ‘flourishing’ than happiness. If the prison taught me anything, it was to value my freedom, a complex and sometimes painful condition, but one of the dynamic, and difficult, components that Hesmondhalgh identifies as essential to ‘different versions of a good life’ (2013: 17).



Teaching inmates including Erwin James and Tom Shannon, I came to understand David Scott's distinction between *reform*, which he connects with change, and *rehabilitation*, which he connects with restoration (2008: 19). The distinction is made clear by the reverse-wisdom offered to a Canadian parliamentary sub-committee: 'How do you expect me to rehabilitate when I was never habilitated?' (Wright, 1982: 75). As this inmate's wisecrack suggests, rehabilitation is a complex business – and the forces operating against it are strong.

To those critical of my interest in the well-being of perpetrators of terrible crimes, I have several answers, both pragmatic and idealistic. Pragmatically, an improved approach to rehabilitation would save money and make us all safer. Idealistically, I would argue that education has the potential to restore a criminal to his/her better self, and that this itself makes it worthwhile. In making that currently unfashionable argument, I repeat the words of Richard Shelton, a poet who worked for years as a voluntary teacher in Arizonan prisons: '*I am after all... an educator, and all I am being asked to do is educate*' (2007: 9). Like me, Shelton treated his students as if they were 'born yesterday and had no past' (9), remembering that he was educating individuals, not a herd:

...those I feel great pity for, those I respect, those who give me the creeps, those I am in awe of, those who baffle me, those who are repellent to me, those with enormous talent, and those who have touched me so deeply I will never be the same (118).

The Israeli writer David Grossman wrote that a 'moral and human code of behaviour' (Grossman, 1988: 195) must be forged in 'precisely... the exceptional, repugnant cases' (195) that arouse 'no sympathy' (195). I read Grossman's book, *The Yellow Wind*, while working in the prison, and felt that its notion of civil dignity applied not only to the Middle East, but to the jail. 'You shine your light,' a prison-teacher told me when I asked him one day how he maintained his faith in education. 'Even if no-one sees it, you shine your light.'

In addition, I would repeat the wisdom of the poet Judith Tannenbaum, another long-term teacher in American jails, who asked her readers to ‘think of the worst thing he or she had ever done’ (Tannenbaum & Jackson, 2010: 172):

“Now imagine,” I instructed, “that this act is all you’re known for. Imagine that everything in your world is designed to treat you as a person defined by this act. Any other fact of your life – any act of love, creativity, compassion, intelligence, or joy – is irrelevant. You are only a person who has done this worst thing... from now till forever” (Tannenbaum & Jackson, 2010: 172-3).

Whenever I felt dismay at the pressures on rehabilitation, I recalled Erwin James and Tom Shannon, two students who had used writing to repair and protect their humanity, in circumstances of adversity. Contemplating those brave souls, my mind carried me back to the prison’s trees, still somehow managing to flourish in the yards and sterile-zones. Despite being violated by a pole that bristled with surveillance-cameras – ‘rape’, one of the prisoners called it – the cherry tree went on summoning its magnificent blossom.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne calls prison the ‘the black flower of civilised society’ (1970: 76), and describes ‘an ugly edifice’ (75) that ‘seemed [to] never have known a youthful era’ (75), but he is careful to place ‘almost at the threshold... a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner’ (76).

Like Hawthorne, I wondered whether the cherry tree had ‘survived out of the stern old wilderness’ (76) of Sherwood Forest or whether it had always been an inmate. Whatever its origins, the tree remained a symbol of what might flourish, even in the desert of Charles Murray and Michael Howard.

## Chapter Three

### ‘The Legend on the License’: First Attempts at Poetry and Nonfiction Narrative

This chapter focusses on how my imagination stirred as I navigated the jail’s desert. Having entered the prison as a journalist who was trying to plot a new course as a teacher and writer of fiction, the switch to poetry proved slow and sometimes painful. It forced me to weigh my journalistic training against an unexpected apprenticeship in poetry. The chapter begins by discussing the first lyric poems I wrote, and concludes by considering the first prose. The poems were limited, but marked a significant point, since I’d never considered poetry as an option. The prose was not part of any plan, either – but it came as less of a surprise, because, in certain respects, it resembled journalism.

During the discussion, I explain how I came to see the prose as belonging to the ‘nonfiction narratives’ that Ted Conover identifies as evolving from New Journalism (Conover, interviewed in Boynton, 2005: 7). Using *In Cold Blood* as a test case, I identify ways in which my prose resembles, and differs from, New Journalism – and how it fits within the tradition of ‘immersive’ non-fiction practised by Conover. Throughout, the aim is to show how my creative thinking took shape, particularly with regards to the thorny relationship between facts and fiction.

I will begin by reproducing the very first poem I wrote about prison:

#### **A lifer offers me a cup of tea**

It isn’t just the burnt edges  
of the plastic cup he offers,

or rumours of doctored drinks,  
nor even the hands that reach to mine –

what they’ve become,  
as spoiled and yellow as his beaker –

just the thought of fingers, once,  
when he was small,

before anyone had yet  
to turn away his gifts. (Swann, D. 2010: 51)

The poem reports on one of the small acts of ‘banal kindness’ (Crewe, 2016: 92) that the Governor of HMP Grendon, Ben Crewe, identifies as characterizing ‘prison life alongside all the deprivations’ (92). These gestures are important, Crewe says, in helping us to avoid the mistake that jail is ‘a lawless jungle without moral baselines’ (92). On the contrary, I discovered that prison can sometimes play host to altruism and friendship and, to a more limited extent, trust. On several occasions, I was protected by prisoners, once when an inmate grew concerned that our workshop’s horseplay would get me into trouble. I was also offered gifts: hooch; cigarettes (one of the jail’s most precious commodities); music tapes (one of them taped over an audio episode of the TV series ‘Porridge’); and unlimited tea and coffee, as described in the poem above.

This first prison-poem emerged in one continuous, cathartic sentence that took me by surprise. I did little but arrange the lines, partly as a technical exercise intended to complicate the syntax and experiment with line-breaks, and partly so the poem would float within the space that was becoming crucial to my understanding of the jail’s psychological environment. I paid little regard to the poem’s ‘music’, and now see that as a problem. But I can appreciate the poem’s unaffectedness, or the direct quality I was striving after during a period when I still saw myself as a teacher and a journalist rather than a poet.

I have begun this chapter with the first prison-poem I wrote, as a means of demonstrating the turn my imagination was taking, from journalism into poetry. So slow was the turn, I managed only one other poem during my residency – and this, together with the only prose-piece I completed, is discussed later in the chapter. My intention in including these three early pieces is to show that my creative response to the jail was initially influenced by a grounding in journalism. After discussing that grounding, the chapter goes on

to critique such practices and to describe innovations in reportage pioneered by proponents of The New Journalism. In discussing The New Journalism, I use Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* to test my approach to the subject matter of prison and to interrogate fiction's intrusion into reportage. Where is the line between fact and fiction? What is the relationship between journalism and literature? Is it acceptable to manipulate plot and viewpoint when dealing with factual matters?

To deal with these questions, I must return to the moment, six months into my residency, when I finally found secure lodgings in Nottingham. Before that, I had been too frazzled and unsettled to manage any writing. But now, for the first time, I started making journal entries: hasty fragments, more like bullet-points than prose or poetry. My rule was to confine myself to concrete images of things seen and heard, or smelled and touched (and tasted, in the case of prison-hooch). I set myself this forensic restraint out of exhaustion, and out of deference to my journalistic training, which had been based on values of accuracy, objectivity, emotional distance, and fidelity to the facts.

When making these fragmented notes, I operated rather like the narrator of the novel *HHhH*, whose account of the assassination of the Nazi chief, Reinhard Heydrich, is bound by a desire to avoid 'novelistic invention' (Binet, 3013: no page number, section 107).

'Inventing a character to understand historical facts is like fabricating evidence' (192), the narrator avows. The novel tests the purity of that factual approach, and buckles as the narration demands the subjectivity of fiction, not the objectivity of journalism, and he breaches his self-imposed rule to favour the 'known' over the 'plausible' (189).

There is a similar set of restrictions in Agota Kristof's *The Notebook*, where the twin-protagonists' journal contains only 'the faithful description of facts' (Kristof, 2014: 27):

We must describe what is, what we see, what we do. For example, it is forbidden to write, 'Grandmother is like a witch', but we are allowed to write: 'People call Grandmother the Witch'. (Kristof, 2014: 27)

It's probably silly to claim 'news'-like qualities for work that took 10 years to produce, and to shackle one's writing to problematic journalistic ideas of neutrality, objectivity, and truth (not to mention, the strange, commonplace assumption that every story has only two sides). But I felt the need to bring the 'news' from jail's closed world – and was surprised this 'news' began to emerge as poetry rather than journalism. The move into poetry was partly made possible by the reading that was influencing me (discussed in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven) – but there were other factors, especially the jail's thunder and lightning. Without this animating spark, I feel it's unlikely I'd have become a writer of poems.

Well, of two poems, anyway. The second, 'Seizure', was inspired by my disabled student on the 4s, who had endured a night in chains at the city-hospital. After he described his cramps, I happened to discover that the word 'prison' had etymological connections with the Latin term 'seizure', and I imagined him trapped inside two jails, one of them his body:

**Seizure**

*Pris-on, n. [F prisoun <L prahensio, -onis seizure]*

Hours before,  
 he knows it's coming.  
 Knows it the way  
 a dog knows thunder,  
 in his teeth and hair.  
 Soon they'll lace him  
 with chains  
 and load him into a van,  
 take him to the ward  
 in the hospital  
 in Nottingham  
 where he'll spend the night  
 fighting the pains  
 that quake in his bones,  
 free at last of jail,  
 still cuffed to himself (Swann, D. 2010: 87).

Again, the poem came as a transmission which required me only as a recording device. I felt it was flawed by a lack of back-story concerning the man's cerebral palsy, but I settled with the outcome, because I'd no idea what else to do. The short lines created more of the white space that I was interested in, and this suggests I was still thinking in visual rather than aural

terms. But although the poem was plain in its diction, it contained a few minor sonic effects, particularly the half-rhymes, most of them situated at line-endings. There was enjambment, too – and that pleased me, because it was good to feel something flowing in a place where so much had stopped, and I sensed the excitement that my students reported when their imaginations tingled with possibilities.

Two minor poems in six months. It doesn't sound much, yet I was grateful to be writing *anything*. Those tentative first attempts lacked sophistication, but they opened a door (and how important opened doors now seemed!), as well as allowing me perspective on prison's bewildering 'spiral'.

The nascent poet may have been stirring, but the journalist inside me was struggling. In jail's rumour-factory, where gossip alone moves freely, a journalistic mind encounters bewildering arrays of 'truths' – not only versions offered by inmates, officers, psychologists, doctors, etc., but the information stored in the records system, often criticised for its inaccuracy, especially by those men I met who proclaimed their innocence, often at great length and in intricate detail.

Who were you supposed to believe? How could you hope to keep track? With little to do, and nowhere to go, prisoners would spend hours of their 'endless present' (Herman, 2001: 89) describing the complexities of their innocence – stories impossible to follow. For example, a few days after a riot had been snuffed out, I was offered several different reasons for the unrest. A man who hated prison food said it was dust in the custard. Another who was dying of loneliness claimed it was changes to visiting arrangements. Factual or not, these stories contained the truths of the men's grievances.

In his cultural history of the rumour, Hans-Joachim Neubauer describes the 'ugly disharmony' (1999: 42) of the Roman goddess Fama, a monster 'covered with feathers, ears, tongues' (42). Although she is the carrier of rumour and gossip, Fama can operate only when

‘the motives of power become opaque’ (49), and when tensions such as the ‘boredom of waiting’ (94) create a strong need for information. Not surprisingly, then, Fama was alive and well in the prison’s closed world. Although rumours are constructed from ‘montage, projection, invention, inversion’ (124), Neubauer says they are better understood as ‘symbolic realities’ (169) than as distortions of reality, in the sense that they often ‘express what cannot be formulated in other ways’ (169). He gives as an example the horror of World War One, when battlefield rumours passed between soldiers in the trenches who ‘knew that the reality they were experiencing was a part of the irreality which their generals, with the help of the field telephone and aerial photography, held to be the ‘actual’ course and ‘true’ description of the battle’ (83).

Neubauer’s analysis has helped me to understand the flow of fiction within the jail’s closed world, where information is so restricted that ‘symbolic realities’ thrive. What’s more, his ideas have explained difficulties facing the witness. The detached overview of the general is one perspective. But the squaddie’s blood-drenched combat is another. For Neubauer, a rumour is not a chain or a line or a net, but ‘a curve that circles around a point again and again... the spiral... [with] no beginning and no end, no origin and no destination’ (174).

Until I worked in prison, I’d never felt such aversion to journalism’s working-code. Although post-modernists have argued that there are no facts, I felt I had stumbled upon a more worrying proposition: that there were vast swarms of them, impossible to organise or verify, ‘too many in too long a row’ (Stafford, 1998: 82). Hence, the question for a writer of reportage becomes not only whether the facts are accurate, but also: ‘*Which* facts? And *whose*?’ If powerful forces choose and arrange the facts to suit their own ends, the journalist’s task is to search out elements that have been erased or re-prioritised.

But it’s not only the facts – it’s the relationship between them. When writing news stories, journalists structure the material around the principles of: ‘sequence... priority...



[and] relationship' (Gerard, no date. *Brevity*). A former cub reporter who is now a novelist, Philip Gerard argues that: (a) sequence is the order in which 'elements are arranged', (b) priority is 'the importance of any element relative to other elements', and (c) relationship is 'a special connection to each other element and to the story as a whole' (Gerard, *Brevity* [online]). In Gerard's view, these three elements can be manipulated erroneously if the journalist misses 'a Big Fact... [the] fact behind the facts that determines the meaning of all the other facts'. For Gerard, 'a fundamental truth about stories... [is that] backstory drives present action'. He contends that the 'Big Fact' in the backstory is the crucial ingredient around which the story coheres. By failing to find the 'Big Fact', a journalist would put him/herself in danger of filing an article in which 'every fact was true, and yet the story was utterly false' (Gerard, *Brevity* [online]).

As an example of this danger, I would cite my experience of a visit to HMP Whatton, an unusual prison in Nottinghamshire, populated exclusively by male sex-offenders, who voluntarily embark upon re-education aimed at changing offending behaviour. During the visit, I attended a 'sentence planning' meeting (in which prison-staff assess the inmate's progress – and devise a future-plan, based on evidence presented). There, an inmate confessed for the first time (with his daughter present) that he was guilty of touching the young girls who had attended his riding school. The man offered alcoholism as his reason – and the room crackled with tension when he confessed.

Afterwards, when a tutor solicited my reaction, I said I'd found it moving when the man and his daughter wept. It had been a privilege, I said, to witness this turning-point. In reply, the teacher asked how I would feel if he revealed that the man was the subject of arrest-warrants from several foreign countries, where he was alleged to have committed atrocities while serving as a mercenary. This, if true, was the 'Big Fact' that couldn't be mentioned by the committee, for legal reasons – and its absence called everything else into

question. Was the man's alcoholism a response to unacknowledged war crimes? Or did his abuse of young girls, and his alleged war-crimes, take their cue from yet another Big Fact, hidden in the past? After starting out within a story of confession, the facts now began to rearrange themselves into a narrative of continuing denial and deception.

Despite these dizzying problems with facts and Fama, I continue to stand by certain values I learned as a 'cub'. Back then, I'd been warned by a colleague not to applaud at press-conferences. He said I was a member of 'the shabby profession' – often in the company of powerful, well-dressed people, but never their friend. Another colleague said my job was to separate what was happening from what I *expected* to happen. I remembered this many years later while 'kettled' at a demonstration in London. A powerful story (the first major 'kettling', a seven-hour ordeal for many tourists and peaceful protestors) was missed by the press, who went on waiting for the violence that their working code demanded. When some of us tried to reason with the journalists, we were ignored, as though we didn't exist – a fascinating experience, and one that many inmates of British jails would recognise.

Of course, it's hard to abandon conceptual thought and simply *experience* the moment, as I have proved in the above paragraph, which is full of received ideas. As Garland suggests, there is no such thing as 'direct, unmediated encounter with the real... unmediated, untutored, unscripted' (2001: 147). For one thing, definitions of the real are notoriously slippery, as the novelist Philip Roth emphasises:

Obviously the facts are not just coming at you but are incorporated by an imagination that is formed by your previous experiences. Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imagination of the facts... (Roth, 1989: 8).

Even without the complications caused by time's passage, there is more to any moment than the events empirically observed by a journalist. What about the things happening out of sight, for instance? Things that can't be picked up by the senses? Or the abstract forces that made the event occur? Or the thing that *would* have happened if your

news editor had sent you to cover another story? It isn't only a question of perspective, and there's also more to it than the gathering of facts, as I hope I have demonstrated.

Whatever my reservations, I did my best to make written notes on what happened within the prison. The notes were plain and terse, reduced to bullet-points by my exhaustion. And there was no creative plan, except to survive. Later, I will explain how I drafted those scribbled fragments, but here I will include the first of the prose-pieces that took shape. It was assembled from the fragmentary journal-entries, and completed soon after I left my job. After quoting the piece in its entirety, I will use it as a means of describing the journalistic working methods that I carried into the prison, and as a vehicle for exploring the relationship between fiction and journalism:

### **First day**

On the way in, I had counted the gates as they were locked behind us. Five gates, six...

My boss swung the final gate shut as an unseen double-decker growled past on the road beyond the wall. That's how close the world was. How far away. Just seven gates...

I was led into the education block, passing a cluster of unyielding men who had gathered in the dog-leg of the corridor. I didn't know who was a prisoner and who wasn't. Their clothes were made of drab acrylic. Against my expectations, only one of the men seemed to be wearing anything that I understood as a prison uniform. He was dressed in navy clothes with bright yellow stripes down the sides.

Secretly, I practised holding the keys in my pocket. There were only two of them. Two keys. You'd to shield the keys from forgers, that's what the head of security had told me. Some forgers needed only ten seconds to memorise the cut.

"The thing is," I said, rushing to keep up, "is, I thought there'd be *tons* of keys..."

My boss nodded. "These two keys fit almost every lock in this whole place. That's why you've to hand them in at the gate whenever you leave the jail..."

In the corridor, a cluster of men stopped to study me. The keys burned against my thigh. Their chain might as well have been connected to the anchor of a trawler. I'd never felt more giddy, was almost floating on a wave of my own fear. But heavy too. Both at the same time. Anchored. Adrift.

"If you forget... if you leave the prison with those two keys... they'll have no choice but to change all the locks," said my boss.

His voice slowed to a crawl.

"Every. Single. Lock. In. This. Jail."

\*

That first morning, I was allowed to sit in on various lessons. To get a flavour of how things went.

First I was shown the cookery class. On the way in, I noticed a blackboard covered with hooks, where the prisoners hung their tools. Each tool belonged in a particular place, and each spot on the board was marked with a white outline of the tool, like the lines painted around bodies on TV cop shows.

I noticed that several knives were missing from their hooks.

Over by the cookers, a group of men in aprons had almost finished melting chocolate to pour over Rice Krispies clustered in bun cases.

The teacher shrugged. "A special request," she said. "I was supposed to be showing 'em roast beef, but..."

All around her, prisoners stared into the pans as if they could see naked women down there in the depths, faces simultaneously animated and stunned.

"Not the spoons," the teacher scalded. "Don't lick the spoons yet!"

Some of the men cracked up laughing. "You can't help yourself," one of them offered. "It's the temptation..."

The teacher directed a smile into the pockets of her apron, where no-one might see it, where it might be safe.

Later, a quietness fell over the room as the men sated themselves on their buns and their spoons.

"Happiness..." I said to the teacher.

"Or caffeine, lad."

"Happiness IS caffeine, isn't it?" said one of the men. "Or did I miss summat? Have I been in here too long to remember the difference?"

The teacher waved him away. "Philosophy's in that classroom over there," she said. "This is cookery, lad. Wipe down your work surfaces."

"Yes, Miss," said the prisoner.

\*

Nervous in the staff-room at lunch-time, I listened to the conversations of the teachers around me. Their voices contained that strange mixture of exhaustion and wonder that I'd known from my own days as a teacher. But the things they discussed I barely understood at all.

"... the poisoner?"

"So they say. Still up to his old tricks. Even in here..."

"How?"

"Slipping it into folks' drinks, so they reckon. Cups of coffee, and that..."

Both teachers turned suddenly, realising that I was staring at them.

One of them smiled wearily. "Fancy a brew, lad?"

\*

I was told it was time to go on the wing. I thought of the pigeons I'd seen in a dingy alcove near the Governor's office. The places a creature may choose to spend its freedom! *On the wing, on the wing*. Every phrase hit me in the stomach.

I was put in the care of a man who'd been mopping a landing on the 3s before we interrupted him. He'd show me the ropes, my boss said. He was a trusted prisoner. I nodded, confused. From a distance, I'd again mistaken the man for a civvie.

The trusted man had dull eyes, dark waxy rings beneath them. But the ghost of a smile came easily to his face, and that was a relief because the smile softened his features and seemed to grant him respite from the gloom that had seeped out from his eyes. He took me along the landing, grunting hello's to men who didn't look up. Would I like a drink of coffee, he asked? He had a flask on the go; would I fancy a drink of coffee?

I thought about the teachers' lunch-time poison stories. I also worked hard to remember advice offered by a friend, an actress: *Don't blink at the wrong moment. If you're challenged, do a Michael Caine on them. Power is control over the eye. Power is not blinking.*

That first week, I must have looked deranged. I didn't blink again until January. I started to understand why the men's eyes burned.

I did my Michael Caine. "Yes," I said to the trusted prisoner, probably shaking my head, "I'd really like a drink of coffee. Very much, please."

\*

The trusted prisoner came back with his flask. He poured coffee into a flimsy red plastic beaker. The beaker's rim was burned where a cigarette had been pressed against it. It felt rough against my lip. I tried to shrug off the conversation I'd overheard in the staff-room.

The trusted prisoner watched me as I drank. Later, I was to grow used to some of these bitter things, the taint of sweat on acrylic clothes, nicotine on breath and fingers, roll-ups smoked twelve times, the stink of coffee that some of the men said was ground from acorns.

My guide looked pleased that he'd been able to help. After he had watched me drink all the coffee, he wiped his hands down his trousers and took the beaker back to his cell. He seemed to walk with a more positive stride. I watched the flask bob at his side as he went back along the landing.

I followed him, unable to shift the bitter taste. I was afraid to look into the open doorways of cells, where men lolled on beds or sat idly munching little snacks. It's a writer's job to *look*, but in looking I felt as if I was taking the last thing that some of these men had. Instead, I trained my eyes on the suicide netting that was stretched like giant sheets of gauze between the landings.

Above us, the space was huge, a vault of stale air not unlike the rain-spoiled Methodist chapels of my youth... always these strange reminders of that other world, so close to this one, visible from the windows up here on the 3s...

\*

On that first frightening day on the wing, a watchful, inscrutable officer gave me a safety demonstration. He showed me how to shoot the bolt in the trusted prisoner's cell. You snapped it shut, putting a bolt between the wall and the door so that no-one could lock you in.

"And this is what I do every time I visit a cell?"

"Unless you want to be held captive," said the officer, straight-faced. "Unless you want to find out if we think you're worth rescuing."

Unexpectedly, his face broke into a smile full of warmth and concern. "By hell, lad, I were only joking..."

I stared at the stiff bolt. My guide, the trusted prisoner, was staring at it too. Now there was this bolt between us and the rest of the prison. Now there was this bolt between me and him.

\*

The bolt. I couldn't forget the bolt. It seemed proof of my fear. It seemed to confirm my lack of faith. I sat with my guide, the trusted prisoner, in his cell, playing chess. I could do whatever I wanted. I had two keys. I could go anywhere except the staff room. I had the most freedom a job has ever afforded me.

My guide beat me in four moves, a blur of motion and thought. He was a champion, he told me as he laid my King to rest. It wasn't unusual for him to have forty postal games on the go, and he expected to win them all, but he sometimes had to wait weeks for the mail to come through.

"At first they thought it was some sort of code," he said. "All those grids and numbers. They thought I was plotting something."

"And were you?" I asked, an opening gambit, my first risk.

"Aye," he said. "I was plotting my next move."

\*

"So this is it," said my boss as we approached the day's final destination. "The Records Office. In case you want to check anything. In case you're ever worried..."

Do *you* check?"

"I did, lad," he said. "Once. On my first day."

"And you never went back?"

He didn't reply. He led me across the yard.

Near the sterile zone, along a line of wire fencing, lengths of toilet roll flared in the wind.

The Records Office was a disappointment at first sight, hundreds of manila folders inside a Portakabin that would have looked normal in infant school playground.

But so many of them. So many envelopes, so many lives.

"Pick one," said my boss.

"I wouldn't know where to start."

"Start with a name you know."

I knew only one, the name of my guide, the trusted prisoner, who had made coffee for me and beaten me in four moves.

We pulled out the file. It bulged with reports and cuttings. Testimonies in old-fashioned type. Yellowed newspapers. Faded photocopies. The trusted prisoner was older than I'd thought.

My boss remained business-like. He placed the envelope on the desk and sorted through the first few documents. Neither of us spoke. I was aware of a jet passing high over the jail, its engines here with us in the cabin. Almost as soon as I'd begun to read, I closed the folder, put it back in its rack, shut the drawer.

Neither of us spoke. We went back across the yard. I was aware of my hand and of the skin it had touched, aware now of the things that the other hand had done.

Dark shapes stood at the windows of cells and spilled their voices into the night, the only part of themselves they could free. The yard echoed with their roar, a wave always breaking.

"How do you do this job?" I asked my boss.

"You aim at the best part of a man," he said. "Even if you know it doesn't exist, you still aim at it."

(Swann, D. 2010: 22-5)

This piece was my first finished piece about the jail, although several other drafts were then either half- or quarter-built, or in states of disrepair and abandonment. The notebook-fragments on which I based the article were brief, containing only blunt facts and observations, e.g. *'7 gates btwn street and cell; d-decker sn from wing; Cookery – outlines of tools (several missing); teachers called 'miss' by lifers; tour by trusted lifer – his crimes in Records Office'*, etc. That first frightening day in the prison had remained vivid in my memory so it felt easy to fill the gaps between the bullet-points, and afterwards I thought of it as straightforward reportage, in the sense promoted by John Hersey, who argued that 'there is



one sacred rule of journalism. The writer must not invent. The legend on the license must read: NONE OF THIS WAS MADE UP' (Fisher Fishkin, 1988: 209).

I had stayed true to Hersey's 'legend on the license' (discussed on p. 17) with 'First Day'. Like any writer, I selected some details and omitted others (choosing incidents that best succeeded in illustrating my shock and discomfort). But all the included events are depicted accurately... with the exception of the dialogue, most of which I re-constructed from memory. Without dialogue, the piece felt flat, and therefore I rejected brief attempts to use reported speech. The inclusion of reconstructed speech raises issues that Ted Conover has discussed. Interviewed by Robert Boynton, Conover says he uses plenty of what he calls 'recreated dialogue' (Conover, 2005: 28) in *Newjack*, an account of the year he spent as a prison-guard in Sing Sing Jail. Conover describes this as presenting one of the 'biggest, most persistent problems of "creative nonfiction"'. Everything in my book is true. And yet dialogue is so difficult to record verbatim that it is a big gray area' (28).

I was attracted to Conover's philosophy on the art of reportage, and shared his ambivalence about the re-creation of dialogue. It had been impossible for me to record, and now recollect, every single word spoken in jail, and therefore I faced a choice between either avoiding dialogue (as I had avoided naming specific individuals) or of re-creating the voices. I opted for the latter, aware I was entering Conover's 'big gray area', but hopeful I could stay true to the spirit of the voices, even if the words were estimations. Nevertheless, I proceeded with caution, rather like the narrator of Binet's novel, *HHhH*. His desire to accurately reconstruct the assassination of the SS chief, Reinhard Heydrich, contains a suspicion of 'hypotyposis, which means making a scene so lifelike that it gives the reader the impression he can see it with his own eyes' (2013: no page, section 15). Despite this suspicion, Binet's narrator reluctantly concedes that 'If my dialogues can't be based on precise, faithful, word-perfect sources, they will be invented' (15).

I pressed on in similar fashion, curious about the scenes I was constructing. A scene is defined by John Gardner as ‘an unbroken flow of action from one incident in time to another’ (1991: 59), and these units of action, taking place in specific times and locations, seemed to require not only situations and settings, but action and dialogue. The scene-based nature of the writing intrigued me, since journalism usually gets by on summaries rather than scenes – whereas fiction hardly ever can. So what was I writing? Journalism or fiction? I’d included nothing that was made up (except the recreated dialogue). Hence, the piece felt like reportage. But the journalism was bundled up inside a structure that resembled fiction.

It’s usually a waste of time for a writer to worry about genre, especially early in the writing. The priority, I think, is to write something good, and finish it, and worry later about its packaging. Yet what happens when Hersey’s ‘legend on the license’ is at stake? What are the ethics there? Does the writer owe an obligation to the reader?

Conover’s thoughts on the matter of genre proved helpful. Rejecting labels such as ‘literary journalism’ (for their pretension), Conover describes his work as ‘nonfiction narratives’ (Conover, 2005: 7) – because ‘storytelling is the backbone of my work’ (7). He says he favours ‘the literal truth of nonfiction as opposed to the philosophical truth of fiction’ (28). In the opening of *Newjack*, he describes the book as being:

a work of nonfiction, describing events that I witnessed and participated in. No scenes are imagined or made up, though some dialogue was, of necessity, re-created (Conover, 2011: 1)

Although I was intrigued by the complexities buried in that casual phrase, ‘of necessity’, I felt that Conover’s thoughts fell broadly in line with my own, describing the way I wanted to work. Like Conover, I felt best suited to storytelling. Hence, ‘First Day’ is my first attempt at ‘nonfiction narrative’, a genre that Boynton positions as being part of the wave of ‘reportorial’ writing (Boynton, 2005: xii) that evolved from the New Journalism of the 1960s.

For Boynton, writers like Conover are part of a loose, like-minded group that he calls The New New Journalists – not ‘a school of thought, or rule-defined movement’ (2005: xxxvii), but a set of practitioners who use immersive strategies to become part of the lives of the people they are studying and investigating (xiii), sometimes over a period of years. Conover’s immersive strategies have included spending months not only with prison-guards, but railway-hobos (*Rolling Nowhere*, 1984) and illegal Mexican immigrants (*Coyotes*, 1987). Whichever sub-culture he has explored, Conover has approached it with the mind-set of the anthropologists he studied in college. He says anthropology ‘dovetails with journalism... [With a] ... willingness to get your hands a little dirty, you will be able to get stories that nobody else gets’ (Conover, 2005: 7).

Boynton contrasts the approach of later writers like Conover with the rule-bending attitudes and habits of the New Journalists. The days, he says, ‘in which nonfiction writers test the limits of language and form have largely passed’ (Boynton: xii). Whereas Wolfe’s earlier school is described as joyfully distorting reality, Boynton sees their successors as going in ‘the opposite direction, drilling down into the bedrock of ordinary experience’ (xv).

Yet Conover and his contemporaries owe a debt to the practitioners of New Journalism, who were said by Tom Wolfe to have borrowed four techniques from realist fiction: ‘scene by scene construction’ (1980: 46); ‘record[ing] the dialogue in full’ (46); ‘the so-called third point of view’ (46), and ‘the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles’ (47) to build the social world common in realist fiction.

Conover sees his work as drawing upon conventions ‘required for good fiction: character, conflict, change through time. And if you’re really blessed, you get resolution. But life doesn’t usually work out that way’ (Conover, 2005: 11). Three of the elements from which he builds his narratives are present in Tom Wolfe’s list (above): scene, dialogue, and description. There is also an attempt to build a social world, albeit one that is ‘a marginal or

strange sub-culture' (7), as in most of Conover's work. However, Wolfe's list can't be applied in its entirety, for *Newjack* contains no experiments with point of view, remaining locked within Conover's external, third-person perspective. As such, it feels far closer to traditional reportage than to the rule-bending New Journalism celebrated by Wolfe.

Boynton concedes that the free-play with convention of Wolfe's 'truly avant-garde movement' (2005: xii) succeeded in:

expanding journalism's rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the centre of the story, channelling a character's thoughts, using non-standard punctuation, and exploding traditional narrative forms' (xii).

These innovations were praised by Norman Mailer as creating nervy fusions of fact and fiction that were 'ideal for a 20<sup>th</sup> Century mood' (Fisher Fishkin, 1988: 2009) – and celebrated by Wolfe for creating a situation where 'the basic report unit is no longer the datum, the piece of information, but the scene' (Wolfe, 1980: 66). This, Wolfe said, had the capacity to 'create within the mind of the reader an entire world that resonates with the reader's own emotions' (64). Positioning practitioners as outsiders and rebels, Wolfe argued that they were 'ignoring literary class lines that have been almost a century in the making' (40). He defended practitioners from accusations that their experiments were impressionistic and lacking in depth. On the contrary, he claimed New Journalism 'depended upon a depth of information that had never been demanded in the newspaper world' (35).

Many of these defences were challenged by writers working in similar fields. For instance, John Hersey wrote both fiction and reportage, but he was opposed to journalistic experiments that steered the writer away from what W. Dale Nelson called 'the undoctored incident' (2007: xv) of conventional reportage. Hersey acknowledged that his own journalism was influenced in some ways by fiction. For instance, he borrowed the structure of *Hiroshima* from Thornton Wilder's novel, *The Bridge of St Luis Rey*, which (like Hersey's famous

reportage on the dropping of the atom bomb) focuses on several characters ‘whose paths crossed each other and came to this moment of shared disaster’ (Hersey, 1988: 115).

Borrowing a fictional structure was one thing. But Hersey took exception when the New Journalists *invented* detail, either by imagining viewpoints they’d never inhabited, or by devising dialogue for events they couldn’t have witnessed. He is quoted by Fisher Fishkin as saying: ‘The reader assumes the subtraction as a given of journalism and instinctively hunts for bias; the moment the reader suspects additions, the earth begins to skid underfoot’ (1988: 209). Hersey conceded that ‘by selecting 999 out of 1,000 so-called facts, you are bringing your own bias to bear’ (Hersey, 1988:130). However, for him, these acts of subtraction differed from the additions and inventions that ‘tempted some writers to cross the line’ (132).

In some ways, what I’m discussing here are the labels used to identify and market a text. For instance, John Cheever’s *Falconer* was written and marketed as a novel. Its depictions of prison life draw upon four main sources: (a) Cheever’s work as a prison teacher; (b) Cheever’s discussions with inmates; (c) Cheever’s experiences in rehab; (d) Cheever’s imagination. His dramatization of prison-life gains solidity and credibility from the first three sources, but he can draw upon the fourth because we’ve read the ‘legend on the license’: it’s a novel, and the protagonist is a creation of Cheever’s own mind. As such, the writer cuts and pastes from his own experiences in the confinement of rehab, so that his reflections become part of the experience of a fictional character in prison:

I stand at the window, watching people on the street. I am confined. They are free to come and go, but they move so casually through this freedom that it seems wasted. (Cheever, 1991: 299)

They were free, free to run, jump, fuck, drink, buy a seat in the Tokyo plane... and yet they moved so casually through this precious element that it seemed wasted on them. (Cheever, 1977: 29)

The first of the quotations is from Cheever’s journal, written when he was trying to kick booze in rehab. The second is free indirect discourse from the perspective of the brother-killing convict Farragut in *Falconer*, the novel Cheever was working on when he entered

rehab. Since we understand that *Falconer* is a novel, we allow Cheever the freedom to fuse fact with fiction. Similarly, Malcolm Braly's book, *On the Yard* (1968), one of the best prison books I've read, is rooted in his own years as a convict, yet the label of 'novel' allows him to cross Hersey's line. We learn in Braly's memoir, *False Starts* (1976), that the writer harboured fantasies of becoming invisible and walking through walls in San Quentin. However, in the novel, these fantasies are given to a wild-eyed young fantasist named Stick.

The line that Hersey argued should exist between fiction and journalism was perhaps most famously crossed by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a product of the lengthy immersion praised by Wolfe, involving 'prodigious research, spread over five years' (Tynan, 1966: 130). I want to discuss the book here because I used it as a test case for my own philosophy on 'nonfiction narratives'. By studying the places where Capote crossed Hersey's line, I hoped to work out how I felt about abuses to the 'legend on the license'.

*In Cold Blood* is an account of the notorious spree-killings committed by two drifters, who were later executed for their crimes. Capote described the book as a 'nonfiction novel', which Tynan understands as meaning 'a documentary tale handled with the psychological insight of a novelist' (Tynan, 1966: 131). For Tynan, the book's use of fictional techniques was a problem. He wondered how it was possible to 'verify events and statements that only the hanged men could corroborate' (130).

Hersey wrote both fiction and journalism (and seems to have believed that fiction offered the possibility to say 'more about events' [Sanders, 1991: 108] than his journalistic dispatches did). In Hersey's view, Capote was mistaken in believing that 'something can be both a novel and journalism at the same time' (Fisher Fishkin, 1988: 208). The assumption, he suggested, made the work untrustworthy.

Although masked as reportage, *In Cold Blood* utilises structural devices familiar from fiction and cinema, including cross-cutting between places and events, and flashbacks that

rearrange chronology. By allowing Capote to carefully delay and divulge narrative information, these devices skilfully build tension.

Of course, journalists often employ fictional techniques to structure their work, as Hersey concedes. But *In Cold Blood* courts controversy by employing free indirect style to access, first, the thoughts of the murderous Perry (Capote, 1981: 12) and, then, private thoughts and dialogue (28) that Capote, himself, could never have witnessed first-hand. Elsewhere, we find precise descriptions of private body language in inter-actions between the police (234), and two dream sequences (149, 190). These dreams may well have been related verbatim to Capote, but the first is interesting for its decidedly intricate handling.

The dream is pressured up in the mind of the detective, Dewey, who has ‘put his faith in facts – sweated for and sworn to’ (100). Capote’s skill in entering the detective’s consciousness before the recounting of the dream is maybe a result of his empathy for the detective’s conscientious efforts, so reminiscent of Capote’s own exhaustive investigative methods. The shift in narrative perspective puts readers inside Dewey’s head when he notices, outside the house of the murdered victims, a scarecrow wearing ‘a dress of weather-faded flowered calico’ (149). The vivid detail of the scarecrow is then used as a classic expositional trigger to remind Dewey of clothes worn by the murdered girl, Bonnie Clutter.

Having entered the detective’s mind, and then used a prop to introduce Bonnie, Capote has now created a bridge for the dream-sequence that follows: ‘Somehow’ (149), he says, the detective’s sudden memory of Bonnie has put him in mind of a dream his wife Marie described to him. That word ‘somehow’ is a slippery touch, allowing the scene to flow from the observer to the prop, and then to a memory of the murdered girl, and finally into the recalling of dream that was not Dewey’s, but another off-stage character’s.

Cunningly and intricately, through point-of-view techniques that are literary in design, Capote has allowed the ghost of the murdered girl to return, and to haunt Dewey (and the

reader) with her dreadful lament: ‘To be murdered. To be murdered. No. No. There’s nothing worse. Nothing worse than that. Nothing’ (150). For me, it is the book’s best moment, creating the pity and fear that Aristotle thought it was tragedy’s role to purge. Whether it is factual or not, is another matter! According to Tynan, Capote neither took notes nor used a tape recorder, but said that he ‘had sedulously trained’ his memory until ‘it could retain 95% (or 92% or 97%; his interviewers differ) of total recall’ (Tynan, 1966: 130).

Suspicious precision? Should that worry us? The literary critic Alfred Kazin didn’t think so. In his defence of *In Cold Blood*, he said that Capote had:

...wanted ultimately not the specificity of fiction, which must be content to be itself alone, but to make an emblematic human situation for our time that would relieve it of mere factuality (Kazin, quoted in Galloway, 1995: 146).

‘Mere factuality’. Now there was a phrase for an ex-journalist to ponder. If the prose I was producing was part of the genre that Conover called ‘nonfiction narrative’, then was it okay if the needs of the narrative out-weighed those of the nonfiction?

No. It felt wrong for the facts to become less important than any self-declared emblem, or for literary experiments to undermine a reader’s sense of what was invented and what was real. In saying this, I don’t wish to take a moral line on *all* writing that crosses Hersey’s line. The truth is that, in Capote’s work, I’d been moved to fear and pity by his manipulations. However, these vivid, slippery shifts of perspective would simply have felt wrong in my own prison-prose.

I had steered clear of experiments with point of view and language in ‘First Day’, and had taken a minimalist approach to description. The aim was to record what had happened, as accurately as I was able. To that extent, I had more sympathy with the aims of Conover than with those of Wolfe. I simply couldn’t imagine myself breaching the ‘legend on the license’ by inhabiting another consciousness or by writing as if I’d witnessed things that I never did.



Having said that, it interested me to see that ‘First Day’ *did* unconsciously absorb traces of New Journalism. For instance, the scene-based structure contains re-created dialogue. And the narrator is at the centre of the frame (although he has little idea what’s going on, so the centre is pretty vacant).

Whether I was right to obey Hersey’s line in other matters, I’m still not sure. With greater imagination, or ability, or courage, maybe I’d have found some way to enter other viewpoints, or experimented with imaginary prisons (as Stanley Elkin does in his remarkable prison-novel ‘A Bad Man’ [2003] in which a convict is housed in an institution that couldn’t possibly exist, and often talks to the homunculus that shares his body). As it is, I found myself working from a more conventional position. In my ‘nonfiction narrative’, I stuck to third-person descriptions of things I had witnessed. If this limited the imaginative sweep, I decided to settle with that. As for my own presence in the story, this seemed an honest method, if I kept it to a minimum. And I decided the re-created dialogue was a necessary evil, as Conover suggested. But the biggest vestige of New Journalism is the scene-based approach mentioned earlier. Each of the prose-pieces is rooted in scene, and dependent upon realist imagery, drawn from the jail. As Conover put it: ‘I pay a lot of attention to place’ (2005: 16).

If my ‘nonfiction narrative’ is lacking in what Wolfe called ‘datum’, there are two main reasons. First, I wrote from the perspective of a confused newcomer. Second, I constructed the pieces around specific moments. Hence, the structure tends more towards fiction than journalism, because its scenes are pinned to moments when something significant happens (or fails to happen in a way that is significant). Writing here about ‘scene’, I remind myself of the word’s history. Etymologically, ‘scene’ is descended from a Greek word for ‘tent’, or a cover (or stage) to shelter travellers (Hoad, 1986: 421). As an image, this reminds us that the story has a journey to complete, but that each of the journey’s stages needs a shelter, so that characters have a concrete setting to act out their fears and desires.

The following chapter explores the next scene in my own journey. It analyses the work of Tony Parker, an oral historian often active in prisons. As well as giving me insight into the prison, Parker's work inspired me to put my journalistic training to use. The result was a series of interviews with prisoners that I later worked up into autobiographical sketches, written in the first-person, from the points of view of the inmates. I conducted these interviews mainly as a means of busying myself, and because it felt good to utilise professional skills in an environment that often left me clueless and ill-equipped. However, the activity was to have one unexpected benefit. In inhabiting the prisoners' viewpoints, I glimpsed what becomes possible when one writes from a new perspective. This discovery had no effect on my prose, which I continued to treat as 'nonfiction narrative', but it opened a path for the later development of a different kind of poetry, one less constrained by Hersey's 'legend on the license'. I analyse the first fruits of this breakthrough in Chapter Seven.

For the moment, however, I wish to stay with the writers whose 'auras' influenced me. Hence, Tony Parker's work forms the focus of the chapter that follows.

## Chapter Four

### ‘Life after Life’: The Influence of Tony Parker

In the previous chapter, I discussed the first poetry and prose I completed in response to prison. The danger in discussing the evolution of those three pieces is that it misleadingly suggests I was immediately prolific. To reiterate: I wrote nothing during the first half of my residency. Thereafter I kept a journal of fragmented jottings, and worked on several first drafts. The only three pieces I completed were those discussed in Chapter Three.

Now, in this chapter, I want to focus on a development during my residency that was to feed my writing. The development took the form of detailed interviews with prisoners, which I later transcribed and edited, and then either published in the prison magazine or gave to the men as gifts, depending on what they preferred. One transcript is included later in the chapter to illustrate my successes and difficulties. The process of interviewing inmates and then working their words into prose allowed me to draw upon my journalistic training, and created a valuable structure for my daily work – and this opened a path that later helped me to write dramatic monologues, as I will explain.

The chapter’s primary focus is on the work of Tony Parker (1923-96), since his tape-recorded interviews with inmates proved a strong influence, not only for his output, but for his working methods.

After analysing the decisions that were necessary when developing the transcripts, I utilise research into ‘life narratives’ by Maruna (2001) and McAdams (1993). Their work with prison-inmates and hospital-patients has resulted in a fascinating body of research, whose concern with ‘meaning, unity, and purpose’ (McAdams, 1993: 6) is deeply connected to storytelling and its role in rehabilitation. The chapter contains three poems from *The Privilege of Rain*, included because of connections with Tony Parker’s work.

Parker described himself as an ‘oral historian’ (Parker, 1999: 241), whose work ‘can perhaps be summarised as being about social exclusion’ (Soothill, 1999: ix). He published 22 books, ‘roughly half... based on interviews with criminals and others connected with the criminal justice system’ (Soothill: ix): including ‘sex offenders, con-men, the inmates of Grendel psychiatric prison; all are caught in the sweep of his ever sharply focussed observation’ (Morris, 1999: 9). He was capable of encouraging people ‘in a remarkable way to tell the story of their lives’ (Soothill, 1999: 13):

For all his astonishing skill in gathering... data, no-one would call him an academic... Tony was altogether too passionate, too sensitive to injustice and hypocrisy ever to compromise with them; too much aware of pain, of sorrow, of loneliness, of humiliation, of cruelty and of injustice, ever to be able to stand wholly apart from the subjects of his inquiry (Morris, 1999: 9).

Before I even entered the jail, Parker’s work had already proved valuable. For example, Parker explains that a life-sentence ‘remains in force until the day the person given it dies, and it can never be cancelled or revoked’ (Parker, 1994: xi):

“For life” means for life. A lifer may however at some stage be allowed out of prison on licence, to continue serving the sentence... under the supervision of a probation officer, on strict conditions (xi).

Perhaps we learn to see for ourselves by first looking out through the eyes of our guides. If so, Parker played a part in directing my vision beyond the prejudices that make a jail hard to see. As well as providing valuable facts, his work freed me from monolithic notions of the lifer. For example, one interviewee describes jail’s ‘biggest single impression’ (1994: 145) coming from the nun who sent him a copy of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Four Quartets’:

When I first tried to read it, I couldn’t make head nor tail of it; and I couldn’t the second or even the twenty-second time either. But then suddenly one day it was like somebody’d switched a blinding light on... (Parker, 1994: 146).

I was heartened by this. It gave me a sense of how long-term incarceration can create possibilities for peaceful change. I realised how much I stood to learn simply by listening to the jail, as Parker had done.

In *The People of the Streets*, a series of interviews with people ‘who live irregularly organized and wandering lives’ (Parker, 1968: 11), Parker said his aim was not to investigate poverty but to explore ‘the variety and richness of human experience’ (11), and he sets out a credo that holds for *all* his work, not only the substantial part of it that investigates prison:

If someone will listen, people will talk: at first about what they consider to be the ordinariness and uneventfulness of their lives, and then gradually about themselves, about their thoughts and beliefs and dreams, demonstrating how extraordinary the ordinary are (12).

The fruits of this philosophy are evident throughout Parker’s work, providing rich, fascinating glimpses into the complexity and strangeness of the people and things we often take for granted, or stereotype. I’m thinking here of moments like the one in *In No Man’s Land*, where an unmarried mother living in conditions of chaos and squalor suddenly reveals that she has ‘a degree in musical composition’ (Parker, 1972: 45) and once wrote music for ‘string trios, quartets... stuff like that’ (45), before chillingly revealing to Parker that something compels her to read ‘newspaper reports about people who kill children’ (62).

Part of the fascination comes from Parker’s ability to draw confessions, so that the reader is gifted a dangerous intimacy. There’s a powerful example in *In No Man’s Land* when ‘Ann Kent’ reveals for the first time that she was the instigator of the childhood thefts that she has blamed on others. There are also several confessions in *The Twisting Lane*, whose interviews with eight sex offenders would probably struggle to find a publisher today, in a climate where a former prison-guard feels able to describe the child killer Ian Huntley as ‘this murdering nonce cunt [who]...lives the life of Riley’ (Thomson, 2008: 70).

In *The Twisting Lane*, ‘Russell George’, takes 16 pages to describe ‘what you might call the biography of me I suppose – or at least the outward details’ (Parker, 1969: 21). And

then finally, he reveals: ‘But all the time... there’s been this other life’ (21) – and then it begins, the 14 pages that describe ‘six convictions altogether, for indecent assaults on little girls’ (21). Such confessions have a grim fascination. But Parker’s work is more interesting for its patterns of absence and evasion, and these were to prove particularly beneficial when I came to reflect upon the narrative ‘holes’ I had experienced in jail.

Generally, I was attracted by Parker’s lack of theorising about motive, and by his unwillingness to judge. His work is understood as being oral history, or journalism, or sociology (or maybe even anthropology). But it is also a close cousin to that strain of contemporary fiction which is mistrustful of omniscience. Parker’s adherence to the principle of showing rather than telling leaves a space for the reader. In that sense, he uses literary techniques identified by the critic James Wood (2009):

We know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us through reliable manipulation, to that narrator’s unreliability. A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator (Wood, 2009: 7).

As Wood suggests, ‘even the apparently unreliable narrator is more often than not reliably unreliable’ (7). And this ‘reliable unreliability’ becomes apparent in a series of interviews entitled ‘Pretty well the whole story’, where a lifer identified in *The Twisting Lane* as ‘Edgar Johnson’ – described in Parker’s brief, italicised scene-setter as an ‘*elderly white-haired man, long legged and tall*’ (Parker, 1994: 21) – proves elusive about why he still ‘under active supervision’ (35) almost 15 years after release.

We get no confession here, just a pattern of ‘reliable unreliability’ in which ‘Johnson’ eventually admits ‘it is unusual for someone still to be seeing his probation officer as long after release’ (35-6). He says it’s because of ‘little scrapes or bits of bother’ (36), both involving young women. One involved a broken bottle that ‘just grazed’ (36) the face of ‘a black man’ (36) who was threatening ‘this young woman I knew’ (36), the other ‘an air pistol

sort of thing' (37). The interviews are peppered with mysterious references to 'unhappy times with women' (24), including 'the accident' (30) that killed his second wife:

I sort of put my arm up like that, you see, to protect myself; and I can't quite exactly remember how whether I did give her a little push backwards or not. And this van, you see, it didn't have doors that opened outwards... [and]... at the very moment I gave her the little push, the door had flown open and she went backwards out of it. Out of the van, over the edge of the road, and all the way down the cliff into a wood at the bottom of it (30).

Throughout, 'Johnson' uses diminutives, qualifications, and memory-lapses to distance himself from these 'tiffs' (33). Although he was married for eight years, he claims never to 'have actually met' (34) his wife's offspring, 'but I believe she had, I think it was, two grown-up children, who... lived up north, Manchester, or somewhere that way' (34). He can't say where or when he was born, or 'how many brothers and sisters I had' (22). But his memory of the legal verdict on his crime is clear: '... and before he sentenced me the Judge said 'The jury have seen through your cunning' (32). Here, he demonstrates a habit of mixing candour with his revisions and evasions, a trait that preserves a measure of human complexity – and, in one of three italicised sections, Parker describes the lifer's frequent '*long silences as he frowned and tried to order his thoughts*' (21), suggesting that he has some sympathy for the ageing man. However, the third italicised section betrays Parker's impatient disbelief that he has been told 'pretty well the whole story' (35). Rather than accepting the evasion, Parker interviews the man again. In asking for clarification, Parker employs a straightforward fact-gathering method that I recognised from journalism. But elsewhere he uses less direct means to encourage our suspicion, including the 'cunning' ones identified by John Banville:

... he is a very cunning writer. By means of arrangement and pattern, rhythm and tone, even of punctuation, he achieves an extraordinary narrative tension. He knows exactly how to place things, so the reader is carried along one from sly revelation to the next (Banville, 1990).

Parker said: 'I will not put words into their mouths or have them saying things they didn't say' (Parker, 1999: 242). His methodology is described as involving the 'meticulously

laid... groundwork' (Smith, L. 1999: 246) of research, followed by use of his skills as an 'excellent listener' (247) in interviews that took '15 hours, spread over several weeks' (249).

According to Roger Graef, interviewed by Alan Dein for *The Great Listener*, a 2012 BBC Radio 4 documentary, the interviews usually started with Parker fumbling to work the tape recorder, as a means of defusing tension. However, one of Parker's interviewees says could be a 'bully' in pursuing his agenda (Dein, 2012), and accuses Parker of having a 'split-personality' (Dein, 2012) in the sense that his relaxed social behaviour was so different from his determined demeanour while conducting interviews. During interviews, Parker would 'relish moments when people fell absolutely still' (Smith, L. 1999: 247), and these silences 'would come back to him as he later listened to the tapes, and... nourish the books along with the words' (248). For Graef, these silences were the 'eloquent' (Dein, 2012) means by which he achieved his 'celebration of the ordinary' (Dein, 2012).

Then came 'the really hard work' (Smith, L. 1999: 249) of transcribing the tapes, a process involving 'numerous journeys through the original interview' (249). According to Parker's son, Tim, Parker hand-wrote the transcript, then passed it to his wife for typing before carrying out laborious editing (Dein, 2012). In the words of Lyn Smith: 'he'd edit things out, and change the order but he was always concerned to keep the original integrity of the voice, never overshaping or inventing things' (1999: 249):

One of Parker's most cherished skills was that of editing: of selecting and shaping his oral material into something readable... it was the *written* result that was his goal. It was a pattern, a structure, not a storyline he was after. (Smith, L. 1999: 250).

In *The People of the Streets*, Parker says that 'anything repetitive or superfluous has been left out, but nothing that was not said has been put in' (Parker, 1968: 12). Elsewhere, he describes his published interviews with lighthouse-keepers and their families as 'composites of conversations with different people, transcribed from tape recordings' (Parker, 1976: 288). Here again, he emphasises that 'this is what was said' (288) while making it clear that the



original interviews have been re-worked for the published book. Elsewhere, a common line of defence is: ‘This happened, and it happened like this; the reconstruction is factually correct and only some of the dialogue is imagined’ (Parker, 1963: 21). On occasions, Parker’s re-workings appear to have incorporated material that he gained from journals which he encouraged his interviewees to write, as one remarks here:

You said to write down whatever I want and whenever I feel like it... I’m not even sure what sort of thing you want me to put in this. Since you’ve not given any kind of indication at all, I think I’ll just start off with a straightforward description of myself, at least as I see me, that is (Parker, 1972: 109).

In one of Parker’s most interesting literary experiments, he moves away from his preferred journalistic vehicles (objective reportage and interviews) to enter the consciousness of the ‘helpless recidivist’ (Parker, 1963: 13) who forms the focus of his book, *The Unknown Citizen*. As well as entering his head directly through straight first-person narration, Parker uses free indirect style to construct a monologue in the third-person (anticipating the later work of James Kelman). Here, the style comes close to stream-of-consciousness, suiting a character whom Parker describes as ‘exasperating in his irresponsibility, erratic in his behaviour’ (13). However, questions arise when we start to unpick the artful third-person narration. Could such a chaotic character possibly have remembered all the very precise times that Parker uses to structure the work? And what about the mass of dialogue that occurs throughout? Is this fiction or journalism? Or both? Having recently left journalism, these questions felt important. I saw good sense in Fisher Fishkin’s assertion, during a discussion of Mark Twain’s work, that ‘the tools of fiction may be fruitfully employed in the service of fact’ (1988: 69). However, I was mindful of her distinction between subtraction of the facts, and additions to them, as John Hersey likewise maintained, i.e. it’s OK for a journalist to take real things *out*, but not to put false things *in*. In Parker’s case, these questions are complicated by genre, for it’s difficult to categorise his books, which share ground with journalism, fiction, biography, oral history, sociology, and anthropology.

Perhaps even poetry. The English word for ‘poem’ comes from Greek, and is related to ‘making’ – but the Germanic term ‘dichtung’ finds the essence of poetry in economy and compression, and Graef identifies these very qualities of distillation in Parker’s work, describing his work as a ‘poet’s task’ (Dein, 2012):

The compilation of the verbatim account is... distilled by a brilliant, empathetic mind without judgment, so that what he’s trying to do is get the essence of what people are saying while using their words to do it... it’s very much a poet’s task in its own way (Dein, 2012).

Editing, preservation, distillation, and pattern-making: it makes for an interesting brew. And perhaps it isn’t, therefore, surprising that Parker’s subjects should have expressed interest in his methods. For instance, a night-watchman with an inferiority complex says, ‘There are many things in my head that I’d like to ask you... Such things as how a writer man works, how he puts it all together’ (Parker, 1968: 256). It’s an intelligent question, and brings us back to Parker’s struggle to get his ‘pattern’ (Smith, L. 1999: 250), a process satirised by the lighthouse-keeper, who delivers a funny monologue to his fellow-interviewees in *Lighthouse*:

We have now had arrived here in our humble abode a man who says he’s going to try to write a book what will contain our recorded words. He will then muck about with them, alter them, turn them round and twist their meaning into the exact opposite of what we’ve said, and eventually issue the whole lot in print and make himself a fortune out of it (Parker, 1976: 238)

The man’s playful monologue contains suspicions that continue to hover above Parker’s methods, not least his habit of systematically wiping interview-tapes after he’d finished – a habit criticised by those who worried that the material could be construed as fiction if no original survived (Smith, L. 1999: 253). Parker dismissed this criticism, maintaining that the destruction was consistent with his desire to preserve confidentiality:

I never use a person’s real name or give a clearly identifiable description of them. Similarly all locations mentioned are changed – for example, Birmingham to Leeds, and so on. Some people say they don’t mind being identified; and if they wish to identify themselves in a published book, that is their prerogative (Parker, 1999: 241).

Smith says that ‘any description would be altered to avoid identification’ (Smith, L. 1999: 245) – an intriguing revelation, given Parker’s habit of opening pieces with economical visual descriptions of his subjects, e.g. in his interview with ‘Edgar Johnson’, we meet:

*an elderly white-haired man, long legged and tall, he sat in the old armchair of his council flat sitting-room, his bedroom-slippered feet stretched out towards the small coal fire... From time to time he rolled up a needle-thin cigarette... Gold-rimmed spectacles, pale blue eyes, his voice soft and quiet* (Parker, 1994: 21).

If ‘any description would be altered’ (1999: 245), as Smith says, then how are we to understand this description of ‘Johnson’? As oral history, or fiction, or both? Smith’s emphasis on Parker’s search for a ‘*written*’ (Smith, L. 1999: 240) result takes on resonance in this light, particularly when we set it alongside Banville’s view of Parker’s ‘cunning’. An example of this ‘arrangement’ (or ‘pattern’) occurs in the second italicised section, which follows the ‘little push’ (Parker, 1994: 36) that led to the death of ‘Johnson’’s second wife. Here, Parker uses italics to describe the ‘*small middle-aged woman in bright green trousers*’ (31) who ‘*appeared unexpectedly*’ (31), ‘*swaying slightly unsteadily*’ (31), and is dismissed by the interviewee as ‘*just a neighbour who comes in sometimes, she’ll not disturb us*’ (31). That throwaway phrase becomes loaded when incorporated into the man’s pattern of diminution and distance. What exactly is she threatening to disturb? The interview? Or the man’s story? As ever, Parker lets the reader decide – although the event’s positioning gives us a nudge. After all, Parker could have included the woman’s appearance elsewhere, or excluded it. But by positioning it after oblique references to the ‘scrapes or bits of bother’ involving women (36), he suggests that the pattern of the man’s life has remained consistent. This ‘cunning’ allows space for the reader’s imagination to draw uneasy conclusions.

Parker’s skill with ‘arrangement and pattern, rhythm and tone, even... punctuation’ (Banville, 1990) is effectively deployed at the point where ‘Johnson’ describes the most recent incident that has kept him under scrutiny:

Then the second event was very very unfortunate indeed, that was all that was. This would be just about four years afterwards exactly or perhaps a little more, I don't remember now. Another young woman I started having an association with, it was nothing serious and it hadn't been going on very long, but one night she and I had a row about something trivial or other, and she ran out of the flat where I was living. I'd no idea where she was going, I thought it might be perhaps to her sister who lived further down somewhere. But to my amazement the next thing I knew the police were banging at the door (37).

The speaker qualifies his regret by diminishing the event's importance – 'that was all that was'. He then proves inconsistent on dates, telling Parker it was 'about four years afterwards exactly or perhaps a little more, I don't remember now' – a phrase of just 14 words that manages to incorporate four modifications – 'about', 'exactly', 'perhaps a little more' and 'I don't remember'. These techniques create an 'extraordinary narrative tension', as Banville suggests. We want to believe in an old man's frailty, yet the pattern of ellipses and revisions suggests we are not being given 'the end of everything there is to tell' (35), a suspicion fuelled by Parker's arrangement. If we want the truth, it's buried in the syntax, Parker suggests. Here, I'm reminded of a scene in Jonathan Franzen's memoir, *The Discomfort Zone: a Personal History*, in which a tutor outlines three 'universes of interpretation' (Franzen, 2006: 140) to understand the character of Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial*:

one universe in which K is an innocent man falsely accused, another universe in which the degree of K's guilt is undecidable... [and]... the third universe of interpretation, in which Joseph K is *guilty* (Franzen, 2006: 140).

Parker points us towards the 'third universe', but he never makes an explicit statement on the matter, leaving it to the reader to 'go back and look at what's on the page' (140), as Franzen's teacher advises. When Franzen does as instructed with *The Trial*, he's astonished to find a 'creepy, arrogant, selfish, abusive shmuck who, because he refuses to examine his life, is having it forcibly examined for him' (143).

Made vigilant by Parker's work, and keen to see what was written on men's faces, I watched and listened carefully whenever inmates described their crimes and plans. When one

man told me 'he was going out with the rubbish', his fatalistic expression seemed designed to challenge me. Was he planning escape in the bin-wagon, or offering an oblique reference to his fate? Much later, I wrote a poem in which I tried to capture the phrase's ambiguity. I wasn't thinking consciously of Parker, but I believe his influence was there:

**I am going out with the rubbish**

He'd stared out of the window  
of his cell so long, he sometimes thought  
the yard was his, half-expected his kids  
to toddle over the sterile zone.

He wasn't cracked, though. Not yet.  
So the shiny posters had turned yellow  
and his paperbacks were fat with damp?  
So what? He'd no time for birds  
or books; he'd to keep watch.  
Times in, times out. Think of the prison  
as a body and the gate its mouth.  
Everything needs to eat, pal.

He tapped a fist off his watch and pointed  
into the yard. The bin wagon left  
and the gate shut, and he said:  
I'm going out with the rubbish. (Swann, D. 2010: 72)

Parker's work reminded me to concentrate not only on the words, but on the patterns hidden within cadences and syntax, and to watch for elliptical, fragmentary, and evasive turns-of-phrase, as well as silences 'often more informative than what was said' (Smith, L. 1999: 247). Sensitised in this way, I wrote a poem called 'Denial', which turned syntax into subject matter:

**Denial**

Her murderer says he was gone when he.  
When she. When the incident happened.  
And he stares into the yard,  
into the cherry blossom,

lately skewered with a camera pole.  
Gone, too, while he does this,  
while I stare after him into the boughs,  
trying to imagine the moment

he's fled. "Eyes everywhere,"  
he says, far off. "Even in that poor tree."

Now, years on, I recall the look  
that took him when the words failed.

Injustice wherever he looked,  
a blameless man in jail.  
He had been miles away when he.  
When she. When the incident happened. (Swann, D. 2010: 70)

‘Denial’ started as rudimentary jottings of words spoken by a lifer who spent hours staring at the prison’s tree. Later, I fused this man’s mutterings with the syntactical evasions of another, very evasive lifer, who seemed permanently on the brink of some confession, until backing off. When he described a death as an ‘incident that happened’, I felt that his passive phrasing was intended to distance him from murder. The fusion of the two inmates seemed to be demanded by the poem, which hankered after the physicality granted by trees and cameras. Otherwise, the poem would have lacked a material grounding, and the voice would have floated away. To that extent, I was learning not only about the fictionalisation made possible by poetry, but about the need to balance verbal utterances with concrete detail, so that the work operated through a wider range of senses.

By fictionalising the season, and allowing the tree to blossom, I saw possibilities to counterpoint the man’s verbal block against the natural flow of a tree in flower, and this helped me to solve a formal problem, so that the poem’s stuttered evasions now book-end a middle-section with qualities of enjambment that give it a looser, less clamped-down feel.

Verbal inconsistencies like those offered by the evasive lifer are summarised by Shadd Maruna, an expert in crime desistance, as containing:

...a chaotic jumble of excuses and justifications mixed in with concessions and admissions of shame... a bewildering mixture of the passive voice, the third-person, and the conditional verb tense (Maruna, 2001: 134)

There’s a fascinating example of split, evasive narration in Parker’s interview with a murderer in *The Violence of our Lives*, where the man describes his crime ‘like it was a movie I’d seen way back’ (Parker, 1995: 175). Using the present-tense and third-person to

describe his own actions, the murderer asks: ‘What’s in his head? I don’t remember’ (175). The man’s account of the murder continues like a screenplay: ‘Cut to deserted workings in an old quarry... The boy’s sitting on a rock somewhere ... kicking his feet. He doesn’t know what he wants to do next... He looks around at nothing, and nothing looks back at him. Fade’ (175). Puzzled by his ability to see the crime from the outside, like a film-script, the prisoner tells Parker ‘it wasn’t real but it was real, so I guess I’m saying it’s both’ (175).

There was a need for suspicion, then. But for trust, too. Because life needs to contain more than suspicion. And I was certain that Parker couldn’t have achieved what he did without remaining ‘fully engaged, attentive and sympathetic, yet at the same time keeping the necessary distance and objectivity’ (Smith, L. 1999: 247). If I had nothing else to offer, I would give my time, and I would do my best to listen in the same spirit Parker had, ‘looking for the essence of each person’ (247) and trying, if I could, ‘to demolish stereotypes’ (247), including those soaked up by my own fearful mind.

Inspired by Parker, I drew on my training by recording interviews with willing subjects who lacked literacy skills, and then wrote up transcripts. Although I never kidded myself that the interviews would create substantial changes, I did hope to promote self-reflection, as part of wider rehabilitative efforts. My hope was that imprisoned men might experience the power of the written word, perhaps for the first time, and find a new path. If listening is a close cousin of reading, I hoped also to filter out the prison’s din and open a two-way communication channel.

The first interview was conducted with a semi-literate lifer who had mistakenly shot a bystander while settling a score. The transcript featured in *Beyond the Wall*, an anthology of inmates’ writing, published soon after leaving the prison. The prose version of the interview now follows. Afterwards, I discuss the challenges in transcribing and structuring the interview, when I came face-to-face with Parker’s methods. The interview alerted me to the

rehabilitative potential contained within the process of helping someone to produce a ‘life narrative’. Hence, part of the discussion that follows is devoted to a consideration of work by McAdams and Maruna, two proponents of that approach.

### **Jamaican Childhood – From the Memories of David Antonio Barratt**

My friends and me used to make money by catching crabs for tourists to eat. These weren’t the crabs you get in England. They were land crabs – fierce, black-shelled creatures, sometimes with vivid red streaks. They scuttled about between rocks on the cliffs and hill sides. You could get up to five shillings for a dozen. Not bad for a 10-year-old – but you earned every penny. The best time to catch land crabs was at night, especially after heavy rain. Then they came out from under the rocks. At these times, the hills were full of boys, hopping bare-footed through the undergrowth, stooping and grabbing. It wasn’t easy because you had a sack on your back and a burning kerosene torch. We kept the torch burning with a rag which you ‘funked’ back and forward so it stayed damp. The flame could be deadly – as we discovered one tragic night. But it must have made a pretty sight down in the valley, where folk would look up to see brilliant points of light dancing in the dark.

You had to be quick to catch a land crab because they moved like lightning. Worse than that, they sometimes grabbed your hand. We called these clinging devils ‘left-handed crabs’. You knew all about it if one of them got their claws into you! The only solution was to shake it loose, but sometimes you’d be so desperate that you’d squash the crab. And that meant one less penny in your pocket.

The animals we feared most, though, were snakes. As far as I’m concerned, all snakes in Jamaica are poisonous. In fact, I’d never heard of a harmless snake until I came to England. You have to imagine us there, bare-footed in the dark, rooting around for crabs, on the alert all the time for that tell-tale sliver of black and yellow. Even worse was when you found a hole where a crab had burrowed into the earth. You knew there was a crab down there, but you wondered what else might be lying in wait, man! Friends of mine swore they’d shoved their hands into crab holes, only to feel something long and slimy. Boy! You knew when someone had had a snake fright. They were the ones who’d learned to fly!

Even if you were running from a snake, you had to keep your wits about you because of the macca in the ground. Macca was a prickly wood which cut the skin in your bare feet. We saved our shoes for special occasions and – when I could be bothered to go – for school. You got macca in your foot, you’d be picking it out for days.



It wasn't hard all the time up in the hills. Sometimes there'd be six of us on the prowl all night for crabs and we'd often sit in a circle, chatting and joking. We were young and had the energy to keep going for hours, but sometimes it got a bit rough the next morning when I dozed off at school.

I remember one particularly bad morning when my teacher came down hard on me because I fell asleep. She was a slim, pretty woman with dark skin, and I must have been driving her mad. I wasn't keen on school at the best of times. Anyway, I was frustrated at being told off. My confidence was low because of my stutter, and I always felt even lower when I was under pressure. Eventually she got so angry that she slapped her ruler against my hand, right where the crabs had been nipping me. I snapped, and jumped on her. I must have been hurting her because everybody came across and pulled me off.

Those land crabs got us into all sorts of scrapes like that. But a couple of shillings meant a night out at the pictures, and we weren't going to miss having fun. Also, you felt free up there in the hills, and you could have good times with your brothers and friends. Sometimes now in England I look up at the skies and think, 'Where are all the stars?' Back then in Jamaica, you'd look up to give your back a rest from all that stooping and bending and there they would be... stars. Thousands and thousands of them, shining in the black skies.

Then, in the morning, you'd come down from the hills and see the sea close by, with all the boats bobbing up and down and the sun shining back off the water.

As we picked our way down the hills, you'd hear occasional yelps. See, those lands crabs didn't altogether like the idea of being crammed in a sack, and they'd make their feelings known with bites on the back. After a shock or two like that, it was a relief to get back down by the roadside, where we could sell our wares. There wasn't a lot of traffic, but we got enough trade from white tourists to make it worthwhile. It taught us lessons, too. Sometimes the tourists would try to knock down the prices, and we'd have to haggle – unless it was Saturday and you needed money for the pictures!

If we caught a lot of crabs over a few days, we'd telegram a Chinaman in Kingston who bought in bulk. Most of the time, though, we made between three and five shillings a dozen selling to casual shoppers. One good lesson we learned: you can always put the price up if there's a shortage!

It was a relief to get down in the open and feel the sun on your face after a night in the hills. A boy could get jumpy up there on his own. There were noises in the bush. We called it iniquity. By that, we meant the squeaks and scrapes which seemed to come out of the trees. Maybe it was the grasshoppers, maybe it was small animals. To this day, I still don't know. But it was there all the time, like a background hum.

Then there were the stories you heard. Jamaica is full of ghosts. The worst was the Rolling Calf, a creature half-man, half-animal. It lived in dark places, prowling the wilderness. Man, we were always on guard for the Rolling Calf. We'd keep close, the six of us, looking around with wide eyes, holding our breath.

You knew the Rolling Calf was close if you heard a rattling chain coming nearer, getting louder. If the sound got too near and too close, that was it – they said the creature would kill you.

One of our gang died. It wasn't the Rolling Calf, though. We were having a rest after a hard night on our feet in the hills and my friend was 'funking' his rag on the kerosene torch to keep it moist. But he funk'd too fast, too hard, and the flame leapt out on him.

His clothes caught fire at once. We jumped up to help but everything was in slow motion. I remember emptying the crabs, using the sack to smother the flames. My friend was screaming, and we were hopping around because the crabs were crawling everywhere, nipping at our feet with their claws.

It was already too late even when we got the fire out. We took him home alive, but our friend died of his burns later in the hospital.

Like I said, we were young boys and we enjoyed ourselves. But it was poverty that drove us up into those hills. (Swann, D. ed. 1998: 7-8).

The interview was a rewarding experience – for me, at least. Sometimes when describing his Jamaican childhood, the interviewee had to work hard because I pressed him to recover specific details that I deemed important, e.g. names of animals, plants, and superstitions. Perhaps he was frightened of arousing painful memories? Or maybe his memory had been re-organised by poverty and crime? Alternatively, I suppose, he may have thought I could never understand his life.

The man was reticent about the loss of a childhood friend, burned to death when the boys were hunting. He couldn't recall the boy's name, and was sketchy with details. This vagueness struck me as mysterious, particularly after I'd experienced the man's agony over the crime that had earned him life-imprisonment. His face contorted when he described the by-stander who had entered the path of his bullet. An accident, he said – he'd been chasing a rival pimp. Yet the papers called him a gangster. 'I'm a pimp, but I ain't no gangster,' he

repeated. When I pressed him to explain the gun, our interview hit a wall. 'A fella needs his protection,' he maintained. But his despair over shooting an innocent person was plain. Later, writing up the interview, I grew fascinated by Parker's interview with 'Edgar Johnson'. What had looked simple on the page now struck me as insanely complex. How had Parker managed to arrange the facts with such tension? And to what extent was this manipulation justified? How much of the piece was 'Johnson' and how much Parker?

Ultimately, I confined myself to the lifer's childhood, hoping this would build trust. It meant editing out references to his days as a shotgun-wielding pimp. I was unsure whether I'd made the right decision – except that it felt important to create a portrait that contained more than simply crime, and that went beyond the 'evil and dingy situations' (Bly, 1990: 15) that Carol Bly criticises for stoking the anxiety of Americans. As part of her project of building a more moral, empathic literature, Bly argues that writers should follow Tolstoy in aiming to create characters whose 'worlds overlap the periphery of all our worlds' (15), i.e. not simply concentrate on the character's basest elements.

Without being aware of it at the time, I see now that my approach was a cousin of the far more systematic 'personal narratives' approach adopted by Shadd Maruna, an American researcher working on crime desistance projects in Liverpool at about the same time when I was at HMP Nottingham. His research has helped me to understand my methods in interviewing the prisoners. In attempting to understand why some offenders return to crime and others desist, Maruna used ideas from McAdams (1993) to suggest that the reformed criminal is more likely to have fashioned a 'convincing, coherent, acceptable' story (Maruna, 2001: 145) about his life than the offender who returns to crime. For Maruna, personality-traits 'tend to be largely stable over time' (42), but 'a person's narrative identity can and does change' (42). Hence, rehabilitative efforts ought to encourage the creation of 'a generative script' (117) that contains 'meaning and achievement' (118). This generative script is

described by McAdams as ‘an adult’s plan for what he or she hopes to do in the future to leave a heroic gift for the next generation’ (1993: 227) – an act that takes on added significance when it is experienced as being part of a coherent life-story. In carrying out work containing ‘performance accomplishments’ (2001: 155), Maruna believes we can ‘increase a person’s sense of self-efficacy and appraisal of internal control’ (155). And these achievements are perceived as being even more meaningful if the offender is given the chance to ‘give something back to society, particularly the next generation’ (88).

McAdams (1993) identifies two different ways in which we make sense of the world: ‘paradigmatic’ and ‘narrative’ modes. The first is based upon reason and proof while the second is ‘the mode of stories’ (1993: 29), usually involving ‘human desire, goals, and social conduct’ (29). For McAdams, ‘a great deal of emotional suffering stems from our failure to make sense of lives through stories’ (33). He draws upon research about the survivors of breast cancer by Shelley Taylor to suggest that ‘healthy adjustment to life-threatening events... involves three inter-related themes: the search for meaning, gaining a sense of mastery, and self-enhancement’ (49).

This body of work by McAdams and Maruna allows me to understand why I pushed interviewees into describing their childhoods and love-affairs. In one way, maybe I was simply tired of self-aggrandising habits in prison, where some revel in crime. But there was more to it than weariness, for I wanted the men to release different stories about themselves, so that they gained a glimpse of other possibilities. Maybe that was naïve. And I’m sure that relatives of the pimp’s victims would accuse me of overlooking the defining act of his life. Yet I wanted to believe that this imaginative expansion might allow access to peaceful, creative impulses – and that this could be of future benefit to society and the individual.

A danger was that the interviews might encourage escapism and denial. This seemed to be the case with the prisoner whose elaborate life-narrative about a career in the French

Foreign Legion proved, apparently, to be untrue. In such cases, I unwittingly colluded in evasions rather than helping to analyse failings. But I thought the challenge to the narrowness of the inmates' identities as murderers and criminals was a healthy one, particularly if it helped 'to make sense of one's life' (Maruna, 2001: 145).

For McAdams, a healthy life-narrative consists of 'high marks on 6 narrative standards' (1993: 110), which should ideally increase as we grow older: coherence; openness; credibility; differentiation; reconciliation; and generative integration. Summarised, this means that psychological health depends on our ability to tell stories about our lives that make sense without becoming 'too coherent to be true' (111), and which remain open to a healthy degree of change. The story must also be based on facts, and complex in terms of 'characterization, plot and theme' (112). However, there should be 'harmony and resolution' (112) between contradictory elements, as well as a sense that the storyteller is 'a productive and contributing member of society... willing to promote, nurture, and guide the next generation' (113).

McAdams's methods for identifying these tendencies, and thereby testing the health of a personal myth, are very different from mine. Whereas I worked with the mind-set of a journalist, he describes taking his interviewees through a structured psychological process involving questions on thematic 'life-chapters' (256), key life events, significant people, future script, and personal ideology.

McAdams appears to share Maruna's view that traits of behaviour are less susceptible to change than life-narratives. However, in arguing that 'the stories we live by are made, not found' (274), he stresses that adjustments in our life-narratives often demand difficulty and pain, either through 'developmental' (270) or 'personological' (273) processes. The first of these struggles is more common, he says, and likely to result from a desire to escape stagnancy, and a will towards 'growth, fulfilment, maturation, moving ahead...' (270). But personological problems occur when 'the myth is no good [and] doesn't work' (273). Here, in

cases where the life-narrative is ‘shattered, empty, without narrative form’ (274), any meaningful change requires ‘the awesome task of creating yourself anew’ (273).

That ‘awesome task’ took my former student, the ex-lifer Erwin James, many years to achieve. In his case, he claims that rehabilitative change became possible after meetings with a psychologist, who ‘described my childhood so succinctly’ (2005: x). After reaching a new understanding of his life-narrative, James then embarked on a 10-year journey ‘to establish a way of living that I believed was authentic’ (34). Thereafter, writing became just one element in the ‘scholastic monastic experience’ (46) that led him to a ‘whole new attitude’ (x).

James’s notion of authenticity marries up with ideas suggested by McAdams and Maruna, particularly in the sense that James conveys of gaining ‘meaning, unity, and purpose’ (McAdams, 1993: 6) from his pursuit of an education. In time, the skills earned him a regular *Guardian* column on prison-life, a role that allowed him to transform his self-image. Where, once, his life-narrative had been narrated by a ‘powerless captive’ (James, 2005: x), he now saw himself as ‘an active observer, a chronicler of secret lives in dark places’ (xi).

‘A chronicler of secret lives in dark places’. James’s phrase works equally well as a description of Tony Parker, whose writing shone a light into society’s forsaken corners – and this brings me back to the other strand I’ve been pursuing in this chapter. For, as well as exploring the rehabilitative potential in life-narratives, I have been seeking to explain my search for a narrative ‘pattern’ when transcribing the interview about a Jamaican childhood.

Returning now to that strand, it’s important to stress that I followed Parker’s example in using *only* words spoken by the lifer (although, admittedly, some were pressured up by my insistence on specificity). However, like Parker, I rearranged the man’s account, structurally. I did this by foreshadowing the ‘tragic night’ in the second paragraph and then withholding mention of the event until the final section. My aim in doing so was to create narrative suspense concerning the piece’s most singular and memorable matter.

Singular and memorable to me, that is. For I struggled with the lifer's reticence. No matter how often I returned to the tragedy, he seemed unable or unwilling to discuss it. More than that – I sensed a lack of interest, something that went beyond detachment or apathy.

Was I missing something in his apparent disinterest? Or was this a glimpse into the coldness of his being? I lacked the skills to know, and wondered what Parker would have done with this 'hole' – whether he would have made the 'hole' the focus, as in the case of 'Edgar Johnson'. Eventually, I decided to end the piece with the friend's death, but to maintain the lifer's matter-of-fact tone, and that's how the interview appears in the anthology – although I concluded the piece with the lifer's statement that 'it was poverty that drove us up into those hills' (Swann, D. ed. 1998: 8), a decision I now regret. The man *did* utter this phrase, but at another stage, and I dragged the sentence out of him, as an attempt to understand his indifference (or whatever it was), until he – perhaps wearied by authority's demands – went along with me. I believe the piece would have been stronger if I'd presented the boy's death with the prisoner's (and Parker's) ambiguity.

In other ways, the piece proved successful. The finished article was greeted with smiling silence by the lifer, who folded the paper like a precious document and carried it to his cell. And the intricate process allowed me to carefully study an individual prison-voice – and then to make decisions about how best to represent it.

These interviews let me experience the tension between reportage and literary technique that I had encountered in Parker's work – and, as such, I believe they were an important step towards the work I managed later. Above all, I experienced a strange freedom in writing a first-person account of another man's life. My own perspective would get me only so far, I realised. In inhabiting a persona, I had gained an expanded set of possibilities.

But Parker's work carried a warning too, and I would need to remember his wise reflection on the art of listening in *The Man Inside*: 'It may be I have spent too much time

listening to prisoners, and not enough in trying to hear what they have to say. I hope that others are more perceptive' (Parker, 1973: 7). It's this sense of failure that I describe in my book's final poem, 'Apology' (Swann, D. 2010: 141), a short lyric based on the realisation, too late in the day, that forensic detachment (with the aim of facilitating clear-eyed creative writing) had prevented empathetic engagement with a lonely individual. It's all very well to listen to a person's voice, but we must hear it, too.

### **Apology**

Made thieves of my eyes,  
 counted possessions,  
 listed your books, their contradictions.  
 Looked at your hands  
 while you tried to find my eyes,  
 missed it all by looking too hard.  
 Thought I was a searchlight,  
 I was just another wall (Swann, D. 2010: 141).

In the chapter that follows, I discuss work by Don Colburn, another journalist-turned-poet, who describes a similar 'cross-training' (Colburn and Petersen, 2010) in poetry and journalism, and similar challenges when writing dramatic monologues. By focusing on Colburn, I hope to demonstrate how I grappled with this double-role.

The chapter culminates with a discussion of my discovery that poetic syntax can play a role in freeing the imagination to pursue the 'truth' of the evolving poem – rather than the 'facts' that are prioritised by journalists. The discovery opened a door, but put me in fear of the freedom that lay beyond. As such, the chapter concludes by considering self-imposed limits that I continued to maintain, partly for professional reasons, partly because of my upbringing.



## Chapter Five

### ‘A Cross-Training’: Working as Both Poet and Journalist

Now, granted time to compare the disciplines of poetry and journalism, I see that they share several qualities, not least the demands to work, wherever possible, with economy, accuracy, clarity, and, I believe, the complex art of simplicity. Additionally, both disciplines rely upon skills of close observation, although poetry may prefer emotional accuracy over the factual accuracy prized by journalists. These insights are built on the experiences in HMP Nottingham that turned me into a poet. However, they did not come easily, for in the early days I was so excited and troubled by poetry’s freedom that it was hard to think straight.

In this chapter, I discuss differences and similarities between poetry and journalism, and tensions that arose from attempts to write in both modes. The freedom that poetry gave me to inhabit new voices and perspectives tugged against restraints I had set myself in the field of ‘nonfiction narrative’ (where my journalistic approach privileged third-person reportage over New Journalism-style experiments). Ultimately, I came to think of this twin interest as the result of a ‘cross-training’. The term is Paulann Petersen’s, and was used at a University of Oregon symposium when describing the work of Don Colburn, a Pulitzer-nominated journalist who, like me, experienced a late-career blooming as a poet. Colburn’s work is the focus of the second half of the chapter. I offer analysis of his work, both as an attempt to understand my ‘cross-training’ and as a vehicle for understanding the freedoms opened by poetry (particularly dramatic monologues). In order to map this development, I will begin with the following piece, written the year after my residency ended:

#### Safe

I have not been touched by her hand,  
nor felt it move through the drizzle  
that might shine on a coat.

Not shivered as her fingers trail the arm  
to the sleeve. To hover on the sleeve  
and then slide into the clasp.

Not closed my own fingers  
around her quiet bones, nor seen  
the slow beat of those eyes,

the steady gaze which says, through rain:  
“I am watching. You are safe.”  
Not heard that, nor seen the mouth

which forms the kiss. But I have felt her  
deep in the chalks and irons  
that make me more than stone.

I have known silence and also trust.  
And I have watched the slow comings  
of dawn over the slates of this jail,

wondering how the days get here  
and where they go. And who I am.  
And how I know that I am safe (Swann, D. 2010: 90).

As a dramatic monologue, this poem was a new departure, and fed into to my first thoughts about the ‘blood-self’ (Lawrence, 1971: 121), a term borrowed from D.H. Lawrence that I discuss in Chapter Seven. However, while writing ‘Safe’, I had no grand, contentious theories in mind. Instead, I simply did what I could not to get in its way. And afterwards I realised that the poem’s voice belonged to someone that wasn’t entirely me. It’s one of the gentler jail-pieces that I wrote, and rooted in an experience during a Wednesday workshop. I’d asked the men to write about ‘guardian angels’ – and, although one student invented a snarling angel (based, I think, upon an enemy), most responded in a warm, enthusiastic manner. In words that were free from cynicism, lifers and long-term inmates described their faith in a higher power. The guardians ranged from clichéd angels with white robes to powerful female figures and mysterious gods. I was surprised and moved by this optimism, and sensed the presence of something that hadn’t been crushed, a life-force that yearned to thrive.

In ‘Safe’, the poem’s speaker has no obvious reason to be happy. The woman he’s imagining is born from a negative, emphasised by the anaphora of those two ‘not’s that tie together the opening stanzas. He knows this woman doesn’t exist – yet the feeling of safety

refuses to dissipate. Was this false consciousness, or some valuable survival instinct? I didn't know. But, in finding one voice to unite a feeling reported by several prisoners, I'd stumbled upon a path that excited me.

In her study of the dramatic monologue, Glennis Byron describes a form that has pulled away from the 'inward-looking and isolated Romantic lyric' (2003:56) while retaining an 'oppositional stance' (36) that becomes 'an instrument of criticism by giving a voice to marginalised figures' (64-5). This, she argues, has made dramatic monologues a place 'to question rather than to confirm... to disrupt rather than consolidate authority' (100) – a place roamed by 'criminals, madmen and other misfits' (65) and 'prostitutes or fallen women' (65). Seen in this light, dramatic monologues made a natural fit with prison, allowing 'a poetry of contestation' (2003: 3), and offering a stage for the marginal.

My own first attempt at the dramatic monologue offered little contestation (unless the speaker in 'Safe' is contesting the prison's determination to crush his sense of security). And 'Safe' also lacks drama, since nothing happens. What's more, there's no dramatic irony, one of the things that Byron identifies as giving the monologue its power, i.e. 'the disjunction between the limited understanding of the speaker and the wider awareness of the poet and reader' (15). The lack of dramatic action is, I guess, part of the poem's point. With nothing to do and nowhere to go, the speaker's mind has conjured the only movement. Hence, the poem is concerned with the invisible. As such, it's probably better seen as a lyric monologue, or a soliloquy. As far as dramatic irony goes, I had no interest in allowing a superior position from which to judge the character. Hence, the poem lacks that powerful extra layer. Instead, I wanted readers to be the ones with the missing chip. Has the prisoner glimpsed something we can't? Is it possible that his altered sense of time has opened him to a new dimension? Again, I had no answers – just questions. But I liked asking them (although it pleased me that the poem's form allowed me to dispense with question marks). And I was pleased that the poem

had approached the mystical side of prison life, a development that would have been less easy while locked inside my own viewpoint.

To develop a better understanding of the passing of time in jail (or its *refusal* to pass), it's necessary to perform the kind of shift in perspective accomplished by the writer Barry Lopez on his visit to a stone intaglio in the remote Arizonan desert. On first sight, this stone-horse in the ruins of a vanished civilisation is just a crumbled set of rocks, but, 'as the angle of the light continued to change' (1989: 10), Lopez notices how the monument relates to its environment. Finally, he says, one learns a landscape 'not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it – like that between the sparrow and the twig' (64). This accommodation becomes possible after Lopez refuses the contemporary sense of time that reduces the monument to a heap of rocks – and finds, instead, the perspective of a desert-dweller whose life and tribal memory are situated in that place:

Intaglios, I thought, were never meant to be seen by gods in the sky above. They were meant to be seen by people on the ground, over a long period of shifting light... It is our own impatience that leads us to think otherwise (14).

Writing 'Safe' had helped me to slow down, and adopt the perspective of a man who had watched a lot of rain, over 'a long period of shifting light'. It gave me a deeper sense how prisoners inter-act with the mysterious qualities of space and time that make up their days.

This new freedom with point-of-view was rather bewildering, and I was glad to gain enlightenment from the work and views of Don Colburn, a writer who'd had to deal with similar issues when making the transition from journalism to poetry. Although operating at a higher journalistic level than I ever did, Colburn traces a similar career arc when describing himself as a 'journalist-poet' who 'for 33 years... made my living as a newspaper reporter' (Colburn & Petersen, 2010). Colburn argues that poetry and journalism start 'with words and the human condition, also concision and precision and clarity':

What's more, the two forms of writing can inform each other. I think paying closer attention to the sound and the play of language and the nuances of words can help a news story come closer to the truth (Colburn & Petersen, 2010).

For her part, his discussion partner in the Oregon symposium, the poet Paulann Petersen, proposes links based in metaphor:

We cannot scrub metaphor out of this language. Would a journalist not say, 'she cupped her hand'?... It is so embedded in the language, we do not even see it as a metaphor (2010).

Colburn quotes from William Carlos Williams' poem, 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower', to suggest the 'news' a poem conveys:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.  
Hear me out  
for I too am concerned  
and every man  
who wants to die at peace in his bed  
besides (Williams, 1962: 161-2).

Here, we encounter a poetry charged with the urgency of 'current affairs' (the imperative, 'Hear me out', perhaps being an echo of 'Read all about it!'). However, in his suggestion that poems should help us to live and die in meaningful ways, Williams identifies a significant difference between poetry and journalism, a difference summarised in the famous phrase: 'Literature is news that STAYS news' (Pound, 1951: 29). We might say that journalism is concerned with the day's 'news', whereas poetry pursues 'news' of lasting value. Put another way, reporters seek facts whereas poets want truth – a topic Colburn raises when he considers some differences between poetry and journalism:

Journalists aren't supposed to make things up. Novelists and poets often do, but they don't write on deadline, usually. Most news stories are in the third person. A lot of poems aren't. In prose, the computer or the page margin decides where the end of the line comes, and in a poem the writer does, and I think non-poets may not realise what a difference that makes. In news writing, you try to know what you're going to say before you try to say it. In a poem, I've learned, you try not to (Colburn & Petersen, 2010)

Colburn suggests that poetry allows liberties denied to journalists, notably through line-breaks and the freedom to incorporate mystery, and fiction. His discovery that a poem must come from elements unknown in advance also made sense to me.

Now that I was starting to take the craft seriously, I saw what Colburn meant when he declared that certain moments in our lives demand the unplanned spontaneity of poetry. In a poem about the upbringing of Emily Dickinson, he describes how her father, with his ‘drill-bit eyes’ (9), is thrown into the emotional turmoil he detests after witnessing the wonder of the aurora. This man who has promoted ‘real life’ (10) above his daughter’s poetry now ‘runs to church to pull the bellropes’ (10), obeying the same transcendental wonder that Colburn appears to have discovered in poetry.

In ‘The Luxury of Difference’, Colburn hunts for meaning beyond the headlines, which are attracted to the ‘quick implosion under the breastbone’ (32) rather than the ‘life that leaks through quietly, / too slow to notice’ (32). This suggestion that poetry accesses numinous zones denied to journalists wins support from Petersen:

Maybe the news in a poem is something as simple as the urgency, the music of urgency... It might be that the news found in a poem is an answer to the mystery of why a teenage daughter is so contrary, so difficult (Colburn & Petersen, 2010).

To support her insight, she quotes from Stafford’s poem, ‘Reading the Big Weather’:

there is a weather  
of things that happen too faint for the headlines,  
but tremendous, like willows touching the river.

This earth we are riding keeps trying to tell us  
something with its continuous scripture of leaves (Stafford, 2012).

Seen this way, a poet is a reporter bearing ‘news’ from invisible zones. By contrast, journalistic ‘news-sense’ is bound up with the outward and the visible, which Colburn summarises as ‘a bullet, a needle, a cliffleap’ (Colburn, 2006: 32). Petersen adds an additional distinction, rooted in purpose and inspiration: ‘If journalism is news for a majority,

poetry is news by way of epiphany... what we might call the lyric impulse' (Colburn & Petersen, 2010).

As well offering Colburn access to invisible emotional truths, poetry allows respite from the day-job through its capacity to build a 'stage' for dramatic monologues (65). He comments upon this after reading a villanelle narrated from the viewpoint of an AIDS patient (inspired by a news article about Africa):

As a journalist... it was so liberating to presumptuously assume the voice of someone else and still I think keep the poem true – true to the facts I read in the newspaper... all of those details – I didn't make up. I'm not that imaginative... they came from the newspaper (Colburn & Petersen, 2010).

Colburn compares his approach to that of Walt Whitman, who wanted 'a poetry that gets out of the classroom into the streets' (Colburn & Petersen, 2010). It could be argued that Whitman found an internal polyphony, but Colburn remains a working journalist, hunting for the voices of others. His preference for a democratic, Whitman-esque poetry is linked to a newspaperman's desire for the clarity that makes an article comprehensible on first reading: 'I think poems rely on a kind of clarity too. I feel fiercely about that' (Colburn & Petersen, 2010). However, he refuses to eliminate difficulty from the equation, arguing that 'in a poem it's quite wonderful, I think, if someone has to read it twice or more than twice' (Colburn & Petersen, 2010). He quotes from William Carlos Williams's poem, 'January Morning', in support of his argument:

All this –  
     was for you, old woman.  
 I wanted to write a poem  
 that you would understand.  
 For what good is it to me  
 If you can't understand it?  
     But you got to try hard (Williams, 1991: 103-4).

There is much in Williams's work that Dr Johnson's common reader would need to try *very* hard to understand, not least *The Great American Novel*, 'one of the first anti-novels written in the U.S.' (Williams, 1970: 155). The difficult strain in Williams's work is partly a

result of his belief that ‘The imagination will not down’ (Williams, 1970: 200), but must give life ‘splendour and grotesqueness, beauty and infinite depth’ (200-1). Characteristically, however, this extravagance is counter-balanced by Williams’s enduring concern to ‘try to say it straight’ (Williams, 1967: 21) – a simplicity evident in the extract from ‘January Morning’ (above). Here, the plain diction is given a colloquial flavour in the final line, when we see Williams’s desire to stay true to ‘the American idiom – that was a better word than language, less academic, more identified with speech’ (Williams, 1967: 76). The poem’s lineation provides a sense of Williams’s search for ‘a technique of verse’ (86) that would allow ‘the American language... to ‘shape the pattern’ (76): ‘My two leading forces were trying to know life and trying to find a technique of verse’ (86).

Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us to find this polarity in Williams’s work, particularly given his range of influences: ‘the studied elegance of Keats... and the raw vigour of Whitman’ (Williams, 1967: 20). In Chapter Six, I look at similar tensions in the imagination of Ken Smith, and argue that these polarities invigorate his work. But, in terms of my current concern to show how I was preparing my journalistic mind for the accident of poetry, the key line from ‘January Morning’ is the final one, ‘But you got to try hard’, where Williams preserves a space for poetry to do things that journalism finds difficult – and perhaps rise to the kind of difficulty that Donald Justice says has the potential to ‘engage more of the whole man’ (82). Justice concedes that such difficulty may leave readers ‘dazzled, overwhelmed’ (83), but he holds out a hope that ‘the initial puzzlement... may become embedded in one’s experience of the poem and inextricable from it’ (91).

Like Williams, who wrote about his professional work as a doctor (when he ‘delivered 2,000 babies’ [Williams, 1970: ix]), Don Colburn has created poems from episodes in his working life, e.g. the brief, simple poem, ‘Local News’ (Colburn, 2006: 20):

Ten years after,  
I remember two things:



It was a mild, cloudless afternoon  
 and the sick boy wore a wool cap  
 indoors, down to his eyes  
 which were not scared.  
 No. Three things. I was scared.

‘Local News’ (an ironic title, given the universal subject matter) places its faith in the plain diction and structural organisation of journalism. The only example of Petersen’s ‘musical devices’ (Colburn & Petersen, 2010) is a distant rhyme between ‘indoors’ and ‘scared’. However, the poem allows in a subjectivity denied to the journalist, and shows relish for manipulations of the line. Colburn says line-breaks offer ‘a slight shift’ (2010) – or what Petersen describes as ‘silence – quietness around the words’ (2010). In a droll aside, Colman notes that such silence is ‘not our strong point in the media’ (2010), but there is some of it in ‘Local News’, which possesses a spare visual quality. Additionally, the poem’s lineation creates ‘a slight shift’ (2010) between lines 1 and 2, echoing the temporal distance between event and re-telling, and perhaps also the distance Colburn has travelled from his day-job.

In contemporary tuition, poets are advised that ‘The most important point in the line is the end of it. The second most important is the beginning of it’ (Oliver, 1994: 52). Hence, the poet will aim for line-endings strong enough to bear the weight of attention. This often means choosing verbs and nouns, in preference to prepositions (unless the relative weakness of the preposition is part of the design). Largely, Colburn stays true to this contemporary orthodoxy in ‘Local News’, where three of the seven lines end in nouns and two in a repeated verb.

Line-breaks are of interest in Colburn’s poem ‘To a Condemned Man Now Dead’ (46), a poem inspired by media coverage of an execution. Here, Colburn personalises the event by addressing the dead murderer directly, using the second-person (which evokes the accusatory tone heard in many public debates):

Not exactly  
 that you didn’t deserve it, either,  
 having shot an old man for his rare coins  
 and killed another for cash... (Colburn, 2006: 46).

Before book-ending the poem with his own reaction to ‘the most premeditated’ killing’, Colburn describes the dead man’s crimes, followed by an account of the execution, and the unsympathetic response of a victim’s husband. The poem’s line-endings feature half-rhymes that take on a measure of semantic power, e.g. ‘jerk’ and ‘mercy’ (where the punishment’s brutality is set against the punisher’s complacency), but the poem is more notable for its use of verbs early in the lines. Half of the 24 lines are energised by verbs at, or near, the line-openings – and the verbs often belong to phrases linked by enjambment, so that the poem takes on an urgent, breathless quality that fits with its life-or-death subject matter:

And not because their friends and next-of-kin  
stood by the road, waiting to whoop it up  
when the hearse slid by, or because Mr Sellers,  
whose wife you kidnapped from the jiffy store  
and raped and shot, was there at midnight  
to watch them tuck down the blindfold  
and buckle you in... (46).

Here, we gain a sense not just of Colburn’s journalistic interest in observable events, but also of his excitement at the possibilities created by an effective line-break:

It was stunning to me... when I started writing poems... it allows a little silence to break into the poem in an important place... The only thing comparable in the newspaper is the paragraph... it’s a unit of sound and it’s a unit of emotional attention, and it may of course be a grammatical unit too (Colburn & Petersen, 2010).

Through its syntax, ‘To a Condemned Man Now Dead’ makes its reader ‘try hard’, as Williams said. This is partly because the poem begins with a negative – ‘Not that you were too young to die’ (Colburn, 2006: 46) – that is then sustained and extended through a series of subsidiary phrases. These phrases increase our understanding of the dreadful deed – but are inserted into sentences that similarly start with negatives (six, in total). Consequently, we learn details about the background while simultaneously experiencing a delay in the poem’s resolution. Colburn has been telling us what *isn’t* at stake. But if none of these events is the

central issue, then what is? When we reach the ‘But’ on the third-from-last-line, we recognise the rhetorical destination. The answer comes, at last, in the 22<sup>nd</sup> line:

But to know so well what killing is  
and call it mercy --  
nothing in this life is easy to believe (46).

By delaying the resolution, Colburn builds a tension that may have intensified if he hadn’t nailed his colours to the mast in line 4 by describing the execution as ‘premeditated’ – a word that lets the cat out of the bag too early in what is otherwise a fine and moving piece.

In an essay defending the perilous art of rhetoric, the poet Tony Hoagland repeats Pound’s statement that ‘The ‘image’ is the furthest possible remove from rhetoric’ (Hoagland, 2006: 11). Hoagland defines rhetoric as ‘the art of persuasion’ (9), and says it ‘encompasses all speech acts that take place outside the shower... Every time we use an *although* or *but* in a sentence, we are limiting an assertion to make it more credible to our audience’ (9). He describes rhetoric as ‘intrinsically public, civil, civic, and civilizing’ (15).

Colburn’s *but* at the start of the third-from-last-line is the moment when we expect a civilised correction to the savagery, and the poet duly delivers this with his suggestion that the taking of *any* life is murder, whether legally sanctioned or not – except that the final line reserves space for doubt. Separated by a hyphen from the condemnation that proceeds it, the final line (‘Nothing in this life is easy to believe’) floats alone, leaving us to share the poet’s doubt that he has earned certainty on the issue.

Here, Colburn fights shy of the full-blown rhetoric that Hoagland laments as being ‘a skill in atrophy in contemporary poetry’ (17). In avoiding the definitive statement that Hoagland sees as having potential for ‘boldness and freedom’ (17), Colburn is perhaps aware that ‘The two dangers of rhetoric are emptiness and impersonality’ (11), and so opts to end the poem on an indeterminate note (rather than clearly stating the point of view that the writing of the poem has carried him towards).

Although lacking in the rhetorical boldness that Hoagland celebrates, ‘To a Condemned Man Now Dead’ strikes me as being the work of Colburn’s that makes the greatest departure from journalism. It achieves its effects largely through the complex manipulation of syntax (defined by Ellen Bryant Voigt simply as ‘the order of the words in a sentence’ [Bryant Voigt, 2009: 167]), which frees Colburn to move outwards from the facts, into the imaginative realm that Louise Glück sees as being far more ‘real’ than journalism:

News stories are detailed. But they don’t seem, at least to me, at all real... they don’t say this is what it was to be here... Louis Simpson says the lyric poem is any poem expressing personal emotion rather than describing event. The opposite, in other words, of the news story (Glück, 1999: 74).

In discussing the symposium, I hope I have demonstrated several overlaps between the fields of poetry and journalism, as well as some differences. The challenges reported by Colburn remind me of many of my own struggles and excitements. In particular, I was exercised by dramatic monologues and by matters of form, which collided when I began, like Colburn, ‘to presumptuously assume the voice of someone else’ (Colburn & Petersen, 2010).

Glück’s preference for the vision over the fact, a preference rooted in romanticism and highly sceptical towards ‘the authority of event’ (Glück, 1999: 25), reminds us that some remain suspicious of poems like ‘Local News’ – and prefer poetry that rises beyond its origins, using devices that free the writer from the facts. In ‘To a Condemned Man Now Dead’, there is a strong sense that the poem’s syntax opened a path that carried Colburn beyond autobiography and memory. Hence, syntax could be viewed as central to any act of creativity in poetry and prose – a point that the poet Mimi Khalvati impressed upon me at a summer school in Crete in 2007 when she described syntax as having the power to ‘enact belief’. What she meant, I think, is that syntax – ‘the nerve of all language’, as she put it – is the means by which poets bring language closest to how their minds really work.

I’d met Mimi a few years earlier when she gave me a prize for one of the few poems I wrote immediately after leaving the prison. Whereas the poems described previously in this

Commentary were similar to Colburn's 'Local News' in their scope and limits, the poem that Mimi rewarded ('Bunker') was my first conscious attempt at greater complexity:

### **Bunker**

After 12 months it had always been this way:  
a life of pickings from market stalls,  
of apples pocketed when no-one was looking

-- and no-one was looking. He was nameless,  
living in a concrete box on the edge  
of the moor, which first smelled of piss

and later of rotten fruit, of cores tossed  
to the corners and forgotten, just as he was,  
a ghost in a bunker from an old war.

This is what can happen, he said, if you've fled  
your dad's hands and your mother's death.  
It can happen that you forget your own strangeness,

accept the fox's life as your life – become a rumour  
on the skyline, where wind moves in the grass  
and only the broken walls have heard of you

until you're not much more than an eye  
at dawn, bagging meat when the butcher's back  
is turned – raw specks good and moist in your mouth

as you skirt the dirty market's hem, watching  
crates get born from trucks, draymen rolling  
barrels into dark places – a new thrill

of hops and yeast in your nose, your chest –  
wondering: with some of *that* in a boy,  
would he really be gone – would his mind grow

as dark as the hole where he spent his days,  
where he looked out on himself as if from a slit,  
as if the war was coming, but he was safe. (Swann, D. 2010: 46).

Originally, this poem took the form of a single sentence, sustained through subsidiary phrases. It was rooted in a lifer's anecdote – and I began with a journalist's desire to relate his story. But I was pushing my limits, attempting to find new ways of representing experience. It was the first jail-poem to develop from its own creative process rather than to satisfy some preconceived aim, or to act as reportage. Syntax, I think, was the key. Although I dispensed with the single sentence, the piece demanded enjambment reminiscent of Colburn's in 'To a

Condemned Man Now Dead' (not that I'd read his poem then) – and the final sentence runs on through 16 lines.

Looking back, I think my interest in working with more complex syntax was rooted in a need to find some linguistic correlation for the 'gone-ness' of the poem's character, whose life becomes a blur, so that he loses the ability to connect incidents, or to see his feral life-style as anything unusual. It was this loss of causality and perspective that sparked the poem. With the syntax taking priority over facts, the character began using phrases never uttered, and I let rhyme do the thinking. There had been a bunker in the anecdote, but no mention of 'war'. Bunkers strongly suggest war, of course, but I think I was guided to the conclusion by the assonance in the words 'stalls', 'moor', and 'cores' in the preceding lines, where the poem seems to be calling for a return to the 'war' first mentioned in stanza 3.

The conclusion, where I describe preparation for combat, surprised me, since it had nothing to do with the prisoner's story. I now count myself fortunate to have stumbled upon this fiction as it adds a dimension, lifting the material beyond personal reminiscence. It could be, too, that the assonance in those groaning sounds made me leave the boy in the 'hole', but I like to think that there is some 'awe' for the subject too, and I hope that this counter-acts the closure of space, suggesting the boy's potential for 'human flourishing', if only he can be reached by someone who cares.

The composition of 'Bunker' was a crucial step in my 'education' as a poet because it allowed me to understand that the writing of a poem is as much of an event as the subject matter that inspires it. If it is to live in the imagination, a poem must be rooted not only in our experience of the original event, but in the experience that transforms the memory into poetry. The point is brought home by Stafford's insight:

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them (Stafford, 1978: 17).

Or, as Richard Hugo puts it: ‘Somehow you must switch your allegiance from the triggering subject to the words’ (1979: 12). For Hugo, the imagination must get free from the knowns to ‘seek the unknowns’ (12-13). Mark Doty puts it another way: ‘Metaphor is an act of inquiry (not an expression of what we already know)’ (Doty, 2010: 81).

In lamenting a tendency to ‘supplement memory with invention’ (2004: 58), the poet and prison-worker Ken Smith writes: ‘I have opened the space in which to make a fiction, when all I wanted was to remember it as I saw it, then’ (58). Despite this lament, Smith seems to have accepted fictionalisation as inevitable when he concedes that ‘so much that we recall is touched by what has happened since’ (58). He uses a beautiful image to explain: ‘though the ladder is an imaginary ladder it is leaning on a real barn’ (58), a phrase I found helpful when refereeing the contest between memory and imagination. Approaching the same issue, but putting it slightly differently, the poet Simon Armitage is quoted by Ian Gregson as confessing: ‘I’m trying to think of a single instance when I’ve told something straight, and I can’t... because eventually there was another word or another phrase that came to mind’ (Gregson, 2012: 80).

I’ll admit it bothered me to sort through these issues, just as Armitage says it did when he first began. As a reporter, I’d always tried to remain faithful to facts. However, the process of composing ‘Bunker’ allowed me to understand distinctions drawn by Glück:

By *actuality* I mean to refer to the world of event, by *truth* to the embodied vision, illumination, or enduring discovery which is the ideal of art, and by *honesty* or *sincerity* to “telling the truth”, which is not necessarily the path to illumination (Glück, 1999: 33)

Heller (1993) uses the phrase ‘spheres of truth’ (119) to describe how we move between different conceptions of truth, just as she argues the ancient Greeks did when living with both ‘the mythical and the everyday’ (117). There is the truth of our senses and the truth of facts and events, but those facts may not reveal the truths that extend beyond our senses, or

the truth in an event's *meaning*. Some truths exist now, others in the eternal (or as Glück's 'enduring discovery' [1999: 33]). And notions of truth vary, too, across time and cultures.

I feel it is essential for all art to strive towards the meanings that explain facts, yet there remains a stubborn part of me that wants to fight, simultaneously, for the journalistic values defended by Colburn: clarity, brevity, accuracy, and simplicity. Perhaps this is a result of my professional training, or maybe the legacy of an upbringing in a neighbourhood devoid of books. As well as generally wanting my work to be understood by working-class people, I felt a specific desire, very similar to one identified by Lesley Saunders when describing work that grew from a gardens-residency at a university:

... I wanted to write in a way that was comprehensible and, if possible, pleasurable to the gardeners... I decided not to be tempted into writing in a style that impressed the literary elite at the university but to be directed by what I encountered in the gardens (Saunders, 2012: 199).

Desires like these may have exerted a brake on new experiments and discoveries – and I knew that very few people from my home town or the prison would ever even consider reading poems. So, to all intents and purposes, I was working in a manner that was silly and self-defeating... yet, for all that, what use would the writing be if they failed to understand it? (They'd have to try hard, though, as Williams warned!)

The following chapter explores the influence of Ken Smith, one of the writers who guided me towards a deeper engagement with the poetic techniques that fascinated me as I sought to give 'voice' to the 'news' I was gathering in jail. The chapter focuses on his concern with ruins and fragments, and the ways in which his deployment of personae helped me to go deeper into my exploration of voices other than my own.



## Chapter Six

### ‘The Great Mask Project’: The Influence of Ken Smith

In *Why Poetry Matters*, Jay Parini writes: ‘Poetry is conversation, and poets enter into the discussion wherever they are, as they will’ (Parini, 2008: 98). For any writer entering a male prison in Britain, the inescapable conversation partner is Ken Smith (1938-2003), whose creative response to the first official prison residency, at HMP Wormwood Scrubs (1985-87), makes for a daunting and inspiring body of work.

Whenever I pondered prison terms (‘wing’, ‘bird’, ‘kangaroo’) that fascinated me for their ambiguity and pathos, I discovered Smith had been there first, e.g. he laments the wasted potential of men now ‘perched on the landing railings’ (Smith, 1987: 44), ‘their wings tucked’ (44). Similarly, Smith had reflected upon elusive men like Tony Parker’s ‘Edgar Johnson’, noticing the ‘feints’ (Smith 1982: 167) and ‘inventions’ (167) in their syntax. After hearing an inmate describe his crime as ‘this business that came up’ (Smith, 1988: 320), he describes ‘a fair inventory of elisions; to murder, first person singular, is a verb, I think, more often used in the future tense’ (320).

In his analysis of Smith’s ‘Fox Running’, Andrew Duncan makes a comparison with ‘Night Thoughts’ by David Gascoyne, in which ‘a character [is] ceaselessly loping the darkened streets of London’ (Duncan, 2008: 203), and becomes ‘not a point of the spectrum but the whole horizon’ (204). The phrase serves as a good description for the impact of Smith’s work. When I imagined prison, Smith filled ‘the whole horizon’.

As far as influence goes, Smith cast the biggest shadow and shone one of the brightest lights. However, while I remain impressed by his approach to style and form, I believe his general philosophy on jail was a bigger inspiration. As such, I feel his influence exists at an abstract level rather than being visible on the surface of individual creative pieces.

Parini's notion of the 'aura' (discussed in the Introduction) is useful in understanding Smith's impact. I was impressed by the scale of his achievement, and moved to write by the light of his influence. Yet the question of influence is rarely straightforward, and Smith's writing inspired not only energy, but anxiety. Listening to a tape of him reading, I was struck not only by its driving rhythms but by a breathless, inexorable quality that made the listening almost uncomfortable. In 'Fox Running', there seemed no end to the wandering, as if the poem could go on forever. Yet something held the relentlessness in check, too – an element that owes a debt to the Anglo-Saxon poetry that Smith loved:

I use the alliteration quite a lot. I use the caesura as a pause in the middle of the line... I tend to use metaphor and not simile. I don't say one thing is like another; I try to bang them together by being another... a tendency within Germanic languages, particularly Anglo-Saxon (Smith, 2004: 139).

We hear the Anglo-Saxon exerting its gravity in 'Brady at Saddleworth Moor' (the first part of the triptych, 'Figures in Three Landscapes' (Smith, 2002: 141-3), where Smith dons the mask of Ian Brady at 'the time when the Moors Murderer was taken by the police to the scene of his crimes' (Byron, 2003: 139). When the speaker's syntax falters in stanza 4, the alliteration of 'fell' and 'felt' adds an Anglo-Saxon thump, described by Colin Raw as 'the revenant of the Old English line, consonant heavy' (Raw, 2004: 119):

Think how many years the rain fell I felt  
my heart in my chest a fist of sour dust  
forming in the acids of my discontent (Smith, 2002: 141).

Here, Smith is 'thinking in half-lines, like the Anglo-Saxon *scops*' (Raw, 2004: 108), but mangling the lineation and syntax so the dissonance echoes Brady's lost-ness. The lack of a full-stop between 'fell' and 'I', combined with the line-break on 'felt' (not 'fell'), creates a pile-up intensified by the absence of a comma after 'chest'. Hence, we get a 'driving, vehement plain-chant, of nominal and participial phrases being jammed together shorn of elaboration and connectives' (Raw, 2004: 145). Raw suggests Smith had access to 'a sort of English *ur* speech... most of it non-educated or language-conscious' (Raw, 2004: 145) and

connected to the ‘guttural music’ (Raw, 2004: 139) of Anglo-Saxon poetry. However, the Anglo-Saxon tugs against the looser free verse that Smith developed in America when he began to find ‘increased compositional freedom’ (Raw, 2004: 107) under the influence of the US poets, Merwin, Wright, and Bly. The result is work full of a ‘vitalising interplay between a desire for the free flowing and an instinct for the bitten-back’ (Raw, 2004: 108) – a duality that we encounter at every level of Smith’s work and life, including ‘that same duality of excess and restraint, expansiveness and reserve’ (Raw, 2004: 116) which Raw found in Smith as a person:

I remember once setting off down Barking Road in East Ham with him to get a pizza and coming close to passing out with thwarted expectation as he proceeded to flamboyantly greet someone or every two or three yards. I also remember a three-hour car journey of silence (Raw, 2004: 116).

That same duality is evoked in Chris Jones’s poem, ‘The Reading’, in which the ‘bloody-minded poet’ growls at the narrator to ‘*Shut up... I can’t hear myself think*’ (Jones, 2013: 6) before delivering a reading in which ‘his weighed voice never wavers’ (6). After the reading, Smith’s ‘reserve’ (6) returns, but Jones celebrates how he ‘marks the edges’ (7), and suggests that his ‘restless’ ways (6) are part-and-parcel of what leaves him ‘peerless’ (6).

A contrary, freedom-loving wanderer who roamed Europe and the States, Smith seems to have deliberately sought out the walls and jails that intensified his creative longings. For Barry (2000: 88), the character of Fox is both a doppelganger of Smith and an amalgam of the ordinary wanderers who fascinated him, which Smith listed as:

musicians, salesmen, mercenary soldiers, bartenders, gypsies, wandering mechanics in the early industrial revolution, printers, journeymen... the busker on the subway... the wandering Hasid in the Russian Pale... the motorway’s construction gangs... the beggar, the pilgrim, the wandering friar... rovers, herdsmen... the Anglo-Saxon wanderer... a witness, perhaps an intermediary between God and man... long traditions of the wanderers, present in all literatures... (Smith, 2004: 82-3).

These are the same ghosts that haunt Smith’s poem ‘No one’: ‘Vanished peoples consigned to the hedgebacks’ (Smith, 1998: 48) – perhaps versions of his own elusive father, an itinerant

farmworker, described by Smith as ‘Swift to anger... sometimes violent, vengeful, always moody and secretive, bearing his grudges along’ (Smith, 2004: 64). Not only ghosts, but ruins. Like his far-off Anglo-Saxon antecedents, who described Roman traces in poems like ‘The Ruin’ (which survives as a fire-scorched document), Smith was drawn to fragmentation and dereliction. In this, I find a fellow traveller with Tony Parker, particularly through the fascination with anonymous lives. As the historian E.P. Thompson put it, ‘The inarticulate, by definition, leave few records of their thoughts’ (Thompson, 1980: 59). In that sense, Parker and Smith are record-keepers and elegists for history’s forgotten multitudes.

The ghosts, ruins and traces in Smith’s work operate at the level of the phrase as well as the image. He saw himself as a *bricoleur*, ‘forever reassembling the broken bits of the world into new shapes’ (Smith, 2004: 93). There is an example in *On the swings* (Smith, 2002: 110). By italicising the title, Smith suggests it was lifted from elsewhere, and the work evidently incorporates another sampled phrase, ‘*all this is prison*’ (probably jail graffiti), to evoke the jail’s contamination. Characteristically, he then follows that ‘sample’ with a third phrase, perhaps eavesdropped: ‘Myself I want / to be me’ (Smith, 2002: 110). Now, the poem’s voices are leaking into each other. What began as a poem about Smith is now apparently a monologue from the point-of-view of an inmate. ‘*All this is prison*’ – not only the bricks and bars, but consciousness, memory, and the imagination.

Here is the challenge faced by any teacher entering prison: how to keep one’s soul apart from the jail, and how to lift others clear, too, so that the imagination rises to meet its best potential. Paradoxically, Smith pulled free by refusing to separate from the men. The result was a hybrid voice that is always Smith’s and yet always merging into the inmates’.

Smith’s *bricoleur* methods were criticised for yielding ‘occasionally too elliptically enjambed, thought-in-fragments poetry’ (Oxley, quoted by Raw, 2004: 115). But where some critics saw weakness, I drew creative comfort. Whenever prison’s damaged environment felt

oppressive, I reminded myself that the damage was my starting point. This was what Smith taught me: ‘Beginning again and again / Beginning from what’s broken’ (Smith, 1988: 134).

Over the years, perhaps perversely, Smith’s work took on a form of glamour. Not only did its outcasts and ruins refer back to previous abandonments and derelictions, but the work itself remained marginal, even within the marginal world of contemporary British poetry. The critical silence that greeted *Shed* (‘not a single review in a national newspaper... the most significant book of his life ignored’ [Glover, 2004: 50]) left Smith’s work like the lost, wandering fox in his poem, ‘back of a stone littered silence’ (Smith, 1988: 131) – and I liked it all the more for that, in the sense it has been ‘salvaged from the ruin of things’ (Smith, S. 1997: 75) and that it is also part of that ruin.

It’s little wonder that Smith confessed that he felt ‘very invisible over the years’ (Smith, 2004: 117), but the neglect did at least allow him to stay clear of ‘the jostling and hyping’ of the literary world (117) and to maintain empathy with the trapped wanderers he encountered in jail, a tribe of ‘dispossessed protagonists’ (Barry, 2000: 88) emblemised by the fox, described by Smith as a ‘brother shadow’ (Smith, 1982: 169). ‘Brother shadows’ litter Smith’s work and life. Meeting an inmate who shared his birthday, Smith imagined how he ‘might have turned out to be’ the man (Smith, 1990b: 50). And in his poem ‘At the solstice’, Smith (or a version of Smith) confesses:

Years back  
in the paranoid self of myself  
I recall in the seventyeight of it all  
I would have killed a man and been here  
meeting myself a prisoner on no road  
anywhere... (Smith, 2002: 128).

The ‘brother shadows’ can be places, too, like the halves of Berlin, whose wall inspires Smith’s book *Berlin: Coming in from the Cold* (1990a), and the village on the Slovakian border in ‘Malenki Robot’:

the village in the mirror  
 that is the other half of us, here  
 where the street stops at the wire  
 and goes on again on the other side' (Smith, 2002: 286).

Slippery doubles are evident, too, in *Inside Time* (1990b), a prose account of life at the Scrubs that's partly narrated by 'Dave Wait'. Another of the 'nicknames that are used in the nick' (Smith, 1990b: 19), this mask-voice is described as 'serving a life sentence for murder' (117). It isn't made clear whether 'Dave Wait' is an individual, or an amalgam, but I suspect the latter. In using 'Wait' to illuminate 'those parts of the labyrinth I cannot reach' (19), Smith appears to be working in the manner of Goya, i.e. finding 'a singular imaginary being' (Liardet, 2006: 7) to emblemise the characteristics of many – the same thing that I had attempted to do in the poem 'Safe' (discussed in a previous chapter).

Personae open possibilities for the 'double register' (Barry, 2000: 99) identified by Barry, in the sense that Smith's identity bleeds into those of his characters. Smith was conscious of 'the reshaping, recasting, of my own experience to blend it with another, historical or imaginary, a persona that changes but is usually some variant of the wanderer' (Smith, 2004: 129). He used Jung to explain how figures 'press forward and become more defined... demand attention' (127). This capacity to fuse with his subjects seems to have carried psychological risks, as he suggests in '*Years go by*', where he tells his father's ghost:

go back now, you're sleep walking again,  
 you're talking out loud again, talking in tongues  
 and your dream is disturbing my dream' (Smith, 1998: 33).

We never hear the old man's voice, which has returned with all its 'violence' (33) – but the implication is clear: that the donning of the mask risks raising voices that refuse to go 'back up the long pale corridor' (33). However, Smith said that 'if such figures are not allowed to be realised, they break out anyway' (Smith, 2004: 127), and he speculated that upheavals like this may have occurred in the lives of the violent men he taught in jail.

The 'brother shadows' in Smith's work took on resonance after I'd transcribed my first tape-recorded interviews with the inmates. Noticing that Smith couched poems as monologues and as soliloquies narrated by elusive, fox-like personae, I grew interested in Smith's 'great mask project' (Batchelor, 2004: 77), the method by which Smith found some of his characters. Constructing masks 'out of chicken wire and papier mâché, newsprint colouring and bits of beads, earrings, tassels, feathers' (Smith, 2004: 91), Smith described finding 'a face... from the mess' (93) and then 'sometimes there's a someone with a name and a history' (93).

The dissolving of one identity into another is never more evident than in 'Fox Running'. The poem begins in the third-person, and its unnamed narrator initially uses fairly stable tercets and quatrains to describe the fox as he slips through London. Gradually, Smith dissolves the binary opposition between man and fox by making the creature both fox *and* man, a hybrid creation. Hence, the fox can have a 'heart attack up his sleeve' (Smith, 1982: 132) while carrying the scent of 'bloody feathers' (131). As a result, that slippery creature, the urban-fox, becomes even more elusive, its fox-hood acting as a metaphor for wounded and fugitive masculinity (within the 'red slash of fox body' [132]). 'Fox Running' prepares us for his character's hybrid, liminal status by abandoning full-stops and making sparing use of commas (the first is on line 35), creating a blurry syntax that allows 'some chicken dream' (131) from the unconscious to bubble up. And when the third-person narration is interrupted on the fourth page by a short section in which 'Fox writes' (133), the slippage between narrator and character accelerates. 'Dawn glimpsed and sometimes sighted' (132), Fox first falls into the crack between night and day ('in the rattling milk bottle dawn' [131]), and then dissolves into the city itself ('Running into the tube maps/ into the bus routes into the rails' [132]). At last, 'he is anyone / naked under his clothes' (169), an archetypal wandering figure who has suffered 'bankruptcy desertion failure redundancy' (167).

The slippery relationship between Smith and his characters caused some critics to ‘come unstuck... because half the time when there’s an ‘I’ in a poem I don’t know if it’s a persona or the poet or a mixture of the two’ (Stannard, 2002). But Stannard’s criticism is intelligently countered by Paul Batchelor:

So many characters make their way through Ken Smith’s poetry, and clearly all of them contain a measure of Smith himself – as they must. Whether you have a problem with this depends on how you define a persona. A persona can be used as a disguise or as a theatrical mask. A disguise preserves the wearer’s identity, a mask accentuates certain characteristics... Smith was the Brando type: able to speak for so many, yet always unmistakably himself (Batchelor, 2004: 77).

In ‘Brady at Saddleworth Moor’, by dispensing with conventional punctuation and elevating the diction (and ghosting in Anglo-Saxon alliteration), Smith alerts us to his presence, as poet. The impact of a phrase like ‘the acids of my discontent’ (Smith, 2002: 141) is diminished, and perhaps turned into an unreliable whine, by our knowledge of the unpleasant character who has uttered it, but we see Smith’s eyes through the mask, as Kennedy (1996) suggests.

For Kennedy, the ‘deliberate clumsiness’ (Kennedy, 1996: 222) of phrases like ‘fell I felt’ is the mechanism by which the poet emphasises his ‘detachment’ (222) from his speaker while mounting a ‘tacit argument about his [Brady’s] humanity’. In essence, Kennedy is complaining that Smith wants to have his cake and eat it – to be both differentiated from, and connected with, his speakers. I’d like to consider this criticism by examining Smith’s poem ‘Writing in prison’, another monologue in which we can hear the simultaneous voices of both Smith and his character:

Years ago I was a gardener.  
I grew the flowers of my childhood,  
lavender and wayside lilies  
and my first love the cornflower.

The wind on the summer wheat.  
The blue glaze in the vanished woods.  
In the space of my yard I glimpsed again  
all the lost places of my life.

I was remaking them. Here in a space  
smaller still I make them again (Smith, 2002: 139).



‘Writing in prison’ achieves a haiku-like calm that fits with the meditative wisdom acquired by the speaker. But who’s speaking? Smith, the prison-writer, reflecting on his lost youth? Or the prison-gardener? In one sense, it’s Smith, particularly when the poem repeats Anglo-Saxon consonants – g, w, l – that Smith loved, and ends with five ‘ay’ sounds, a music of lamentation common in Smith’s work. But it would be equally possible to argue that the poem is ‘spoken’ by the prisoner, similarly longing for the simple beauty of the countryside.

Smith agreed with an interviewer who referred to him as ‘a rustic in the city’ (Evans, 2000: 3), and there’s often a strong pastoral tendency in his work. He confessed he’d taken the ‘warning to get out of this “nature” slot’ (Raw, 2004: 141) after being lumped in with ‘the tribe of Ted [Hughes]: ‘I had been writing a pastoral nostalgic lament... when in fact I was a townsman’ (141). This led, he said, to ‘forcing myself to... look at the city around me, and to work from that rather than reflective old memory’ (141). Nevertheless, he continued to be criticised for using nature as a ‘get-out-of-jail’ card. Barry argues Smith ‘merely sampled’ (Barry, 2000: 101) ‘extremes of self-loss and social dislocation’ (101) before turning away ‘to a much more familiar romantic pastoralism’ (101). He says this provides ‘a much-needed sense of closure’ (101) to ‘poetic problems presented by this urban material’ (101) – and implies the poems lose their troubling sting, as a result.

I think this criticism ignores the dualism in Smith’s work, a quality that creates tension and beauty. For me, these tensions stem from fundamental struggles in Smith’s own being: between village-boy and city-man, between social realist and pastoralist, between optimist and pessimist. Having been raised in rural poverty, the search for consolation in nature is hindered by experience of its hardships – just as the yearning for liberal ideals runs up against an underlying doubt about human nature. Rather than seeing a poet wriggling off the hook by ‘suppressing and containing that otherness’ (Kennedy, 1996: 223), I find a writer

struggling to understand, not the murderer Brady's otherness, but his own. That's the source of his poems, and the thing that gives them their tension. Smith saw doubles wherever he went, and understood that he could easily have been one of the wanderers and misfits that fascinated him. Moody and self-conscious, but capable of high spirits and good humour, Smith was as much of a riddle as the men he studied – and these contradictions are all there in the poems. He believed that his students were seeking help 'in figuring out who they were... how they came here' (1990b: 8) – and that phrase counts just as well for his own work, and for the motivations that gave it such energy.

In its concern for the 'human flourishing' of those 'struggling to keep their imaginations alive' (Smith, 1988: 318), 'Writing in prison' became a totemic poem for me. I felt it emblemised Smith's wider concerns, and it served to remind me of what I was trying to achieve through my teaching. What's more, I shared Smith's fascination with wanderers in prison. Jail is a dreadful place for anyone to wind up, but there's something particularly awful about a confined traveller. Often, these wanderers seemed to have met their grim fates through a failure to cope with the magnitude of their freedom. That's the impression I was trying to convey in the following poem, written a few years after my residency:

### **Tale**

Tell me about thunderstorms on cliffs,  
how you opened your mouth to taste metal,  
raced over dark fields, seeking  
caves, overhangs, the hems of trees.

Tell me about ceilidhs: limestone walls,  
a peat roof, how the fire burned red  
and the bothie filled with smoke  
and you breathed it in and the people danced.

Tell me what I have to guess,  
how your love of being free  
took you beyond the camp fire's ring of light,  
brought you here, to a tin plate and sodium sky.

Tell me you didn't do it,  
that you shouldn't be here.  
Tell me the seconds, the minutes,  
the hours, the days, the years (Swann, D. 2010: 124).

It would be inaccurate, and too neat, to suggest that this poem took direct influence from a piece by Smith. As I suggested, I don't think inspiration works like that. But the subject matter of 'Tale' reminds me of Smith, for there's a wanderer struggling with his freedom, and the repetitions (in the stanza openings) curb the wandering. Hence, there's a tension between 'the free flowing and... the bitten-back' (Raw, 2004: 108).

'Tale' started as a journal-jotting, neither prose nor poetry: *jailed bothie-dweller: fields/camp-fires; parties/whisky; horses/space. Toilet-seat/tin-plate; thunderstorm/sodium lights*. The notes were based on conversations with a man who emblemised the suffering wanderers I'd met, men who'd tested their freedom's limits and gone out over the edge. If that *is* what had happened. Several men in desperate situations insisted upon their innocence, and that's what the end of the poem is yearning after, I think: for the truth and simplicity of the outdoors to come flooding into the jail's cramped spaces, so that it's possible, at last, to tell who's innocent and who's guilty.

A hopeless yearning. But that's where the poem took me. For it was moving to see prisoners pull down toilet-seats for guests, and hard to listen as they described days at sea, or in foreign lands, or wild places. My imagination longed to recreate 'lost places', as Smith put it in 'Writing in prison' (above). To that extent, I share with Smith an instinct for the elegy – some melancholic, Romantic interest in ruins and trapped wanderers, and characters longing for home, or those drawn backward into the past, like Van Dyne, in Heathcote Williams's wonderful book, *The Speakers* – a wanderer who claims he appointed himself the 'imaginary Emperor' (1982: 184) when he was imprisoned in Sing Sing, and now speaks at Hyde Park Corner about how 'prisons should be torn down for all the good they do' (186). The poem beneath is rooted in my attraction to wandering misfits and storytellers like Van Dyne:

### **Longing**

to go back to the fields  
that I pulled turnips from

to eat on the frozen days  
when there were no lifts

to towns down the coast  
where I wanted to find a way

to live with myself  
after what I'd done

to people I loved  
and what they'd done

to me, for we were none of us  
angels, and ain't yet.

To go back and find that town  
I was always wanting.

To stand on the roadsides  
with all my hunger.

To live again through the bad times.

To go back to the bad times (Swann, D. 2010: 134).

My impulse in writing the piece was straightforward. A prisoner had described a longing to return to the 'bad days' of youth, and I found this moving. If there is any aim other than to record that longing, and to pay attention to a melancholy person, it is evident in the decision to start each stanza with the word 'to'. This device acts as a speed-bump, creating a staccato quality – but it captured the man's static framing of his story, in which each event seemed mysteriously unconnected to the next, as if he were showing me an unknown stranger's photographs rather than projecting his own home movie. In trying to capture this stasis, I surrounded and infiltrated the poem with white space, so that each unit was separate. This involved shortening lines and breaking up the original draft's big dollop of words so that the stanzas floated alone. I hoped these spatial qualities worked with the stop-start rhythm to bring home the wanderer's strange stasis. Looking back, I remember the prisoner's frown as he recalled each frozen moment. It seemed he was staring down a long road, into the same cold wind he described. Each memory had to be dug from icy soil, and the digging caused him pain, but the memories were still better than what he was living through in jail.

In wearing a mask to speak from the narrator's perspective, I had ventured from my own fixed position, a freedom partially fuelled by engagement with Smith's work. Once more, I sensed the poem generating its own path, freeing me from the facts – to the extent that, now, looking back, it's hard to remember which lines were spoken by the prisoner and which by the character that emerged as I wrote.

Where I parted company with Smith was in my use of given poetic forms. Although his work skilfully deploys a wide range of formal techniques (e.g. the Anglo-Saxon *scop*), it tends to avoid traditional vehicles. Not many sonnets, for example. Even fewer villanelles. The ghosts of these forms haunt Smith's work, true – especially ballads and haiku. But Smith matured when free verse was in the ascendancy. Years earlier, William Carlos Williams had proclaimed: 'We do not live in a sonnet world' (Caplan, 2005: 64), and this attitude had percolated widely by the 1960s. In contrast, during the 1990s, a lot of UK traffic was heading in the opposite direction, as made clear by Peter Sansom's exclamation: '*Form is back!*' (Sansom, 1994: 16). Hence, I was interested to see how prison-material reacted within sonnets, villanelles, and ballads. For example, in the villanelle 'Number' (a first-person monologue, narrated by a haunted murderer), formal pressures created possibilities for repetitions that intensified theme:

### **Number**

These things I'm sure of: fists and thunder -  
learned from alleys, learned from glue.  
That thing in me, it pulled me under.

Eyes of blue and golden hair -  
I screamed and then I hit her. One punch, two...  
two things I'm sure of: fists and thunder.

They sent me to this far place, where I'm near her,  
the girl whose lips turned blue. Whose lips turned blue.  
That thing in me, it pulled her under.

Dreamed it was a nightmare,  
then woke to hear her ghost. Her ghost said, "Choose  
between the two: fists or thunder."

I rolled away - I tried to shun her.  
 The jail rained fists, its boots made thunder - loosed  
 that thing which pulled me under. Under.

And now each night she sings of squander:  
 breath, trees, love, truth.  
 These things I'm sure of: fists and thunder,  
 that thing now me: these bones, this number. (Swann, D. 2010: 32)

The poem is rooted in a difficult day, halfway through my residency, when three prisoners described their murders. I didn't ask them to do so, and none of the individuals appeared to know that others had chosen the same day. What signals I was giving out, I have no idea, but the experience shook me, and I wrote about it afterwards, as an attempted exorcism:

### **Not like this**

Today, on the first morning of Spring,  
 when I wanted to think of mountains,  
 three men told me their murders,  
 the first a stabbing on stairs,  
 the second a shotgun in the street.  
 I can't remember the third  
 – why can't I remember the third?  
 The staircase won't get out of my head:  
 a spindly banister, skin rugs.  
 He broke apart when he told his story,  
 his sobs bunched together, hard as fists.  
 I call home to forget two murders  
 and remember the third. It's engaged,  
 the box smells. In my hand,  
 the cord is cold, slimy.  
 I go to the worst café I can find  
 and eat a mound of fried food.  
 No-one else is there. Curtains trail the sills  
 like dying sea-weed. The furniture's slashed,  
 joined together again with black tape.  
 A cup sits in its own puddle.  
 Grit in the Formica.  
 A clock ticks.  
 This is what it's like, I think,  
 this is almost what it's like. (Swann, D., 2010: 63).

The only parts that asked me to work hard in the drafting were lines containing imagery from staircase and café. Here, I had to distil essential elements, and subtract surface clutter. The other lines, I kept as they came, which is why the poem is rough and ready. The end-result struck me as having some of the 'insurgent naked throb of the instant moment' (Lawrence, 1920: 88) mentioned by Lawrence – even if the poetry itself is halting and prose-like, and too

bitten-back to claim real flow. As the very least, this poem left a trace on the page of the horrible day when three men described murder, and this became useful when working on 'Number' (after I'd been granted perspective by the passing of time, and was experimenting with new perspectives).

Then something strange happened. In 'Not like this', I had described an inability to recall details of the third murder. Now that I sat down with the poem that became 'Number', I realised I could no longer remember the crimes in their sequences and particularities. Instead, I faced a mixed-up film, spliced from several sources, key scenes either missing or over-exposed. The confusion stopped me in my tracks, until I remembered Smith's notion of beginning with damage, beginning with what's broken. What about the man who had broken into pieces when he described his murder? What would it be like to live with that? I was thinking here of Borges's story, 'Funes the Memorious', about a character who can remember absolutely everything, and goes mad with the burden. We're supposed to forget, that's how we stay sane: this appears to be Borges's message. And it was a message that made sense when I failed to remember those dreadful accounts of killing.

But what about a man who never could forget? A man who broke into pieces every night? I had an idea now, even if ideas are the easy bit, as the writer Ian Marchant once mischievously suggested to my students. The idea needed something to carry it or chafe against, and I was learning that poetic form can achieve both, so I pondered the villanelle, a form that makes a natural home for obsessive memories and repetitions.

Generally, I had glimpsed a possibility to 'rhyme' the form with the subject matter of prison. I had in mind the effects that can occur when a story is trapped. With nowhere to go and no-one to listen, prison-stories will circle a mind repeatedly. In a villanelle, there is claustrophobia of repetition, too. The words are confined within their own cells. Two lines are always fated to return, and these are the only ones allowed conjugal visits from rhymes.

Yet there was something else within the fierce mathematical grid of the villanelle that I found moving – and which led me back to jail. For, in lifers like Erwin James, I had witnessed what struck me as being nigh-on impossible within the stasis of jail: rehabilitation, and transformation of character. And that was why the villanelle made such a good fit – because, when you’re locked inside a villanelle, you’ve entered a form that demands creativity on the most minimal of resources. To that extent, a villanelle is *like* a prison. I wanted to see if words could free themselves, as Erwin James had freed his mind.

As far as ‘Number’ goes, I felt the repetitions helped to intensify the narrator’s guilt, but I used small variations to build the speaker’s growing horror as he realises he is not separate from the ‘thing’ that killed his partner. Here, I believe I was influenced not just by contemporary mutations in the villanelle, but by serialist musicians like Gavin Bryars, who use repetition to underpin compositions while introducing new elements that build change.

While writing this group of poems, I did my best to remember the suspicion in jail of ‘what other cons would call a “sad story”’ (Taylor, 129). These are the words chosen by the former prisoner John McVicar to describe his acclaimed memoir, which he says was ‘written for people like probation officers’ (129). By comparison, he says that the film based on the memoir, thought by many to adopt ‘a much cruder approach’ (129) is ‘a bit more about how it really was’ (129). Here, McVicar is confessing to the same thrill that I heard very often in the jail – the ‘kick... the buzz... of being wanted and outwitting them. Being around and surviving’ (Taylor, 93). Or, as another bank-robber puts it in the same book: ‘once the adrenalin started, then all the anxieties and concerns of the everyday world began to move aside’ (73). This search for ‘the kick... the buzz’ suggests a boredom with everyday life that I see as an imaginative failure. I wanted to keep this in mind when I was telling ‘sad stories’. Otherwise, the elegies would lapse into sentimentality, and lose any sense of the boredom and violence that are deeply connected with both prison and crime.



I hope this discussion gives some sense of how I was drawing upon the 'aura' of Smith, and fusing it with my own concerns, when entering other minds and voices. This tendency is explored in greater detail in the next chapter, where I enlarge upon questions of 'voice', and describe how D.H. Lawrence's concept of 'the blood-self' (Lawrence, 1971: 121) proved helpful in carrying me towards a more complete body of work.

In the next two chapters, I present case-studies of creative pieces written in response to jail, guided by the light of the influences I have been discussing. During the discussion, I refer to issues, themes, techniques and devices already mentioned. In picking up these threads, my aim is to create a coherence that was rarely apparent while I was struggling through multiple drafts or chucking aborted poems in the dustbin.

Chapter Seven is devoted to the poetry that slowly began to emerge. Chapter Eight concentrates on the prose. The separation of the prose-piece from the poems is artificial, since, in their early stages, some poems started as prose. And the prose-pieces often became so distilled that they felt more like poems. Ultimately, I decided to separate the discussion of the prose from the poetry because this division allows me to shine a stronger light on issues connected more organically with one form of writing than the other. For instance, the third-person perspective from which I narrated most of the prose has more connections with journalism than it does with the dramatic monologue.

Although they have been separated in this paper, both the poems and the prose-pieces emerged from the same soil, and were affected by the same pressures.

## Chapter Seven

### ‘The Blood-Self’ – Case Studies in Creative Writing (and Reading)

In the previous chapter, I hope to have demonstrated engagement with the work of Ken Smith. In my teaching, I emphasise to students of Creative Writing that there is no substitute for close-reading of an influential author. But I also try to show that a creative writer is likely to ask different questions from a critic or a theorist. Here, in this section, my intention is to explore some of these questions, and to analyse the development of several pieces that owe various complicated debts to the work of Smith, Parker, and others.

Why do writers read? Hopefully, in the first instance, it’s for the same reasons as anyone else: for the pleasure of the act, and for the potential of the reading to move them, perhaps to an emotion, and/or to a new point of understanding or insight. The creative writer may, of course, carry critical and theoretical curiosities to a text, but s/he is likely to have pragmatic reasons for making a close reading. It’s a matter partly, of ‘reading to understand the writer’s choices’ (Carlson, 2007: 8) and of asking ‘how’ questions, e.g. ‘*How* did the writer achieve that effect? *How* is the book arranged? *How* did s/he succeed in moving me?’

Jane Rogers argues that students must first identify challenges facing an established writer in a specific creative piece – and then learn to solve those problems by drawing upon skills acquired from their reading. Her approach is summarised in the following quote: ‘If creative writing is to be taught alongside academic subjects... then I believe it must be taught as a craft’ (Rogers, 1992: 108). Sometimes students complain that the approach recommended by Rogers contaminates their reading, and prevents relaxation. As a teacher, it’s never pleasant to feel one is interfering with pleasure, but I try my best to remind these depressed souls that they should read as they have always done when first encountering a book – and then, in later readings, aim to move to a different level of pleasure, learning

analytical skills that expand one's creative range. Of course, this sometimes-painful process is most useful when it feeds into the student's writing, and that can take time.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi distinguishes between pleasure and enjoyment: 'Pleasure is an important component of the quality of life, but by itself it does not bring happiness' (2002: 46). In his search for processes that build 'psychological growth' (46) and 'complexity to the self' (46), he identifies enjoyment as crucial: 'Complexity requires investing psychic energy into goals that are new, that are relatively challenging' (47). For Csikszentmihalyi, then, enjoyment may involve a degree of struggle and pain, aspects of experience not usually associated with pleasure. For Csikszentmihalyi, the ability to keep going is linked to a notion of 'autotelic' experience (67):

When the experience is autotelic, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake; when it is not, the attention is focused on its consequences... The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself. Even if initially undertaken for other reasons, the activity that consumes us becomes intrinsically rewarding (67).

In other words, we continue to engage because the process of reading and re-reading is, itself, interesting and rewarding – and because there is no break of flow between reading and writing: they are constituents of the same process (even when the process happens to be painful). Csikszentmihalyi believes: 'The self becomes complex as a result of experiencing flow' (42), and comes close to the notion of 'human flourishing' explored by Nussbaum and Hesmondhalgh, when he describes the process through which we achieve creative growth:

Paradoxically, it is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than what we were. When we choose a goal and invest ourselves in it to the limits of our concentration, whatever we do will be enjoyable (42).

For Csikszentmihalyi, then, the goal is important, but needs to be forgotten during an immersive experience that becomes fascinating for its own sake. A similar link has been made in my own field between planned and unplanned elements. In Graeme Harper's

schema, Creative Writing is more than a goal-directed process, judged by concrete outputs that the market can badge and sell. Rather, Harper seeks to expand the definition of Creative Writing to include the non-mechanical activities associated with ‘*creativity*’ (75). He warns that ‘it would be disempowering, if not quite simply illogical’ (Harper, 2010: 75) to entirely discount ‘plans or formulations of goals’ (75) from the practice of writing. But, for him, writing combines ‘planned action and rationality’ (65) with ‘fortuitousness, irrationality and emotionality’ (65).

In Csikszentmihalyi’s view, the immersive experiences of ‘flow’ offer an opportunity to forget our preoccupation with self, so that:

...we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward (64).

His words resonate for me, in as much as they describe how my engagement with the work of Parker and Smith allowed me to reach a better understanding of prison – and to move beyond the narrow parameters of purely individual experience, so that writing took on new possibilities. Smith’s approach had taught me to begin with what’s broken. His use of *bricolage* and masks had also suggested possibilities for the poetry that I was beginning to write. Parker’s ‘cunning’ deployment of literary techniques such as ellipsis, tone, and pattern had alerted me to ways in which I could manipulate prose about the jail.

But it was the ‘aura’ of D.H. Lawrence that pushed me further out beyond the personal boundaries described by Csikszentmihalyi. It wasn’t just that I grew fascinated by Lawrence as I wandered his home county, Nottinghamshire, nor that I later followed in his footsteps to New Mexico (as described in Chapter Nine). It was also his faith in art, best expressed in an influential essay, ‘The Spirit of Place’, where he argues that art has its own voice, independent of the artist:

Art-speech is the only truth. An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day... Never trust the artist. Trust the tale (Lawrence, 1971: 8).

By opening up the idea of ‘art-speech’, Lawrence allows us to distinguish between ‘facts’ and ‘truth’, a useful notion for ex-journalists who have been trained in ‘objectivity’. In particular, Lawrence helped me to stumble towards an approach to the dramatic monologue through his image of ‘the blood-self’ (Lawrence, 1971: 121), a phrase I thought appropriate to jail.

Lawrence developed his idea about the ‘blood-self’ across *Fantasia of the Unconscious* and *Studies in Classic American Literature*. In the latter, he repeats:

KNOWING and BEING are opposite, antagonistic states. The more you know, exactly, the less you *are*. The more you *are*, in being, the less you know. This is the great cross of man, his dualism. The blood-self, and the nerve-brain self (Lawrence, 1971: 121).

Lawrence uses this image of ‘the blood-self’ to ‘insist on our experience of the body as the most important fact about us, and... intellectual detachment as our greatest danger’ (Worthen, 2005: 82). In Cowan’s view, Lawrence wanted to hold the mind and the body ‘in dialectical tension... The meaning of the world resides in neither side of the dialect but in the dynamic polarity itself’ (Cowan: 1970, 40). This interpretation helps us to understand Lawrence’s respect for Native American belief-systems, in which ‘God is immersed... in creation, not to be separated or distinguished’ (Lawrence, 1927: 114).

I glimpsed what Lawrence may have meant in northern Arizona, once, when members of the Hopi tribe raised their arms as lightning flashed over their reservation. After reading Lawrence, I understood that it wasn’t the lightning they were celebrating, but the contact forged between land and sky, and the mysterious ‘Third Thing’ (Lawrence, 1977a: 515) that was brought forth from the dialectic. Or, as Lawrence himself put it: ‘in the tension of opposites all things have their being’ (Lawrence, 1977a: 348).

Not surprisingly, some critics have referred to ‘Lawrence’s... celebration of “blood consciousness”’ (Middlebrook, 2003: 4) as ‘notorious’ (4). Even if understood dialectically, ‘the blood-self’ carries obvious problems, given its echo of ugly phrases in fascist ideologies.

Lawrence's celebration of instinct is challenged elsewhere in the thesis (e.g. Doty's suggestion that rationality sits alongside instinct in the complex task of description – an argument explored on p. 174). However, for all its questionable assumptions and distasteful echoes, the phrase took on resonance when I considered it in the light of dramatic monologues written from the points-of-view of men who had shed blood.

In attempting to make this leap into the experience of murder, I bore in mind a story told to me by a fellow writer-in-residence. He described a chance encounter with a former schoolmate, now an inmate in his prison-class. 'I could have been him,' the writer told me, memorably. And my students shared this view. 'There's nothing special about you,' one of them told me – 'if you'd had my life, you'd be sitting on the other side of this desk, mate.'

I agreed. If my parents had split up during my adolescence, and I'd gone looking for the wrong boys to impress, who's to say where I would be? When I considered the dreadful infancies endured by many of my students, and the years of abuse and neglect, I saw my fate as a matter of good fortune. In that sense, the monologues allowed access to the alternative 'blood-self' that could have been sitting on the other side of the desk.

In my earliest poems, I'd written from a lyric position in which the narrator was more-or-less me, but now that I had stumbled upon some vague notion of the 'blood-self', and fortified myself with the aura of Smith, I began to experiment with other vantage-points. Although this felt liberating, I will confess to the same apprehensions that dogged the journalist Don Colburn when he adopted poetic masks/disguises. Who was I to adopt a prisoner's voice? What did I know about confinement?

I let Lawrence answer these doubts:

Meeting all the other wayfarers along the road. And how? How meet them, and how pass? With sympathy, says Whitman. Sympathy. He does not say love. He says sympathy. Feeling with. Feel with them as they feel with themselves... Accepting the contact with other souls along the open way, as they lived their lives (Lawrence, 1971:181).

I may never have known what it was like to be a prisoner, but I could ‘feel with’, and I tried to do this while walking the jail’s strange ways and afterwards when I travelled deep enough into the writing process to escape myself and enter the creative trance where many things are mysteriously joined. The attempt to get out of my own way, and approach ‘the other wayfarers along the road’, gained impetus when I started to explore given poetic forms (discussed in the previous chapter). In using traditional forms, I found the poems chose their own courses. There was freedom from myself in those little prisons.

The return of form in contemporary poetry is attributed by Caplan (2005) to important work done by black and gay poets who renovated sonnets, ballads, sestinas, etc. by bringing to them new concerns and sensibilities. Caplan refuses ‘to like one and discard the other’ (2005: 5) when it comes to the war between meter and free verse, preferring to advance the pluralist case that poetry is a world containing many species. For my own part, I found it exciting to encounter a contemporary poetry alive with so many possibilities. Politically, I have always found inspiration in the motto ‘equal but different’ – and if this holds true for human beings, then I don’t see why it can’t for poems, too.

One key challenge for the poet working in days of such variety is to listen to his/her poem and try to work out how it wants to be expressed. When it came to work produced in response to jail, there were clear divisions between those that demanded free verse and others that preferred given forms. However, I rarely knew this in early drafts, which often arrived as prose-like chunks with no clear lineation or rhythm.

My interest in form intensified after I discovered the truth in Ken Smith’s assertion that most prisoners wanted to write in traditional meters, and to confine themselves to ballads: ‘poems traditionally written in prison, conventional ballads and lyrics, rhyming *hell* and *cell* and *jail* with *fail*, short on the page and wide on the abstractions’ (Smith, 1988: 323). In prison, Smith said, ‘writing poetry is a perfectly acceptable activity... it has currency – it’s

like a bloke who can cut hair. If you can cut hair you can earn some tobacco' (Evans, 2000:

5). But he met the same challenge that the poet Richard Shelton faced in an American jail:

... to convince my group of hotshot poets that clichés, sentimentality, and doggerel were not necessarily the best way to go. I was learning that the process of learning in prison often consists of unlearning. Most of them were slaves to strict rhymes and wooden meter... (Shelton, 2007: 25).

At first, this lack of poetic ambition offended my new-found zeal for contemporary poetry. If my role was to awaken men's senses, and to create new patterns of thinking and feeling, then it was my duty to promote writing that challenged the 'artificial world of highwaymen, maids a-milking and all that bollocks' (Evans, 2000: 5).

However, while I may have lamented the lack of inventiveness in form and language, I began to understand the inmates' craving for form and familiarity. During days when I was travelling the country, and shuttling between unpleasant lodgings, my own freedom was in danger of becoming too complicated. At times, there's good reason to seek security in the familiar. In the long-term, it's unfruitful to cling to stale habits, of course. But who was I to question short-term interests in prison when 'long-term' contains so many other associations?

Rather than simply rejecting the ballad as a primitive mode of expression that relied upon too-reliable rhymes and rhythms, I decided to go deeper. I wanted to understand the pleasures it afforded, and to test whether it could explore the regularities of prison-life (and the terrors held at bay by those regularities). Could the ballad survive in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century 'without its tune' (Grigson, 1975: 14), and rely purely on 'peculiar, simple, open, direct, unambiguous storytelling' (15)? Reading Blake Morrison's frightening monologue, 'The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper', I thought it could, particularly if contemporary elements were injected into the form's ancient frame, and if the ballad took the sort of risks that Morrison's did, with its use of a speaker who is awkwardly entwined with the male struggle for 'owerance' (Morrison, 1987: 35).



Although I wasn't aware of it until later, I was following a path burned by Judith Tannenbaum. Teaching for 25 years in US prisons, Tannenbaum had put imagery at the heart of her tuition. However, an electrifying visit to the jail by the writer Plavia Kujchagulia made Tannenbaum wonder whether her students 'had not been mimicking some out-of-date English verse, but instead were actively interested in poetic qualities to which I had given short shrift' (Tannenbaum, 2000: 42).

In my case, the ballad was a rather obvious starting point, given that the jail was located in Sherwood, close to the home of England's most famous outlaw. As a form, the ballad has known a long connection with acts of murder, imprisonment, and execution – and Robin Hood has remaining on the front page ever since ballads about him first began circulating in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century (Grovier, 2009: 43). So this seemed rich ground. What's more, the ballad 'developed from an oral tradition' (Caplan, 2005: 110), which made it a good fit for prison, where so many lacked literacy skills, and where the ballad-themes identified by Grigson take on such significance: 'love, incest, transgression of the divisions of class and rank, violence, bloodshed, revenge, acquittal' (Grigson, 1975: 12). Additionally, I sensed a connection to Ken Smith and Tony Parker in the ballad's methods of dissemination through:

...the half-world of the travelling chapmen and their customers... a lost unwritten history of hardworking traders, rogues and cheapjacks, of lonely places wrapped in a timeless spell... the saga of simple people who lived and died with no record other than a church register' (Shepard, 1973; 91)

The ballad was a marginal form, read and distributed by the marginal, on paper that quickly vanished. Shepard describes the ephemera that carried the ballads as 'sheets of verses, traditional or topical, usually decorated with a crude woodcut' (1973: 16), and makes a case for the first chapbooks of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century 'as a kind of printed folklore' (26). In their sensationalism, he connects the chapbooks to today's red-top tabloids, but he sees them as also being a 'continuation of the folk-tradition of minstrelsy' (21) and as offering, 'at a time when folk-memory was beginning to fail' (46), 'the last hints of a secret that mankind once

knew – the meaning of religion and everyday affairs, the balance between tradition and topicality, the wonder and mystery of the humble life’ (46).

The ‘simplicity and passion’ (145) of penny-dreadful publications meant they were usually ‘banal...grotesque, anti-social and dishonest’ (36), and often did little but confirm prejudices, as in the case of an eight-page booklet celebrating the trial of Maggie Lang, the last woman burned as a witch in Scotland (96). However, Shepard also describes the potential of ballads to become a ‘protest literature’ (125) that spoke from, and for, the street, as evidenced by the Act passed by Queen Mary to ‘suppress dyvers heinous sedicious and schlanderous writings’ (55). The punishments were fierce: not only fines and the stocks, but the loss of an ear or the right hand (55).

The ballad’s ‘schlanderousness’, as a form existing beyond literary respectability, proved too enticing to ignore. I was seduced by colourful terms once part of its ‘half-world’, and which had now vanished into the ruins. The ballads of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries were sometimes described as ‘catchpenny’ (74) and ‘cock’ stories (74), passed on by skilled ‘running patterers’ (72) and ‘chanters’ (103), and by hawkers known as ‘mercuries’ (82). Run together in groups, ballads were called ‘garlands’, but, when appearing on single-sheets, individual works would be displayed by ‘pinners-up’ (103), and fluttered along ‘a good half mile of wall... on the south side of Oxford Street alone’ (103).

If ‘the folk ballad considered impersonal, communal concerns’ (Caplan, 2005: 110), I kept this in mind when beginning ‘Prison Ballad of the Prison Ballad’, a piece that had the specific aim of individualising a ‘communal concern’ – in this case, the consumption of drugs as a means of coping with jail’s distances and pains:

#### **Prison ballad of the prison ballad**

X came to a walled-in place  
Where men craved earth and sky.  
He saw the wire, he saw the bars,  
And he began to cry:

“O, Ma, I’ve travelled much too far,  
 too far for you to come.  
 I’ve turned my back on earth and sky,  
 My wandering days are done.”

They locked the door on that poor wretch  
 And then they doused his light  
 And X stood at the bars and cursed  
 The brilliant glare of night.

And night came on, and it was long,  
 Stretched out beyond the dawn,  
 But if it seemed long to our boy X  
 Think how endless for his Mum.

She was sick and frail, on waiting lists,  
 And came down on the bus,  
 And as she tottered through the yard  
 He listened and heard her stick –

But chose to stay in bed that day,  
 never showed for her Visit.  
 And X gazed over the yard and thought,  
 Not of things he’d lost,

Of earth and sky, his girl, and more,  
 But dates he had to cross,  
 The calendar where he lived his life,  
 As slow as grass. As moss.

Then night, and shame, fell slow and vast  
 And pinned him to his bunk  
 Till he was alone in that dark place  
 Where the desperate scream for junk.

And he covered his ears and howled to the bars  
 And spilled his voice like ink:  
 “O, Ma, these veins are all that’s left,  
 They bring me drugs’ bright glow

And I have found a place to live,  
 A shelter from this woe.”  
 But Ma had lost her voice by now.  
 It was her ghost that answered next:

“O, Son, this is your Ma to say  
 they laid me down to rest.  
 The home you left is up for sale,  
 Now wandering’s all that’s left.”

Then X went to his lonely bed  
 With a needle and a pen  
 And he wrote the ballad of his life,  
 Its rhymes protecting him:

“Dear Ma, I write to your old dust.  
 The life we shared is gone  
 But I will use these words as bricks  
 And build a house of song.

I will use these words as bricks  
And build a house of song.” (Swann, D. 2010: 78-9)

In describing the ‘formulaic phrasing and rhymes and many repetitions’ (Caplan, 2005: 110) that are sources of derision for the ballad’s detractor, Caplan identifies the very qualities that I thought appropriate to my subject matter. There is probably no environment on Earth more riddled by stale self-expression than jail, where the repetitions of daily life test a human soul to its limit. Hence, in ‘Prison Ballad of the Prison Ballad’, I risked incorporating stock and archaic imagery – the ‘lonely bed’, etc. – because I wanted to plug into the ‘formulaic phrasing’ of something old and folky. But those hokey elements needed to bump up against the contemporary issue of drugs, and I hoped that the poem would not only reflect the ‘impersonal, communal concerns’ of prison but also absorb my own individual curiosity about the persistence of the ballad’s popularity in jail.

I rarely read the poem in public these days, because I find it depressing. I’m also uneasy about the suggestion that writing and drugs are similar addictions. However, I remain pleased with the place where the poem took me, and stand by its ending, which describes ballads as ‘houses of song’, intended as places of safety.

I was drawn not just to ballads, but to villanelles, and experimental fusions, e.g. ‘The Shell in the Yard’ – a ballad that makes use of the repeating line familiar from villanelles:

### **The shell in the yard**

I made a life on the ocean waves  
Many miles from any shore  
And the girl who called me home,  
O, my heart to her I swore!

But a soul’s at sea on dry land  
When those married days turn sour  
And he’s washed up in the Flatlands  
Many miles from any shore.

And it’s true there’s no excusing  
What I done, and that’s for sure.  
Serves me right to roam this jailhouse

Many miles from any shore.

For I turned to sin and drinking  
When she stretched my heart, and tore.  
And I burned my boats and drifted  
Many miles from any shore.

So I spend my days now sweeping  
Stuff they throw on this damn floor,  
The filth of prison places,  
Many miles from any shore.

*But today I found a sea shell  
In the yard of this old jail*

*(Many miles from any shore  
Many miles from any shore)*

*And I held it to my ear  
And I heard the ocean's roar!*

And I thought of the bird  
That brought it, soaring on the air,  
A beast of shining oceans,  
Many miles from any shore.

And, for a moment as I held it,  
I recalled the girl that I let go,  
Then came back to this prison  
Many miles from any shore

And I was filled with an empty feeling  
For the home I'll see no more,  
Another shipwreck on the waters  
Many miles from any shore.

*But today I found a sea shell  
In the yard of this old jail*

*(Many miles from any shore  
Many miles from any shore)*

*And I held it to my ear  
And I heard the ocean's roar!* (Swann, D. 2010: 34-5)

Like 'Prison Ballad', this poem came from tapping out the meter, a repeating pattern of 4-3, 4-3 beats which acts as a guide if the writer feels an emotion strong enough to drive the story. Here, I was drawing upon the desolation I'd felt meeting several mariners who'd washed up in jail. The emotional spark was an anecdote I'd heard about a lifer finding a sea-shell in the yard, a story that was probably apocryphal, but whose imagery struck me as beautiful. As soon as I'd imagined the shell's finder as an ex-sailor, now shipwrecked in jail,

the piece sprang to life. But the opening lines summoned me to a wider desolation, perhaps because five lamenting ‘O’ sounds circulated around the woman introduced in line 3.

The entrance of a murdered woman was probably born from my lengthy contact with a non-sailing lifer who lovingly described the ocean walks he’d relished before ‘the thing that happened’ with his wife. The final stroke of fortune happened when the poem incorporated the yard-cleaner who had so impressed me with his philosophy on freedom (discussed earlier). This gave the sailor a reason to find the shell – and the job itself offered opportunities to compare the dirt of jail with the purity of the man’s memories.

Formally, repetition of the phrase, ‘many miles from any shore’, leaves the poem open to accusations of monotony, and I’m careful these days at readings to omit the second bracketed two-liner. However, the remainder of the repetition feels right for a narrator caught in an obsessive loop, and I thought that some echo of the villanelle would be useful in feeding the poem’s emotion. Perhaps that’s why the poem demanded to be couched in the first-person, as a short-cut to the prisoner’s frustrated inner world – which helps to explain the failure of another version, using the third-person. Problems remain, of course – not least the inversion of the natural word-order in the first stanza’s final line, where I probably went too far with the ‘folky’ element.

Going back over the account above, I find at least six imaginative steps, all made possible by the ballad’s driving rhythm. The resulting fusion of imagined characters and imagery carries the poem away from its factual grounding. No-one ever spoke these words to me, and the speaker himself never existed. But I see the poem as true, in the sense that its evocation of longing is emotionally accurate.

As a final example of how my ideas about form and the ‘blood-self’ contributed to my work, I’d like to mention the sonnet ‘Refused’, which began in the first-person, as free-verse. Ultimately, the poem became a sonnet, a form that is traditionally connected with love.

However, the first-person refused to co-operate, for reasons I didn't fully understand.

Somehow the third-person allowed a detachment that felt right for the situation, where distance and the denial of contact lie at the heart of the matter:

### Refused

Turned away by a minion at the gate,  
 the woman weeps quietly into her hands  
 while the toddler by her side chafes  
 for release and the baby in the pram  
 screams. She lurches for her fellah's jailers  
 as if yanked by a chain, the protest bursting  
 in her throat: "What do you mean, *papers*?"  
 The gateman repeats the rules. Calm. Certain.  
 Her eyes meet mine, a dull colour, the wrong  
 side of grey. "Three buses," she gasps: "Three buses  
 from Manchester. And now this." She flings  
 her young life at the pram and pushes  
 it hard down Sherwood Rise, her kids  
 famished and uneasy, her face unkissed (Swann, D. 2010: 113).

The sonnet was based on events I witnessed at the main-gate, when long-suffering relatives were prevented from visiting inmates, usually for bureaucratic reasons that made sense only to those issuing orders. I was told that women were far more likely to visit jailed spouses than men – a point dramatized in Jennifer's Clement's novel, *Prayers for the Stolen*:

The queue of visitors waiting to get in outside the women's jail was short. The queue for visitors to the men's jail was long and went way down the road and covered a distance of at least ten blocks (Clement, 2015: 214).

Watching women (it was *always* women) traipsing away, dragging crying children in their wake, I was reminded again of the truth propounded by Herman:

Not until the women's liberation movement of the 1970s was it recognised that the most common post-traumatic disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life (Herman, 2001: 28)

Every day, in jail, I dealt with men who had battered and murdered women – and now this: a set of pains and harms never recorded in official statistics. I found the treatment of these loyal visitors shocking and mystifying, and now contemplated unsettling truths about the misogyny of the jail. I hated to think about this, and about my attempts to write from perspectives like that of the narrator of 'Number', a character who killed an innocent woman.

Now Lawrence's concept of the 'blood-self' began to take on new resonance, as I considered the innocent blood spilled by my speakers. In this upsetting period, I was fortunate to encounter the neglected poetry of Joan Swift. Her book, *The Dark Path of our Names*, guided me not only in the handling of dramatic monologues and violent subject matter, but in the patterning of a theme. In her harrowing 12-poem sequence, 'Testimony', Swift uses a variety of viewpoints (including her own) to describe the trial of a man alleged to have murdered a woman whose body was found by her husband 'face down / throat cut' (Swift, 1985: 37).

Twelve years earlier, Swift was raped by the same man, and now, in the trial that forms the focus of her collection, she must cope with the twin-ordeal of facing, in court, both her memories and the perpetrator, who is present as she describes how 'The word *sodomy* forms on my tongue, dissolves like a wafer' (46). This image feeds into the poem's concern with water and purification, to suggest a religious undertow that is amplified by several confessions (the murderer's mother admits that she initially left her disturbed son with his abusive father before going back to retrieve him, and the poet confesses 'I could not die bravely' (39) when facing her rapist).

Seven of the dozen poems can be clearly identified as monologues. Two are voiced by professionals involved in the case: the coroner, and a detective. Two are supplied by the victim's husband (one a soliloquy, since it is spoken to himself), and two others come from the murderer's family: his mother and sister, respectively. The last monologue is 'spoken' by the murdered woman, now staring 'forever from police photographs, / the struggle, the long cut' (38). Two of the remaining five poems are likewise 'spoken' from a first-person perspective, but here the viewpoint is supplied by the poet, in lyric- and narrative-modes, as she moves between the murder-trial and her awful memories of the rape.



The other three poems take us into the life of the murderer. In these pieces, Swift abandons the first-person, and chooses to operate from the relative distance of the third-person. Perhaps this is a symptom of the man's baffled, unknowable nature, or a gesture towards self-protection in what is otherwise an unsparing sequence. It is one thing to try to understand the killer's background (as Swift does in his sister's monologue, a moving account of the struggle to educate a teenager who had 'no blood yet' [43] 'on the dark path of his name' [43]), but it is quite another thing to enter the killer's brutal perspective.

One poem narrated from Swift's perspective ('Beside Her Husband') deals with the struggle to face the horror, not only in the court-room, where 'over and over her body flashes to the screen' (39), but also at the scene of the rape ('I knelt. I wept. / I could not die bravely' [30]). The sequence is unflinching, and refuses to look down at the floor, as the victim's husband does (39) during the evidence. These images are set against those in the monologues of the coroner and detective, and by the soliloquy of the victim's husband. All are saturated in violence, and narrated, in a literal sense, by Swift's 'blood-selves'. The victim's husband imagines a punishment in which '*Blood spurts where his testicles slice off*' (40), and the coroner describes how he 'slid my knife into her throat / the depth of the other blade' (36).

The sequence pivots around its longest poem, 'Another Witness', written from Swift's first-person perspective. Here, in a poem that shares a strong narrative tendency with the rest of the sequence, Swift counterpoints the horror of her rape against several delicate images (e.g. a 'dress of India cotton, green and yellow print / like a field of regimented flowers' [45]; 'something feathered, a wren or winter thrush' [46] in the movement of her breath). As well as evoking vulnerability, the images strike up a yearning for the 'purification' (50) that is mentioned on the penultimate line of the sequence.

The murderer is linked throughout to water. 'The storm moves in his whole body' (35), and he kills during a storm under 'an oak tree dripping rain' (38). Swift notes the

violence of the elements ('Wind hurls a tree to ground / and lines sag without power' (48), but she also sees rain and water as some key to the man's twisted psychology, and perhaps his redemption. Described as a man whose only solace was 'the slender song / of water... between one unhappiness / and another' (44), the murderer is shown to be fascinated by water, which he walked by 'almost every day' (44). However, the water is tormenting because it 'has always run away' from him (35). In murdering the woman, he is trying to stop this outward flow by making a 'red pool / he wants to bathe in again and again' (35).

By the sequence's end, the murderer has entered the underworld. At work in the stinking sewers beneath San Quentin, he ignores 'a single cell of sky / through the open manhole' (50) and 'wants only the sewer's dark' (50), where 'he stands on the riverbank again' (50), 'free with orders from Maintenance / and a wrench for the penstock valve' (50). Here, in the sewer's freedom, Swift says 'The water runs down to its purification' (50), an image that fits with the sequence's yearning for the crime to be cleansed: 'One of us must lift her now / from the wet grass, / sponge clean her bloody throat' (48).

I was impressed by Swift's ability to counterpoint the brutality of the murderer's crimes against images of delicacy and grace. Her sequence offers a panoptic view of the murder, carefully preserving distance from the murderer by refraining from entering his perspective. But the poems refuse to flatten him into a monster, and present us with images that suggest his own distant, barely-understood yearning for redemption. For all their anger, violence, and sadness, the poems are memorable for their compassion.

Although the first-person didn't always cooperate (as in the case of the sonnet, 'Refused' [above]), I was fortified by Swift's brave approach, and persevered with the 'blood-self' principle by continuing to write monologues. The patterning of Swift's sequence, with its circulating viewpoints and manipulation of first- and third-person, was powerful when I considering ways to arrange my own poems into a sequence.

A self-imposed rule of facts-for-the-prose and fiction-for-the-poetry helped to settle my nerves, especially if both facts and fiction were deployed in the service of truth, which was always the primary aim. In trying to establish what I meant by ‘truth’, I found myself thinking along similar lines as Robert Olen Butler in *From Where You Dream*, a book that transcribes his lectures on creativity. For Butler, ‘the trap of literal memory’ (2005: 133) results in the writer ‘putting yourself in the middle as a passive observer’ (134), which means that ‘The dynamics of desire are utterly missing’ (134). I didn’t always agree with Butler’s rejection of the role of the mind in writing. And his views on the necessity of the ‘thrum’ and ‘twang’ of literature (114) left me puzzled. But I liked his commitment to the senses in fiction. For Butler, the ‘point of revision is to find meaning’ (58), and ‘coherence among the details’ (57) so that writing rises beyond the recounting of literal fact, and becomes a ‘moment-to-moment sensual experience’ (47). It’s this, he says, that separates artists from ‘nonartists’ (47). The latter know the effects they want to achieve in advance, and so ‘construct an object to produce them’ (47). By contrast, the true artist is, in Butler’s view, a writer who surrenders to ‘an exploration of images’ (47), so that the writing comes from your *sense memory* – not your ability to remember exactly’ (143).

Real-life events may require the writer, as Butler says, ‘to break them down in the compost of your imagination, and then to recover them, revoke them, and recombine them into these new imagined things’ (143). The aim is to move the focus from the author to the character, uncovering answers to Butler’s most crucial narrative question: ‘*what is it at her deepest level that she [the character] yearns for?*’ (42).

In the following chapter, the thesis moves on to consider the *prose* that emerged in response to prison, as I describe the evolution of the book’s longest piece of nonfiction.

## Chapter Eight

### ‘What is Not There’: Case Studies in the Writing of Prose

This chapter offers reflections upon the stages of composition that rewarded me with the most substantial piece I produced in response to jail. The piece took the form of an imagistic prose-essay, ‘The Privilege of Rain’, which eventually gave its name to the collection, and I believe it owes a debt to the ‘aura’ of Parker and Smith, especially for its use of fragmentation and ellipsis. But there were other influences, too – including fiction by Mary Robison. Hence, analysis of her work forms an additional strand in the chapter. In the interests of maintaining the flow of this discussion, I have included my long two-part essay at the chapter’s end, where it can be read in its entirety.

As stated earlier, in the first precarious months of the residency, I was too exhausted and bewildered to write anything down. Instead, I simply tried to keep my eyes open and follow Lawrence Durrell’s advice on finding the ‘spirit of place’:

To tune in, without reverence, idly – but with real inward attention. It has to be done for the feeling, that mysterious sense of rapport, of identity with the ground. You can extract the essence of a place once you know how. If you can just get as still as a needle you’ll be there (Durrell, 1969: 162).

For Durrell, ‘all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper. ‘I am watching you – are you watching yourself in me?’ (Durrell, 1969: 158). It’s a mystical question, but it made sense in prison, where eyes watched from all corners. Yes, I could see the place studying me, and I did my best to look back, and to search for a piece of myself there – maybe that past ‘blood-self’ who could have gone wrong as a teenager. Or the piece of myself which hadn’t extended enough empathy to innocent prisoners, or had failed to consider that this could be my fate, too. Durrell was right: it was easier to find ‘rapport’ with the place if I saw myself there, and part of it.

Of course, the work of the witness is never straightforward, as the writer Chris Arthur makes clear after describing the moment he ‘saw a terrorist in a bookshop’ in Ireland:

... ‘saw’ already simplifies that complex confluence of perception, memory, imagination, desire, comparison – all the rivulets in the stream-of-consciousness that allow experience to happen (Arthur, 2009: 144).

If the very moment of perception is so freighted with complexity, then how much more problematic does the role of the witness become when the passing of time has added perceptual layers to the stream?

I became aware of Arthur’s ‘complex confluence’ when reading descriptions of prison conditions written over the centuries by famous writers. Dickens, for instance. His sketch of a ‘ghastly’ condemned man (Dickens, no date: 156) in *Sketches by Boz* includes two dream-sequences that are projections on the writer’s part, offered as attempts to externalise and dramatize the ‘mental anguish’ (150) that Dickens perceived in prison. And, in Turgenev’s account of a public execution, the writer starts by declaring that ‘I should now like to tell everything I saw’ (Turgenev, 1958: 210), but then quickly moves from vision to metaphor, describing the prison gates as being ‘like the ‘immense mouth of an animal’ (228), and comparing the jailers to ‘spiders on a fly’ (228). Then, later, when he hears the ‘abrupt thud’ (229) of the blade, he says it sounds ‘as though a huge animal had retched’ (229).

Dickens’s dreams and Turgenev’s similes are reminders of Mark Doty’s contention that ‘Description is an ART to the degree that it gives not just the world but the inner life of the witness’ (Doty, 2010: 65). For Doty, the inevitable difficulties around the act of perception (i.e. that it is ‘provisional; it gropes, considers, hypothesizes’ [19]) should never be offered as reasons to shy away from the work of witnessing. Rather, he says we ought to work hard ‘to be better at description’ (72) – and, for that to happen, we must develop ‘enhanced attention to the looking’ (72) and to the information that is yielded by the looking. ‘The best description’, he says, succeeds in ‘building an argument about the nature of the

real' (93). In Doty's view, the witness must produce description that is 'complicated, full of feeling and tension, something almost as mysterious and active as experience is' (82).

I like Doty's notion that description builds an argument about the nature of the real, particularly for how it chimes with the poet William Stafford's advice that writers should 'treat the world as if it really existed' (Stafford, 1970: 66). For Doty, writers operate best when using both instinct *and* intelligence – when they use the 'blood-self' to sniff out the world, but draw upon their rational faculties to question their findings. Without falling into naturalistic traps that the world and the word can mirror each other, and maintaining space for 'a degree' (Doty, 2010: 19) of 'self-consciousness and uncertainty' (20), Doty rejects post-modern game playing, and insists 'the dilemma and work of the witness' (107) are worthwhile. 'To see,' he says, 'is joy and scruple, privilege and duty' (17).

His words made sense to me. While studying at Lancaster, I had met post-modernist academics with a suspicion of over-arching meta-narratives. I felt it right to be suspicious of authoritarian discourses, but certain positions made me wary. Several times, I was told that there was 'nothing behind the scenes', a phrase that implied the lack of a solid world beyond language. For some, this seemed a source of existential anxiety. For others, it appeared to represent liberation. With language freed from its tethers, a writer could work with child-like glee, sampling and hybridising in carnival-esque fashion.

This interest in pleasure appealed to me, since I believe that play and learning are intimately connected, but, unfortunately, I'm suspicious, too, of any philosophy that ignores pain and sacrifice, particularly where creativity is concerned. Granted, there are perils in high-seriousness, but I prefer 'arguments for the real' that allow for complexity and depth, and not only the surface play of signifiers. I like art that is alert to the complexity of language and discourse, and to the worlds known non-linguistically, through the human body and the senses (and the numinous realms beyond human perception – the 'more-than-human' world

[Dunkerley, 2012: 217] known, say, by the ducks and foxes that passed through HMP Nottingham's grounds, and which I felt had just as much of a place in any 'argument for the real'). The condition of the prison's trees was a particular fascination, as I go on to describe in the final chapter. Having witnessed their blossoming and their 'rape', I came, like Ken Lamberton, to see the trees as 'a living point of reference' (Lamberton, 2000: 195).

In his remarkable memoir of prison-life in the US's South West deserts, Lamberton describes the jail's trees as allowing him to keep his bearings 'on how I felt about my family' (195) by connecting him 'to a reality beyond prison' (195), both physically and emotionally:

I have a bond with them; they are familiar friends... they, like other bits of wildness confined or visiting here, expound some vital part of me in the midst of prison's two heavy hands: fear and depression... these trees particularly lessen the burden of this place... (193).

By staying alert to the movement of the seasons through the trees, and to the migrations and wanderings of wild animals ('I mark the swallows' [31]), Lamberton remained open to the liberating power of description valued by Doty – and also to the kind of wonder that Laurence Gonzales (2004) identifies as being important in the mind-sets of survivors: 'Survivors are attuned to the wonder of the world. The appreciation of beauty, the feeling of awe, opens the senses... and creates strong motivation' (Gonzales, 2004: 289).

Lamberton describes the desert as his 'mentor': 'I learn from it how to adapt to adversity... I have become a disciple of wildflowers and brittle bushes... and I will survive this drought' (93). He sees the wilderness everywhere, 'in every uncontrolled, impenitent bit of nature that violates the rules of the prison' (207) – and by tuning in to these natural guardians and violators, he gains access to that deeper layer of meaning which most rehabilitated prisoners ultimately discover: 'I hold the toad and allow myself to listen to the wildness, the freedom in its voice. It's not as escape, more a kind of passage' (78).

Not an escape, but a passage. Here, I think Lamberton is referring to 'those quiet moments' (92), alone with toads and trees, when 'I'm not buffeted by meaningless and

sadistic rules... [and]... I find clarity' (92). He says that the 'connection to nature that may even be more essential than freedom' (113) – the book's most powerful sentiment, and one that continues to fascinate me, particularly for the sense it conveys that true freedom depends upon depth of engagement with something greater than oneself.

In order to pursue the 'joy and scruple, privilege and duty' (Doty, 2010: 17) that are inherent in Doty's witnessing, I knew I'd need to work with the keen eye of a writer like Lamberton, and remain attuned not only to prison's artificial world, but to the natural zone that surrounded and penetrated it – and to retain an awareness of issues raised by Susan Sontag in her meditation upon photography.

For Sontag, our sympathy when we gaze voyeuristically upon 'the pain of others' (a phrase from the title of her book) 'proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence' (2004: 91). As such, mere sympathy is too easy, 'and one more mystification of our real relations to power' (91). Rather than simply looking on in passive superiority, Sontag's witnesses must remember that their privileges may be 'located on the same map' (91) as the indecencies suffered by the subjects of their gaze – in other words, that their comforts may be linked in complex ways to the deprivations of the people they are observing.

My challenge, as a witness in the jail, was complex. I had to remember that the eye is not separate from the emotions, dreams, memories, and desires that make vision possible, and that the eye is also limited in its capacities, and vulnerable to deceptions. What's more, I needed to remember that, being part of the same society and economic situation as the men I was writing about, I was also part of the problem represented by prison. Hence, my response would need to go beyond the detached sympathy of the 'objective' journalist.

I was daunted by these challenges, but my interest in the notion of 'witnessing' was strong. That interest deepened into a fascination when I became aware of the black flowers of the jail's surveillance system. There were eyes looking on from all angles and directions, and



their number was growing. Wherever you went, whatever you did, there was a witness. It was just as Lawrence Durrell said: ‘I am watching you – are you watching yourself in me?’ (Durrell, 1969: 158).

My interest in cameras was encouraged by the presence of a photographer-in-residence, the first of his kind in the UK, directly appointed by the Governor. The photographer’s monochrome pictures haunted me with their evocations of isolation and loneliness, and I wanted to include them in the anthology of prisoners’ work I was preparing. In return, the photographer supplemented his evolving exhibition with writings by the inmates. Hence, there was a degree of overlap in our work, and I began to see potential for the pictures to bring structural coherence to the anthology. This was my first intimation of how words and images might resonate in a successful publication – a discovery that was to bear fruit in my writing, as I discuss in the next, and final, chapter.

An engagement with photography was similarly useful when I came to write my own prose. Having struggled to bear witness in conventional fashion, I groped towards a form of ‘flash fiction’ that felt more appropriate, particularly in the sense that cameras share an ability with very short fiction to freeze a moment or to light up the darkness with a single flash.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. As far as the prose goes, it began simply as fragmentary bullet-points (discussed in earlier chapters). These notes were hastily accumulated in lodgings I secured halfway through my residency, and took the form of anecdotes, imagistic one-liners, and fragments of conversation, e.g. ‘*prisoners fastening Christmas tinsel around suicide-netting*’; ‘*a man screaming wildly, throwing oranges*’; ‘*lifer: we want what you want – a quiet life*’. When I returned to the notes after leaving my job, it felt therapeutic to start typing them up, using the fragments as an *aide memoire* for fuller exposition. By re-visiting those experiences, and by adding detail, some of the more troubling

memories settled in my mind. However, faced by several new day-jobs, I had no choice but to set the writing to one side.

Yet the jail kept nagging. In a university job after leaving Nottingham, I was assigned to share an office with an academic who had the same name as a lifer I'd taught. I stared at the name-plate before finding the nerve to knock. Inside, my new colleague had left a badger's skull, as a welcoming gift. I never told him that a lifer had shared his name, nor that the same prisoner had been incarcerated for beheading a man.

When I did finally return to the prose, I was dismayed to discover pages of tired abstraction, which contained little of the spontaneity that D.H. Lawrence had craved: 'the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present... Now, *now*, the bird is on the wing in the winds...' (Lawrence, 1977a: 185). Or, as he is quoted as saying elsewhere: 'The living moment is everything' (Merrild, 1964: 230) – a reminder that, for Lawrence, the words, themselves, should be alive.

All my adult life, I've admired George Orwell for his clarity of mind, and have urged students to read his essay, 'Politics and the English Language', a treatise on the importance of accuracy and precision that influenced my approach to describing prison. But something felt wrong now when I read my descriptions. They were untrue to my own thought processes. Embarrassed and irritated, I put the notebook away, and returned to my teaching: namely, a module on postmodernism in which I introduced Cage's '4.33', a famous experiment in minimalism, and then followed it with the film, *Down by Law*, in which the one dramatic episode (a prison-break) is omitted from the plot. Afterwards I experienced a Cage-like silence that prompted me to lecture my students with such urgency that I realised I was trying to pass myself a message. Somewhere inside, a penny was slowly dropping – but it would take a while before it hit the bottom.

Meanwhile, having lagged in my efforts to produce an anthology of prisoners' work, I was receiving messages from jail about the need for speed. It had proved difficult to familiarise myself with publishing technology, but this was not accepted as an excuse. A prisoner is like a hospital-patient. If you promise a visit, you'd better make sure you turn up. I knew that, and there was no more time to waste.

After securing technological support, and finding a thematic structure for the anthology (using photographs to break it into sections, as indicated earlier), I wanted to contextualise the writing with an introduction. So I returned to my journal, and tried to harvest material. Slowly, I understood where I'd gone wrong. In attempting to make sense of the prison, my writing had become too cerebral. Set alongside the visceral writing of prisoners, my prose felt anaemic and abstract. There was too much intellectualising, and it got in the way of my strength, story-telling.

Orwell was right about clarity. But this doesn't mean you write like your heroes. It means you write what is fully your own. In its Olympian overviews, my prose had moved away from my own experiences. As a tiny cog in the jail's wheel, I had never understood much that was happening. Hence, it felt false to write as if I did. Now I set to work on the anthology's introduction, distilling the prose until it was less dependent upon abstractions, and became a more accurate expression of how my mind tries to understand the world, through imagery and narrative, or, as the wife of the Native American writer Thomas King tells him when he's tempted to preach: 'Don't show them your mind. Show them your imagination' (King, 2003: 26)

### **Foreword**

Brown atoms flitted across the murky water of the jail's disused swimming pool. A tall, gaunt prisoner paused from his gardening duties, leaning on a spade. 'That's a pretty sight, isn't it?' he beamed.

A few days later, the ducklings were piled in a sleeping heap under their mother's wing. The leaning prisoner was still grinning. 'Their dad's sodded off to Skegness for a bit of nookie!' Behind him on the poolside was a chipped sign: NO RUNNING OR ROUGH PLAY.

It was a hard Spring, and the ducklings didn't make it. Some prisoners said that the cold killed them, others that they drowned in the choppy waters. Grown men with long criminal records wept. The mother duck wandered through the prison flower-beds.

Her second brood appeared in early summer. An RSPCA officer came to fit a wooden exit ramp to the pool.

One evening in late May, a fearful storm stripped the blossom from the prison's most beautiful tree. Coming away from my evening class, I watched the ducklings struggling on the tips of brown waves.

Next morning, they were back under the wing again.

Weeks passed, and fluff turned to feather. 'They'll be ready to fly soon,' said the gardening prisoner. His eyes scanned the endless blue Nottingham sky.

Workers came to drain the pool a few days later. The ducks flew away.

In autumn, as my residency was coming to an end, labourers began filling the empty pool with rubble. They threw in stones and earth, tins and litter, and an old tree with indestructible leaves. A golden Buddha statue was removed from the poolside and placed in storage. Banged-up inmates hollered to each other through the bars.

I glanced at the dark silhouette of a prisoner in the Segregation Unit which overlooks the old pool. I was thinking: 'How would I feel if I knew I'd had my last swim for 15 years?'

Change has come fast to the prison service in recent years. When I entered my post as writer in residence, friends told me to expect frustration. Prison, they warned, is a place of stasis.

During the 12 months I worked at HMP Nottingham, the jail's population soared. Two new wings were added to the original Victorian structure. Remand prisoners were moved into the jail, and lifers were allocated to a separate wing.

Throughout the year, drills shrieked and hammers clattered. Yellow-helmeted construction workers picked their way past JCBs, trucks, and piles of bricks. Meanwhile, the long grind of prison life continued. For a long time, I considered calling this book 'Hard Hat Zone'.

In prison, staff and inmates rely on the steadying influence of regular routines. Change is a threat. The writing in this publication has emerged from the pressures and stress of the greatest change in the prison service's history. It contains individual voices straining to be heard above the law and order debate.

Just as beautiful writing can be conjured from bare, echoing walls, so the essential myths of freedom persist behind prison walls. Deprived of the ducks, some inmates of Nottingham claim to have seen a fox roaming the yards by night. A resourceful creature living on its own terms inside the walls...

During the last 12 months, I have been impressed by the resourcefulness displayed under trying circumstances by both inmates and staff at HMP Nottingham. But it is the resilience of their creative spirit which has really moved me.

The writers in this book have set their imaginations in flight. (Swann, D. 1998: 3)

The introduction met with approval when I returned to Nottingham to distribute the anthology. One of the lifers I liked best gave me the cold-shoulder for being slow, and others had moved on, so missed out on the book completely. These things gave me cause for regret. But it felt good to see a sense of accomplishment in the inmates who remained, and I was pleased to hear all of the men in my former evening class report that they were still writing.

I had hoped my visit would help me to draw a line under an important experience in my life, as well as giving the inmates a sense of satisfaction and hope. But the return stirred up memories and emotions, and made me keenly aware my life was moving and changing while others' had gone nowhere. I wasn't free of the place, not by a long stretch.

Occasionally, when memories and emotions seized me over the following months, I scribbled poems to release tension, and it struck me how often I described holes, absences, gaps, and negatives. For instance, the poem 'Gone' is rooted in the testimony of a lifer who described himself as 'a hole' before he committed his murder. It was difficult to listen accurately after he'd issued that startling word, and I'm not sure how much of the rest of the poem accurately represents what the man told me. But I stick by the accuracy of the poem's

‘embodied vision’ (Glück, 1999: 33). Here was a man who had felt a vacancy in his own being – and now yearned for oblivion so that he might escape the pain he’d created.

### **Gone**

I could have been anyone on that street,  
but my luck twisted me.  
The kind of loneliness I mean,  
it’s frightening to be near.  
The gap around me widened  
as the gap opened in myself.  
I was like a hole inside an emptiness,  
a hole something was bound to fill.  
The thing I did, the blood I spilled.  
She never harmed a hair on any head.  
I wish someone would take  
every atom from my body  
and fire it at the sun.  
Then I’d be good and gone.  
Good and gone, mate. (Swann, D. 2010: 31).

Similarly, the poem that follows was inspired by a phrase uttered by a long-term inmate. After casually asking a prisoner how he’d been, I received a litany of place-names, followed by the baffled statement that he didn’t know *where* he’d been, let alone *how*. This was, he said, because he’d been on a ‘spin’, i.e. moved from jail to jail, day after day. The encounter gave me a dizzying glimpse into aspects of prison-life that were denied to me. Whenever I left the jail, a hole opened behind me. And the hole was just as real and important as the solid things that surrounded it because prisoners spent months and years inside it:

### **The Spin**

He’s wise after his Spin:  
“Five nicks in five nights,  
then back where I began,  
or so it would seem”,  
and looks at the floor  
as if to check he’s still on it.

*Not the words  
or how they’re spoken,*

*but the silences between.*

*Not the chapter,*

*not the verse,*

*but the empty thing around it.*

Five days in the van,  
he forgot where he was

and who had forgotten:

“Like an atom, mate –  
made of holes”,

then turns away, his piece done.

*Not the words  
or how they’re spoken,*

*but the silences between.*

*Not the chapter,  
not the verse,*

*but the empty thing around it (Swann, D. 2010: 97).*

This poem acts as an emblem for my work back then, being simple in its phrasing, and still leaning strongly towards free-verse, while betraying a growing interest in form and shape, with the italicised sections acting as a chorus. This song-like set-up created an ironic angle for the poem, which is really about the opposite of singing – about things that have never been vocalised.

‘The Spin’ is an example of how I was loosening ties with journalistic habits, especially as this prisoner never said anything about atoms. I added that phrase to amplify the man’s surreal fatalism – and because it was the sort of thing I’d heard inmates say. In prison, there is much clichéd language, but the clichés exist alongside a fund of arcane and esoteric knowledge, often offered by men who’ve spent a great deal of time alone.

Holes, then. And gaps and absences. I noticed how often I tried to describe things that weren’t there – things that had eluded me or the men. In my case, this was a huge amount. As my successor, Chris Jones, once put it, the writer-in-residence is as marginal as the Buddhist priest who occasionally visits the jail. To pretend you have an overview when you exist at such a peripheral angle would be silly and dishonest.

Eventually I connected the dots back to Tony Parker, whose interviews often centred on ellipses that made his subjects fascinating and difficult. Hence, I probably had holes on the brain when I returned to the troubling notebook of bullet-points and fragments. But now I fed in the novelist Alan Burns's imagistic guidance: 'A picture in every line – I want to get a physical picture' (Burns, interviewed in Firchow, 1974: 59).

I also had the good fortune to chance upon Mary Robison's *Why Did I Ever* (2001a), a novel whose 200 pages contain 536 brief numbered sections. Most of the novel's 'action' occurs inside the ellipses between sections, and 'only gradually do the facts of Money Breton's life emerge' (Hallett, 2002: 329). The novel's protagonist is a Hollywood story-doctor in danger of losing the plot following the rape and torture of her son.

As this brief summary suggests, *Why Did I Ever* is built around a huge back-story, filtered to the reader through Money's fractured, traumatised consciousness – and disrupted and intensified by the ellipses that surround the vignettes. In an interview with *Bomb* magazine, Robison reveals that the novel was 'pretty literally, assembled' (Robison, 2001b) from fragments scribbled on index-cards as a response to personal crisis. ('I was having more than difficulty' [2001b]). As such, its holes and vignettes seem to be connected to traumas suffered by both the characters and the writer.

By patching its void with a series of floating, often tangentially-connected (and occasionally confusing) fragments, *Why Did I Ever* is reminiscent of what Molly Andrews describes as 'traumatic testimony... marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility' (Andrews, 2014: 37). This notion suggests that meaning is generated from absence as much as from content – or the 'empty silence ... in the darkness / Between stars', as R.S. Thomas puts it in his poem, 'Via Negativa' (Thomas, 1993: 220).

Thomas searches for God in the darkness between the stars, an approach that puts him in line with many of those who have followed the *via negativa*, including perhaps Robison,



who is described as having ‘a Roman Catholic background’ (Whitney Hallett, 2002: 325). In an interview on KCRW Radio, she listens quietly as Michael Silverblatt describes her work as gesturing towards a God that may not exist, and concedes that much remains ‘submerged’ (Robison, 2003) in her fiction. However, she takes umbrage when her elliptical work is described as minimalist. Instead, in an online interview, Robison says she prefers the term ‘subtractionist... That at least implied a little effort’ (Robison, 2001b). It’s easy to see why Robison would want to evade being classed as a minimalist when one encounters the list of complaints against that literary mode, neatly summarised below by Frederick Barthelme:

a) omission of big “philosophical” ideas, b) not enough history or historical sense, c) lack of (or wrong) political posture (expressed as ease with the culture), d) insufficient on-page thinking resulting in boil-in-bag characters, e) commonplace description too reliant on brand names, f) drabness of “style”, g) moral poverty (Barthelme [no date]).

How to distinguish between ‘minimalism’ and ‘subtractionism’? In her KCRW interview, Robison suggests it’s more than a question of editing out words. Rather than simply subtracting language from her evolving drafts, she describes a tendency to re-write from scratch. Hence, the ‘effort’ towards subtraction is part of a general tendency to pare the fiction down to its essence.

In choosing parts to stand for the whole, and using a minimum of exposition, Robison operates like many writers of ‘flash’ fiction, who tend to privilege the foreground over the background, and to prioritise character, imagery, language and situation over the plotting that is favoured by writers operating with longer forms. Robison makes ironic commentary on this in another fragmented novel, *One D.O.A., One on the Way* (2009), which follows a Hollywood location scout around the ruins of post-Katrina New Orleans. When her assistant tells her, ‘I never understood why the background’s so important anyway’, the scout replies that it ‘entertains the eyes’ in the absence of special effects (Robison, 2009: 124). To add to the irony of this metafictional element, the novel is saturated (literally) in the pain of the disaster’s aftermath, with New Orleans itself reduced to fragments and gaps.

Barthelme is quoted on the jacket of Robison's 1991 novel, *Subtraction*, as saying that Robison has a 'peculiar squinted view', and this works well to describe the brief, often-static tableaux that flare up from her fiction. In many of her stories and novels, the characters are immobilised or uncertain in the face of disaster (it's a personal disaster in *Why Did I Ever*, but Hurricane Katrina forms the backdrop to *One D.O.A.*, *One on the Way*, and several of her short stories take place around earthquakes and storms). This tendency to present stasis in response to crisis is illustrated in Robison's story, 'Care', in which the protagonist says: "Jack tells me I'm just walking through life. He says I ought to start changing" (Robison, 2002: 223). But when one of the characters asks how she's supposed to change, the protagonist confesses she doesn't know. Moments like this have earned Robison criticism for using 'wit, formal ingenuity and wacky angle... seemingly to sanction worlds in which people are unable or cynically unwilling to act, or are frozen in states of abdicating adolescence (whether they be 25 or 60)' (Bauer, 1991).

Robison's approach can lead to dramatic inertia, it's true, and this makes some of her less dynamic work frustrating. However, the stasis is charged with tension and relieved by humour, and there's a poetic compression of language and imagery:

The language is really the thing... it's restless, prowling. Words, rubbing hungrily against each other, taut and potential, up down and sideways on every page... Shorthand to describe the rhythm of it—the wry and twisty dialogue, the crooked shards of description, the gristly lists of harrowing facts and litanies of sensorial particulars (Robinson, 2009).

Throughout her work, there's a sense that Robison's 'squinting' has caused her pain. The light into which she's staring can be tolerated by only short bursts of attention. In that sense, Robison may well be the most literal practitioner of 'flash fiction', a writer who stares hard at a single point of illumination rather than shielding herself from its glare.

The brief 'flash' of attention is bound to leave 'darkness / Between stars' (Thomas, 1993: 220), but these absences hold clues – or, as Robison told *Bomb* magazine: 'Oh, the white spaces make sense, don't they?' [2001b]), and this leads me back to the *via negativa*,

which is linked by Sheldrake and Fox to a process in which the soul grows by subtraction (1996: 74). Sheldrake and Fox make an unusual attempt to fortify the contemporary practice of science with Jungian ideas and mystical theology. They identify grief, praise, meditation, and simplicity (74) as methods towards subtraction. For them, subtraction and the growth of the soul requires ‘receptivity, an open heart, a letting go...’ (74).

While wary of the new age tendency in their thought (a tendency which Sheldrake and Fox themselves criticise for being too obsessed with light, and not honouring ‘enough the darkness, the sinkings, the suffering, and the shadow’ [122]), I felt emboldened by Robison’s approach, and receptive to the ‘subtractionist’ suggestion that less could be more (whereas many of minimalism’s detractors complain that less is even less).

Therefore, I set to work on a new draft of my ‘nonfiction narrative’, interested to see if I could isolate the jail’s images among a series of ellipses. The aim was to find out whether the prose could replicate my daily experience of jail: an onslaught of disjointed images, too riddled by holes to make sense. I enjoyed the violence in this work, hacking out exposition and leaving gaps to suggest meaning. It felt like I was exacting revenge on the miseries of incarceration. Using ellipses, visual rhymes, juxtaposition, and collision, I aimed to create the associations and ruptures described by Robison describes in the *Bomb* interview:

Like the fact that the gas station is not in the mall—it’s kept separate, for several reasons. All the little sections are employed differently. They’re meant to have different jobs. And that’s as far as I was able to go in providing a customary shape for the story... I can shade things however I prefer... Or, omit anything the story really doesn’t need... I have to see to it that problems get solved and questions get answered and that nobody wears a snowflake sweater in July. But I’m not obligated to the order and sequence, or to the details or the whole that I would have to try to authenticate if I were recounting an experience. These are some of the good reasons I’m not a news writer or journalist (Robison, 2003).

While tutoring me, Alan Burns once said his imagistic approach was informed by an interest in cinema, and I shared this attraction, having studied Film as an undergraduate. Slowly, then, as I ejected the abstractions, I saw possibilities for the notes to become a screenplay. Hence, I spent time re-writing the material. The experiment was a failure, but

allowed me to discern a pattern of ‘shots’ and ‘cuts’, and I drew an analogy with Kuleshov’s experiments in montage-editing, described as a variety of ‘collage’, in which: ‘meaning is not inherent in any one shot but is created by the juxtaposition of shots... by the relationship of the images to one another’ (Shields, 2010: 115). After abandoning the screenplay, I was left with a collection of imagistic prose-fragments, vivid but formless. I considered sealing the fragments in a box, and releasing them like confetti, after the manner of B.S. Johnson, whose novel *The Unfortunates* is comprised of chapters that can be read in any order.

In her work on abuse, Herman explains fragmentation as a response to trauma. Traumatic memories, she says, are likely to arise as ‘fragments of the traumatic event in exact form, with little or no imaginative elaboration’ (Herman, 2001:39). For the traumatised person, significance often ‘lies in what is missing’ (73).

Herman’s work concerns survivors, rather than perpetrators, of terrible crimes, but her insights are relevant. Although many of my students had inflicted appalling traumas, lots of them were clearly in trauma. And this damage extended beyond the men’s minds, into the physical landscape that surrounded them. Thanks to the re-building programme, the jail was riddled with holes. I have already mentioned the swimming pool, smothered under rubble, but there was another ruin that lingers in my imagination, although I have never managed to write successfully about it.

Within the walls, standing side by side, were two perfectly normal suburban semi-detached houses. When I asked about these dwellings, I was told that officers had raised their families in them. The thought of children growing up in a jail was one thing, but the confusion that ensued when the houses were demolished was something else entirely. The dwellings evidently vanished while I was on holiday, and afterwards it took me weeks to remember they’d ever existed. By now the new wings were rising with startling speed, and

when I enquired about the fate of the houses, I met only vagueness. One officer told me I was mistaken – there had never been any houses. And afterwards I started to doubt myself.

Now my essay entered a new phase. I had begun by trying to de-familiarise, because I was in thrall to Schklovsky's ideas and curious about the possibilities posed by the fragmentation in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo*, a novel described as 'a work made of less... a study of continuous subtraction' (Franco, 2006) in which a series of ruthless ellipses construct a deathly, hallucinatory desert for Rulfo's dispossessed peasants.

However, some of these experiments made me anxious. While I saw potential in adopting Rulfo's techniques to mimic the jail's fragmentations, I conceded there were limits to my interests in experimentation.

Czeslaw Milosz describes the writer facing 'a choice between the dictates of the poetic language and his fidelity to the real' (1983: 71). The paradox, he says, is that he can 'be faithful to the real things only by arranging them hierarchically' (71):

Otherwise, as often occurs in contemporary prose-poetry, one finds 'a heap of broken images, where the sun beats', fragments enjoying perfect equality and hinting at the reluctance of the poet to make a choice (71).

It's a criticism that could be made of the prison-poetry of C.D. Wright, where the 'perfect equality' of the shattered fragments takes on a list-like quality that I find lacking in the 'hierarchical' organisation identified by Milosz. Of course, it may well be that this is exactly the point Wright wishes to make, given her interest in the divisiveness of jail. However, the approach didn't feel right for my own purposes. I required hierarchical arrangement, and not only a 'heap of broken images'.

In her *Bomb* interview, even Mary Robison agrees to longings for a traditional shape:

At times... I think the beginning-middle-end structure is very appealing and very comforting. It's similar to north-south-east-west. Both of them help us know where we are (Robison, 2003).

If form is fiction, then the use of form should surely be as heart-felt as the fiction itself, and the pleasure of narrative drive was too deep for me to abandon. Where Rulfo used ellipses to bold, experimental ends, gradually dismantling narrative conventions, I preferred to orientate the reader, and to maintain a measure of coherence. It was the old tug, I suppose – the need to communicate with the community that raised me, even though that industrial world no longer exists, and its few survivors never read poems.

In recognising that I valued narrative drive over hallucinatory experimentation, I decided to build more trees into the piece – especially the cherry tree in the prison-yard. I had made random mentions of the tree in the fragments, but I saw its potential to become an image that provided continuity. As a marker of passing seasons, the tree would impose chronology, anchoring the reader in the ‘when’ and the ‘where’.

Having positioned some fragments so that I hoped they would gain resonance from both the gaps and the prose surrounding them, I realised I was allowing myself to re-order the events in a new time sequence, so that the fragments were patterned according to the material’s inner demands rather than to maintain temporal fidelity. Here again, I was learning that the act of writing is as much of an event as the experience that inspires it.

A similar search for structure is discussed by Lesley Saunders (2012). While working as writer-in-residence in a university garden, Saunders supplemented her poetry with prose that ‘relieved the poems of holding the whole responsibility of having to describe and explain, and I think the poems became freer’ (2012: 201). I recognised something of my own process in this, and in Saunders’s discovery that: ‘The problem with such hybrid material is that it doesn’t fit the usual categories’ (210). Well, I’d cross that bridge later. In the meantime, I decided, like Saunders, to ‘follow the annual cycle of seasons... [as]... an obvious and accessible structure’ (199).

I now look back upon the linking device of the tree and its seasons with an odd mixture of emotions. On one hand, it destroyed my original intention of de-familiarising the reader by replicating a prison ‘spin’ and playing with time. On the other, I liked the coherence created by the motif. As for the tree itself, that would prove valuable in adding an extra level of coherence when I was finalising the collection – as I explain in the final chapter. For now, though, I end this chapter with the final version of the piece I have been discussing throughout. Shortly before publication, I decided to split this work into two halves, having originally conceived of it as a single piece. The prose stands here exactly as it was published in *The Privilege of Rain*, in the two-part structure that I now feel was a mistake.

### **The privilege of rain (part I)**

I stopped him in mid flow.

“Don’t say it again. Please,” I said. “Please don’t say *at the end of the day* again.”

He picked a string of skin from his thumb.

“It’s a cliché,” I explained, confident in my role: I was the jail’s new Writer In Residence. I had come here to help men like him with their self-expression.

Banged-up prisoners shouted from the opposite wing. Downstairs, canteen orderlies had started dishing soft-boiled potatoes onto tin plates. The air was wet with steam. Everything seemed to smell of laundry and oranges.

“And what would you know about the end of the day?” he said.

I looked at him and he seemed to smile, so I joined in, but it wasn’t that kind of smile.

“At the end of the day,” he said, “is when a stranger closes the door on you. When you hear this stranger take away the key on a chain, and the lights go out. When you start fretting whether your flask’ll see you through till dawn. You’re staring through the bars, trying to picture the kid you’ve not seen in three years, trying to remember what she looks like, her face, her eyes. Wanting to make up a nice place for her to live in, not just this dingy corner of your head. But you can’t concentrate; you’re on edge, waiting for something – some scream, or a bell, maybe just water in the pipes – because the guy in the next peter is addicted to flushing his toilet. And you wonder how long *this* night’s going to be. Worse still – Summer. Days stretching out, on and on. Hour after hour, standing at the bars - swearing at the sky, for it to go dark. Already dreading the *next* day and the one after that...”

I fingered the keys in my pocket - two keys for the eight gates that lay between the street and me.

“So I’ll ask you again,” the prisoner said softly: “what exactly is it that you know about the end of the day, mate?”

\*

Advice came thick and fast when I was appointed to work at HMP Nottingham: “Don’t ask what they did”... “Prepare for frustration”... “Sit near the door”... “Don’t raise anyone’s hopes”...

But nobody warned me about the smell.

Imagine a building which has housed 130 prisoners all day, every day, for the same number of years. Imagine a place with no female scents – which smells only of men, of their food, their hair, their glands: a place where smells are sentenced to life.

Add to the sourness of the air the shrieking of kitchen tins, keys chattering on chains, the grating of chairs, banged-up men roaring. Hem the sound with razor wire, bleach it with sodium light, clothe it in nylon.

There’s nowhere more real than a prison. Naturally, therefore, jails are factories of fantasy, where the lathes spark with anecdotes, jokes, tall stories, lies, denial. Prisons are a good place to send a writer. But nobody except the writer wants to be there. And the things new to the writer – the body-tastes you smuggle out – are old hat to the inmate, who dreams only of ringing a door bell, walking in a straight line, sleeping with his door open.

\*

On my first day, in December, under a sky as pale as the prison’s faces, I set three inmates to write a description of a chair. I told them to try to evoke the unmentioned person who normally sat in it.

Two of the men wrote about chairs with massive rolls of padding and pillows, chairs as places to sprawl. The other man wrote about a chair with straps and dials, and a plug.

It was my first lesson.

\*

A lifer told me his dream. He was digging with bare hands through dry red earth.

“All this dust sifting through my fingers. But I keep on digging and digging... until I start to realise – there are white bones in with it, in with the dust. Hundreds and hundreds of them, very white. Tiny white bones in these handfuls of red dust, all slipping through my fingers.”

At his back, the winter moon was brilliant and low and yellow in the sky above the prison.

He stared at me. “This dream,” he said. “What do you think it means?”

I coughed, covered my mouth. As I started to speak, he cut me off.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” he said, and he turned to point at the blazing sky. “I think it means I’ve been to Mars. Either I’ve travelled to Mars in this life, or I was once there in a past life.”

I searched the side of his face for the joke, found nothing.

“The Red Planet,” he said, still gazing upwards.

\*

The sky – it was always the sky.



Jets hung their trails like bunting over the prison. Wandering aimlessly, I found a gardener staring upwards. He pointed at the white trails of vapour. “Reminds me of the ‘fridge in my old house,” he said. “Exactly the same colour of white.” He gave me some fertiliser, grey and soft, like putty, in a thin plastic bag. “Put it on the garden at home,” he whispered, flitting his eyes to check for guards.

I lived under a flight path in a big city. That summer, blue cornflowers sprouted from the fertiliser. Jets roared low over the garden.

\*

A lot of the time, it was the usual stuff that a writing tutor gets used to:

“Use your *own* words, not this 18<sup>th</sup> Century language”... Maybe try it without so many adjectives... Don’t *think* about it – follow your pen...”

All year, I kept at it, preaching that the reader of the poem is the poet. It’s in the reader’s heart where the poem’s action takes place. Don’t crowd your reader. Don’t poke her in the chest.

Some prisoners simply wanted lessons in grammar, others help writing letters. Two or three were labouring over novels. A few sought advice with legal documents.

A man with scarred hands and a wide smile wanted me to write to his girlfriend for him. “Only it’s embarrassing,” he said.

“If you’re in love, that’s great.”

“Okay,” he said shyly. “Write this. Write, *Thank you for them knickers you sent.*”

\*

I brought sonnets to my evening class, mentioned the way they bend two-thirds of the way through, into a changed feeling. The men listened, fairly intent. A few of them seemed to enjoy the idea of the *volte*, the change. One of them, soft-voiced, with boxer’s fists, repeated the word quietly, as if it was a taste. Two mentioned Shakespeare, how they loved his words without understanding them. We discussed the role of sound in poetry, the power of music.

All the while, prisoners shouted from behind bars on the remand wing. Unlike lifers, they were banged up in the evening, so they stood at the windows and shouted, some to their friends, others at enemies. And some called to women standing in wait beyond the walls.

Each night, as it went dark, the shouting grew louder. Tonight, something seemed to be animating the shouters more than usual, but I was unable to understand. It was a general din, like Atlantic rollers. The noise sometimes scared me – the way it kept on, its capacity for growing deeper and rawer, and deepening again.

That evening, our talk veered off, the way it often did. I don’t remember the *volte*. All I remember is a mention of Byron mingling with the roar of the men in the remand wing, and that roar somehow coming inside, to the classroom.

Everyone in the room had started talking at the same time.

“The Bomb. Do you know what is planned for the fall of the Bomb?” one of the men asked me, wide-eyed. He ran his fingers backwards and forwards over the table, as if there was Braille inscribed there, a message I couldn’t understand.

He said, “They will kill us. The first thing the screws will do, when the Bomb falls, is they will fire on all lifers.” His fingers halted on the table. He fixed me with brown eyes, not unkind, but wild. “There is a cupboard in this prison with an execution gun in it,” he said. “You didn’t know that, did you? They will put us to death rather than see us escape into the radiation and fall-out.”

It was intentness I saw there on his face, as if he could smell and touch the events he foresaw. He was thinking like a writer, drawing on the senses.

“No-one will be spared,” he said. “These are the facts. You ask your mate, the Governor. Maybe he will tell you the facts. That there are death squads waiting to put us to death.”

It was quiet in the room again, but, across the yard, in the remand wing, the roar had kept up.

I took a breath, moved on. Talked about the connection between sonnets and romance. Talked about love.

In the tea-break, no-one threw a kettle of boiling water, as I had read in bad books and heard in gossip. Nobody sliced anybody. Nobody bugged anybody. What happened is this: the men sat down and ate biscuits I’d fetched in, and drank coffee that tasted of acorns, and one man asked if I wouldn’t bother with the Jammy Dodgers any more, on account of how they clogged up his fillings.

\*

Once, near Christmas, I escorted a prisoner between wings.

“It’s years,” he said, studying the stars, “since I was outside in night air.”

Another time, a prisoner laughed at my umbrella. “Best is when it rains during a dry summer. There’s soot in it, then. You can taste the dirt. It’s real, man. Why would you want to keep out something real?”

\*

Change was coming to the prison. Two new wings were being added to the original Victorian structure. Drills shrieked and hammers clattered. Yellow-helmeted construction workers picked their way past JCBs, trucks, and piles of bricks.

Soon, remand prisoners were to be moved into the jail, and lifers allocated a separate wing.

I remembered advice I’d been given on my first day: “Don’t change anything too quickly. In jail, change is a threat. Go easy.”

\*

He had shot two people. In prison, they taught him to read and write, and he was angry at how the Newspapers were describing him. “They callin me a Gangsta,” he said. “I’s a pimp, but I ain’t no Gangsta.”

He wept when he told me his murders - two by-standers shot dead in a fight over drugs and girls. "I didn't mean for that to happen, man..."

I tried to get him to see Chekhov's law: a gun in the first act always goes off in the third. "If you hadn't taken a gun to town, it would never have happened."

He looked stumped.

He told me about his childhood in the Caribbean, going into the hills to hunt for land crabs. They were delicacies for tourists. But the hills were full of terrors: snakes in the prickly undergrowth, and dark nights, and the Rolling Calf, a feared ghost - half-man, half-beast - that made a noise like a rattling chain, coming close.

On one of these trips into the hills, a young friend burned himself to death on a makeshift lamp.

When I pressed the prisoner to tell me more about the incident, he shrugged. Next day, I took him a print-out of his hunting stories. He stared at the paper with wonder. He had small hands, and held a pen gently. He was well-liked in the prison.

I found myself thinking about my Grandad. How he opened Christmas presents with a knife, and always folded up the wrapping paper to save for next year.

\*

At Christmas, as I prepared to steal away, the jail became quieter. I asked a lifer about this. I said I'd expected trouble.

"Think about it," he said. "You miss family, you've got no family, you feel jealous of blokes missing families - it's all the same: you just need time to think. In the end, you want what everybody wants: you want a quiet life."

Down at the end of the wing, two prisoners were carefully threading glittering gold and silver streamers through the suicide netting.

### **The privilege of rain (part II)**

My writing career was going badly, I had little money. After New Year, I booked into a city centre boarding house, the cheapest I could find. My room was painted mauve, with a red lampshade and a bright bulb. The television was tied by a chain to a metal shelf too high up the wall. The bed's mattress was sealed with a plastic sheet. I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating. Next door, there were loud banging noises, then silence.

Breakfast was a lump of colourless scrambled eggs, too hot, then suddenly cold. I paid up fast and walked to the prison. It was Thursday. It rained every Thursday in Nottingham. My shoes leaked.

At the bottom of the hill was a vast bakery. The street smelled of bread, and something fruity, maybe currants. All the way up the hill, smelling this dough and yeast, watching vans go in and out, seeing flashes of white-capped workers, who reminded me of the orderlies in the prison kitchen, I worried about that smell.

Would you get tired of it? Was it possible in this world even to grow sickened by the smell of bread?

\*

An ex-squaddie told me about the guy he'd killed while on active service abroad. "A maniac. He came at us, howling, swinging a blade. There was nothing else for it, the two of us stiffed him. I felt the blood on my hands, he was brown bread. He was brown bread, mate."

At the end of the man's bed, two joy-riders swapped bottles of hooch. One of the men farted. They giggled, pleased with their system. The bottles were lassoed with little ropes so that they could be suspended from the bars on the outside wall if unexpected visitors popped in.

The ex-squaddie looked at his hands. He spoke very quietly. "Later, when I reported what we'd done, the officer was furious. 'You mean you've come here to tell me you stiffed a Chink?' he said. 'Ought to have tipped him in the briny,' he told us. It was the paperwork, see. The paperwork we'd put him to."

\*

"Who?"

"The Writer In Residence," I said, ashamed.

"In where?"

"Residence."

"So you live here, do you?"

"I just teach," I said. "I teach people to write."

"Fiction? Fiction's a lie. Have you come in here to teach us how lie?"

\*

Inside the prison, there was an old swimming pool, overlooked by the squinting windows of the Segregation Unit. Officers had pinned a sign to the wall: "NO RUNNING OR ROUGH PLAY". At one end of the pool was a statue of Buddha.

The pool was no longer in use. Men often stood at the bars of the Segregation Unit and stared at its dark water. Rumours said that the pool was kept on as a reservoir for putting out fires.

In April, ducks flew in to rear their young. But it was a bad Spring. As I left the jail one night, I saw ducklings struggling on the tips of huge brown waves.

They didn't make it. Grown men with long criminal records wept. The mother duck wandered through the prison flower beds.

A few days later, RSPCA workers came in, and a group of prisoners helped them to fit a ramp to the pool. The ducks hatched another batch of young, which survived, and then flew away again into the vast flat places of Eastern England.

One man told me he was looking forward to their return.

\*

The prisoner said that he had spent most of his life seeking out cliff-tops, fields, bothies, the hems of trees. He described his love of storms and camp fires. I imagined his face lit up by the flames, and the darkness of the wilderness on his back.

“I remember the smoke off the peat,” he said. “I used to breathe in big draughts of it. It smelt like whisky.” He told me about dancing to fiddles in an old hut, told me this as he picked boiled potatoes out of a slot in a tin plate, lights blazing in the yard.

\*

The nights were shrinking, the world growing bigger again.

The joker stared out into the city. “I hate this time of the year,” he said. “You remember what’s out there. You can’t hide from it anymore, it’s there facing you.”

\*

I was finding out about my freedom. I had the most liberty a job has ever afforded me: I talked (on landings, in libraries, a greenhouse, the gym) to men with chests twice the size of mine but legs far skinnier. It was like stalking the a giant galleon that was forever cresting the hill, its decks laced with wire nets, sails never rigged, the crew within sight of a port which was always out of reach.

I found a library book called *Great Walks* which hadn’t been borrowed for five years.

Staff talked about “going on the wing”; time was “bird”. They named it “stir”, and it never moved. Cells were “pads”, as if they’d cushion a fall, or patch a wound, or launch them.

I had come “inside” and found the edge.

\*

Burn was what everybody wanted.

“You go mad without `baccy,” a man explained. “Blokes in here’ll smoke anything. ‘S why bananas are banned. They used to dry the skins and smoke them. Mellow yellow. Tweet tweet tweet.”

“What’s the weirdest thing you ever smoked?”

“Hair.”

“Did you feel anything?”

“Only the roots, when I pulled it out.”

\*

In Robin Hood country, with the outlaws, my thoughts turned often to the handful of trees that had taken root in the prison. They were cut off from Sherwood by a wall, beyond which there was no longer a forest.

One of the trees, a weakly sapling, was close to the ‘topping shed’, where men had once been executed. I never found out what kind of tree it was, although one of the men referred to it as a sickly ash. Some men said there were bodies at its base.

“Even after they’d been killed, they couldn’t escape.”

My favourite tree was the cherry blossom in the main yard. In Spring, it burst into flower, dark branches sagging under the new weight.

“The last curvy thing in this whole place,” sighed a colleague.

I told him the last lines of my favourite poem, ‘A Blessing’ by James Wright, in which the poet suddenly realises that if he breaks out of his body, he’ll burst into blossom.

Later, they drove a metal pole into the earth beside the tree. Workers mounted a camera on top of it.

“Rape,” the men called it.

\*

Afterwards, nobody knew what had triggered it. Some said it was dust in the custard, others a change in the visits regime. In one way or another, everyone blamed the prison’s re-building programme, which had transformed the routines that men despised, and relied upon.

Whatever the cause, plates went flying and punches were thrown. The Governor ordered everyone to their cells. All work and education was cancelled. The men went to their windows, and roared.

The cherry tree was in wild bloom. At a loose end, I stood in the yard and gossiped with my boss. Without anyone to sweep up, blossom had pooled in pink drifts against the inside of the wall. Nearby, workers were fiddling with the drains. I watched them work, thinking about that other world below, where men’s hair and skin floated free, into the sewers, to the sea.

It brought to mind the yard cleaner who willingly picked up shit parcels thrown from cells, just so that he could feel the wind on his face.

“Look,” said my boss, suddenly.

The workers had unrolled hoses.

“They’re sorting out water cannons,” he said.

It was a beautiful day, warm breeze, blue sky – the type of day on which you know the world will end. We sloped back to the Education Block, and waited.

A long time later, word came down that one of the men wanted to talk about his A’ level in English.

We went to the yard and stood in that incoming wave of shouts, trying to get the prisoner’s attention.

“Thank God,” he exclaimed when, finally, he saw us. “I’ve been trying to swot up, but it’s bloody impossible with all this noise. I can’t think straight.”

The roar grew louder, some of it directed at us.

“But I was wondering -” he shouted, “I was wondering – the ghost in *Hamlet*, do you think he’s an actual ghost? Not that I believe in ghosts, and that. But do you think Shakespeare meant him to be more than just a symbol of guilt?”

I don’t remember what I said. I probably fumbled it. I just remember hearing someone call me a bastard, and two men begging for pens. And dark smudges behind the bars, asking questions I couldn’t answer.

\*

Somewhere under the roar, a desperate man was shouting, "Margaret!"

"What?"

His call came again: "Margaret!"

I stood in the dark prison yard, listening.

"What?"

"Margaret!"

"What?"

"Margaret!"

He must have been standing at the bars, the woman somewhere beyond the wall. Like them, I could see nothing. All that remained of them was their grief.

"Margaret!"

"What?"

They were still calling to each other as I came out through eight gates, into the street.

"Margaret!"

"What?"

And as I climbed onto the bus back to my boarding house...

"Margaret!"

"What?"

"Margaret..."

\*

Later, when things were calmer, I found one of the prisoners staring through the bars of the new wing, into the street beyond. He was a small man with a quiet grin, and I felt he had been badly led in life. "Seen something you like?"

"My house."

I laughed. "Got your eye on a bit of property, eh?"

He nodded.

"Don't you think you should try to find a place somewhere further away?"

"Y' what?"

"When you get out," I said. "A clean break, sort of. Leave this place behind."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Well, when you're free, you can live anywhere."

"You're not right bright for a Writer in Residence, are you? That one with the blue door. That's my house. I live there."

We stared through the bars.

"Your house," I said.

He looked at me like I was the world's most stupid man. "I should have straightened the curtains," he said.

\*

In the new lifers' wing, one of the men proudly showed me his view. "I can see the whole of Nottingham," he beamed.

I didn't tell him what a forbidden map would show – that the city he'd lived in for years lay in the other direction, and his view was of drab outer suburbs.

Days later, he was still staring in wonder through the bars.

I wondered where his grey eyes had taken him – down which streets? Into whose arms? In which Nottingham?

\*

On holiday, in Wales, a summer storm swept the clifftops. We took cover under an ancient stone and chewed sandwiches, watching a fox forage for seagull's eggs in the rocks.

Later, in a churchyard, we put our hands on a row of yew trees that bled red sap, and then walked down a valley where we heard the locals still observed the Julian Calendar.

Finally, tired out, we crested the shoulder of a wild moor and caught sight of our cottage in the safety of the valley, far from the sharp blue stones of the Preseli Mountains, stones which the ancients had quarried for their star-temple at Stonehenge.

Back in prison, I listened to where the rumours said I'd been. I wore my tan skin furtively, like something stolen. I was full of secrets: of ocean and stars, and ancient calendars, and the trembling fur of a fox.

\*

A disabled prisoner had punched a governor and been carted off to the Segregation Unit. The likelihood was that he'd be 'ghosted' – spirited away to another jail.

In the weeks before throwing his punch, the man had been writing vividly about his life, but the circles were darkening under his eyes, and his smile had lost its spark. I went down to the Seg, full of foreboding.

His bare cell overlooked the prison swimming pool. He was stripped to the waist. His only furniture was a mattress and a cardboard chair. I noticed the delicacy of his shoulder blades, the whiteness of his thin arms. A smile blared from his face. "I fucking socked him one," he said. His hands moved like wings as he told me the story. I'd never seen a man more joyous.

As I left the Segregation Unit, I was struck by its high ceilings, and tall windows, and the late summer light that flooded the building. *Grace*, was the word in my head.

\*



On Guy Fawkes Night, the loop of the year almost complete, I dragged a bag of paper and pens from my evening class, and hurried away to the staff room.

The prison's *sterile area*, a zone of high security, where no-one was allowed to venture, winked with tiny fires – rockets and Catherine wheels burning out in the dark places beneath the wire fence.

The prison was quiet. For once, there was no-one at the bars, no-one yelling. The only sounds came from the bonfire-builders on the other side of the wall. Every day, after dark, the jail's neighbours had no choice but to endure the roar of the prisoners. Now, on this one night of the year, they had licence to send fireworks pluming into the yard. Their missiles fizzed off the fences and spun in daft circles over the asphalt.

They were giddy with revenge, laughing and shouting in the manner they'd learned. All evening they went on with it, firing their rockets into the centre of our silence.

\*

When I described the fox I'd seen on the cliff tops in Wales, I was told to open my eyes. "There's a fox comes *here*," the prisoner said. "Watch for him at dawn, you'll see him. He slips out from under the Education Block."

Two other men verified the story: "They built this place across the line of his ancestors' paths. These bastards couldn't keep him out even if they tried. Not with the biggest fence in the world"

One man said he had seen the fox with a pigeon in its mouth. "Like it was grinning," he said.

That made them whoop.

Foxes and ducks. Wild, resourceful creatures living on their own terms, inside the walls.

\*

The prisoner who was close to the end of his sentence had gate fever. Time had slowed down, he couldn't see any end to his sentence.

"I dreamed I got out, and the outside was just the same as the inside. Jesus Christ, I was hammering on the gates to get back in!"

His friend still had a year to go. He shook his head. "No. Get to them gates, and, me – I'm dust."

I told him that was a beautiful image. He only shrugged.

\*

I arrived at HMP Nottingham shocked at how prison flattens the senses: the giant metal pole of a security camera disrupting a blossom tree's curves, the filling-in of the swimming pool with trash and a blameless tree. I had some heroic mission to use poetry to re-awaken the senses of men denied colour and flavour.

I left the jail on a bus, happy to hand silver coins to a stranger who bore me no malice. From a moving window, I saw the everyday miracle of a cat. Gutters glittered with rain. I had a key in my pocket.

It occurred to me, as I looked back one last time, that I was seeing inside from the outside – from the same place that prison had allowed me to view my own life (Swann, D. 2010: 38-42, and 53-59).

## Chapter Nine

### ‘A Choir of Trees’: Discovering the ‘Voice’ of a Poetry Collection

This final chapter explores ways in which a collection made of many disparate pieces needs to find its own holistic ‘voice’. It describes how I stumbled upon notions of ‘voice’ that proved helpful in allowing the completion of a book that I’d been working on for a decade.

During the time when I was trying to solve my ‘cross-trained’ confusion, several friends recommended that I should publish two books – one of prose, the other of poetry – but I wanted to stay true to the process of composition, and to those weird ‘doublings’ of prison-life, where endless stretches of ‘prose’ are pierced by sudden stabs of ‘poetry’. No matter how different, the pieces had emerged from the same struggle, and it felt important to remain faithful to that.

Ultimately, the breakthrough in how the book should be presented followed from a chain of poetic thought that had its roots in the jail’s location, Sherwood, the legendary home of Robin Hood. This was the geographical reference-point that allowed me to find guiding metaphors of ‘forests’ and ‘choirs’. And those metaphors uncovered thematic links and organising principles that released the one ‘voice’ of what had seemed like an impossibly diverse body of work.

To what extent does a poetry book *need* a coherent theme? After all, most readers dip in and out with little regard for the writer’s sacred order (Gundy, 2006). Yet Gundy warns against ‘massive but haphazard accumulations’ (2006: 11) of work – and he suggests that ‘during the time devoted to sorting out and arranging a manuscript all sorts of other undercover but necessary work may be happening as well’ (14).

When I asked the poet Jo Shapcott about ‘theme’ after a reading at the University of Chichester in May, 2011, she identified a trend that she has discussed elsewhere:

There is a lot of attention paid to how the book is laid out, in what order the poems come, which I think is relatively new. Even when I published my first book in the 1980s there was not so much attention to that – my poems just went in chronologically. But now it's almost like writing another poem on a bigger scale. And you do find that they resonate and speak to each other, and you can group them if you like to intensify a certain theme... (Herbert, 2010: 183)

Mimi Khalvati echoed these thoughts at a master-class in Crete in 2007. She suggested treating the projected book as 'one poem' (Khalvati, 2007) with each of the pieces acting as lines or stanzas. 'Always sacrifice the parts to the whole,' she advised. 'Don't put a poem in just because it was published.' Look for variety in length and form, Mimi said – 'and also for tension between subject matter and form. But make sure it isn't a mish-mash.' Instead, there ought to be 'a recognisable identity, a certain feel'.

She recommended an assessment of the work's key features: 'If one of your strengths is narrative, then that helps you to shape the collection around stories.' Also: 'just as each poem will have a central image, so too will the book as a whole'.

Although I hadn't mentioned I was writing about a jail, Mimi suggested *The Blood Choir* by Tim Liardet (2006), an imaginative record of the author's experiences as writer-in-residence at Europe's largest young offenders' prison. In its achievement of both coherence and variety, Liardet's book has much to teach anyone assembling a collection. Its seven sequences are spread fairly evenly, separated by 28 one-page poems and a solitary two-pager. The collection culminates in 'Ground Bass', a six-page monologue by a Russian serial killer, where Liardet examines the obsessive interest in violent crime, 'a new sort of wilderness' (2006: 63). Of the one-pagers, seven are contemporary sonnets – while the non-sonnets are shaped into couplets, quatrains and three-liners. Again, these are distributed carefully so that Liardet avoids repetition – or of what Norman Dubie is said by Beckian Fritz Goldberg to have called 'peeing elephants on opposing pages' (Goldberg, 2006: 45).

I was fascinated by how Liardet entwined his prison experiences around subject matter that stood at a remove from the institution – not only accommodating a Russian serial

killer but descriptions of the foot & mouth virus that struck the area around the jail. I noticed how he managed to incorporate these elements in an organic fashion, without sacrificing the book's narrative or thematic intensity.

The book's overall design is strong, starting with the cover. Its reproduction of a detail from Goya's painting, 'La Romeria de San Isidrio', immediately cements an image of the 'blood choir' as a densely packed group of grotesque figures, some staring out towards the reader as they sing. Inside, three epigraphs preface the collection, one attributed to Goya, in which he describes how 'the artist avoids becoming a 'servile copyist' by uniting 'in a singular imaginary being circumstances and characters which nature presents distributed in many' (2006: 7). This contrast between reportage and art seemed peculiarly apt for a former newspaper hack now trying to find himself as a poet.

The epigraph prepares us for Liardet's insistent attempt to make sense of clumps and accumulations of matter – not just the boys of the prison 'choir', with their 'opera of yawns' (27), but also 'the pyre in the centre of the whole heath' (38) where 'the latest load of slaughtered beasts slides and shuffles off' (36) as the authorities deal with foot & mouth. These pools of fleshy imagery wash into each other, in dangerous proximity. And there is a similar porousness about the jail, which struggles to repel invasions from ladybirds, wasps, and the substance like 'nuclear ash' (38) that settles 'on every prison-ledge' (38) after piles of animals are incinerated.

'How to make a book instead of a collection?' (Brady, 2006: 37). *The Blood Choir* confirms that books can be bound not just by individual poems and their placement but also by elements such as art-work and epigraphs. For the first time, I had an inkling of how poetry, prose, and images could fit together and become a true book. Additionally, I was struck by the power of a good title. *The Blood Choir* alludes to a conglomeration of flesh – and also prepares us for rough music.

Mostly, the voices of the ‘choir’ are mediated by Liardet, or by the persona that represents him, a witness represented in Ken Smith-like fashion as being ‘on the brink of zero hour’ (Liardet, 2006: 22). In ‘The Echoists’, a struggling teacher describes a lesson where his students ‘began by repeating all my words’ (23), their ‘echolalia’ (23) made grotesque by being ‘struck in the key of an old man’s falsetto croaks’ (23). This first-person account of a traumatic teaching experience pulls back from reportage by saving the final stanza for a reflection upon the slippery nature of language itself, a lake of ‘undrinkable water’ (23). That baffled late shift into the reflective mode is typical of a collection in which language is often passing ‘out of human hearing’ (22), like the ‘intolerable’ (22) scream that accompanies the teacher’s subterranean journey in ‘The Vaults’.

Although they deploy naturalistic devices such as framing narratives and descriptions of character and place, e.g. ‘McStein had a facial scar and mannerly sense’ (31), the poems are saturated with anxiety about our ability to understand and represent excesses of human behaviour (and by a suspicion of our hunger to dwell upon horror). Therefore, the collection can’t remain content with the acts of witness found in conventional reportage and autobiography, which depend upon a more secure notion of empirical ‘reality’.

In the long final poem, ‘Ground Bass’, Liardet allows a soloist to emerge from the choir, granting a monologue to the Russian serial killer, Chikatilo. Elsewhere, first-person voices such as Loy’s in ‘Loy’s Return’ are qualified by speech-tags. Here we hear only the speaker as he addresses an institute in Moscow, where an italicised note informs us that he has been sent for ‘psychiatric evaluation’ (61). It’s a bold move, since the dramatic monologue releases us from the jail where most of the collection has been based. But ‘Ground Bass’ is like the earlier poems in preserving a measure of space between speaker and reader. Although the poet is no longer present to act as a mediator, he gives the speaker grand alliterative formulations such as ‘final enfilade’ (62) and allows him to liken himself to ‘the

stump in the mist/even your rainswell cannot dislodge' (62). Through this elevated language, Liardet signals that we should read Chikatilo's voice as not a naturalistic transcript, but as a literary creation, and this helps to draw the monologue into the orbit of the other poems, where the language is similarly heightened and complex.

Another reason why Liardet's work can summon strength from the various angles of approach (rather than becoming 'baggy' or diffuse) is that the variance in subject matter is under-scored by themes connected with the temptations and frailties of our mysterious flesh.

How best to explain this thematic coherence? A good way of thinking about this is provided by Jo Shapcott, who distinguishes 'subject' from 'theme':

... the difference may be 'subject' has got that 'sub' prefix which means 'down', that 'theme' does not have. So maybe the subject is the place where you put the theme: theme lives inside the subject but is more than the subject, which is like its house (Herbert, 2010: 179).

I didn't discover this insight into the nature of 'theme' until I'd finished my book, but it serves as a guide to my thinking as I approached what felt like the make-or-break year of 2008, a decade after I'd finished my residency. Still searching for coherence between my prison-pieces, I now knew that the jail wasn't enough, being only a 'subject' (rather than a 'theme'). Somehow or other, the prison-house required an occupant – an animating force. It needed the invisible skeins of matter that bind cohesive works.

In retrospect, Liardet's book was valuable in allowing me to understand that a collection of poems is a 'choir', where individual pieces require the correct setting. But I had to travel further before stumbling upon the metaphor that guided me towards completion.

The experience that changed everything was a pilgrimage to D.H. Lawrence's old home at Kiowa Ranch in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Taos, New Mexico. Lawrence had been born in Eastwood, not far from HMP Nottingham, and I'd been fascinated for years by the 'savage enough pilgrimage' (Lawrence, 1962: 736) that had taken him to the States.

Still, I can't claim I was expecting anything special on the morning my partner and I made the long drive up to the only home he ever owned.

Yet some days open like a flower, and this was one of them. That summer, I was suffering from a painful back injury which made it impossible to sit up, so I was lying awkwardly in the rear-seat when my partner stopped the hire-car and told me to look out. Ahead of us, a cougar was crossing the track, close enough for us to study its slow, powerful strides – and for me to recall Lawrence's poem 'Mountain Lion' in which 'Two Mexicans, strangers' carry 'A long, long slim cat, yellow like a lioness' (Lawrence, 1977a: 401) into the Lobo Canyon, allowing Lawrence to record 'her bright striped frost-face' (402) and to lament the 'gap in the world' (402) that the hunters have opened.

Later, at the ranch, there was no sign of activity, only a notice explaining that the steward had died. Otherwise, we were alone with sunshine and birds. I stood beneath the pine tree (immortalised by Georgia O'Keeffe's painting), under which Lawrence had written, and felt something like electricity flowing into my body. 'There was a curious allure to the place, a magnetism' (Shukman; 1997: 76). So said the poet Henry Shukman after first visiting the place, and I felt it too.

That half-an-hour was perhaps the closest I'll ever get to the 'shivers of energy [across] ... my living plasm' (25) that Lawrence said he experienced beneath the tree, which he described as 'a guardian spirit' (Lawrence, 1978: 24). He proclaimed that 'old Pan is still alive' (24) in the ancient wastes of America, and likened the god to a tree, 'a strong-willed, powerful thing-in-itself...' (24).

Eventually Lawrence praised his time in New Mexico as 'the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had' (Lawrence, 1978: 142), giving him a glimpse of the 'vast old religion' (145) – the 'thunder-life, air-life, earth-life, sun-life' (147) that

Nottinghamshire had lost or never known. He relished the ‘savage, unbreakable... spirit of place out here – the Indians drumming and yelling at our camp-fire’ (Lawrence, 1962: 790).

Although modernity has continued its relentless march, I gained a sense of the ‘big unbroken spaces’ (790) that Lawrence described eighty years earlier. ‘Something stood still in my soul, and I started to attend (Lawrence, 1978: 142) -- that was how Lawrence put it, and I knew what he meant. In the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, among the eagles and bull-snakes, where coyotes yelped in the canyons, the light was as strong and clean as any I have ever known. ‘Something stood still in my soul, and I started to attend.’

That was the day that turned a pile of poetry and prose into a book. Afterwards Lawrence’s search for some ancient life-force made sense to me. He had sought the same thing in nature that he yearned for in art and humanity. For Lawrence, free verse ought to be like a ‘bird... on the wing in the storm, its very flickering depending upon its supreme mutability and power of change’ (185). And so, too, the poems within a collection. Together, they establish relationships with their surroundings. A strong collection is a forest or a choir, all the parts working together and against each other in ways that create an overall ‘voice’.

It is strange to suggest that ‘wilderness’ should have pushed a prison-book towards fruition, since a jail is far removed from mountains and eagles. But, for me, the prison felt like a zone ‘outside’ society’s boundaries, a place separated by ‘something intrinsically surreal’, as the prison-teacher Richard Shelton put it (2007: 174). Etymologically, the word ‘bewilder’ is derived from the Anglo-Saxon verb ‘wilder’, meaning ‘to lead someone into the woods and get him lost’ (Gonzales, 2004: 165). I hadn’t been ‘wildered’, far from it. On the contrary, I was among a tiny minority free to come and go from jail. And, later, I realised that my ‘journey into the woods’ (Yorke, 2014: xviii) had brought me close to the ‘dark but life-giving secret[s]’ (xviii) that John Yorke identifies as being the central project of traditional narrative. However, in the early days, ‘wildered’ is an accurate word for how I felt.



Those high places in New Mexico now sparked fresh poems by fusing the prison with natural imagery that I could never have planned, and a thrilling period followed when I absorbed new notions of ‘wilderness’ into my thinking about the prison, including those proposed by the poet and eco-critic Don McKay:

...not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations... To what *degree* do we own our houses, hammers, dogs? Beyond that line lies wilderness. We probably experience its presence most often in the negative as dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet. But there is also the sudden angle of perception... the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism. The coat hanger asks a question, the armchair is suddenly crouched: in such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind’s categories to glimpse some thing’s autonomy – its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being (McKay, 1995: 21).

Strangely enough, I had a moment with some coat hangers while working in the prison. They were hanging together on a rail in a forgotten corridor that was about to be closed off for the reconstruction work. One of the hangers was white, the other black, and both were naked. My colleague, the photographer-in-residence Mike Usiskin, took a picture of them that I included in my anthology, *Beyond the Wall*. They returned to mind when I encountered McKay’s stimulating essay. In a place where no-one owns anything, where do we draw the line? Does the wilderness begin at the cell-door? Or does it extend within? And what of the old wing of the jail, with its acres of splinters and rot? This was a place with an ‘alien being’ so strong that ordinary domestic objects like coat hangers stood out in violent relief, taking on a ‘capacity... to elude the mind’s appropriations’ (McKay, 1995: 21). Little wonder that prison can seem like a wilderness, or that it lends itself to those ‘sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism’ (21) that release us into the wilds of metaphor.

That mysterious contact with Lawrence’s wilderness had set in train events that enabled me to find a final form for the collection. This process began shortly after the inspiring visit to Kiowa Ranch when I had the good fortune to meet Clare Dunne, an English artist living in Santa Fe. She kindly allowed me to watch her making wood-cuts, and I found the process so fascinating that I was still thinking about it days later while staying at a cabin

in the forests of northern New Mexico. Hiking in the woods, I realised I'd been under the influence of trees for weeks, and began to dwell on Dunne's art, itself dependent upon trees.

The tradition of wood-cutting struck me as strangely relevant to prison-life in Nottingham, perhaps partly because of an 18<sup>th</sup> Century chapbook I had seen in which images of Robin Hood illustrated an outlaw ballad (Ashton, 1882: 356-9). The arduous process of cutting wood with knives and gouges reminded me of self-harming inmates I had taught, and of an enigmatic phrase that Ken Smith had found carved with meticulous care into a desk inside HMP Wormwood: 'TIME IS WHAT IT IS' (Smith, 1987: 9). I was struck, too, by the violent nature of the tools and terms used by practitioners of the wood-cut:

The ordinary Stanley knife, fitted with a thick, heavy-duty blade, is an excellent tool. It is held either with an overhand grip, as you would hold the end of a stick to deliver a blow, or grasped as a dagger is held for a downward thrust. (Rothenstein, 1966: 113).

Yet wood-cuts require delicacy too, a quality I had also encountered in jail, where some inmates accomplished miracles of self-improvement against almost impossible odds:

[The] specific structure – the grain and rings in the wood and in the block – often contain in themselves a spur to composition in forms, but [the] hardness and intractability also set bounds to its sensitivity. And yet it's the reputed inflexibility of this material which has stimulated the artist... to overcome these limitations and even, like the Japanese, to elicit a delicacy from it (Rumpel, 1974: 11).

Now that I thought of it, trees were all over my prison writing – 'my tree-book, really' (as D.H. Lawrence described *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, [Lawrence, 1977b: 43]). In the long prose-piece, 'The Privilege of Rain', I'd chained together a jerky series of fragments using the image of a cherry tree changing through the seasons. The job of gouging holes in the text now struck me as a close cousin to wood-cutting, where meaning is created by the removal of portions of the original material. When I mentioned some of these things to Clare Dunne, she proved enthusiastic, and there followed an exciting period when we collaborated on fusions of art and poetry, producing new work in response to each other's efforts. There were also strange moments of coincidence, particularly in my reading. For instance, I found

an odd comparison between jails and forests in Cheever's novel, *Falconer* – a description that tallied with my memories of the Victorian wing at HMP Nottingham:

The light in the prison... reminded Farragut of some forest he had skied through on a winter afternoon. The perfect diagonal of light was cut by bars as trees would cut the light in some wood, and the largeness and mysteriousness of the place was like the largeness of some forest... where a succinct message was promised but where nothing was spoken but the vastness (Cheever, 1977: 152).

Out hiking again under the trees, and buzzing with the associations that were forming, I decided to divide the collection into three sections: 'seed', 'sap', and 'stump'. The words attracted me for their multiple meanings, referring to both trees and states of mind. And I liked the journey implied by that sibilant list -- from beginning to end, from acorn to axe. More important, the words acted as organising principles, exerting a gravity that attracted certain poems and prose-pieces, enabling me to group the pieces in a manner that felt organic.

For a long time, I had wondered how 'to make, of a pile of poems, a speaking whole', as Louise Glück describes (1997: xiv) the challenge of shaping a collection. Now, suddenly, far from its origins, my prison writing felt more like a forest than a collection of trees, more like a choir than a gathering of voices. I located specific parts of the book where I needed to chop clearings or plant new saplings, and experienced the thrill described by Miltner:

One of the exciting discoveries that emerges from assembling and revising a collection occurs when we find that the unified body of our work suggests new poems (Miltner, 2006: 25).

Deep in the process of 'flow' described by Csikszentmihalyi (2002), and with wilderness set in opposition against prison, I felt the book had gained an ingredient that the poet Bernard O'Donoghue once identified for my MA students as the most essential element in any writing: 'two things pulling' (O'Donoghue, 1998). In this final stage of composition, the jail sometimes fused with imagery from the natural world, producing poems like 'When it rained', 'Sherwood', 'Cursed earth' (all reproduced below), and prose-pieces like 'No need for rivers' (included earlier) and 'Acorns from the forest' (not included, for reasons of

economy). All became possible because I now knew the book's shape. For Csikszentmihalyi (2002), this is a state of mind in which 'events are linked... in terms of an ultimate goal; that there is a temporal order, a causal connection between them' (2002: 216), and where there are 'recognizable patterns directed by a final purpose' (216). The result, he says, is a sense of meaning and order. After a decade of struggle, I was glad to experience this urgency of flow and direction. The poem 'Sherwood' was the first to emerge in this period:

### **Sherwood**

There ain't a tree for miles  
but they call it a forest

'cos a forest don't need trees;  
it just needs hunting.

Well, then – bang on.  
They rode that one to ground.

A hundred screws on your trail  
and nothing to hide behind.

Call it a forest, mate.  
Call it hunting country (Swann, D. 2010: 29)

This poem emerged because I was now, literally, sure of my ground, as Csikszentmihalyi implies. With the forest implanted thematically, and my confidence in dramatic monologues growing, I decided to find out what a prisoner would make of the echoes between jail and wilderness. The speaker is invented, and these words were never spoken. I aimed, instead, for a composite voice, one that spoke with the blunt cadences familiar in jail – but that mixed an inmate's no-nonsense vernacular with the wilder species of thinking I had also encountered. My aim, I think, was to achieve the expressive 'incoherence' that had impressed Tony Parker (Parker, 1973: 6), and to dismiss associations with wilderness while simultaneously using them as metaphors. In this, there's a cognitive dissonance that reminded me of prison.

'Cursed earth' emerged from the same growing confidence about territory:

### Cursed earth

Buggerthorpe, they called it then,  
a few acres of bog on the city's rim.

You went there for a whore or a fight.  
You went there if you'd fallen

through a crack in your own life.  
That's where they marked out the jail's plot:

high on the moor, where all water stopped,  
on earth that bloomed with thorns and gallows –

there, where men dangled for their misdeeds  
and the living came in search of crimes

to ease their freedom, like the killer  
who rolled dice until his victim's purse

was done, then reeled over the wilds  
in search of a stream to wash his hands,

finding only the truth of a stagnant pool,  
finding a woman's face in the swamp (Swann, D., 2010: 36)

In my research, I discovered that the low moor of Bagthorpe, where the prison was built, had been infamous in Nottingham as 'Buggerthorpe', the city's cursed outer-quarter – and this fused with something I'd read about Japan, where folk culture was said to regard areas of stagnant water as bringing energy to a halt. 'Mere' and 'moor' are connected etymologically, and this linkage helped to guide me towards the image of the murdered woman in the pool. I have my editor Naomi Foyle to thank most, though – for the poem originally ended on the word 'gallows', until Naomi disagreed. 'There's more down there,' she said. 'Dig a bit, Dave.' Her use of the word 'dig' brought to mind a man using a shovel – and, although I discarded that image, it allowed me to discover the murderer.

I'm grateful to Naomi for releasing the fiction writer inside me. By including an individual character, the poem becomes a 'murder ballad' in free verse. In as much as the man in the poem will never be free of his crime, there's an echo of the character Loyal Blood in the novel *Postcards* by E. Annie Proulx, which I read while working in jail. Having murdered his wife, Blood wanders America, doing jobs that resurrect the murdered woman.

In one, he digs up dinosaur bones for a fossil-collector. In another, he descends into a Hell-like mine, the Mary Mugg (named, appropriately, after a woman).

My increasing interest in the musicality of vowel-sounds guided me to the suggestion in lines 10 and 11 that crime may ease freedom's burden. The strong 'i's and 'e's in those lines were, I think, suggested by the poem's earlier pattern of sounds. The word 'crime' emerged from assonance with 'fight', 'life', and 'high' – whereas the 'ee' in 'freedom' contrasted with the strong vowel-sounds in 'acres', 'whore', 'jail', 'moor', and 'bloomed'. These lines also created a convenient hinge, enabling a transition from setting to character, so that the poem could find the depths my editor had encouraged.

'When it rained' was one of the last prison-poems I wrote, after realising that the book would carry the word 'rain' in its title and bear a wind-tossed tree on the cover:

**When it rained**

They tried to pull him in that day,  
but he lingered  
in the yard, gulping every drop

he could get. It was summer-gear,  
the rain soured by soot  
and sly with town buildings,

hints of smoke and the breath  
of drains, a tang of tyres  
and old coats and cooling towers

and train's brakes:  
each a rumour, each a taste,  
everything pouring into his hunger.

It took five men to pull him  
from the fence. One screw for each  
of the years since he was last wet (Swann, D. 2010: 26)

The poem recalls a prisoner I'd met who yearned for the outdoors, and my aim was to evoke his appetite for nature in a place that didn't even allow rainwater to touch an inmate's skin.

These new poems emerged organically, having been suggested by material I'd already generated – and by the sense I was gaining of the collection's shape. In this stage, I was

concerned with structural symmetry, and with binding the work's disparate components, using some underlying pattern that avoided randomness. As such, when thinking again about Robin Hood, I followed organising principles suggested by Liardet's *Blood Choir*, and planted ballads in each of the three sections.

In this last stage of assembly, I tried to balance free verse against formal poetry, first-person narration against third-person, poetry against prose. By distributing the forms, I was seeking to create variety and tension. Simultaneously, I was thinking of the book's 'arc', a journey from seed to stump, from my 'green-ness' upon entering the jail, into states of weariness and hope, to a final position of bafflement, regret, relief.

My hope was that the narrative would follow a path through the forest before emerging with a new perspective on the other side. In that sense, I was thinking of prisoners in my classes who had been serious about rehabilitating themselves – and of gaining safe passage from the darkness of the forest.

## Conclusion

There is one other world where time operates as it does in prison. According to Dava Sobel, that world is Mercury, and the planet's slow rotation combines with its close proximity to the sun, to make 'the years hurry by while the days drag on for ever' (Sobel, 2006: 39). Life on Mercury is grim, and extreme. Time refuses to pass, yet suddenly the prisoner's life has gone. Where it faces the sun, rocks melt in the heat. Where the planet turns away, everything freezes. I saw both sides of Mercury: the ice-box of the warehouse-jail and the furnace of the Victorian prison-house. Neither was designed to support growth or meaningful life.

The poet Benjamin Zephaniah, a former prisoner, says that TV shows like *Porridge* miss 'the boredom of it... [and] the smell... I mean, you can never capture that' (Jewkes, 2006: 140-1) – and it's the boredom of jail that sticks with me now, all these years later, particularly the effects noted by Norman Doidge in Toohey's *Boredom: A Lively History*:

Nothing speeds brain atrophy more than being immobilized in the same environment: the monotony undermines our dopamine and attentional systems crucial to maintaining brain plasticity (Toohey, 2012: 176).

Doidge says that experiments on rats have proved that 'enriched environments strengthen the brain' (176), and I take some comfort in remembering the small enrichments that writing created. However, I share Toohey's anger that boredom is put 'to the service of social utility, a utility that benefits no-one' (101). And I continue to worry that 'if you're not careful, men go through their sentences with their deepest problems untouched' (Campbell, 1987: 157).

In the introduction, I said I wanted this thesis to explore what writing can do for a prisoner, and what prison does to a writer – and I hope I have succeeded in identifying challenges that both the men and I were forced to confront when writing in, and about, jail. Imaginative thought, and rehabilitation, *can* occur within punitive Victorian jails, and within the stifling conditions of 'warehouse' jails – but national prison policies always prioritise



security, and subordinate the activities of education and creativity. What's more, any attempt at rehabilitation must survive the onslaughts of boredom, violence, and fear.

Links between these difficult emotional states are explored in *The Canal*, a novel by Lee Rourke (2010) in which boredom and desire share a similar 'urge to do something' (33). Rourke finds 'sheer beauty' (33) in the intensity of the boredom he evokes, but, in the novel's climactic act, the same ferocious emotion propels teenagers to kill a swan.

There is a line in *The Canal* that has haunted me: 'I've often thought we seek reality in places and not in ourselves... It is only... when space becomes a *thing* to us, that we truly feel real' (155). Was that why I had gone to prison? To feel real? Certainly, my fear of the jail's *thing* felt real. And it was fear that kept me awake in that stagnant place. I faced it whenever I went through the gates, and it faded only when I was busy with some task.

If, as Toohey says, it is limited to a 'transient' state (2012: 106), boredom can be 'a beneficial emotion, warning us away from potentially much more damaging situations' (51). In that respect, boredom shares something with fear, as the travel writer Geoffrey Moorhouse discovered during an arduous Saharan journey.

Moorhouse understood that fear was useful in protecting him from 'purely physical danger' (Moorhouse, 1975: 17). However, dangers arose when it became 'the most corrosive element attacking the goodness of the human spirit, which, untouched by fear, finds itself always in a natural movement towards its fellows' (17). It is for this reason – the need to move towards his fellows – that Moorhouse refuses to end his desert-journey prematurely, even though it has nearly killed him. If he gives up, he:

...will be pursued by it to the end of my life, always running away from the subject of my fear. And this would not be fear of death by thirst and dehydration, or fear of being lost in a wilderness of sand. It would be fear of encounter. Nothing more. Fear of encounter with a person, a task, with anything at all intimidating that might cross my path (215).

*Fear of encounter*: another phrase that has haunted me. And there it is again, too: wilderness. I've been advised that prison and wilderness make an awkward fit in any

discussion of creativity, and I can see the sense in that. Yet it was wilderness which *gave* me my prison-book. And it was fear of being lost (or eaten) in jail's wilderness that helped me to find working methods that ultimately made me a writer of poems. So it feels right to return to the wilds, very briefly, in this conclusion.

The wilderness of jail is home to a great 'fear of encounter'. In a place where most have come adrift from their families, homes, and jobs, any encounter is likely to begin in suspicion and wariness. *Who am I speaking to? What does he want? Who's watching?* These are among the questions a prisoner will ask himself when meeting someone new. In such circumstances, some will despair over their disconnection from humanity – while others may seek dangerous new connections, in compensation. The results of these disconnections and connections include suicide, self-harm, depression, drug abuse, gang-violence, and a deeper induction into crime.

The writer Claudia Hunter Johnson has rejected the common notion that conflict is the primary narrative force. Instead, she proposes that:

...underlying any good story, fictitious or true – is a deeper pattern of connection and disconnection. The conflict and surface events are like waves, but underneath is an emotional tide – the ebb and flow of connection (Hunter Johnson, 2005: 3).

This 'tide' was to become one of my themes when describing jail. But, when writing about the marginalised and the vulnerable, I needed to remember the sorrows of the men's victims and family-members, and to balance empathetic material against work that incorporated ugly realities. In trying to write the 'real', I came to understand, literally from the inside, that the facts would get me only so far – and that the 'real' extends to the process of composition, so that a poet must stay alive to the dynamic possibilities created by the act of writing, and not merely rely upon the recording of events (no matter how remarkable those events may strike him/her as being). The point is made, eloquently, by the poet Stanley Kunitz:

If the terrain were familiar, the poem would be dead on birth... the path of the poem is through the unknown and even the unknowable, toward something for which you can find a language. It is that struggle, of course, that gives the poem its tension. If the poem moved only through the familiar, it would be so relaxed that it would have no tension, no mystery, nothing that could even approximate revelation, which is the ultimate goal of the poem (Kunitz & Lentine, 2007: 89).

Eventually, I came to agree with Wendy Lesser that a poem may enjoy the same relationship to journalism as a skilful pencil-sketch does to TV images. In *Pictures at an Execution*, Lesser sees a ‘stupidity’ (Lesser, 1995: 149) in the camera’s ‘failure to look away’ (149). The truth conveyed by a skilful drawing, she says, ‘is not verifiable as fact’ (158), but it contains ‘the human dimension’ (158) which remind us that ‘it’s not just the moment itself that constitutes the death penalty – it’s all those horrible moments leading up to the execution’ (257). In other words, a drawing (like poetry) can restore ‘social context’ (170) and ‘reality’s complex range of truths’ (131).

In my case, that ‘complex range of truths’ demanded accommodation in poetry’s tight, intensifying confines. And if my aim was to act as a witness, bringing ‘news’ from jail’s closed world, then poetry allowed me to re-define how I understood the concept of ‘news’. Further, by sentencing this ‘news’ to those small jails known as sonnets, ballads, and villanelles, I discovered that form could think for me. Consequently, the detached journalistic perspective in my prose-accounts was counterpointed by poems narrated by ‘blood-selves’, capable of fictionalised vantage-points.

Eventually I found a path that allowed me to bridge the journalistic and the poetic. But the task was exhausting, and it was years before I could face the ‘encounter’ that Moorhouse had understood as an antidote to fear. Gradually, though, I have been drawn back. In March 2014, I joined a protest at HMP Pentonville against the Government’s decision to restrict the size of parcels entering our jails. This petty change, apparently unsought by prison-guards, has since been rescinded. But, after the measure was announced, writers gathered at the jail to decry limits imposed on a prisoner’s store of books – and his/her potential for ‘human flourishing’.

Standing on a hectic junction opposite the jail, I watched as guards idled in the gateway, and puzzled drivers slowed down to clock us. One driver shouted we should, ‘Bang ‘em up and throw away the keys.’ Another stared me menacingly in the eye. Meanwhile, one protestor, wielding a bag of books on World War II, spoke over the top of the Poet Laureate to tell me he’d have preferred Pam Ayres. As all this was happening, a few obscure shapes stood watching from the bars beyond the high wall. They were too far away for me to make out any features, just as our society prefers it.

More recently, I’ve returned for a day of workshops in the prison-library of another over-crowded Category ‘B’ jail, HMP Lewes, as part of ‘Penned Up’, the first Creative Writing festival held in a UK prison (Lewes Live Literature, November, 2015). Going in, I watched as the main-gate creaked open, disgorging a large truck. Recalling the man at HMP Nottingham who’d said he was ‘going out with the rubbish’, I wondered idly whether anyone had managed to smuggle themselves on-board. As the truck passed, I saw its cargo: hundreds of lobster-pots.

The shock of re-entering an ancient, decaying prison led me to forget this odd sight for several hours. In the meantime, I got to work, setting reading and writing exercises, listening as the students offered their analysis. Some inmates were sleepy, others alert. There was a boastful man, and one who was extremely self-deprecating. Whereas the man sitting next to me seemed very watchful, his neighbour appeared to notice nothing. One student had read more than 200 books in a calendar year, and another had broken a similar number of bones during his career as a bare-knuckle fighter (but the total didn’t include bones in his hands ‘because everybody break those, don’t they?’).

I detected suspicion towards the inmate who had facilitated the workshop, but any aggression was held in check, perhaps out of respect for the librarians, who had created a good stock of books and a calm environment. Thanks partly to their efforts, the sessions

passed peacefully and productively, reminding me once again of the potential of literature and writing ‘to awaken [the prisoners’] interest in matters other than their own captivity’, as a doctor in a wartime prison camp is quoted as saying (Somma, 2012: 262).

Of course, the day was marked by the usual frustrations. One of these was described by a prisoner who’d signed up to study A’ Levels, and was now being shipped out to a prison that didn’t offer A’ Levels. This new prison would be far away, he said – too distant for friends and family to visit. His whole adult life, he’d craved a chance to improve himself, and now this... Afterwards, when I mentioned the man’s case to the librarians, they shook their heads, as prison-employees often do. What sense did it make? Only the non-sense served by ‘the failure of prison’ (Foucault, 1979: 272).

Just as the librarians were about to escort me back through the seven gates that separated the library from the street, I remembered the truck. Had I been seeing things? Did a cargo of lobster-pots leave the prison? The librarians smiled guardedly. They took me to the workshops, and let me peek in through the bars at a room littered with nets and plastic cages. The makers of the lobster-pots had returned to their cells, but it was easy to imagine them crouching down to thread the nets through eye-holes, before tying up the ends. They were paid 80p an hour, I was told, and produced most of the pots used in Southern England.

Outside, I rode home through tipping rain. The ride was long and dark, but I ignored the temptation to put my `bike on the train. If prison does anything positive at all, it makes you appreciate your freedom. I spent the journey wondering what it must be like to labour over those cages. To spend another endless day making little prisons for other creatures.

In Garland’s analysis, summarised in Chapter Two of this thesis, the ideologies of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism derive energy from a ‘fear of strangers’ (2001: 153), a phrase that takes on additional weight as I write this conclusion in December, 2016, after UK

citizens have been frightened by the spectre of immigration into leaving the EU, and US voters have voted for a sociopath who has promised to build a wall to keep out strangers.

Throughout the thesis, I have favoured approaches that seek to repair harm rather than exacting retribution or simply ‘warehousing’ offenders. To that end, I continue to be attracted to Hoyle’s belief that ‘Restorative justice is an attractive prospect for those who do not subscribe to the “criminology of the other” and who yearn for a more humanised response to crime’ (Hoyle, 2010: 40). Or, as Todorov puts it: ‘not to punish but to restore relations that should never have been interrupted’ (2010: 66).

By creating a more positive educational environment within jails, and by using literature to play some small but important role in rehabilitation, I believe our society would be safer, and that money currently wasted on perpetuating a ‘spiral’ of incarceration could be put to more useful purposes.

Should Hoyle’s ‘humanised response’ be coming, then it’s taking its time. But if something as beautiful as the cherry tree can blossom in a UK prison, then who is to say what kind of ‘human flourishing’ may be possible? The challenge will be for the rehabilitative imagination to renew itself, and to oppose competing neo-liberal and neo-conservative philosophies, as Alison Liebling suggests. When we resist the ‘fear of encounter’, we meet individual people rather than glimpsing vague outlines – and, perhaps, gain a chance to learn something about the stranger who lives in all our souls.

In closing, I would like to mention one final prison-visit. Last year, I obeyed some impulse to return to HMP Nottingham and make a circuit of its outer-wall on a long summer evening. While taking this loop, I tried to block out all memories, and simply concentrate on a place that has occupied so many of my thoughts over the last two decades.

I was struck again by the noise. Banged up in their cells, men were shouting down the wings to friends and enemies. This shouting nearly always sounds hostile, but I remembered

a teacher reporting that he'd once heard two prisoners roaring cookery tips at each other – another example of jail's banal surrealism, and a reminder for me of an observation made by the writer Charles D'Ambrosio after discovering holes smashed in the walls of a Russian orphanage: 'What the boys did wasn't vandalism... that hole in the wall was about their hope for love. It may have looked destructive, but it was really an act of restoration... they sought and found proximity' (D'Ambrosio, 2004: 170). Although prison is full of violence and damage, it also plays host to dreams of connection and transcendence – and its rough voices sometimes do more than fulfil the clichés and prejudices of tabloid journalists and right-wing politicians.

Still, listening to the din made by the men on that summer evening, I wondered how I could ever have imagined that my students had written together in silence. It had felt like that, though. It had felt like silence when we wrote during our evening classes.

As David Toop says 'silence has pretensions towards the absolute' (2004: 44). But absolute silence is an impossibility, not least because our bodies are hives of acoustic activity. So perhaps the 'flow'-activities described by Csikszentmihalyi provide our best hope of finding the quietness of mind that creates opportunities for reflection, education, and self-knowledge.

There was something else that evening, something I struggled at first to make sense of as I studied the jail's harsh profile. Then, slowly, I worked it out. There had been more rebuilding work, this time involving the Victorian structures where I had started my job. The mouldering wing I had known – a building that had swirled with the pains of imprisonment for more than a century – was gone. All that remains of it now is carried inside this thesis and the book I wrote about it – and within the memories and imaginations of the prisoners, staff, and visitors who survived it.

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