

Deconstructing Light

(A collection of poems)

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Writing

Abstract

This collection of poems, *Deconstructing Light*, is a poetic memoir, an exploration of my changing relationship with the science of light and certain associated technologies (the camera the telescope and screen)

The significant other individual appearing in many of these poems is my father. This collection is also in part an elegy - reflecting on the loss of the photographer dad, the astronomer dad, the guiding light dad.

The collection presents a partial view of my personal travel from a place entrenched in science, in rationality; towards the delights of metaphor, the borderlands of truth and non-truth, and the developing confidence to become an unreliable narrator.

In particular the camera and photographs are a recurring theme and there are a number of ekphrastic poems.

The first section of the work has a 'history of science' emphasis - the foundations of my scientific upbringing.

The second section is concerned with family life, and particularly my father's life - as I explore his war experience, his post-war life, and his relationships with partner and children.

The third section takes a camera out to the world - the further view - the changes in point of view.

Section four is a short introspection on the craft of poetry writing

And the final section of the collection references the now and the future, and becomes less narrative and more abstract and metaphorical.

The exegesis, *Inheritance, The Camera and The Self*, describes the theories used in deciding a structure for the work, and also for the focus of the exegesis. I discuss some technical issues and theories, with reference to the sections of the work and to some individual poems. I also consider the wider poetic and memoir genre context for the work, and finally justify considering the collection as a series of verbal selfies, by contrasting the historic development of the written memoir with the historic development of the photographic selfie.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Candidate's Signature:

Intellectual Property Rights

All intellectual property, including copyright, is retained by the candidate in the content of the candidate's thesis. For the removal of doubt, publication by the candidate of this or any derivative work does not change the intellectual rights of the candidate in relation to the thesis.

Confidential Material

The content of the candidate's thesis is confidential for commercial reasons, that is, the possible publication of the thesis, or a derivative of it, as a work of creative fiction for sale.

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Ethics approval

This is a poetry collection and entirely a work of the imagination, therefore no ethics approval was required.

Exigesis: part one

Inheritance, the Camera, and the Self

Pakeha mihi

I come from a small town
inward-looking restrained
without horizon
keep your hat and gloves on
don't eat in the streets

a clapped-out Morrie-minor
the only waka I knew
that distant queen irrelevant
a faux-rangatira
my whanau were the limits of my tribe

Waikato flowed through my blood
awa full of secrets and death
in its depth a murk of uncertainty
eels my grandmother cooked
eat it it's good for you

Those few clear days we had
Pirongia called my face to the sky
the maunga dark distant iced white
needles of frost crisp honesty
in the air like a winking exit sign

But over all the winter fog
hung heavy
the summer humidity sapped
taking breath
until even my name was lost

Finding Focus

This work *Deconstructing Light*, is a creative exploration of ancestry the camera and the self. Photography and astronomy - technologies of light - bracketed my childhood and in later life the computer screen came to prominence also.

During the war my dad was a photographer in the Air Force stationed in Guadalcanal and in Whangaparaoa (where classified research was being carried out). He was employed as a wedding and social photographer and dark room technician post-war. He was a keen amateur astronomer.

I now have a number of keen amateur photographers and one astro-photographer in my family.

My initial approach - writing about my father - became somewhat hagiographic, but hagiography is neither sustainable nor desirable so I moved to a more self-oriented approach, curious about how I could use the initial ideas about my father, astronomy and photography, and a scientific home milieu to explore my own psychological and authorial development, ie a journey from causality towards metaphor; and the ubiquity and necessity of light in all our imaginings.

So this poetic memoir is about the impact this science-y tech environment has had on me and considers whether indeed the apple never falls far from the tree even if it wanted to.

I specifically wanted to write a series of poems and I searched for a while for focus and structure, then decided on a sort-of psychological memoir of influence and identity. (how I came to see through my father's eyes) and, to use a photographic term, to write a verbal 'selfie' - with all the care for construction, and elimination, and fakery that 'selfie' implies.

It is an ekphrastic memoir, and it is also in part in memory of my father and aspects of his life, so there are some elegiac components.

To quote G Thomas Couser "Memoir is the literary face of a very common and

fundamental human activity; the narration of our lives in our own terms” And in this vein my poem *Prologue* (p. 24) sets the scene for the collection. The title of the work *Deconstructing Light* was taken from the title of a series of online lectures by the photographer Ming Thein. I realised as I read through these lectures that they could be taken as a metaphorical guide for writing poetry.

Thein deconstructs light into direction, intensity, length of exposure, use of flash (an instance of great brightness), filtered light, diffused light and how lighting is used to produce shadows and highlights to clarify /enhance a desired effect.

Chiaroscuro refers to image that is predominately described by its shadows or negative spaces -

‘Sometimes you want hard definition, in such cases a concentrated direct source is the best way to go, without diffusion, (Thein), for example the poem *X-ray* (p. 35 and *Snapshot* (p. 64).

Thein discusses the difficulties of lighting at the macro scale - which I translate into poetry as writing about one small image, concept or experience eg the haiku syle of *A brief taste of persimmon* (p96), also by controlling lighting (the focus or direction of the poem’s attention), you can highlight the subject but preserve the ambient atmosphere, and ambient light provides compositional context. Lighting for a scene, a stage: what is illuminated is made significant by the lights’ direction, and may be made hyper-real.

Light is a ubiquitous necessity. It is a biological truism to say that without light there is no life. However we use light in many non-essential i.e. not survival-related ways; there are ways via technology that we play with this most essential energy, and the various ways in which we play become significant to individuals and to society.

So this work will be a consideration of the science-tech playings with light and how I/we are enframed by it (Enframing or *Gesell*, Heidegger’s concept discussed further on - part 2)

Light illuminates our lives, our faces, and therefore our identities.

"The outer light of nature - the inner light of the human spirit And our quest for an understanding of light reveals as much about the nature of our own psyche as it does about the nature of light itself" (Zajonc)

I came across some interesting light-related mathematics which gave me my structure for the work - the bidirectional scattering distribution function or BSDF.

The light falling on the skin of the face behaves in two ways - either reflected from the surface and absorbed, or reflected from a deeper skin layer.

The face is a signifier of identity - and to get a realistic (which doesn't necessarily mean truthful) representation of a face in cgi (computer generated imagery) these two different reflections need to be accounted for via BSDF; ie a face aka identity, may be mathematised by BSDF.

So I have taken this as a cognitive metaphor for the structure of the work which is as scattered distribution on a graph, that is the word 'scatter' becomes significant or a signifier - so validating for me the creative appropriation of BSDF and scattering to use as guiding metaphor for the structure of the work

Making linkages/associations between disparate things - this is what poetry can do (whether the linkages are scientifically valid or logically valid is not necessarily relevant) so by the scattering of poems on various axes, an algorithm to display an identity, or partial identity, may be constructed (with the proviso that it may all be lies by an unreliable narrator - me as poet; and this contrasting with me as teacher in the Physics class room reliably 'narrating' a method of measuring wavelength of light - see *Purity* (p.55)

See diagram - and note -the diagram is informally sketched - to emphasise the non-mathematical use I am making of the BSDF; to emphasize that the link is somewhat tenuous, but nevertheless a cognitively attractive link between science and true-seeming appearance.

The start of each section in the collection is marked by a specific point on the graph. These may be connected to give a linear relationship (Note this is not the same as the classic writer's 'graph' of a three-act story with turning points)

Vertical axis :- pages of the collection also past to present

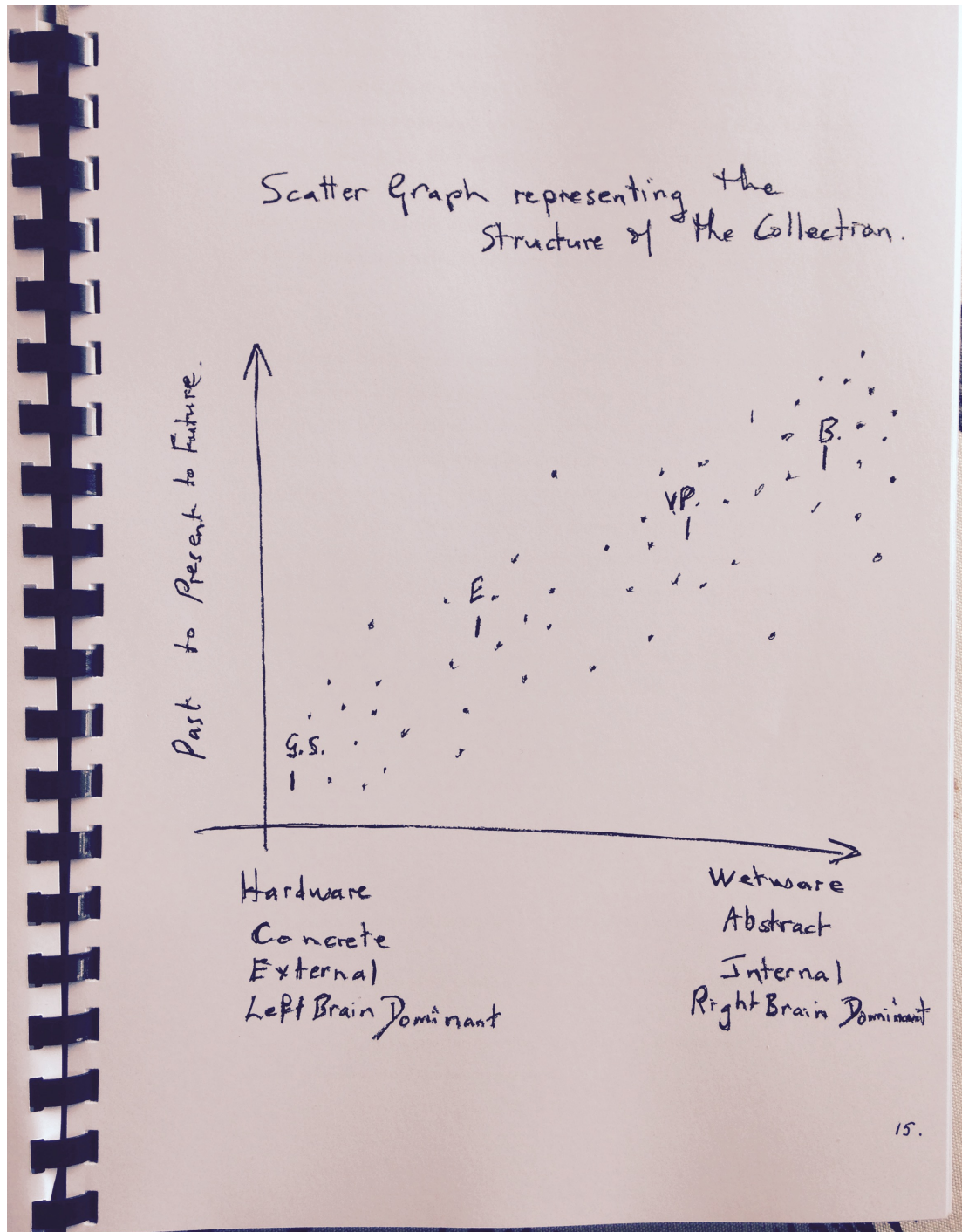
Horizontal axis :- three continua - hardware to wetware, external to internal (internal - being dreams, thoughts, reflections), left brain to right brain

The narrative or memoir goes from history, hardware, external, focus to present and 'wetware' and internal self. In the centre is the self interacting with the external.

The relationship that is paralleled is between incident light and a face, and between the writer's gaze and the formation of identity.

The light responds to skin in two ways, the initial view and the depth like the way the two parts of the brain work - the 'overview' hemisphere and the 'detail' hemisphere - left and right brain as described by Iain McGilchrist, and similarly we may gain a superficial impression of a poem but also find a deeper meaning in it.

GRAPH



Because this poetry collection is text and therefore two dimensional it is inevitably linear, so the order of selection and placement becomes significant - rather as in the way books on a bookshelf may be selected and arranged (a juxtaposition either by chance or by some aesthetic rubric - so an observer will draw certain conclusions about the one who displays. So a poetry memoir is a conscious display to present a certain view of the writer. A series of poems as representative of a life is, by contrast with a book-length memoir or autobiography, a minimalist approach.

The aesthetic theory which informed the arrangement of the work is that of Ikebana - a minimalist theory and practice of flower arranging.

In Ikebana 'the key consideration is to use as few stems and leaves as possible in composing elegant contours that highlight the flowers' beauty.' (Shigeru Furuya)

Classically three sprays of flowers or other plant material were used in a base or *kaki*. The tallest spray labelled heaven, the shortest earth, the mid-size labelled human; and a key consideration is to use as few stems and leaves as possible to highlight the beauty. The *tokonoma* is the space, the environ, in which the ikebana is displayed, and has a strong cultural significance.

So the organisation of the sections in the work corresponds to the ikebana organisation ie the foundation *Giants shoulders* matches the base; the human matches *Enframed, Bokeh* for heaven and *View point* - Earth.

Ikebana heads a set of poems on the craft of writing and *Tokonomu* in the exegesis where I discuss the contexts in which my collection stands

Note

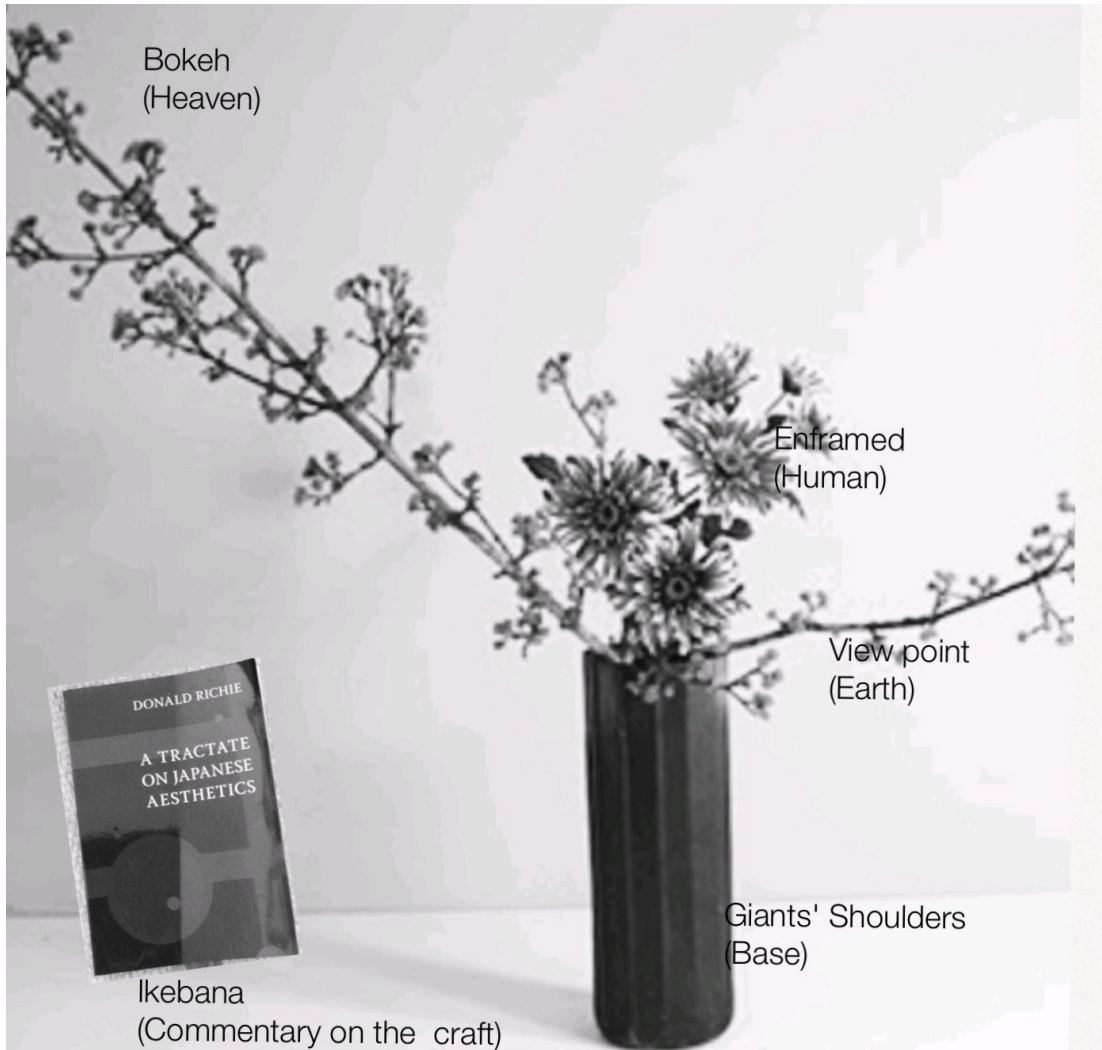
General comments relate only to the western (and usually European) context, as it is my own area of experience.

Font choice is sans-serif - as it is usually easier to read for people with dyslexia or other vision problems

I am enrolled as Sandra Fraser, but use Alexandra Fraser for published works.

Unattributed poems in the text are my own work.

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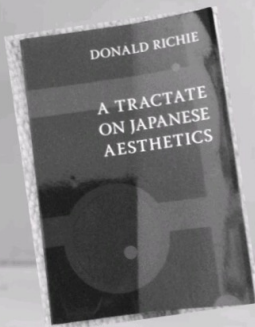


Bokeh
(Heaven)

Enframed
(Human)

View point
(Earth)

Giants' Shoulders
(Base)



Ikebana
(Commentary on the craft)

Exigesis: part two

Inheritance, The Camera, and The Self

Aperture selection

Adjusting the aperture on a camera controls how much light ie information reaches the screen, the film, the receptive surface .

My aperture selection in this exegesis puts limits on how much of the available information will be taken in and used.

Dr Rosslyn Prosser was a guest speaker at AUT 2016

I felt greatly liberated after listening to her and reading her paper Fragments of a Fictocritical Dictionary - that there is not necessarily a strict form for an exegesis and that it is permissible for the creativity of the work to diffuse into the exegesis.

She also interestingly made the point that in her experience poets tended to be more formal in their exegesis writing than creatives working with harder surfaces eg sculpture Whatever - it allowed me to feel I could take the approach I was most comfortable with rather than trying to fit my commentary into a given rubric, and my exegesis will have a prosimetric form.

The formal tone of the scientific papers I read in a previous life, carefully written in a passive voice, so often contained ideas and information which sung, but the writing was so parched, so arid that it was often a struggle to get through to the end of the paper. I was pleased to discover that this is not necessarily a requirement for exegesis writing and language can be informal, personal and even perhaps colloquial.

Dr Prosser's comments re fragmentation seem particularly relevant to the assembling of a memoir of poetry.

'Fragments of text, remnants of memory, bones of a story. The use of the fragment asks that you remember from word to word, that the accumulation of images and stories allows you to construct and formulate, to become a detective, passing for a moment into some imagined subjectivity, where only your personal safety is jeopardised. At heart you are still the reader of the text and are able to remember who you once were; It isn't a very big jump to make. You are always fragmented.'

Also ' A fragmented life can only be understood by attention to random pieces that form a collage.'

Which brings me to Claude Levi-Strauss and his theory of bricolage - a word he used in *Savage Mind* to describe the skill of using whatever there was lying to hand, and repurposing and recombining to make something new.

He contrasted this with the 'engineer' or 'scientific mind' who worked with task-specific items to complete a a planned specified project. Derrida apparently took issue with Levi-Strauss separating the engineer out from the bricoleur, and perhaps if Levi-Strauss had spent more time in engineering work-shops he might not have made the distinction

Certainly my dad did not have a 'savage' mind but he was, with his very scientific mind, a noted bricoleur. I attempt to illustrate in my poem *Making the Telescope* (p.43) - where he makes do with what was available (which is nowadays a thing in itself - recycling) to make a polished mirror and so a telescope. I acquired from my brothers -also themselves bricoleurs - a list of all the objects Dad used in his telescope construction. It was sad to leave so many out of the poem - as it was I had to use the form of a list poem to get in a sufficient number to give the bricoleur-ish impression.

My father the bricoleur has also been a major influence in my approach to a variety of activities - including poetry-writing.

I keep a note of fragments and scraps of lines that come to me, usually while driving or in that half-wakeful state. Usually these lines will be at some point either abandoned, or developed into a full poem - but on occasion various fragments from months even years apart, get put together to make a poem. And somehow the fragments all hang together and form a whole that pleases me. In this case even the title was appropriated from another poem. A very specific example of this is the poem *Time's arrow* (p.116)

The total collection of poems in *Deconstructing Light* is the result of a lot of quite deliberate writing to a theme, but also some use of poems that had been lying around as it were, and even one which I re-wrote completely

(as it had been previously published as *Love Light* in *Conversation by Owl-light*)

It is easy to calculate
the wave length of a beam of light
if the light is monochromatic
and from a point source
using a double slit
and if the distance between
the source to the screen
is large

This is easy but
what formula can we use
and how do we calculate
love
when the distance
between us
is large?)

The wavelength of light seemed very appropriate to address in a collection about light so *Love Light* became re-written as *Purity* (p.55)

This exegesis. in part, can be thought to be composed of various items of information that I had readily to hand, eg Levi-Strauss in my old anthropology notes, and the products of some random Googling, and these, together with the collection form

A power-point presentation
a bricolaged memoir
of whatever was to hand
memories encoded
in old photos
snapshots of the past the future

Ekphrasis

This memoir is made up of individual items - a bricolage of items - and, perhaps inevitably, in a collection which in part focuses on the photographic image, there are a number of poems which could be described as partially or completely ekphrastic.

Ekphrasis is from the Greek ek - out of, and phrasis - speech, originally perhaps

referring to descriptive sections of verbal work, and later becoming more associated with verbal descriptions of paintings or sculpture and then later also photographs and film.

The earliest well-known example of ekphrasis is Homer's description of the shield of Achilles - which contains so many detailed items it is most likely Homer was describing an imaginary work of art.

By the 20th century many poets wrote ekphrastic poems, and these are mainly associated with actual pieces of art eg William Carlos Williams *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* ; a painting I too reference in my poem *The fall of Icarus* (p.82).

Also, from the 20th century on, ekphrastic poems came to be written about photographs.

The following example is beautiful in its spareness - it resonates with me particularly as it could have been written to describe my dad had he lived that long - but it can also generalise to anyone who had that type of tinkering-around father

Two Photographs by Geoffrey Lehmann (2010)

My sister took two slides with yellow filter,
Of father tinkering with a radio
Glittering with tiny lights upon a table.
Wrapped in a hairy old brown dressing-gown
In heavy yellow light he sits and listens
To ancient earphones plugged into the set,
And in the next he has the earphones off,
And sits, a puzzled frown upon his forehead,
A man of seventy with kindly lines
Upon his weathered face, a youngster trying
To probe the age-old whistling of the ether,
The moans and crackles of the distant stars.
How young your face, old man, how young the hand
Of love that made the camera shutter click.

Most photographs fall into the snapshot category of family life or travel, but there are also the categories of art photography and of news photography where often the photographs will be iconic; for example Marilyn Monroe over subway grating, the burning child from Vietnam - and these photographs become part of our cultural capital and can be meaningfully referenced in poems, which can then

have a wide audience.

If the photographs written about are the family sort rather than iconic, they will be unknown to most readers of any associated ekphrastic poem and it is possible there would be difficulty making them have impact for the general reader.

However, if it is a well-known piece of art and the poem just describes bit by bit the whole painting (or photo), then basically why bother if there is the painting/photo to look at directly.

But if there is only partial description, and the writer brings to the poem their own personal experience, perhaps recounting their life circumstance when they first saw the image, or perhaps informed by the writer's personal feelings about the subject of the art work or snapshot or whatever, then a different angle of view is brought to bear on the image.

Thus, the focus in the poems is bi-focal - the image and the writer's experience eg in *Photo album* (p. 46) each photo is briefly described. The writer intrudes once 'Oh. that's Mum' - but the autobiographical aspects of the poem come outside the 'covers' of the 'album' or perhaps they are the covers themselves. My poem *The fall of Icarus* (p. 82) uses the well-known image to comment on our geographical and emotional detachment from northern hemisphere events.

Restoration (p.53) relates to a photo which is very well-known in my family and loved because it so captures the essence of the man. Many of us have gone through the process of having old photos restored so I had hoped that general experience would serve as a hook for other readers. However at some point I will rewrite it, as I feel the rhythm is a little too jaunty for the topic, though I had chosen that form after advice to try and include a variety of poetic forms in the work.

Many of the poems in *View-point* are ekphrastic poems (*Budapest* (p.69), *Church of the Light* (p.71) ,and *False memory syndrome in Cuba* (p.72). For this poem - in contrast to Homer writing about an imaginary shield - I have the actual photograph (or rather the digital version of the photo on screen) but I contemplate an imaginary experience based on the actual photo.

Margaret Atwood's poem *This is a Photograph of Me* is an ekphrastic poem

It contains these evocative lines

'(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.
I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.'

and finishes with an application of the Law of Refraction ie the distortion produced by a ray of light travelling between two media as in my poem about Newton (p.29).

'the effect of water
on light is a distortion.
but if you look long enough
eventually
you will see me.)

I have also included some photographs in the work. There is not in general a 1:1 correspondence between any particular photograph and a poem; although I intend a resonance between each photo and the section the photo is associated with.

But in the case of the photo of my dad and *Restoration*, (p.53) and the poem *Bokeh* (p. 97) also *Selfie* (p. 114), these are ekphrastic poems written in response to a specific image.

I also include here this quote from Cheri Colby Langdell in *Adrienne Rich: the Moment of Change* which summarises nicely the difference between the essence of a photograph and the essence of a poem.

In 'Photograph of an Unmade Bed' Rich suddenly sees the difference between photography and poetry: while photography depicts what existed, poetry depicts a possible future. Poetry proclaims what might be in the future if we use our imaginations and intelligence, while photography, at least in 1969, mainly bore witness to what the camera had seen, what was real.

Piece by Piece , Stem by Stem

In this section of the exegesis I examine each part of the work in order: Giants' Shoulders, Enframed, View point, Ikebana and Bokeh.

Giants' Shoulders

This section is the base (the *kaki* from ikebana) a foundational commentary on some few of the very many people on which my view of life was dependent.

I wanted this to be technical, factual, to begin with the beginnings, the rocks (in space, in ground) the supporting shoulders, the back story, the 'who are your influences?', the structural foundations - rigid and concrete.

This was a challenge to write. There was so much factual information available; the problem was - how to turn it in to a poem without being overloaded with detail. Some of the poems tend to be longer than those in the rest of the collection.

Newton and Galileo in particular have been much written about - I didn't want to be repetitious, neither did I wish to leave either of them out because I am fascinated by both of them, and had read a lot about both in my History of Science papers.

For Galileo I took that much-repeated but apocryphal element in his life and gave it a twist. *Galileo* (p. 27)

For Isaac Newton, serendipitously I found an online collection of his papers which included his comments on his experimental work. I was able to use that as a stepping stone into discussing emotions with the intention of making the poem more interesting to a general reader . *Weaving rainbows* (p29).

Researching the Herschel space observatory gave me so much interesting data. My initial thought was a shape poem (the shape of observatory). The whole thing was too clunky, too loaded with facts. So an elimination of detail and choosing a looser form and nine edits later, it still retained some of its facts, but the more free structure and the opening up produced by the couplet form, allowed an unexpected emotionality to enter the poem. *Collecting the invisible* (p.36). These

poems all have a strong narrative element, especially the one about Emilie du Chatelet - a remarkable woman who led such a complex and interesting life. What was the minimum detail I could retain while still giving a true flavour of her brilliance? *Emilie du Chatelet* (p.32).

There have been many poets who have written about famous scientists, some examples being Helen Heath *And yet it moves* (Galileo), Adrienne Rich *Planetarium* Caroline Herschel and *Power* Marie Curie; and from O'Conner and Robertson, 'Certainly in the English language there seem to be more poetic references to Newton than other mathematicians/scientists. Many contemporary poets treated Newton as god-like and praised him accordingly. Others used him to write rather nationalistic pro-English rants. Over the years, of course, there have been poets who have considered Newton to have destroyed the poetic view of the world. For example, John Keats often proposed the toast, "Newton's health, and confusion to mathematics.'" They list 23 poems about Newton, including those by Pope, Shelley, Byron, Keats and Wordsworth

William Blake wrote, 'Reason says 'Miracle', Newton says 'Doubt'./Aye, that's the way to make all Nature out:/ Doubt, doubt, and don't believe without experiment.' And back to Galileo, the rather charming poem by Gerald Stern, 'Paper will do in theory, when there is time/to sit back in a metal chair and study shadows;/ but for this life I need a squirrel'

Enframed

The title from this section relates to Heidegger's concept of *Gestell*, which he discussed in his essay *The question Concerning Technology*, and which he used to describe what lies beneath modern technology and how technology fundamentally enframes us. He claims that enframing originates with the human drive for a scientific and measured knowledge of the world, and this relationship with the world gives rise to the enframed orientation. This enframing process is not itself technological but rather a means of revealing, (not simply a means of

displaying - the original or common use of the word *Gestell*), the way we are held in the essence of technology.

In this work I am using technologies of light, especially the camera, to reveal aspects of my self; i.e. a memoir.

Because this section and the previous contain poems about my father there is an elegiac quality to them.

The word elegy comes from the Greek *elegos* "poem or song of lament. Traditionally the elegy was written as a response to death and would consist of lament, praise and consolation, three aspects of loss. The modern elegy may generalise to mourning, not the loss of an individual but the losses in war, the loss of a way of life, the loss of the Amazon jungle. The modern elegy is often considered an anti-elegy as it lacks the aspect of consolation with, for example, no imaginings of meeting again in an after-life; they are more a dead-is-dead and no consolation is possible.

My poem about the outdoor statue museum (p. 69) could be considered an anti-elegy for the general rather than personal, and also *Collecting the Invisible* (p. 36) is the about the abandonment of a space station.

My poetry about my father is a lament of loss, but no consolation to be found eg *Caroline Herschel and my dad* (p.34)

A further example of this anti-elegiac aspect is found in Liz Lochhead's poem, *Favourite Place*, where she quotes the consolatory phrase from Sorley MacLean - 'The world is still beautiful, though you are not in it' - and then powerfully opposes this with - 'And this will not be a consolation / But a further desolation'.

There is also the interpretation of the anti-elegy fictive as in *Poetry of Lost Loss: a Study of the Modern Anti-Consolatory Elegy* by Toshiaki Komura where the absence of consolation or disconsolation is attributed to a 'lost loss' - the feeling that the lost is missing, unavailable and the mourning is for the loss of the lost rather than the person or situation in itself

I consider that this interpretation fits with my work where my poems about my dad

reflect not so much the loss of the person, but the loss of the might-have-beens - the grandfather, the old darkroom photographer's perspective on engaging with the digital, (we can only imagine what he would have thought) - and we, my brothers and I, each remembering and missing a different man anyway *We talk about Dad* (p.54)

Toshiaki Komura states 'Poetry of lost loss simulates a mood more aptly described as one of a subdued, causeless, chronic "dysthymia": when the loss is itself lost and is felt only as a dysthymic trace'

Aldebaran rising (p.52) is quite specifically elegiac, and the pantoum form with its line repetitions enhances this quality.

I use scientific concepts in this poem - and struggled with having to slightly modify the light-years distance to Aldebaran to fit with the concept of my father's life taking the same time as a ray of light from Aldebaran to here, eventually giving in to poetic necessity. But because the poem was primarily about loss, using a pantoum form worked, the science gave a detachment and intensification of the grief, and the formal structure supported that.

In general I found that the more strongly science-based the poems were, and the more specifically about technology (both in *Giants' Shoulders* and *Enframed*), a formal structure was very difficult to make work. The data contained in the poem imposed their own cognitive structure. The content is harnessed by fact, further control seems like over-kill. A further psychological difficulty I have with writing is to discard the unidirectional narrative (the 'if this then that' causality).

Making the telescope (p.43) changed during writing from a sonnet of reminiscence to a list poem - the only way I found to deal with so many essential items.

The exceptions were the hard tech poems *Box brownie* (p.38) and *Pin-hole camera* (p.37). The technology fitted happily into shape poems and these were only limited by my own Word formatting ineptness.

Other poets have written about their fathers' influence. Two that I particularly connected with are

Working Late by [Louis Simpson](#),

'A light is on in my father's study./ "Still up?" he says, and we are silent,/ looking at the harbor lights,/ listening to the surf/ and the creak of coconut boughs

...

And the light that used to shine/ at night in my father's study/now shines as late in mine.'

And Suzanne Rancourt's *Whose Mouth Do I Speak With*

'I can remember my father bringing home spruce gum./ . . . /For his children/ . . .
The spruce gum/ was so close to chewing amber/ as though in our mouths we held the eyes of Coyote/ and how many other children had fathers/ that placed on their innocent, anxious tongue/ the blood of tree?'

View Point

I considered this an appropriate title for this section as it incorporated both definitions of viewpoint - the poems are description and image, but also carry the writer's perspective or opinion about the scene viewed. There is a resonance here with the way poems can work' both opinion and (curated) description. We need more than one way to look at something to get to something approaching reality (refer earlier section BDSF (p.13)

I broke the word into its two components to emphasise both parts, the view - which is the scene within a real or imagined frame, and the point - the meaning ascribed to the view.

I was influenced by Vilem Flusser's book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* in which he puts forward his opinion that photography 'serves as the prototype for a fully programmed, post-industrial, post-historical, information-centric world.', and 'photography is not only a reproductive imaging technology, it is a dominant cultural technique through which reality is constituted and understood.' With respect to technical, i.e. photographic, images there is a machine/operator

complex, (unlike the situation with visual or textual images). Photographs are produced by an apparatus, and the operator does not necessarily (and with the ubiquitous camera-phone most probably not) know the internal actions of the camera 'black box'. The person using the camera may think they are in control to produce the picture of the world that they choose, but the pre-programmed nature of the camera shapes the meaning of the produced image. Flusser's 1983 comments, which refer to the mechanical camera, are still relevant to the modern digital camera - as described by Kenneth Goldsmith, 'The program of the camera overrides the artifact that it produces', and 'the camera doesn't work for us, we work for the camera.'

Specifically the viewpoint in photography is the distance and angle from which the camera views and records the subject - here the camera is agent. A viewpoint is either an opinion held in relation to something else; or the lookout (the place for the camera in search of a view.)

And now we look so frequently through a lens, our planning ahead, for example in travel, we significantly take into account what we imagine the lens itself will see, will desire to see - where will we get the best view? Not for our eyes and the view of the moment, but to record photographically, to carry home and to present, but in fact our photos are a record of where the camera has been. for example *Udaipur* (p.73), and *Burning for something scenic* (p.68) - which references Bruegel's painting but it is also a poem about the camera's drive to travel, driving the camera-carrier to seemingly ridiculous and non-human heights.

'We think we're documenting our own memories, but what we're actually producing is memories for the apparatus. The digital photograph's metadata - geo-tagging, likes, shares, user connectivity, and so forth - proves much more valuable to Instagram than any subject matter it captures. The image is irrelevant in comparison to the apparatuses surrounding it.' (Goldsmith)

From the beginnings of photography the received wisdom was that 'the camera never lies'. With the advent of digital processing we are more aware that this may no longer be the case, and yet there is still a reliance on the image as a true

representation. Similarly with memoir or poems about memories, there is an expectation of truthfulness.

Church of the Light (p.71) -Is it an accurate memory? Has the writer in fact visited this church irl? And *False Memory Syndrome in Cuba* (p72) is at least honest about its falsehood.

We go into the world with a camera and the camera leads the way. We look for what would make a good shot. Tourists collect moments for later memoir. The tourist snapshot is an entre´ to another world, an *amuse bouche* which excites and dissatisfies; and what does it do to the observed - is their soul taken a little with each snap? Do all the thundering footsteps press Venice further into the lagoon (*Venice and the soul-stealers* (p.67)), are our souls snapped away, bit by bit, with our willing contributions to, for example, Instagram, where we give over control of our image (our mask, our identity) to a greater power?

The camera angle manipulates how the subject is viewed. In the same way the selection of words, the presentation of the text, the angle taken, can manipulate the way the reader experiences the work and possibly also influence on-going feelings about a circumstance.

The poem is lens, camera and frame.

Ikebana

When writing poems it seems inevitable that the writer reflects on the craft of writing poems and often this reflection will provoke a poem in itself. This section I labelled *Ikebana*, in part recalling the initial discussion in Part one about the structure of the collection.

Poems about writing poems - an instruction manual, see *Ikebana* photo(p.17), in the way *Form Structure of Ikebana* is a guide to the performance of Ikebana arrangements. This guide discusses the various traditional structures and forms,

and so too this section of the work offers a variety of commentaries on the craft of poetry writing, presentation and acceptance; and in the way the adoption of a specific Ikebana form shows something of its creator, so too the adoption of a particular form and content of a particular poem should reveal something of the writer.

Ikebana converts abstract conceptions about nature into a representational concrete art form. This section of the work, like the art of Ikebana, focuses attention on the conceptual process and how these concepts come to be incorporated into a work.

An important aspect of Ikebana is the consideration of the use to which it will be put - that is for whom and what reason is it arranged. Similarly that question can be asked about any arrangement of poetry, and in this specific case it is arranged to be presented for academic assessment. Though should one write with one eye on the reader, the assessor, the critic? Possibly this approach is inevitable, unless one works in a completely solitary way.

There is an awful moment that occurs sometime after the joy of having a poem accepted by a magazine, when one is asked to send in a brief biography. This is the moment when I contemplate myself, and can find nothing but the mundane to summarize. One of the Fibonacci poems (pp 92, 93) is in response to that moment. Another relates the experienced powerlessness of the writer to address false assumptions of reviewers e.g. Jon Horrocks review in *Landfall* of my collection *Conversations by Owl-light*. And the first of the three relates to the differing cultural capitals of the reader and the writer. It has been suggested by various readers that I need explanatory foot-notes or end-notes for my science terms - the implication being that I should not expect people to know - for example -what petrichor is. (p.98)

After brief consideration I decided against this on the basis that an educated poetry-reading person should have to hand not only the English literary canon, the names of famous artists and musicians and a knowledge of their works - but also a similar scientific literacy that goes well beyond the occasional science-

based article in a popular magazine or half-remembered school-days items, (and if not, at least access to Google).

So there are no footnotes with the exception of the date of the extinction of the thylacine. End-notes however seem to be used more often now in poetry collections eg Helen Heath's *Graft* and Leilani Tamu's *The Art of Excavation*.

Other poems in this section deal with the research that may take place before writing to a particular theme, the different approaches a writer may take to the writing process, and some perhaps political, comment on the changing world of poetry.

Writing a poem, requires a careful construction, an act of minimalism presenting, according to rules which may with reason be ignored, the strong centre-piece, a ragged branch bending this way and that, the base the container solid unassuming which fades itself into the background though is essential support.

a quiet lesson flower scents
I will not think of funeral smell
chrysanthemums or endings

the instructors voice low intense
and the snip click of secateurs
first I must decide purpose
an altar a reception room
an examination an assessment

the three stems heaven earth
and human somewhere in between
the words must soar the words
must be grounded the words
must be connected by humanity
the essential balance is achieved
by angle and mass

flax leaf is tall a spear point to the sky
a round of fat daisies
earthed and common

day's eye they follow the sun
and in between a branch
of flowering manuka
blossom as ephemeral
as we are transitory
spiky tiny leaves as dangerous

I choose a heavy base
to hold it all my theme
is light my theme is memory

What follows is a brief commentary on some aspects of my arrangement -my writing about the intersection of the I (eye) with specific aspects of light

In my poetry I generally omit punctuation. On occasion I use capitalisation at the beginning of a sentence to increase clarity. My handwritten first drafts always contain dashes and no other punctuation, this perhaps relates to the speed with which they are scribbled down. When I first started writing poetry, my (unwelcome) task was to translate all these dashes into formal, careful (and acceptable to my teacher) punctuation. In the process I felt something of myself was being lost, and I was structuring the poems to fit some external acceptability. Neither did I feel that retaining the dash in the style of Emily Dickinson, who 'used punctuation to disrupt conventional linguistic relations, whether in an attempt to express inexpressible psychological states or purely to vivify language' (Denman), would give me a result that felt personally authentic.

Written language was not originally punctuated. Aristophanes (third century BCE) attempted to persuade the literate of the values of punctuation, but it was not until the proliferation of Christian texts across Europe that punctuation became common, and became used in text to clarify meaning and to assist the reader to find their way. Punctuation became explicitly linked with meaning (and now emojis have been added to our available repertoire of punctuation, and have even been used in poems).

Because poetry is comparatively minimalist there is not the same issue of being bogged down in crowded text as there was historically, so the omission of

commas, full stops and frequently capitals, does not interfere with clarity. Additionally, and an aspect of structure that aids clarity in my poems, is my characteristic use of gaps (extra spaces).

We integrate the meaning of words in a sentence as quickly as a few milliseconds. My gaps give a few milliseconds space (space for the eye, space for the reader). Momentarily the focus of the eye shifts, there is nothing but whiteness to focus on, but then almost instantly the gap is bridged, but with the understanding that there has been something (some thing) to bridge.

When we are doing a lot of close work it is recommended that at regular intervals we look away from our work to focus into the distance. The act of focussing uses the ocular muscles to change the shape of the lens in the eye, and our perception changes.

So too with the spaces, the gaps, a slight change of perception should momentarily intrude. The gaps function a bit like caesura, a bit like parentheses - usually a combination (a caesurthesis?). But I don't often use as long a gap as I would like to, as it produces a poem which straggles all across the page and I can't, at this point, cope with that (for whatever reasons of psychological control or similar).

Various drafts of the personal poems all started with the pronoun 'you', as I tend to write addressing the person I am thinking of. I played around with a change of pronouns using 'I' and 'he'. (I have been a bit conditioned to the perception that the use of 'he' all the time casts a patriarchal shadow, but the main character apart from the 'I' is my Dad the bricoleur, and my man who is the Dad substitute (thank you Freud). It's interesting to observe how the tone of a poem changes just with pronoun substitution.

Footnotes and endnotes I have already commented on, but in addition I wonder how much is it polite/arrogant to assume the reader knows or will understand technological terms, literary allusions or foreign words (and in this case which languages are privileged or presumed known?), and then I wonder about some of the poets who can be very obscure. TS Eliot's poetry came to us at school with

end-notes, but I don't think they were his. *Altarwise by Owl-light* by Dylan Thomas is a stunning poem, but obscure to the max, and many language poets seem to seek difficulty for their readers and don't supply end/foot notes.

Poem endings seem to require a punch-line, a strong ending; Shakespeare did it - the twist in the tail of a sonnet, even the haiku bends perspective with the last few words - but the poem that allows a drift to the mist, a drift as real life does, could be arguably more true to life and perhaps more appropriate to memoir. Lives don't generally have punchlines, a plotted life has turning points, a steep or shallow gradient to its curve, but in the end just peters out, as Eliot would have it with just a whimper, (though his poem ended with a very definite punchline, a bang in fact.

I had this in mind (and the Burnside quote below) with the poems *Focus* (p.101) *White room* (p.104), *Time's arrow* (p.116), poems ending with this sort of resonance-

"Today, however, she didn't go looking for urchins or broken shells. She simply walked to the end of the earth and stood awhile." (John Burnside)

Bokeh

Bokeh comes from the Japanese word *boke* which means blur or haze. The term *boke* is also used in the sense of a mental haze or senility.

This title seemed appropriate for a section which considers unreal, dream-like and aging experiences, for example *Dream-broken* (p.107), *Petrichor* (p.98), *Time's arrow* (p.116).

In photography bokeh refers to an aesthetic quality of the blur in the out-of-focus parts of an image. Different types of lens used will give different types of bokeh. My poem *Bokeh* (p.97) describes this, and is also ekphrastic in that it references the photograph *Rosemary Twig* (p.95). Bokeh occurs in the parts of the scene that lie outside the depth of field - which is the distance between the near and far

objects that both appear in focus. They are perhaps an 'outside context' experience. (I.M Banks).

What happens when the linearity breaks up, the certainties evaporate, the focus slips or re-directs? Where there is no certain reliable image? These are questions that the poems in this section circle around. Dreams are hazy light-riven experiences, as I illustrate in *The inside dark* (p.105) and *White room* (p.104), but also a dream can be a form of truth; *Dream-broken* (p.107). Aging is seen as an increase in metaphorical experience; *Epilogue* (p.119) and *Consequence* (p.106).

Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that that the position and the velocity of a particle cannot both be exactly measured at the same time. This implies a fuzziness or blur in nature and a fundamental limit to what we can know. So I suggest this may be taken to mean, at a personal level, a blur or haze in our certainties. In *Living with the Uncertainty Principle* (p.117) I show this by paralleling two lives or experiences - the digital and the biological.

Piha night (p.109) is also about focus, the tendency for the eye, in conditions of poor visibility to focus only on the near object (the Mandelbaum effect), leaving the rest of the circumstances of the world in a distant unreal blur, this detachment of distance of what is beyond the blur can also be seen in *The fall of Icarus* (p.82).

Adrienne Rich has written 'Every journey into the past is complicated by delusions, false memories, false namings of real events'. I would modify that slightly - in reference to this section, Bokeh. Every journey into the future is complicated by delusions, false memories, false namings of real events.

Delusions, false memories, fantasies. All these can be attractive for the memoir of a 'nobody' (Couser), a person who may consider their own life to offer little in the way of entertainment value for others. My author bio poem (p.93) and *Selfie* (p.114), 'unable to look straight on/ to all those passing years' , show a swerve away from the straightforward, the honest, the head-on, because it is simply not interesting enough or aesthetic enough. The imaginary may be more desired than

the real, an obscure version of reality. From a childhood where the factual was privileged over the imagination developed a drive to misrepresent, to mislead. Some of the poems in the work may be examples of this. I can neither confirm nor deny.

There is the motivation, the desire to discover and interrogate those silent spaces in a life, the spaces where the noise of others, the semantic noise, the digital noise, any unwanted form of energy which tends to interfere with the desired signal must be worked through, stifled, explained away. *White room* (p.104), *Time's arrow* (p.116), and George Mackay Brown in *The Poet*,

'When all the dancers and masks had gone inside
His cold stare
Returned to its true task, interrogation of silence.

Tokonoma

The *tokonoma*' for my arrangement of poems are the other works with similar content and/or approach which are also of literary significance. The ikebana arrangement in the tokonoma can be seen and appreciated as a thing in itself. So too the poetry collection - but it can also be illuminated by specific and directed lighting to highlight certain aspects; the light of other similar works. The preference is for more than one light source (re BSDF metaphor), so to place in more than one context (a critical context and a context of similar works) to see the essential identity of the work. The genre (the style of arrangement of material) I have chosen is that of a partially-ekphrastic poetic memoir.

Why choose poetry? Because I have a short attention span? Yes, probably, and perhaps because, as Adrienne Rich says, 'poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe', and I am attracted to the idea of aiming towards this.

Why a form of memoir? It's a strong human drive to want to make sense of one's life, and I agree with Shapiro who wrote

One of the greatest gifts of writing memoir is having a way to shape that chaos . . . making a story out of it, . . . It's like stitching together a quilt, creating order that isn't chronological order – it's emotional, psychological order.

Also 'Both poetry and memoir attempt to uncover what lies behind the unreasoning mask and rescue it into consciousness.(Bialosky 2013)

The memoir as genre now splits into a number of sub-genres. What follows is by no means an exhaustive list

the political
the academic
the misery
the triumph over adversity
the celebrity
the sports person
the writer - sub group poet

the scientist

(I consider the last two as being somewhat related to my own work).

Couser presented a number of categories; one was 'the "nobody" memoir, or how this inauspicious "I" grew.' (Larson 2014). (Sadly, I suspect my poetic memoir also falls into this category). Couser also states that 'The ethical dangers of memoir stem from the fact that unlike fiction, it is rooted in the real world and therefore makes certain kinds of truth claims '

And then there needs to be considered emotional truth versus factual truth; it is possible to have one without the other. Also memory itself is a fluid, fluctuating, unreliable thing. Poetry can capture the feel of a life - the small moments that can show, or have influenced, character, the shattering events, the daily round. Each poem can be a mini-anecdote, a dream-drift on waking, a captured moment kept unchanging to refer back to; rather like a photo album (or Facebook kindly showing you the images from your year - their selection not your own, so you feel as irritated by it as if someone else tries to tell your stories but with their own spin, making you look fat or out of focus or cut in half by the frame).

Writing a memoir, poetry or other, or individual poems drawn from a personal past, could be presumed to be cathartic, and indeed maybe they could be in that first draft - but the process of tailoring them for the printed page should bring a necessary detachment and generalisation. For example my poems about hospitalisation, one of which is *Tomorrow* (p.102). And to quote Shapiro again

It's a misapprehension that readers have that by writing memoir you're purging yourself of your demons. Writing memoir has the opposite effect. It embeds your story deep inside you. It mediates the relationship between the present and the past by freezing a moment in time.

In this poetry memoir I wanted to capture something of my changing view of the world; a view that enlarges from the restricted rationalistic causal world view, to a view point and a practice which includes the validity of the random, the dream and the metaphor. By writing memoir or memoir-y poems I needed to reflect on what parts of life I wanted to consider and how I wanted my poetic voice to sound - I had to internalise the camera the lens the apparatus for recording rewinding reproducing framing.

Other poetic memoirs

I didn't read very much of other writers before working on my collection. as I was wary of intimidation and/or discouragement. The discovery that the New Zealander Helen Heath (rather than geographically distant and well-known poets) had written about Newton, Galileo and Curie was initially very disheartening, but one soldiers on.

In a Slant Light; A poet's memoir by Cilla McQueen

'*In A Slant Light* is a layered, intuitive interaction with the past.' (Paula Green, NZ Poetry Shelf 2016). This collection, in prosimetric form, is an account of McQueen's early life as a student, a young mother, the partner of Ralph Hotere, and always as the life of a poet. She proceeds, year by year with vignettes /snapshots from her early life, presenting both prose and poems.

A fascinating social history read, though at times I found it a bit alienating; her account is so full of well-known people (even though they are just her people, her everyday life). From 1979 'On the brick step one of the exploded amphorae Barry made, coiling clay rope, fired until they split like terracotta fruit'; and 1980 'In the dining room above the marble fireplace/ McCahon's *Stations of the Cross* on hessian,' And then this made me consider a possible alienating effect in my own work; I have been told by various readers they find the scientific vocabulary a bit off-putting (but see Saunders further down re arcane vocabulary). However, while reading the collection, I also experienced a great familiarity of time and place.

I discover she flatted nearby
she must have been with that arty crowd
we were just the med students the science
students drinking cider
talking about Camus and Margulis
existentialism and how it felt
to cut up a dead body
writing poetry too

But these perfect lines of hers on writing memories -

I trace the spider-line I've left behind
through times I've lived,
anchored at particular points,
...

Outlines, memories glossed in words -
it was and it wasn't like this, the grain is finer,

Graft by Helen Heath

In this collection I found parallels with my own work - most obviously the poems about famous scientists; we both wrote about Newton, Galileo and Curie. The collection also examines issues of parental influence, in *Infallible father* she 'leapt straight from my father's brain'; with poems of anger, '*I killed my mother*', and loss, *Trace notes* - 'the tape stretches/ her voice/ further /thinner.'

Her poem *Radiant* about Marie Curie is quite wonderful (I had poem-envy -and after reading it I was glad my Marie Curie poem *X-ray* (p35) had taken a somewhat different approach)

'At night she is the moth/ bumping against the soft blue glow/ pulled to the point from which/ all things radiate, to the spontaneity/ of atomic nuclei collapsing./ She lets the splendid beams /spread over her'.

Compare that to the somewhat pedestrian political/feminist *Power*, by Adrienne Rich 'she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness/ her body bombarded for years by the element/ she had purified'

Give Dust a Tongue: A Faith and Poetry. John F Deane

This is an account (also prosimetric) of Deane's life. He was brought up a devout Catholic, studied for the priesthood, lost his vocation though not his faith, married, widowed, founded Poetry Ireland, and developed his own poetry career. I expected to feel an affinity with this collection because I could see certain parallels with my own life. The memoir recounts his change in intellectual context,

a cognitive philosophical change over time. He becomes a serious poet later in life but he is always harking back to his spiritual home because it his foundation, his secure base from which a changing arrangement may develop. Unfortunately I found the level of religiosity a bit difficult to stick with. And again I am confronted with how a certain developed aspect of the poet's work may require a lot more effort from the reader, an effort which they may or may not be prepared to put in

Life Mask by Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay is the current Scots makar. Her collection, *Life mask*, has the personal exposure of a memoir but not the sequential ordering. As is the case with so much poetry, each poem is a small section of experience, well-crafted, beautifully realised. The collection resonates with the interrogation of what was then, and what is now. From *Childhood, still* 'remember the toadstool, the promise of a chrysalis,/ the taste of lemon bonbons, the taste of liquorice./ the past keeps calling the children back'. And then from *Promise* 'remember, the time of year/ when the future appears.'

The collection contains a sequence which was written in response to having a bronze sculpture made of her head for display with others in Edinburgh. So from *Clay=Freedom* 'Just take a face, my face if you like/ And give it another name'.

Serendipitously I read this collection at the same time as reading Ruth Ozeki's *The face; a time code* - which was a record of her thought processes while examining her image for an extended meditation on identity. Ozeki's point of view, particularly with respect to masks, enhanced my reading of Kay.

Kay also writes of her seeking identity by traveling to Nigeria to meet her biological father, and she examines the implications for her of the masks he wears. She writes in *Things fall apart* 'My birth father lifted his hands above his head/and put the white mask of God on his handsome face/ /A born-again man now, gone are the old tribal ways'.

This collection is an exploration of how identity and memory can be realised

though the use of, the understanding of, various masks.

The Art of Excavation by Leilani Tamu

Tamu has used a lens of post-colonial consciousness, a lens of family and inheritance, and the point of view of a modern Auckland girl displaced and searching for identity, to write a memoir of a place (Samoa); an excavation of history and personal identity. From *Ancestor eyes*, 'I can see/through your/ancestor eyes/. . . /my genealogy unravelled'; and *Samoa: 1905* 'years after the fact/ his forlorn gaze/ is frozen in time/ captured for eternity/through the lens/'. There is extensive use of the Samoan language in many of the poems, and a glossary is provided, but is not essential to the pleasure of reading the work.

Fugitive Colours by Liz Lochhead

This collection, by the previous Scots makar, has both elegiac and ekphrastic poems some of which I referenced in other sections.

It is complex, clever in rhyme, sorrowful, wise and delightfully witty. Sections include poems on grieving, children's poems (*Bairnsangs*), and poems written during her tenure as Scots makar. The use of Scots in many poems is a strong assertion of identity; e.g. in the ekphrastic poem *In Alan Davies Paintings*

an arra-heid edder frae ablow it
gaes serpent-slinkan
yont the picture frame

and a rewrite of Bottom's speech (act iv scene i) brings a joyful and artful resonance to the speech. - 'man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive' becomes 'his fummlin, fouterin hauns havena the gumption to taste, nor his tongue to make heid not tail o' -

(More vocabulary which may be off-putting to some, but I enjoyed it, the puzzle and the music of it.)

And with reference to specific language choices

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Cloud Camera by Lesley Saunders

Saunders says her collection

'inhabits an imagined, even a haunted, world of science and technology - there are poems that conjure anything from the first balloon flight made by a woman or the effect of experiments with laughing-gas, to how Braille was invented, when the first artificial plant hybrid was created and what the impact of static electricity on the human body looks like. The poetry both celebrates and laments the endless human curiosity to find out 'what the terrestrial body can stand, / at what point the mind turns itself inside out.'

Reviews of *Cloud Camera* frequently referenced 'the arcane and esoteric nature of the subject matter', 'the unusual scientific context' and 'its disconcerting physicality' (quoted on her website lesleysaunders.org.uk)

Saunders responds to these comments in a podcast recorded at a science and poetry event at the museum of the history of science (Oxford , 2016):

'on the contrary' she says, 'the poems commemorate some of the most important science discoveries and investigations upon which our current state of knowledge and practice depends' and she refers to C P Snow's Two Cultures debate 1959 Rede lecture, where he says and she reiterates 'it is curious that you could know a lot of poetry and no science and consider yourself cultured, or know lots of science and be irredeemably uncultured'

Unfortunately, as I have frequently experienced myself, this attitude persists even today, though perhaps is gradually being nibbled at by the popularity of books about science (eg materials histories, popular astrophysics, and biographies of scientists)

Science poetry anthologies

A Quark for Mister Mark: 101 Poems about Science eds Maurice Riordan and Jon Turney

This anthology is an eclectic bundle of poems about science and scientific discoveries, covering a broad time range from pre-Copernican to post-Heisenberg, and the variation in content from a poem about Godel's Incompleteness theorem, by Hans Magnus Enzensberger to the beautiful environmental musings of the 18th century Mary Leapor.

The editors state that their aim was to put together poems that they had collected individually, to make a volume of poems about science, though they say the poems which are superficially science-y are in fact about love, grief, reminiscence and introspection - the themes generally to be found in any poetry collection

They also comment that poets' curiosity about science seems to have blind spots, particularly with regard to technology. 'The scale and age of the universe impress plenty of poets, and one could make a sizeable, but repetitive, collection just featuring awe-struck or morose meditations on star-gazing.'

Dark matter : poems of space eds Maurice Riordan and Jocelyn Bell Burnell

Another wide-ranging and rich collection. The origin of this, the third in a series of science poetry books, came when Sian Ede (a director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation) heard that the astronomer Bell Burnell collected poems about space, and arranged for Riordan to work with Bell Burnell on this collection for which sixteen new poems were commissioned. Each of the commissioned poets was associated with a working astronomer, astrophysicist or cosmologist who was willing to talk about their work.

The book is arranged thematically rather than by dates, so Longfellow appears

next to Adrienne Rich, and Shakespeare next to W H Auden. This produces varied and interesting juxtapositions.

Some poems to note from the collection

Bill Manhire's list poem *Herschel at the Cape* is derived from John Herschel's journal. This places the mundane and the star-gazing together in a very down-to-earth fashion, 'He studies sun-spots/ The milkboy steals the Beef'

John Herschel is the nephew of Caroline H of whom I wrote. He also did a lot of research into early photographic methods - wish I'd read about him earlier and done my own poem to go with Caroline's.

Robert Pinsky in *The Procession* gives a fresh take to the 'oh gosh how small we are in the universe' trope - he describes the submillimeter array on Moana Kea and the radiation it gathers, with reference to mythical figures Cain and Abel, Lakshmi and Vishnu, finishing with a view of the universe 'Where endlessly Kronos eats us his children, suffering/ By nature each of us in a certain sliver of time.'

Spacesuit set adrift Tom Sleight's wonderful poem, which takes a clever, original and moving view of a spacesuit stuffed with old clothes that was set adrift.

'Under the starflood where/ the flood of earth confronts her/ tiny, unmoored, drifting upside down,/ the ocean's pupil peers into her faceplate:'

My own 'science-y' poems are just poems about life; usually, though not always, stimulated by incidents in my own life and using my own every-day vocabulary. In contrast to the commissioned poets and their hook-ups with scientists - my formative years were spent *embedded* in a scientific (and rationalist) world view See *Prologue* (p.24) and also an earlier poem *In-gratitude* (from *Conversation by Owl-light*), which both describe my childhood. 'My mother didn't make/jams and jellies,/ . . . /or preserves of fallen plums/ . . . / She told me E equals mc squared/and everything was relative/'

Many collections of science poems are written for young children, almost as if either one can only be attractive to a child by wearing the mask of the other, and, for example, Poetry Foundation has a whole post titled *Ten Poems to Get You Through Science Class This Year*.

Critical theory - brief comments

Memoir studies developed in literature departments in the 70s mainly as a response to the critical schools of thought (e.g. deconstruction) that abandoned the notion of authorial intention as a significant factor in interpreting a text's meaning.

Memoir studies, as explained by Sarah Heston, had a contentious relationship with the field of critical theory and consistently rejected it, as 'one of the major projects of critical theory in the last thirty years or so has been to question and complicate concepts of truth and self, the very concepts memoir studies has endorsed without conflict.' (Heston 2016)

Joanne Feit Diehl claims that poetry has a distinctive and close relationship to literary theory because poetry, by its very nature, experiments with form and language. Consider the challenges to traditional form over the last several decades ranging from the complexities and abstractions of T S Eliot, the 60s Mersey poets and their conversational relaxed style, to the post-modern Language poets who see the poem as a construction in and of language itself, to which the reader herself must bring meaning. Issues of expressivity, language usage, and the poetic 'self' are all explored and experimented with in poetry, and these are all aspects of writing with which critical theory is concerned.

Critical mash (my reader-response)

to begin wherever we are
with the semiotic rules which guide
the episteme that underlies
the text

the two-faced text
exoteric esoteric
those old hierarchies
of oppositions
 they had to go
but oh how they come creeping back
and where we wonder
was the différence?

Selfies

I suggest memoir can be considered to be a verbal selfie. In an attempt to rebut the criticisms of memoirs and selfies that they are simply narcissistic expressions, I draw a parallel between representations of the self in text and in image,

A very early well-known memoir in western literature is that of St Augustine - *Confessions* (AD 397-400) - an influential model for western Christian and redemptive memoirists up until at least the Middle Ages

Julius Caesar wrote his *Gallic Wars* - (aprox 50 AD) which was still being studied in schools last century (though many of us didn't get much past the first line which we still remember '*Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*'). This memoir and similar set the scene for a style of memoir which was political and a style which continues today where 'important' military and political men are encouraged to write memoirs.

The visual self-portrait has a much more extended history - they are seen in art and sculpture from ancient Egypt - and in fact it could be considered that the earliest self portraits - or visual indications of the individual self - are the Paleolithic hand-prints found in caves world-wide

For an extended period of human history being able to write - a memoir or anything else - was the preserve of the literate elite. They needed the skill, the time and the access to appropriate technologies (inks, parchments, vellum) and scribes to make copies so that, (for example), Augustine's remorse and self-reflection could have a wider audience. Gutenberg's 15th century invention of the printing press allowed for a more prolific spread of texts and possibly contributed to a rise in literacy rates, possibly by improving recognition of the written word.

The painting of recognisable self-portraits was dependent on the quality of the mirror. Polished metal and stone were used historically, the Romans produced the

first metal-backed glass mirror with improved reflection and the silver-backed mirror was produced mid 19th C. Also of course the ready access to the tools (brushes, inks, pigments, panels, canvases), and the necessary painterly skills so this was still available to only a small and restricted group of people.

From the mid 15th century, artist self-portraits can be reliably identified; the better quality and the cheaper mirrors became, the more artists used these to paint self-portraits

Many artists continue to produce self-portraits, and almost all significant woman painters have done this, producing carefully curated paintings of themselves painting, and in fine-costume to show their skill with detail.

The daguerrotype camera was invented in 1839 and using this daguerrotype process, the first known self-portrait was taken by Robert Cornelius that same year.

The first camera - the Kodak - was on sale 1888. The taking and processing of photographs was still a complex skill available only to a technologically elite

The production and sale of the Brownie camera in 1900 democratised photography. It was relatively cheap, and a developing and printing service, via retail outlets, was readily available. Photography became available to the masses, regardless of skill. They could record their lives in a tangible form which could be kept; even handed on to later generations.

'Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia at the age of 13, was one of the first teenagers to take her own picture using a mirror to send to a friend in 1914. In the letter that accompanied the photograph, she wrote, "I took this picture of myself looking at the mirror. It was very hard as my hands were trembling.'

So from this wavering beginning to 100 years later and the flood of selfies on internet sites.

During the 19C increasing literacy and letter-writing and the postal service increased opportunities for the average person to write down her experiences, communicate these to others and indeed have these preserved. (I have letters from my g g g grandmother (and other family members) - they make a very moving mini-memoir.)

The late 19C saw the development of a variety of type-writers and a greater ease - for those with the skills - to get their stories out - including memoirs.

But it was not till the development of the word-processor type-writer, (late 20thC) closely followed by the computer with word processing functions, that the ability to produce the printed word became very readily available

And then the Smart phone arrived (currently over 2 billion smart phones world-wide) bringing together the ability of the average person to produce both text and image - with a minimal use of skill

So the self-portrait and the memoir, both a carefully curated construction of identity, can now, via the democratising of technologies, become an expression that almost anyone can aspire to. Operating skill and talent are no longer a necessity (over 40 million blogs out there) and social media combine text and image to proliferate selected and partial and possibly mis-representational identities.

However, what belongs to the masses is frequently derided by the critical elite; if it is popular and everyone is doing it, then there must be no artistic or creative value in it. But I hold that a drive to narrativise the self is a common human impulse (and has been since the Paleolithic, as was nicely suggested by Lochhead in her *Way Back In The Paleolithic*, our 'truest impulse' is to 'capture something . . . wild on the walls'), and there is no reason to suppose that the drive St Augustine felt to tell his own story was a drive lacking in the serf working the fields down the road from him . All that was lacking for the serf were the tools, the technology (and a change in the political system), not the drive to make himself understood. Of course medieval field workers did tell their stories but lacking the means to preserve, to encode them and make them available to a wider and future audience, these stories could last maybe three generations? ('My grand-dad told me')

And Anastasia sending her self-portrait to her friend is in no way different in the drive to be seen, than the lass working at Burger king who uses her smartphone,

makeup and lighting to capture and reveal the self she feels she really is.

The proliferation of both the memoir and the selfie are simply a response to improved, accessible technologies.

This brings forward some of the criticism of both memoir and self-portrait/selfie. - they are presumed to be truthful and there is betrayal if they are not. If you want to change stuff in your memoir to express how you feel you really are, even if the truth is bent or omitted; then the suggestion could be: write a novel.

But as stated by Kapka Kassabova (interviewed by Louise O'Brien in *Words Chosen Carefully*),and referring to her memoir *Street Without a Name*

'In the end, your relationship with fact is less important than your relationship with truth. You have some responsibility to fact, but complete responsibility to truth, and finding that truth constitutes the integrity of your writing'

Stories, narratives, can be readily made up. Not so much the moments, the instances and observations of a poem.

if you look closely
at a moment
you will see it is
balanced
like a pearl on a pin
translucent
precarious
its future
unpredictable

And yet a collection of poems meaning to represent a life will necessarily, by the mere sparseness of the material in comparison to an autobiography, inevitably have a spin, a slant, a best face forward in the same way as the instagram selfies





Conclusion

I have focused on framed (and enframed) sections of my life, and snapshot them with my cortical camera, (the one with the science-y lens) then developed them into words to print and to present.

This collection has been a personal psychological exploration of the changing self and the influence of the father, written in the genre of poetic memoir.

This poetry memoir is a presentation of identity which aligns (in an almost ekphrastic way) with the carefully curated Instagram selfie - which tells the truth but not the whole truth, which misleads but not entirely.

I have changed from a person acting in a world that was factual and rational to one acting in a world that embraces not only the inherited rationality, but the joy of metaphor and Keats's negative capability. Through this work I see a successful integration of the concrete and the abstract, the factual, the truth and non-truth, and the imagination, and being 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

Post hoc

the gallery white light
calligraphic bird claw
scrape on snow
marks on paper

photo graph
light writes
refracts through text
photos of the missing

ink and ash
ash and ink

drifts of paper
curled leaves
we are written
characters caught

in a fragile book
focus sunlight
through a lens

ash and ink
ink and ash

Illuminations

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