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FRACTURED JOURNEYS
EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES OF
FRACTAL VERSE

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

In his book *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate acknowledges the question of the use of poetry in these highly technological times. If, as he asserts, ‘poetry is the place where we save the earth’, then the problem arises of how best to write poetry that addresses our most pressing concerns. Contemporary American poet Alice Fulton is one who does address social and political issues and has developed what she calls a ‘fractal’ poetic in order to do so. The research essay, titled ‘Fugue or/and Fugitive: Alice Fulton and the Poetics of Social Change’, examines how effective her poetics are as an agent of social change, and whether her work may serve as a useful model to move outwards from the personal concerns of an individual poet to a wider frame of public relevance.

The first section of the essay looks at the social issues which Fulton raises in her poetry. These include human and animal rights, the politics of climate change, and deep-seated gender and racial inequities. Most of the poems examined come from her 1995 collection *Sensual Math*, because it is here that she introduces or employs some of her most characteristic techniques, such as an invented punctuation mark, word clusters, and syntactic doubling. Some of her more recent poems are also included in this context. The second section of the essay looks at Fulton’s theory of poetics and what other critics have said about it. It examines whether her techniques deliver on their promise to offer a non-didactic platform for activist poetry. The final section considers how I can apply Fulton’s techniques so that my own work moves beyond the merely solipsistic.

My attempt to use fractal techniques is demonstrated in *Unmooring*, the poetry collection which constitutes the other half of this thesis. The first few poems are concerned with family history and the beginnings of an interface between poetry and eco-activism. Unexpected bereavement dictated both the form and the content of the central lyrical section. The collection concludes with poems which draw those elements together, applying a fractal poetic to personal engagement.

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FUGUE OR/AND FUGITIVE:

ALICE FULTON AND THE POETICS

OF SOCIAL CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

In his book *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate acknowledges the questionable use of poetry in these highly technological times. If, as he asserts, ‘poetry is the place where we save the earth’ (Bate 283), then the problem arises of how best to write poetry that addresses our most pressing concerns.

Poetry with a political message is nothing new, and Aristotle, Plato, Sidney and Coleridge are only a few of the many who have written of the need for poetry to do more than offer ‘a printout of the given circumstances of its time and place’ (Heaney 147). The Romantic movement opened the door to more inward looking poems, which by the mid twentieth century had led indirectly to the dominance, at least in the Anglophone West, of the confessional lyric. Part of the Romantic literary aim was to ‘change the world by compelling a strong affective response and a fresh view of things’ (Morton 9-10), but the enduring popularity of their work rests largely on their perceived adulation of ‘nature’, rather than on their socially-focused protests against, for example, the enclosure of common land¹. The majority of readers (and buyers) of poetry were the literate middle classes who supported and were stimulated by the idea of the French Revolution. When the Jacobins came to power, and later when England went to war with France, it was expedient to be less outspoken about

¹ Through the series of Enclosure Acts in England starting in the 16th Century, previously common land used for grazing and arable purposes was fenced off and came under the jurisdiction of land owners. As England changed from being an agricultural economy to an industrialised one, the process of enclosure contributed towards the creation of a landless working class with no means to support themselves except by labouring on farms and in factories. By the middle of the nineteenth century, almost all common land was under private ownership. (Fairlie)

overturning the established order. It is therefore not surprising that the political message of Wordsworth, Clare and their contemporaries was eclipsed by the solace offered by the beauty of landscape, or as we'd put it now, getting away from it all.

One contemporary poet who addresses political issues is Alice Fulton. Rather than 'using the aesthetic as an anaesthetic' (Morton 10), Fulton has positioned herself in both her poetry and her poetics over the last thirty years, as an outspoken critic of what she calls 'ethical forgetfulness' (Fulton, *Feeling as a Foreign Language* 287). By this she means a complicit and complacent allegiance to the systems which uphold economic and cultural power. She has resisted being categorised in any of the accepted schools of contemporary poetry: a feminist, she does not conform to the expected tenets of feminist poetry; although her work shares many characteristics of the Language school poetics – dense, dealing with theory as well as meaning, causing a reader to find a new way to relate to a poem – these concepts are not her principal concern and she does not class herself as a Language poet. Instead, she tries, as she says, 'to infiltrate the everything,' (Lorberer par. 14), touching on or glancing off, for example, human and animal rights, the politics of climate change, and deep-seated gender and racial inequities, while making use of the complexity of postmodern poetic conventions.

In this attempt Fulton sees herself as going against the grain of most contemporary Anglophone poetry which, she says in the 1997-8 essay 'A Poetry of Inconvenient Knowledge', '[r]ather than being concerned with conscience, responsibility, power, cruelty, or *form*, [is] relentlessly concerned with the self. Its investigations are not ontological or epistemological so much as solipsistic ... its failure springs not from didacticism but from narcissism' (FFL 282). Fulton mentions no names here, but says she has drawn her conclusions from being immersed in contemporary poetry for the previous five years, through judging some of the major poetry prizes in the US. Presumably she gave awards to those whom she felt did move beyond the self, and her comments most likely apply to the numerous also-rans more than to the winners. I've been unable to identify other contestants, but during that time Sharon Olds and Louise Glück both won major prizes for their collections *The Father* and *The Wild Iris* respectively. By way of illustration, I take a brief look later on at a couple of their poems to get a general idea of what Fulton is implying. She continues her essay with a call for 'poetry of mindfulness rather than

compliance' (285), and for poets to interrogate received beliefs, lest the imagination of poetry 'serve the "traditional system" or "party line" of American culture' (289).

In a 2010 interview published in *Memorious*, Fulton talks of a number of foci for her current work: censorship, political torture, and 'the big lyric subjects of time and death, recontextualizing them within frames of cultural greed, power, cruelty, and fear' (Kay par. 45). Her earlier poems dealt, *inter alia*, with feminism, human and animal rights, and scientific experiment, as well as family and social history. But a *didactic* poem is in her view a failed *poem* (Kay par. 46) (emphasis added). She argues that 'a poem's relation to social change is quietly subversive', rather than overtly political (Baumgartner par. 15). In an attempt to avoid polemics, she advocates linguistic complexity and richness, so that the poem 'partially resists' the reader, and the politics are nuanced and subtle (Kay par. 46).

To effect this complexity, Fulton has developed a fractal poetic. She adopted the term from chaos theory, where it refers to the way in which certain chaotic structures – for example, 'the occurrence of earthquakes, the way our neurons fire when we search our memories, ... price jumps in the stock market ... [contain] a deep logic or pattern' (FFL 54). In her poetry, she introduces different registers, splicing and weaving disparate elements in order to fracture the homogenous plane of language. Although the structure appears chaotic, it contains repetitions and irregular patterning in the way of a fugue. By writing obliquely, she aims to bring to the foreground issues usually rendered invisible. However, some critics, notably Michael Theune, have dismissed her work as 'merely a messy amalgamation of Language and plainspoken poetry, a work not of someone who has made an important discovery but of someone who is radically self-divided, who ... writes arguments but distrusts, or cannot manage, logic' (Theune 91). He sees her theory as a smokescreen behind which she hides her shortcomings; believes her to be fugitive from fully engaging with either her subject or her audience.

I derive most satisfaction from Fulton's poems when I read the theory behind them, and perhaps it is this cerebral quality which not only helps her to accomplish what she sets out to do, but paradoxically also sets her up for failure under other readers' terms. Like Wordsworth in his 1798 Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballads, and the better-known expanded Preface of 1800, Fulton seems to believe that 'an accurate taste in poetry ... is an acquired talent' (Wordsworth 4), and by publishing her theory of poetics she sets up her own fan club. Whether or not a poem should be

able to stand on its own two feet without supporting theory is a perennially interesting question, but one which falls outside the scope of this study. In this essay I examine how far Fulton's poetics are effective as an agent of social change, and whether her work serves as a useful model to move outwards from the personal concerns of an individual poet to a wider frame of public relevance; if it is in fact a fugue, or fugitive, or if it somehow contrives to be both.

I

Born in 1952, Alice Fulton is of the generation which stands between the overtly political feminists in the mid twentieth century, and 'Gen X' women who were able to take their predecessors' victories for granted. The period of her reaching adulthood was a time of protest and activism, a turning over of the established order. There were student protests all across Europe, and America was embroiled in rebellion against the Vietnam war. This sense of ferment and social conscience weaves through her poetry, and brings to the fore what is normally marginalised or invisible. Themes that recur in her work include gender and race inequities, human and animal rights, suffering, and more recently, aspects of war and climate change. Although much of her work raises questions related to women, it neither falls into a traditional feminist genre, nor deals with areas of experience generally associated with women. She has talked of how she defies categorisation and how instead she values the 'quality of betweenness: ... Being neither a "language" poet nor quite in the mainstream. Being neither a *gendered* female nor a male. The horizon is a between' (*The Poet's Notebook* 48).

This non-binary quality of 'betweenness' is a key aspect of her poetics, in that it underlies her poetry and enables a fresh perspective to be taken on her themes. Didacticism depends on separation and the maintenance of conventional power structures, on the existence of a possessor of knowledge and a recipient. By taking an in-between stance, Fulton immerses herself in 'both/and', rather than 'either/or', so, instead of coming across as overtly political, her poems are more subtly subversive. She raises questions more than offering answers.

The status of women in society and relationships is a subtext in almost all of Fulton's work. In an interview with Eric Lorberer, she says,

the feminism in my work is embedded in other ways — in unsettlements of syntax and structure, in questioning of actions so culturally-correct they're invisible ... And some critics have missed the latent feminism because ... it isn't what people expect 'feminist poetry' to be. (Lorberer par. 13ff)

The poem 'Industrial Lace', from the 1995 collection *Sensual Math*, demonstrates many of the techniques she uses to convey her 'latent feminism', switching background and image so that we see what is often not seen; introducing a word or concept early in the poem which she then riffs; using clusters of related images which recur and are interwoven through the poem. On the surface, the poem appears to be about family members and the community known to the speaker in her childhood. In the dominant culture represented in the poem these factory-worker aunts are invisible, playing the role of functionaries. In the poem itself they are brought to the foreground as individuals, just as their lingerie, normally hidden under housecoats or sack-dresses, is displayed:

The city had such pretty clotheslines.
Women aired their intimate apparel

in the emery haze:
membranes of lingerie –
pearl, ruby, copper slips –
their somehow intestinal quivering in the wind.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 1-6)

In the first six lines, quoted above, Fulton introduces some of the clusters of words which are characteristic of her writing. *Intimate, lingerie and intestinal* all suggest that the body is on display, bringing to light what is normally hidden. The assonance of the 'i' sound emphasises a sense of constriction, enclosure and inner workings. She likens 'membranes of lingerie' to intestines which, like underwear and 'trusses / in Caucasian beige' mentioned later, are also normally hidden from view. Another word cluster is to do with gems and minerals: emery, pearl, ruby, copper. Gems and their qualities are a frequent image in Fulton's later work, with the sense that they are not immediately visible; you have to crack open dull rock to reveal brilliance. The words appearing as they do contiguously, their effect of alerting the

reader to the nature of minerals is even stronger. So when later in the poem we read of *wood and acid, stained glass, leading, amber, garnet, gems, gold*, we are already primed to pick up on the minerals and the connotations they convey: abrasiveness, colour, toughness and beauty, as well as hidden worth. These are the characteristics the speaker sees in the women of her childhood. But their value within the established order lies in their usefulness in invisibly upholding that establishment.

Already in those first six lines, Fulton has introduced other language and images which recur throughout the poem. The idea of membrane is echoed in the many references to types of fabric and textile: Dacron, lace, mesh, webs; the word *membrane* itself has sonic pointers to memory and brain as well as pathological connotations which are picked up again later:

the warehouse holding medical supplies.
I waited for my bus by that window of trusses
in Caucasian beige, trying to forget
the pathological inside.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 23-26)

Fulton is setting up the idea of intimacy and exposure, of veiling and transparency. The ‘emery haze’ in the third line of the poem suggests that even the air is veiled.

The factories, possibly the dominant feature of the cityscape, are pushed into the background and mentioned only in the context of the women: Freihofer’s ‘apron scent’, Aunt Alice’s work at Tek Hughes, and the girls from Behr-Manning.

Aunt Alice wasn’t on this route.
She made brushes and plastics at Tek Hughes—
milk crates of orange
industrial lace
the cartons could drip through.

Once we boarded, the girls from Behr-Manning
put their veins up
and sawed their nails to dust
on files from the plant.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 34-42)

The products they produce become the vehicle for recurring images of net, mesh and lace:

Just as food service workers, counter women,
maybe my Aunt Fran, waited to undo
their perms from the delicate insect meshes
required by The Board of Health.

...

It was dusk—when aunts and mothers formed
their larval curls
and wrapped their heads in thick brown webs.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 30-33, 46-48)

Like the women themselves, these open-weave fabrics create a recessive space that holds everything together, a theme Fulton explores in much of her work.

The emotional centre of the poem lies in the lines:

... trying to forget
the pathological inside.
I was thinking of being alive.

I was waiting to open
the amber envelopes of mail at home.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 25-29)

The line ending ‘open’ can be read as either transitive or intransitive, demonstrating another characteristic of Fulton’s work, that of syntactic ambiguity. At work, the women are closed, private, unknown. They reveal themselves only once they’ve left the factory: filing their nails on the bus, and resting their legs (‘put their veins up’) after all day on their feet. In the privacy of home they open their pay packets, food workers take off their hairnets. The older women put their hair in rollers to make their ‘larval curls’. The word *larval* emphasises the idea of incubation, of not-yet-formed lives, and the potential to grow wings. The speaker’s whole life, and the lives of those around her, is seen to be one of waiting to begin.

Some of the power in Fulton’s work comes from her surprising juxtapositions. In itself, the title, ‘Industrial Lace’ sparks interest and curiosity. The word *industry* suggests male solid mass, heavy machinery, straight lines, mass production, hard work, grey. *Lace* suggests female insubstantiality, lightness, curves, individual hand work, delicacy, white. To find the two words together changes the reader’s outlook:

milk crates of orange
industrial lace
the cartons could drip through.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 36-38)

I can’t see a milk crate now without thinking ‘industrial lace’.

Another surprising juxtaposition is that of abrasives with the gemstone garnet. Although garnets have been used since the Bronze Age for abrasives, the association that most readers would make is with jewellery, with adornment and beautification, as well as echoing the themes of bodies and hard gems introduced in the poem’s opening lines. The contrasting image of beautification set against factory work is further developed in the next stanza with the information that garnet cloth is made from the incongruous application of crushed gems to rags.

... sawed their nails to dust
on files from the plant.
All day, they made abrasives. Garnet paper.
Yes, and rags covered with crushed gems called
garnet cloth.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 41-45)

The colloquial interjection ‘Yes’ at the beginning of line 44 seems to address readers, inviting them to question their expectations of toughness and adornment.

A third interesting juxtaposition appears towards the end of the poem, with cookies and sanding discs, both circular and approximately the same size, the speaker tells us, but their functions are as poles apart as the conventional gender split in their use. The final line of the poem pulls the two objects together with ‘their harsh done crust’, as if the sanding discs had been cooked by Freihofer’s, the bakery mentioned at the beginning of the poem.

It was yesterday—twenty years after
my father’s death,
I found something he had kept.
A packet of lightning-

cut sanding discs, still sealed.
I guess he meant to open the finish,

strip the paint stalled on some grain
and groom the primal gold.

The discs are the rough size
of those cookies the franchises call Homestyle
and label Best Before.

The old cellophane was tough.
But I ripped until I touched

their harsh done crust.

(‘Industrial Lace’ 49-62)

Just as the women are closed and unknown, unnoticed, at work, so the packet of sanding discs is still sealed twenty years after the death of the speaker’s father. The Behr-Manning women filch the files from the factory, and perhaps the sanding discs were also lifted from the same plant. Although their work was different, Fulton seems to be saying, both men and women of the factory performed essential tasks and their work was of equal value, whether or not it was recognised as such. This work was all that was expected; no-one broke away, because ‘The old cellophane was tough’. But it was also transparent, and the *volta* in the poem is right at the end, when the speaker rips the packet open (reflecting the earlier opening of amber envelopes) to touch the ‘hard done crust’, where *done* can mean not only ready like a cooked biscuit, but also exhausted or finished. ‘Industrial Lace’ is more than family or social history. Fulton asks the reader ‘to think deeply about women’s historical and biological situation, a request that entails some empathy, if not self-effacement’ (FFL 291). She uses small domestic details to not only serve as a microcosm but also, like the speaker in the poem, to rip away the old veneer. She wants to ‘strip the paint stalled on some grain’ so that the ‘primal gold’ can be revealed.

Fulton’s political ethos, particularly feminism, necessarily colours all her poetry, even when she is ostensibly writing about something else. As she puts it,

I don’t set out to focus on areas that are traditionally gendered as female ...
Science appeals to me because it offers truly fresh metaphors, and it

encourages foundational questioning. That revisionary thinking is an important part of feminism for me. (Lorberer par. 14)

Fulton turns traditionally male discourses onto themselves to make her argument, just as the women in 'Industrial Lace' subvert the use of the files from the male-establishment factory. So the feminist strategies are embedded because she believes 'linguistic structures are most powerful when least evident' (FFL 185). In a 1997 interview with Cristanne Miller, she talks of her belief that the 'hidden persuasions of structure are the most difficult to undo or contest' (Miller par. 104). To illustrate her argument she points out how ubiquitous the male pronoun 'he' used to be when it was intended to include both genders. Such use implies that male is the norm and female the deviant other. Although fifteen years on from that interview it is unusual in any publication to find the male pronoun used in this way, the current colloquial use of the word 'guys' is equally effacing of women.

As a strategy, the power of using 'he' to mean everyone, '*depends on its invisibility*' (*ibid.*, emphasis added), and it is this power that Fulton attempts to subvert through exposure. Just because we don't see something, it doesn't mean it's not there, so in 'Cascade Experiment'² (*Powers of Congress*, 1990), she lifts scientific terminology for her own ends.

Because faith creates its verification
and reaching you will be no harder than believing
in a planet's caul of plasma,
or interacting with a comet
in its perihelion passage ...
my stance is passionate toward the universe and you.
(*'Cascade Experiment'/'Shy One'* 1-5, 11)

Using the occasion of a scientific experiment she discusses the possibility of consciousness continuing in some form after death:

² In *Cascade Experiment: Selected Poems*, (2004) this poem is titled 'Shy One'

... the soul's decoupling
is an oscillation so inward nothing outward
as the eye can see it

(‘Cascade Experiment’/‘Shy One’21-23)

Like all her poems, this one isn’t ‘about’ a single subject. There are themes which are implied or embedded as well as those which are apparent. Drawing attention to the previously unnoticed female whiptail lizards raises the possibility that there may be many concepts about women which go unremarked because they are hidden by accepted notions and prejudices.

As she says, her ‘appropriations from science are entwined with other discourses’ (FFL 179), so that the poem becomes more than the mere scientific experiment about which she would have little interest in writing. In science, the term ‘cascade experiment’ is used to describe a chemical or physiological staged process in which each development is dependent on, and arising from, the one before³, the scientific equivalent to the fugue. So in this poem the opening and subordinate hypothesis of each stanza (‘Because faith creates its own verification’... ‘Because faith in facts can help create those facts’... ‘Because truths we don’t suspect have a hard time/making themselves felt’... ‘Because believing a thing’s true / can bring about that truth’) is followed by a series of examples which develop or amend the first statement and tumble down the page to the definitive closing assertion of the stanza:

Because truths we don’t suspect have a hard time
making themselves felt, as when thirteen species
of whiptail lizards composed entirely of females
stay undiscovered due to bias
against such things existing,
we have to meet the universe halfway.

(‘Cascade Experiment’/‘Shy One’ 29-34)

The poem includes scientific terms (plasma, perihelion passage, electrons) but they are used as metaphors for the underlying theme of the poem, which is an examination of the way we think and perceive. We see only what we are primed to

³ information paraphrased from the Oxford English Dictionary and the Free Online Dictionary

see, whether that is ‘thirteen species/of whiptail lizards composed entirely of females’ or women, or gods. While the political intention of ‘Cascade Experiment’/‘Shy One’ is more opaque than in the poems discussed earlier, Fulton uses technical discourses as the platform to explore consciousness, the most profound – perhaps the only effective – agent of social change.

Central to any social change is the way we relate to those closest to us. How much of ourselves do we reveal? A recurring theme in Fulton’s work is that of proximity and non-separation, how much we veil, or how transparent we dare to be. Rather than borrowing scientific terms, the discourse she adopts in ‘The Priming is a Negligee’ (*Sensual Math* 1995), is that of painting, where she uses it to develop the idea of betweenness. The title is enjambed with the first line, so she sets up a visual blank canvas right at the start *between* the title and the first line, offering a choice of readings. If the title is read running-on into the first line, it serves as the main clause of the first sentence, a simple statement of fact in which the vital word ‘negligee’ is easy to overlook:

The Priming Is A Negligee

between the oils and canvas. Stroke the white
sheath well into the weave.

(‘The Priming is a Negligee’ 1-2)

However, if the reader glosses over the title, merely absorbing it in the way we silently absorb punctuation, she is left hanging in a subordinate clause, a sort of barren territory of in-betweenness, located in neither one place nor the other, where ‘negligee’ takes on the weight of negligence or neglect. That barren territory sends the reader back up to the title, looking for the main clause. The opening image is of priming an artist’s canvas:

The canvas
needs more veil. The painting
should float on skins of lead
white coating – or its oils will wither
the linen they touch, its colors gnaw

at cloth until the image hangs on air.

The canvas needs more veil.

(‘The Priming is a Negligee’ 2-8)

The repetition of the phrase, ‘the canvas needs more veil’ lineated differently, but so close to its first appearance, draws attention to the veil, to its texture, light and insubstantial, floating in stark contrast with the heavy line-break of ‘lead’, which is deliberately separated from its other half, ‘white’. Like a negligee, veil here is seen both as protection and as concealment. But whereas a veil is normally a facial covering, a negligee covers the whole body; both only barely conceal, and by the suggestion of covering actually draw attention to the nakedness. The reader is prompted to think about veils: who and what are veiled, and why? A veiled remark is one that suggests the unspoken and probably unpleasant, concealing the speaker’s intentions and half-protecting the addressee. The veil is particularly female wear, and usually now less a conscious fashion choice than imposition by a patriarchal culture.

Using the discourse of painting, Fulton raises multiple questions about art and artifice, about superficial image, sexuality, and how we protect ourselves from intimacy. The poem constantly shifts between images of the female form as seen in a painting, and the flesh itself. It considers boundaries between observer and the observed, and the degree of separation between form and image.

Another image of covering and protection in the poem is sunblock.

There are true gessoes
flesh will accept: blocks and screens
to keep the sun just out of reach. Creams
white as Styrofoam but less
perpetual, vanishing like varnish
once they’re crammed between the cells.

So skin is sheltered
by transparencies

(‘The Priming is a Negligee’ 10-17)

Substances have to come between two objects to protect them from each other. We learn that if a canvas is not primed, over time the paint will rot the linen underneath it.

So primer between paint and canvas, sunblock between sun and skin, and spaces between letters in typesetting:

Printers know it's the leading

between lines that lets them be
swaddled in the rag of stanzas.
How close the letters huddle
without rubbing.

(‘The Priming is a Negligee’ 20-24)

The second half of the poem clearly references Emily Dickinson, known for quirky punctuation as well as for her white clothing and reclusiveness:

There is a gown – that breathes –

and a gown – that heats. One to hold,
one to release. Watch
the lead white camisole go up
in arms and hair and skin.

(‘The Priming is a Negligee’ 28-32)

For a poet, reclusiveness is often tempting, but Fulton seems to be suggesting simultaneously both the need for intimacy and the need to protect ourselves from total exposure.

There is nothing between them.
That's how they can consume each other
(‘The Priming is a Negligee’ 38-39).

By inference if there is no space between people in a relationship they will destroy each other, but ‘nothing between them’ can mean either that there is no intimacy or that there is total intimacy. As I see it, she is asking that we at least take notice of what we reveal of ourselves and to examine our relationships, rather than complacently immersing ourselves in intimacy. Only then can the balance of power shift.

The theme of proximity between beings has occupied Fulton through much of her writing career. How close we feel to others, or how closely we feel for them,

determines our behaviour, not just towards other human beings, but also towards animals. Her earlier poem 'Some Cool' (*Sensual Math* 1995) deals more extensively with suffering, starting with the speaker decorating a Christmas tree with 'a string of pig lights'.

Each hog is rendered into darlingness,
rendered in the nerve-dense rose
of lips, tongue, palm, sole. Of the inside
of the eyes and nose.

They wear green bows.

(‘Some Cool’ 6-10)

The speaker’s train of thought switches to the image of

silver bins of pigs
en route to the packing house. Four tiers to a trailer.
A massive physical wish to live
blasts out the slits
as the intimate winter streams in.
A dumb mammal groan pours out and December pours in
freezing the vestments of their skin
to the metal sides, riddling me
with bleakness as I see it.

(‘Some Cool’ 12-20)

Even though recognising that it is ‘culturally incorrect’ to be thinking of this while hanging the pig lights, the speaker relates graphic details learned from a neighbour who used to work in a slaughter house:

about electric prods and hooks
pushed into every hole.
About: they cried so much he wore earplugs.

(‘Some Cool’ 30-32)

If Fulton had restricted herself to developing only those scenes, the poem likely would have come across as unbearably polemic as she piles on more and more shocking descriptions of the cruelty in the slaughterhouse. Instead, she frames it in other discourses, nursery rhymes, rock’n’roll, cookery. The reader is surprised into

the normally glossed-over and uncomfortable feeling of revulsion, but because this is conveyed in direct speech, in the voice of the neighbour, we're beguiled into thinking this isn't Fulton herself wheeling her barrow, but just an overheard conversation:

“Some had heart attacks. Some suffocated
from others stacked on top.
They were pressed in so tight –
hey, what kind of poetry you write? Well.
They suffered rectal prolapse, you could say.”
(‘Some Cool’ 38-42)

She further distances herself by interweaving the narrative with extracts from ‘*Elvis’s Favorite Recipes*’ (bacon, ham, pork chops), which both lightens the tone and heightens the horror. The image of the Christmas tree decorations and the references to Elvis are humorous; by using humour, especially as she does here, juxtaposed with shocking grimness, Fulton seeks to undermine socially accepted norms.

By choosing to write about pigs which are physiologically very similar to human beings, and by focusing on the body parts and characteristics which are similar to those of humans (*lips, palm, sole*, and the use of the word *nose* rather than the more common pig-term, *snout*), Fulton forces the reader to make the connection between animal and human rights, to see that any cruelty is reprehensible; any killing is the beginning of all killing:

Drivers hooked the downers to the winch
and tried to pull them through a squeeze.
Their legs and shoulders tore right off.
You’d see them lying around.
After the showers, they turned a hysterical
raw rose ...
(‘Some Cool’ 68-73)

It sounds like a mediaeval torture chamber, and by inference we are reminded of other places of torture, other inhumanities. And then,

Pigs are so emotional. They look at the man
who'll stun them, the man
who'll hang them upside down in chains.
(‘Some Cool’ 75-77)

She could be talking about women.

Like all of Fulton’s work, ‘Some Cool’ doesn’t deal with just a single, separate theme or emotion. Instead, it is a montage of different aspects of investment in social change: feminism *and* suffering *and* the concept of non-separation. This last is a theme which runs through her notebooks and more obliquely through her poetry, and is closely related to the idea of betweenness already discussed. In the notebooks kept while she was developing the collection *Sensual Math* in the early 1990s, she makes frequent reference to non-duality, suggesting that it’s a concept she was mulling over for some years:

non-dual rather than one. Non-duality means not two, but it also means not one. “Because if there is one, there are two. If you want to avoid two, you have to avoid one also.” *Being Peace*, Thich Nhat Hanh

(PN 49)

Proximity and compassion are at the heart of the sense of non-separation. ‘How can we make the world less cruel?’ Fulton asks (Lorberer par. 16), and, ‘Often, if you really face up to what’s going on, you have to change your life’ (Baumgartner par. 11). To ‘avoid one’, a poet has to move beyond narcissism. More than anything else, ‘getting’ the concept of non-separation in the Buddhist sense has the potential to bring about personal and social change.

II

All of the poems discussed so far demonstrate to a lesser or greater degree the techniques for which Fulton has become known – the use of multiple registers and disparate voices – which she developed into what she called a ‘fractal’ poetic. Critics either love them or loathe them. Despite her initial misgivings (‘What would prevent me from slithering into self-indulgent writing that says *how infinitely*

interesting I am behind everything it says?’ [FFL 173]), Fulton has been generous in sharing her strategies: ‘I’ve come to feel that too few contemporary poets are leaving any record of their aesthetic concerns. Poets often shy away from commenting on their work because such statements are reductive.’ (FFL 174). So what we have is not only her poetry and views on poetics, but also an insight into the how and why of her creative process. She has spoken and written extensively about her strategies and it is these that I will look at now, to see how far they help to build a platform for poetry that encourages social change.

From early in her writing career, Fulton realised she was not interested in writing the lyric-narrative-confession (Miller par. 74) so much as writing a poetry of ideas. A danger inherent in writing poems of ‘ideas’ is that they tend to become didactic, so Fulton attempts to embed the ideas through the use of a multiplicity of voices and a range of diction. Without a single, stable, ‘self’, themes can be suggested by raising questions, instead of presenting opinions. She compels a reader to ‘recognize that there is no authentically personal language ...[and challenging] mainstream understandings of personal identity’ (Keller 322). ‘The poet’ in Fulton’s case, just as much as the poem, is a construct. It’s not that she excludes autobiography altogether: ‘Industrial Lace’ and many of her earlier poems deal directly with family history. In ‘Fuzzy Feelings’ she mentions the death of her niece, the kind of detail that it would break a cultural taboo to lie about. But her linguistic strategies create a distancing between poet and reader, which stimulates some readers but deters others.

Fulton adopted the term ‘fractal’ (from the Latin *fractus*, meaning ‘irregular or fragmented’) from the discourse of mathematics, where Benoît Mandelbrot

found that certain structures once thought to be “chaotic” contained a deep logic or pattern ... I suggested that science’s insights concerning turbulence might help us to describe traits common to the poetry of volatile (rather than fixed) form. I proposed that we view the eccentric yet beautifully structured forms of nature as analogues and call the poetry of irregular form *fractal verse* ... (A poem is not a complex adaptive system: The comparison is analogical, not literal). (FFL 62-3).

A fractal poetic allows the poet to break up the surface of the poem so that, as with a broken mirror or a mosaic, light is fractured and shines on familiar objects from new angles. Unfamiliar, or even bizarre, juxtapositions force an attentive reader to examine preconceptions. Reading fractal verse is not a comfortable experience in the way that reading lyrical poetry can be. In many lyrics language melts into the background, and what is conveyed is often a single theme or emotion with a single narrative voice. In her 1992 collection *The Wild Iris*, for example, Louise Glück takes a magnifying glass to a series of plants and seasons to explore (I think) the nature of faith. While there is a multiplicity of emotions and voices embedded in the collection ('Snowdrops', 'Lamium', 'Ipomoea', and so on), each poem has its own smooth surface and internal unity. This is the beginning of 'Matins', one of seven poems in the collection with the same title:

You want to know how I spend my time?
I walk the front lawn, pretending
to be weeding. You ought to know
I'm never weeding, on my knees, pulling
clumps of clover from the flower beds: in fact
I'm looking for courage, for some evidence
my life will change ...

(Glück: 'Matins' 1-7)

The poems are short, often exquisite in their imagery, and frame a unique occasion. But as Fulton says, the experience of much contemporary poetry doesn't often 'levitate into illuminations above and beyond the slice-of-life' (FFL 282). Similarly, Sharon Olds in her collection *The Father*, also published in 1992, takes different aspects of her parent's dying days, but again each poem is an integer. Her poem 'Nullipara' is typical of Olds' conversational style and personal occasion, though perhaps less self-revelatory and candid than many of her poems:

The last morning of my visit, we sit
in our bathrobes, cronies, we cross and re-cross
our legs. Suddenly, he sees a thread
dangling from the cuff of my nightie, he cries out
Stay there! and goes to his desk drawer.

(Olds: 'Nullipara' 1-5)

The smooth surface of these lyrics permits a reader to recognise situations and emotions, and philosophically remain where she is. Fulton's work, by contrast, loops and revisits images and themes in a Tristram Shandy-like labyrinth. The crazed or scumbled surface of fractals has the reader going back up the page looking for echoes and connections, asking, 'Was that really what she said?' Instead of perhaps being comforted or anaesthetised by the familiar, the reader is pitched into asking questions. Rather than being told what to think, the reader intuits her own conclusions.

One of the reasons that poetry is marginalised and read by only a minority is because it is perceived to be 'difficult', and fractal poetry is especially difficult, demanding of the reader more time and attention than, say, lyrics like the ones quoted above. To a greater or lesser degree, poetry always calls attention to language, and fractal verse does so more overtly. As Fulton says,

The wish for transparency is a wish to forget language. To forget that you're reading something that has lines, has stanzas, that's an artifact. Transparency rejects the pleasure that comes from the physical quality of the language itself. (Petoskey par. 96)

Transparency allows the observer to see clearly. A veil, on the other hand, allows us to see through it, but not clearly; it makes us want to see more. Some features are obscured, and we may think we see what isn't there. We have to work harder to see what is. Fulton, by breaking up the surface, forces the reader to work hard and look hard. Unlike many writers who prefer the art and artifice of their work to be concealed, Fulton draws attention to her craft, in order to make the language do more work, and make the reader do more work, too. Reading poetry becomes a much slower and less comfortable process, not skimming for meaning but, like meditation, a concentration of the mind.

One of the characteristics of Fulton's work is that she uses particular words repeatedly within individual poems and in different poems within a collection. In *Powers of Congress* (1990), some of these recurring words are *cascade*, *crystal*, *light*, which then spawn clusters of related words, like (in the case of light) *lighthouse*, *beacon*, *flashlight*. She continued to develop this imagery-building in *Sensual Math* (1995) with words that suggest veiling and transparency (*veil*, *screen*,

lace, net, mesh, gauze). Rendered as a diagram, these word clusters would be starbursts, each of which spark other connotations. The bigger the star, the further away from each other are the points, so juxtapositions are made of seemingly disparate elements. In 'Fuzzy Feelings' (*Sensual Math*), for example, word clusters include *imitation, fake, veneer, simulated* and *defect, inclusion, imperfection, fissure*. Within the poem and using these clusters, Fulton ranges over, amongst other things, dental treatment ('I'm having / new veneers'), and natural gems versus simulated ones:

Simulants

tend to be flawless, while natural
emeralds have defects
known as inclusions, imperfections
with a value all their own.

(*'Fuzzy Feelings'* 30-34)

She uses these discourses to look at the way in which women commonly hide behind a veneer of socialization instead of inhabiting 'a genuine originary self' (*'Fuzzy Feelings'* 92). As in 'Industrial Lace', discussed earlier, the recurrence of images through word clusters works subliminally on the reader, to convey the underlying and more subtle themes of the poem or collection. While the speaker in the poem questions whether the outcome of a 'refined smile' is really worth the pain of the process, the reader begins to question the whole industry of appearance and artifice.

As well as word clusters, a fractal poetic uses repetition of words or phrases in irregularly recurring patterns. 'The Priming is a Negligee' uses not only the repeated phrases already noted, but also a conspicuous layout of indents and differing line lengths which give the poem a 'sprung rhythm' reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins, where lines running-on and sentences ending mid-line break up the surface:

There are true gessoes
flesh will accept: blocks and screens
to keep the sun just out of reach. Creams
white as Styrofoam but less
perpetual, vanishing like varnish
(‘The Priming is a Negligee’ 10-14)⁴

Other poetic devices are apparent in these lines: rhyme (*screens* and *creams*), alliteration (*vanishing*, *varnish*), and assonance (*gessoes*, *flesh*, *accept*, *less*). Such conventional devices can render the rhythm of a poem smooth and regular, as in a ballad, or Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’:

The breezes blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow follow’d free:
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent Sea.
(Coleridge: ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ 99-103)

A smooth and regular rhythm can be anaesthetic, lulling the reader into noticing only ‘story’. However, in ‘The Priming is a Negligee’, the devices are camouflaged by the irregularity of the lines, allowing them to work more subtly on the reader. The effect is analogous to a fugue, and like a fugue the repetitions add depth to the opening premise.

Most of the poems I look at in this essay come from the collection *Sensual Math* (1995)⁵, because it is here that Fulton uses for the first time some of her innovative techniques. Among these is her invented punctuation mark, the double equal, = =, which she refers to as the sign of immersion or the bride:

⁴ Compare, for example, Hopkins’ ‘The Windhover’ (1877)
I caught this morning morning’s minion, king-
dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in
his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding ...
(Hopkins: ‘The Windhover’ 1-3)

⁵ However, unless otherwise noted, the poems are referenced from *Cascade Experiment: Selected Poems* (2004)

Immersion, as opposed to difference or delineation. No lines or borders in immersion. The sign of immersion = = is a hinge, a close joining. Against transparency. The sign throws you back to the seam, stitching. Notice the way it hangs, hinges, is made. Bride. Bridge. (PN 47).

In lacemaking, the bride is a loop or tie which connects parts of a pattern and Fulton uses her punctuation mark to further develop the idea of recessive space most commonly occupied by women. In the poem ‘= =’ (*Sensual Math*), she introduces a number of images to emphasise invisibility:

It’s the unconsidered

mortar between the silo’s bricks = = never admired
when we admire
the holdfast of the tiles ...

It’s a seam made to show,
the deckle edge = = constructivist touch.

(‘= =’ 6-12)

The unvoiced double equal = = looks like a pair of bricks, and the gap between them could be the mortar. Although we don’t notice the mortar in a wall, or the grout between tiles in a mosaic, they are the glue that holds structures together. In using this invented punctuation mark, Fulton draws attention to the craft of poetry, the ‘constructivist touch’, bringing to the fore what is normally marginalised and invisible. The bride sign, this very specifically female symbol, like a seam made to show, is impossible to ignore. When she notices this mark, the reader asks as she does in the poems ‘Cascade Experiment’/’Shy One’ and ‘Industrial Lace’, what else she has failed to notice.

Although invisible, or perhaps *because* invisible, the recessive space is a place of power. In the extracts from her published notebooks, Fulton quotes from one of Emily Dickinson’s letters:

“Cherish Power – dear. Remember that stands in the Bible *between* the Kingdom and the Glory, because it is wilder than either of them.”
Dickinson’s letter 631, my italics

*

the space in the middle == Fauve, feral. The explosive slantwise force.
(PN 49)

Women’s work holds economies together as well as homes. The bride sign, she says in an interview, is ‘a little picture of the background. The stuff that holds stuff together’ (Kay par. 33). She likens the prevailing culture to punctuation, and then uses that platform to briefly riff on poetics:

while staying reticent, unspoken
as a comma. Don’t get angry == protest == but a
comma seems so natural, you don’t see it
when you read: it’s gone to pure
transparency. Yes but.

The natural is what

poetry contests. Why else the line == why stanza == why
meter and the rest.

(‘==’ 20-27)

Because the punctuation mark is unfamiliar, it stops us in our tracks – and brings to our awareness not only this mark, but all punctuation, and by inference other poetic devices, like the embedded rhymes of *protest*, *contests* and *rest*. We are forced to recognise that the poem is a construct, ‘a seam made to show’. As a very specifically gendered mark, it also makes us look at what else about females is invisible.

Fulton again uses the bride sign to point up the effacement of women in ‘The Lines Are Wound on Wooden Bobbins, Formerly Bones’ part of the long sequence ‘Give’ (*Sensual Math*) which reimagines the myth of Daphne and Apollo.

A daughter like the openwork of lace == between
the raised motif

the field, formed by lines
of thread called brides, shies back

in order to let shine.

(‘Lines Are Wound’ 1-5)

Like the women in ‘= =’, women here are seen to be reticent, to hold back in order to allow others to shine. The short poem finishes with the devastating lines:

the dense
omissions crystallize the lack
that’s lace. She is to be that
yin of linen
that dissolves
under vision’s dominion = = be the ground
of silk that’s burned away with lye = =
the bride.
(‘Lines Are Wound’ 15-22)

Again, the texture of the poem draws attention to itself, not only in the fluctuating line length and layout, but also in word choices which emphasise over and over the idea of negative space: absent, omission, lack, yin, dissolves. Throughout ‘Lines Are Wound’, the short ‘i’ vowel is repeated (*omissions, yin, vision’s dominion*), and some of the words themselves (*spin, windowing, linen*) carry connotations of indoor pursuits and confinement. Reading aloud, you have to make a narrow shape of your mouth to say those words, and the thinness of the vowel, as already shown in ‘Industrial Lace’, suggests enclosure, narrowness and imprisonment, a prospect that Daphne shuns.

When reading Fulton, you are always aware that this is ‘a poem,’ ie. a construct, and the way the poem looks on the page is as crucial as the words themselves. Sometimes, as in ‘Some Cool’, indentation is used to indicate a change of speaker or voice. Occasionally she capitalises the beginning of each line as a kind of red traffic light. The reader is forced to stop and look more closely, asking, ‘What is going on here?’ In the case of ‘Fractal Lines’, you realise the poem is an acrostic, with the lines reading downwards the rather bizarre phrase, ‘Bowling develops the right arm’. Again this has the effect of making the reader go back up the page, linger longer with the poem and look for clues to intention as if the poem were a cryptic

crossword. In other poems she flouts the convention of using the line break for her strongest words, and instead breaks at, say, a preposition, the indefinite article or a pronoun. In the poem ‘= =’ (*Sensual Math*), these line breaks effect a sense of floating, of the recessive space she is writing about, a deckle-edge :

It might

let thermal expansion be syntactical. Let it
add stretch

while staying reticent, unspoken
as a comma. Don’t get angry = = protest = = but a
comma seems so natural, you don’t see it
when you read: it’s gone to pure
transparency.

(‘= =’ 17-24)

As well as very consciously concerning herself with lineation, Fulton often surprises the reader by the use of syntactic doubling. Influenced here by Emily Dickinson, she loads a word by making it work in at least two forms or as two parts of speech. In ‘Fuzzy Feelings,’ for example, she has the line ‘I’d rather wear vinyl than hide’ (‘Fuzzy Feelings’ 77) where the word *hide* doubles up as both a noun meaning the skin of an animal, and a verb meaning to conceal herself. In other poems, the meaning of the word shifts at the line break without changing its part of speech. Like word clusters, this piling on of layers and imagery adds richness and texture, and makes readers work harder by bringing their own connotations to the poem.

Fulton often talks of poetry and her strategies in terms of texture, as if the poem were three-dimensional:

I like to create areas within the poem that are polished and highly wrought
and juxtapose them with something that is much rougher ... Mixing levels of
diction makes each level more powerful. (Petoskey para. 89)

One of the ways in which Fulton breaks up the plane of language is by introducing language and quotations from different and seemingly inappropriate discourses, so

that ‘the unbidden, untoward, comes bubbling up through the linguistic cracks’ (Kay par. 50). By splicing the different registers and voices into a kind of collage, she encourages readers to slow down and look more carefully, allowing time for the message – and the pleasure – to sink in. So, in ‘Some Cool,’ the elements include the ‘occasion’ of the speaker hanging Christmas lights, nursery rhyme and old rock music, references to food preparation, as well as the developing narrative which describes the slaughter of pigs. Each element has a different voice, rather than the poem having a cohesive narrator.

*Invite your friends
to bring their special memories of the King.
Put a country ham in the oven and some of his
songs –
White Christmas to Blue –*

About: somehow a pig got loose. A sow
fuzzed with white like a soybean’s husk ...

Are You Hungry Tonight?
I speak from the country of abundance
curdled brightly in the dark,
where my ethics are squishy as anyone’s, I bet.
(‘Some Cool’ 44-49, 54-57)

In that last quoted line, the colloquial admission is a sort of chummy address to the reader, who may recognise her own ‘squishy’ ethics.

The question of voice has been one of the elements of Fulton’s style for which critics have taken her to task. Michael Theune, in his 2005 review of the selected poems *Cascade Experiment*, believes that fractal theory gives Fulton ‘the license to not have to work on voice’ (94). Rather than seeing the different voices in her poems as disparate and varied, he contests that particularly in dramatic monologues, all the voices sound the same, all in fact very much like Fulton’s own voice when she writes in the third person. This may be true, as a look at the sequence ‘Give’ shows. For example, this is Apollo speaking:

*Just asking for it: Just use two hands and twist.
As it is as it is: your femaleness naturally
says take. Says this rape has your name on it.*

(‘Undoing,’ from the sequence ‘Give’ 15-17)

and this The Tree:

That must be when
I freaked. I drooled
amber as trees do when they’re hurt. I salivated
resin blond
as baby shampoo, lactated the bud-gold of
extra-virgin
olive oil to trap the pathogen, Daphne

(‘Turn: A Version,’ from the sequence ‘Give’ 74-79)

while this is Daphne:

Easing the new release from its sleeve, I saw myself
bent
out of shape in its reflections: a night whirlpool or a
geisha’s
sleek chignon, an obsidian never reached by skin
since skin
always has a warmth of blood beneath.

(‘A New Release,’ from the sequence ‘Give’ 15-21)

I agree with Theune, that they are all recognizably Fulton’s work, with her layered images and her references to minerals and textures, but they sound engineered as distinct ‘voices’. Where I disagree with Theune, it is in his assertion that this is a flaw.

Buckminster Fuller reputedly used to tell his students to expand their minds in order to encompass his thinking, rather than trying to shrink his ideas to fit into their comfortable preconceptions. Much of Theune’s critique is based on a lack of common ground with Fulton for the starting point of the discussion, as if he is trying to shrink-wrap Fulton in his own preconceptions. So for example, where Fulton has a stated intent to write a poetry of ‘inconvenient knowledge,’ of ‘mindfulness rather than compliance’ (FFL 285), Theune criticises her for ‘a poetry that has a palpable design, a domineering intent, for its readers.’ (Theune 97). Rather than appreciating

its complexity, he says, ‘Because Fulton’s work always has too much in it, she can’t ... think deeply. A central casualty of this inability is the ability to make a successful argument.’ (*ibid.*) It seems that his principal gripe is with her logic rather than with her poems, and his deprecating tone masks the validity of some of his comments.

Another of Theune’s objections is that Fulton takes a term from mathematical or scientific discourse and *mistakes* it. However, she points out that her use of such terms is analogical rather than literal (FFL 63). She enjoys borrowing from science because ‘it offers truly fresh metaphors, and it encourages foundational questioning’ (Lorberer par. 14). One of these terms is ‘fuzzy thinking’. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1999) defines the term thus: ‘Fuzzy – (Computing & Logic) of or relating to a form of set theory and logic in which predicates may have degrees of applicability, rather than simply being true or false. It has important uses in artificial intelligence and the design of control systems.’ As I see it, though, like other terms such as ‘cascade experiment’, she uses the expression as a springing-off point to take her in other directions and to lead the reader into a third way (or fourth, fifth or ninetieth way) of thinking.

In non-scientific terms, ‘fuzzy’ means blurred, with indistinct edges, the outline smudged, exactly the textual and textural effect brought about by Fulton’s stylistic techniques of word clusters and layering of dissonant registers. In that environment of nothing-definite, the ground shifts and previously held convictions may themselves become less fixed. Fulton makes her intention clear in the Lorberer interview:

The deepest attempt of my poetry — to subvert culturally-correct banalities and evils — appears obliquely because I dislike didactic writing. I think poetry has to retain mystery, to withhold, be oblique, in order to be poetry. And yet it also always has a worldview and a politics. All poetry is political, whether it means to be or not. (Lorberer par. 13)

Even if ‘all poetry is political,’ a fractal poetic can be less didactic, and therefore more effective as a tool of social change, because its politics are veiled. An overtly feminist poem written by an overt feminist will possibly be read only by people who already subscribe to the poet’s views. We tend to read the books and socialise with the people who share our worldview and confirm our prejudices. A fractal poem, on

the other hand, can serve as a mole, doing an insider job. By ostensibly being ‘about’, for example, dental treatment, a poem like ‘Fuzzy Feelings’ can quite insidiously feed in views on power and culture, and the societal requirement on women to put on a veneer, an imitation of themselves. The poem ends:

Does ‘grace’ mean alive and lucky
to be not writhing?
or the ability to hide it
when you writhe?
The fissures = = vacancies inside

a natural emerald are known as its *jardin*.
I’ll leave this place with a refined smile
outside a headache that makes me cry all night.
Right now I’m trying to open wide.

(‘Fuzzy Feelings’ 106-114)

Fulton’s essay ‘Fractal Amplifications’ is subtitled ‘Writing in Three Dimensions’ (FFL 61-82), and it is these multiple dimensions that I believe make her poetics effective as an agent of social change. In the sequence ‘Give’ (*Sensual Math*), she describes Daphne as ‘graphite,/darkling, carbon as the crow’ (‘Supernal’ 8-9), surprising the reader into recognizing his or her own racist preconceptions.

While ‘Fuzzy Feelings’ questions the way women survive in society by being other than their natural selves, some of Fulton’s poems are deliberately ungendered. At times she avoids saying ‘she’ or ‘he’ in an attempt to explore the notion of betweenness, which ‘stands outside polarity and dualism’ (Miller par. 12). For example, in ‘Echo Location’ (*Sensual Math*), she switches from the pronoun *you* to *it* in order to avoid gendering the perpetration of suffering:

Stop quivering
while I insert straws in your nostrils
and wrap your head in cloth
I have immersed in plaster
(But I ran my finger down its spine
when its back was turned.)

(‘Echo Location’ 1-4, 12-13)

Here, the pronoun *it* forces the reader to question the assumption of which gender would be dominating the other. By avoiding polarity she draws attention to the received and invisible binary norms, ‘bringing the background to light, flipping the ground and figure, so that what was central recedes and what was peripheral comes to the fore’ (Lorberer par. 14). Where you have more than two of anything there is always the possibility of new dimensions, multiplicity and complexity. Two is stable but three, ‘the between,’ is dynamic.

‘Betweenness’ is the principal theme of ‘Priming is a Negligee’ discussed earlier. Whatever comes between two things, be it a third or fourth or multiple, can act as an insulator or as a connector. Fulton sees it as a

rebellious force, something that breaks up binary thinking, positions such as Self and Other, the mind/body separation, all the classic dualisms. If you mix a third into it, then you have a more pluralistic and less stable structure, with less equilibrium. I’m interested in what comes between two things and pushes them a little bit off balance, perhaps. (Petoskey par. 9)

Equilibrium, like even numbers and regular meter, can deaden, so anything that pushes the status quo off balance makes room for a new way of thinking, just one of many ways. It also allows the poet to move away from narcissism because the personal concerns are subsumed in the wider implications of the poem. Far from failing, and rather than fleeing from the exposure of the personal, Fulton’s work does perform well, in that it encourages insights and deeper understanding of issues far wider than the merely narcissistic.

The ‘generic’ contemporary poem tends to be lyric-narrative and deals with emotions such as loss, desire and grief. Fulton also writes about these emotions, but she tells it slant or veiled, recontextualising them, so that they are neither the first nor the only element the reader notices. She writes about other emotions, too, like revulsion and disgust (as in ‘Some Cool’), thereby further subverting the norm of the mainstream lyric. So in the recently published poem, ‘Wow Moment’ (*Poetry* 2012), she addresses the common human emotions of anxiety about elderly relatives and fear of age and isolation:

From the guts of the house, I hear my mother crying
for her mother and wish I understood
the principles of tranquility ...

... We would be soothed
by that slow looking with a limited truth value. See

how the realtor's lens makes everything look larger
and there's so much glare the floor looks wow
under the smartificial xmas tree.

(‘Wow Moment’ 1-3, 8-12),

However, she sets them in the context of cheap commercial kitsch:

After studying Comparative Reality
I began *Die Polyvinylchloride Tannenbaumserie*.
Turn off that tiny tasteful star, I commanded.

(‘Wow Moment’ 13-15).

These bizarre juxtapositions, as in ‘Some Cool’, add bleak humour and sharpen the dread.

As already shown, one of Fulton's lasting interests has been façade and veneers. ‘I've always had the desire, on the one hand, to unveil, to be very truthful and naked, in a sense, in the poems. And then there's also the desire for self-preservation that's very deep in humans, to pull back, to be more guarded. The battle between estrangement and engagement has been there since my first book’ (Petoskey par. 10). Elsewhere she refers to this desire for self-preservation as an ‘avoidance strategy,’ admitting that the multiple voices and different registers of fractals serve as a smokescreen behind which she can hide. By avoiding a fixed identity Fulton has the freedom to slip in under the radar and write the kind of poetry she wants to read, a poetry of ‘inconvenient knowledge’ that destabilises the dominant culture.

By any reckoning, Fulton's is cerebral work, and I admit that I get much more out of Fulton's poems now that I've read her theory. Perhaps it comes down to personal taste as to whether or not a reader wants an intellectual or an emotional engagement with a poem. The cerebrality of her poetry is paradoxically both what attracts some readers and in others' eyes what causes it to fail as poetry. In *The*

Poet's Notebook, Mary Oliver comments, 'The translation of experience into contemplation, and the placement of this contemplation within the formality of a certain kind of language, with no intent to make contact – be it across whatever thin or wild a thread – with the spiritual condition of the reader, is not poetry' (Oliver 230). If Fulton's work was merely an intellectual exercise, a dazzling pastiche of 'fussiness ... giddy images ... calculated cuteness of style and mincing Shirley Temple campiness, all dimples and self-congratulation' as *New York Times* critic William Logan suggests in his review of *Sensual Math* (quoted by Keller 313), then Theune would have a point in calling her work 'faux, flawed and failed.' But both critics miss the key: Fulton's genuine engagement with social issues and her desire to address inequities.

Fulton's work suffers from a mixed press at least in part because, 'The truly new always looks truly wrong' (Fulton PN 44). Although it's a quarter of a century since she developed her theory of a fractal poetic, it is still unfamiliar, and as such 'difficult,' to most readers. As she said ten years ago,

I think fractal poetics is still very much an incipient, cutting edge aesthetic that introduces fresh ways of thinking about the poem ... Fractal poetry isn't too rigidly defined, and that's one of its strengths ... As an aesthetic, fractal poetics offers a fresh approach without being doctrinaire. Poets can find their own way in. (Lorberer par. 31)

If her poetry fails, it is as perceived through the lens of the mainstream lyric. It may 'fail' to provide analgesic comfort to the reader. As an agent of social change it succeeds because it unsettles, unhinges, and demands a change in perception. In this sense it works in the way that a fugue does, layering similar but altered elements to develop a theme. And it is also fugitive, in that it moves away from the personal and towards those issues in the world that need to be addressed. There's a Buddhist saying that awakening, or enlightenment, happens one human heart at a time. If Alice Fulton's work can cause one person to question how pigs are treated on their journey towards becoming roast pork, or another to stop saying 'Guys' when s/he means men *and* women, then, she might say, it's a job well done.

III

I face two specific problems in my own writing: firstly, how do I write poetry of social engagement without being preachy, and second, how can I transform my personal experience so that it moves outwards to a wider frame? Asked what kinds of technical or specific advice she would give someone wanting to write about political and cultural matters, without being didactic and polemical, Fulton responded, ‘No matter what is holding your attention as a poet, you should always say to yourself, “How can I approach it so deeply that it becomes eccentric, idiosyncratic, and mine?”’ (Cohen par. 12). The personal is a useful starting point in that it allows the reader some identification, and as Mary Oliver puts it, you need to make contact with the spiritual condition of the reader in order for your poem to become a poem (Oliver 230). But Fulton’s obscuring of the personal through the use of a fractal poetic moves a poem beyond the confessional lyric into something more expansive and inclusive. Didacticism by its nature is exclusive and binary – I am here talking to you, and you are over there. Only by inclusion rather than separation and otherness can a poem become a mole in the cultural organisation.

Although Fulton uses the vocabulary from other discourses, that of science, for example, or advertising and media, she rewrites what she finds in order to merge it into the poem (Petoskey par. 19). Her notebooks demonstrate that she mulls over her findings, holding them up to the light over a period of time, allowing them to internalise and become integrated into the theme that she is working on. The process allows connotations and vocabulary to cluster and spark off each other and undergo a transformation. When she comes to use them in a poem, they carry more freight as a result of the incubation time than they would have done if she had lifted them direct from their original environment. I am interested in making language work harder, and purely on the linguistic level it seems a useful strategy to take more notice of the possibilities of word clustering.

In one of the poems, ‘Soft’, which I wrote last year and have included in the collection which follows this essay, I tried using fractal principles by weaving a number of different elements into one poem. Starting with the days of heavy rain we

were having at the time, I likened it to the weather common in Northern Ireland, where my partner came from:

It's still raining. You say, it's like this all the time
where you come from.
After just a few hours we're sick of this
detention.

(Auchmuty: 'Soft' 1-4)

Having been with him for nearly twenty years, I learned a bit about the bigotry which has caused so much division there, and which prompted him to leave in the 1960s. I looked at other forms of bigotry, like racism, and remembered a book I had as a child, *The Rabbits' Wedding*, which even at that time I was aware had caused controversy in the US because it depicted a black and a white rabbit getting married. Another children's book came to mind, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which I got to know only recently, in which the main character, a toy rabbit, learns that 'if you're loved enough you become Real.' I found quotations from both books, and from the author of the first, a Welshman, who was stunned by the controversy his book had caused. I also researched the making of the 'lambeg' the huge drum which is seen as a provocative symbol in the sectarian Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Where you come from it's marching season.
Men in bowlers beat their lambegs
build bonfires
torch tyres.

Remember that other kids' book, *The Rabbits'
Wedding?*
that caused such a stink in the fifties
a senator said it should be taken
off the shelves and burned?
(Auchmuty: 'Soft' 10-17)

Recurring images and words started to gather, notably to do with skin and texture, and I spliced the different elements together, using layout to indicate the changes in register.

Last time I was in Belfast it was approaching the ‘marching season’, and we could hear lambegs from the halls where bands were practising. On street corners piles of rubbish grew, including old vinyl furniture and car tyres, and it didn’t take much to imagine the toxic stench that would blossom when the bonfires were lit. Even then, two weeks before ‘the Twelfth’ (ie. of July) the menace was palpable. I wanted to write about the insanity of prejudice, and the fractal structure offered me a way of doing so without being overtly didactic. I believe it works in those terms, but poet colleagues who read it, and who are unfamiliar with Fulton’s poetics, found it ‘difficult’. They were looking for a transparency that no longer interests me.

Shortly after I wrote that poem, my exceptionally fit and healthy partner, David, became sick for the first time in his life and was dead in a matter of weeks. For most of the year since then I was unable to write anything but lyrics, a genre which lends itself readily to the emotions of grief and loss. Equally, I was unable to read anything that was cerebral and for a while wondered if I could still engage with Fulton’s work, which, to say the least, is certainly not poetry of consolation. But, like Fulton, ‘I don’t much like poetry that exists to confess. I want a poem to be more evasive, more elusive, more oblique’ (Miller par. 67). Given that I want to write poetry which engages with social and political issues, I had to find a way of transforming the personal into a wider frame of reference. Grief and loss are common currency, and it’s easeful to remain within the bounds of convention. But that changes nothing. So I had to ask myself, How can I make it ‘eccentric, idiosyncratic, and mine?’ while at the same time diminishing neither the emotion nor my interest in writing with complexity.

The first few poems in my poetry collection were written before David became sick, when I was most concerned with family history and the interface between poetry and eco-activism. Three of the poems in the first section were written before I started work on this thesis, and are included here because they fit, in both form and content, with what occupied me at that time. The central elegiac section deals with death and bereavement and necessarily conforms to the more conventional lyric. The collection concludes with poems which draw those elements together, acknowledging that I am in a new place, but that who I am now is a synthesis of all that engaged me last year, as well as the depth that has come of loss. I am attempting to apply a fractal poetic to these later poems, and reworking some of the elegiac themes to see whether disjunction can aesthetically improve on and

expand the very personal base from which they came. I'm encouraged by Fulton's comments to Eric Lorberer (par. 32):

Fractal poetics ... are an open book. It's an open membership: the only requirements are aesthetic ones, and the aesthetics have a lot of stretch and give. There are many adventurous, brilliant beginners today, and I think those poets might make the most of fractal poetics ... Beginners sometimes write freshly because they haven't learned not to. They make interesting mistakes, full of future possibilities.

Some of these possibilities for me now are to work with what I have, but rather than leaving David behind, to recognise that he is somehow coming along with me. It's early days yet for me, both as widow and poet; as time goes on I hope to incorporate increasingly the issues that really matter to me, so that ecology, rather than elegy, becomes the foreground of my work.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- PN *The Poet's Notebook*
 FFL *Feeling is a Foreign Language*

UNMOORING



poems by

BRIDGET AUCHMUTY

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I

*For þon nū mīn hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan;
mīn mōdsefa mid mereflode
ofer hwæles ēþel*

And yet my heart is now restless in my breast, my mind is with the sea-flood over the whale's domain; (*The Seafarer*, lines 58-60)

WHALEROADS

Driving home these crisply Nelson nights under Sirius under the Southern Cross
under Jupiter burning I could almost turn my headlights off, feel my way
like my grandfather inched across the ocean

by star and south along the Roaring Forties, wandering domain of albatross,
the long haul of whales from the Antarctic to their breeding grounds.
(They sleep vertically, their heads on the surface to breathe.)

Sometimes there's a fishing boat floodlit in the black glass bay idle
as a painted ship upon a painted ocean, no
heaving decks here battened
down or a grey
sea rolling
over, washing over
with hiss of foam
How can anyone survive, a ship
still sail, amid
nausea and cold, the heaving fear? Cold
that's visceral
and can't be warmed
by tot or fire or human touch.

(They drowned the whales for oil, baited albatross
with hook and line; only the atavistic fear of doom
saved the birds from death.)

The white birds follow for days and years tracing in air the whaleroads
below as landbirds follow rivers. I'm looking for the path. Can I be pulled
by moon and tide, celestial navigation beyond the horizon's imagining?

I carried his sextant on the journey here, half my baggage allowance,
a day and a night flying across the oceans
my ancestors sailed over and over.

Tonight it's bitter and bright, so bright I'll ghost
the last stretch through the canopy of elms
trail shadows in my rear vision mirror, backlit by the moon.

JACK SPRATT & HIS COMMON-LAW WIFE

The season turns and sheets are cold against the skin. Spratt who has xylophone ribs and sleeps easily and deep puts out a hand as if to grasp the small bird of her warmth and gather it to him. She welcomes his touch but sleep is elusive. His hands twitch like a cat's dreaming paws. After he has turned over she can still feel the imprint of his quiet fist between her shoulder blades. The season turns and all night she listens to the ocean of his sleeping breath. Moreporks call down the valley. The season turns.

An earlier version of this poem was assessed in 2008 as part of a portfolio submitted in the Creative Writing programme at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology

MINING ORINOCO

The run of bronze-gold days has come
almost to the end of its track. Tarnished light
shafts into the bedroom

What does it matter
if it's true or I make it all up? I could say instead
the sky is leaden and the earth sucking up rain

I could pretend I was writing in Orinoco Venezuela
on the shore of the miles-wide greasy water sliding past my window
instead of beside this piddling little creek.

Producible reserves of tar sands in the other Orinoco:
513 billion barrels ($8.16 \times 10^{10} \text{m}^3$)
 \cong or $>$ Saudi Arabia x 2

2 neighbours dig a pond; the banks are black
oil stinks and films the surface, seeps and bubbles
through the rising level of the water

Tar sands are mostly mined but also pumped
after high pressure steam is injected underground
to separate the oily bitumen from sand

There's oil under all our surfaces
2 tons of mined sand \rightarrow 1 barrel of synthetic crude.
But then what's the point of pure invention

if it's ever pure? why would I write
if not to mine? $\frac{1}{2}$ mine. Just under
the surface the always possibility of loss.

Whole logs, whole trunks of trees
cannon into houses up the valley
swept down in slurry from days of heavy rain

They bulldozed the Cromwell station
ripped up the railway track to Clyde
before commissioning the dam

100 years of families lost
apricot and apple orchards bulldozed
the most fertile land inundated

2 couples splitting all those years of restoration
family possessions lost
leaving quantities of spoil

fissures open earthquakes aftershocks
roads make rivers
and we 2 rattle round in this huge house

What's mine's mined. You want the truth
in poems – though you pick up a novel
expecting only fiction

They didn't even need the dam
ignored the stats and safety factors
for the opportunity of 1000 jobs. And their own

Where are you now god Portunus
protector of the waters
where are you now?

*An earlier version of this poem was included in a portfolio of work
submitted for Paper 139.760 at Massey University*

DEAD RECKONING

It is mostly the work of escapements to keep the time how can we escape the differences in age our clocks are never in synch we never share a decade the longcase clock in the hall which is popularly known as a grandfather is the most accurate one you're ever likely to get hold of the long heavy pendulum can be coaxed into swinging pretty steadily the grandfather in my bed is less inclined to travel every hour's discrepancy translates to fifteen degrees of longitude the grandfather chimes the quarter moments before the carriage clock strikes the hour or I was dreaming one degree of longitude equals four minutes of time the world over since new positions are calculated solely from previous positions but so am I for reasons of eremitic desire money and carbon footprints the errors of the process cumulate so the error in the position fix grows with time sleeps longer in the morning has less vigour for working on the house spontaneous intimacy slashing old man's beard though hardy enough to sprint across the grass I used to dream of doing VSA together next spring if I remember I'll take a paintbrush to the kiwifruit and fertilize by force

An earlier version of this poem was included in a portfolio of work submitted for Paper 139.760 at Massey University

STAMPS OF DOMINION

And he shall have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth (Genesis, I, 26)

My parents are finally shifting

We spend hours on triage

keep

sell

throw away

Twenty years of plastic bags

fabric scraps

wrapping paper

I'm a fine one to talk

storing corks

tin cans

coils of wire

*I have on board, my grandfather wrote,
several pets I got in Adelaide. A wallaby gave birth
soon after we left port. I thought it was a rat
until it climbed into its mother's pouch.*

We divvy up the crested silver

not to take just yet

but to record

expressions of interest

Unexpected – it's pitched me

into a kind of mourning

*I have several animals and birds on board again
this homeward voyage, amongst them two opossums,
one of which got out and was found with its head
in the lime barrel and consequently died.*

My old school friend is visiting from overseas

She loves her camera

and her husband

is an amateur ornithologist

SOFT

It's still raining. You say, it's like this all the time
where you come from.
After just a few hours we're sick of this

detention. Our creek's swollen
its banks fudged with smooth water
the colour that Bunnings' kitchen catalogue

calls Velveteen. Latte suave, plush
like the toy rabbit that believed the words of the Skin Horse,
if you're loved enough you become Real.

Where you come from it's marching season.
Men in bowlers beat their lambegs
build bonfires
torch tyres.

Remember that other kids' book, *The Rabbits' Wedding?*
that caused such a stink in the fifties
a senator said it should be taken
off the shelves and burned?
*Such miscegenation is brainwashing;
as soon as you open the book you realize
these rabbits are integrated.*

Coming up the Lough after a year away
you knew you couldn't live again at home
where you're known by your name and the set of your eyes
shows which foot you dig with.
The banks closed in bigotry.

*It's propaganda aimed at children
in their formative years.*

On You-Tube even the kids are in Orange sashes
in the massed lambeg stick-in at Ahoghill.
It's unreal. Not a Fenian face among them.
You can hear a lambeg a mile away.

That lovely crisp sound – it's infectious, explains the lambeleg maker, brushing a solution of dilute ammonia onto a fresh she-goat skin. November's the time to buy a goat for skinning. By then she's moulted and with the autumn rain her skin is soft.

The man who wrote the book said
he was completely unaware that animals
with white fur, like white polar bears and white
dogs and white rabbits, were considered blood relations
of white human beings.

Once you're Real, the Skin Horse said,
you can't become unreal again.
It lasts for always.

It's the rain that makes your country
emerald.

UNMOORING

In the shift my parents are letting go
their garden tools: 1 spade, 2 forks, 4 rakes
1 sprinkler; from the house,
1 crystal water jug, 1 Minton tea service,
1 fender for the hearth, 1 poker.
Here are the 2 ammunition boxes
in the war containing all they owned.
Also 1 pair of bellows, the leaf blower,
1 kite I brought from China,
each object freighted with memory:
working in the garden, family meals,
Christmas round the fire.
We unshelve endless books,
uncountable griefs.

This is how the letting go begins:
easy as dropping a pencil
loosing hold of the wing strut of a plane
on the one solo skydive
the thrill unshackling
from the things
that chain you to the earth
all that defines you
fines down
refines
you disengage
first earth
then water
fire
air

II

*Stormas þær stānclifu bēotan, þær him stearn oncwæð
īsigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal
ūrigfeþra. Nānig hlēomāga
fēasceaftig ferð frēfran meahte.*

There storms beat upon the rocky cliff; there the tern
with icy feathers answered them; full often the dewy-winged eagle
screamed around. No protector
could comfort the heart in its need.

(The Seafarer, lines 23-26)

AS GOOD AS IT GETS

A morning at home
light shadowed with cloud
canopied in pewter
the air green with spring
and loud with the song of birds.
This is as good as it gets
(though time was when we woke
together more aware of skin
than light or spring)
standing on the high diving board
poised on the balls of the feet
toes curled round the brink
you breathe
look around
(the pool diminished from this height)
taking the time to balance
before the plunge.

CHEMO

This time it's yellow,
lurid, cadmium yellow,
the bladder fat with poison.
They glove up with purple
cover themselves in plastic pinafores.
A single spill reportable.
They run it through his veins.

We wait,
watch for nausea, kidney malfunction,
mouth ulcers, fatigue,
hope his constitution is strong enough
to take the good only.
Keep me to thee only
as long as we both shall live.

THE HITCH

This is the true lover's knot
his need for me

his voice fractured as his back
while September fizzes at the window

into unmanageable growth
and the earth turns to show

a new horizon it's growing
as you watch or look away

two knots intertwined make one symmetry
loose enough for space but inextricable

Old yarns tell of the sailor who waved farewell
and sent his girl a knotted fishing line

his tongue-tied proposal but she
sick of waiting saw only a piece of string

and cast it undeciphered in the fire
Too shy for words and gone too far away

we missed the signs and the swallow of his raised hand
will never make the summer

This is the true lover's knot
the strings of the heart that knit.

MAGICAL THINKING

It happens from time to time
on days like this

pewter mornings of no wind
that promise rain

I think of the year he was sick
so sick it seemed

he'd never come home.
Fifteen years now and you'd hardly know

Sure, he walks with less than his former grace
his hair is shorter

but after that brush with death
he took on a beatitude

softer towards me
gave up dancing

attendance on others, could no longer fix
everything for everyone

started looking after home.
We talk more, share our bed again

and although he's well past eighty
he's sharp and interested

gardens every day
makes furniture as he wanted to

but has relinquished all the Saabs.
The best thing – he has become

so open.
Impossible now there was a time

it seemed too hard to carry on
and harder still to leave.

THE KAYAKING ONCOLOGIST

When he's folded his long legs
into the kayak's body
does he forget his patients in their beds
or do they skim along there with him
just under the surface
pulling themselves through water
a host of thin bodies
buoyed by hope?

WHITE BIRD

You said, what do I do?
I said, just be your normal granddady self
as if anything were normal.
To the children I say
think of the albatross
the way he must take wing
on his solitary flight
how he glides for years
and never touches ground.
If we say don't go
we bog his feet in glar
when he needs to spread his wings.

BILLETTS DOUX

He

seduced
me with his

hand. A wee note in
the mail next day, black italics,
real ink, never used a Bic except to shave. Drafted

every billy doo, chose his words, centred on the page.
Above his desk he kept inscribed 1.618,
The Golden Ratio. Diaries from age eleven
(his birthday digging spuds). Births, transactions, deaths, sheep killed,
his life transcribed in Parker's Quink. Till a week before

he died. Too weak to hold a pen
by then. Keep up the
wee notes he

said. And
I

do.

AN AULD DONE MAN (as you used to say)

Today I ate you
put you on my tongue
felt the texture of you
as I've so often done
(loved the taste of you
salt and Sunlight).
Now fine grit
snow white.
Done.

SUMMER FOG

Christmas Eve
in the supermarket
I walk the aisles
the tiny bell of keys
chinking in my fog
while loaded trolleys rumble past.
I hope they'll miss me and wish
they'd run me down.

Where my grandmother came from
fog sits for twenty days a month
a blanket of invisible quiet
as if the world were wearing
my earmuffs
my pale Puffa
of numb.

DRESSING

For lunch with friends I'm putting on
the only dress you haven't seen
bought on a day much like this
except that now cicadas whir full tilt
and the first of your apples, Irish Peach,
are just on ready to be picked.

While I shopped that day at speed
I left you in your car wearing
the kimono I'd dressed you in
right front over left as befits
the dead. Too hot an afternoon to leave you long
before we took you to the crematorium.

Left front over right I'm putting on
another face to overlay the memory.

THE HAMELY TONGUE

Skimming Heaney, I find words you used
glar, for one – boot-sticking mud that bogs
a slippery slap – a gateway pugged
with the hooves of cows.

I'll have to thole
you'd say not liking what was given
but putting up with Hobson's choice.

The last few weeks you spoke still less than
not at all, fallen into a sheugh
of despond, your gaze no longer on
our life together but already
on goodbye.

Your words had slipped the way
they used to slip from me when you were
travelling. On your return it was
joy to meet them coming home as well
like wains – children – jostling in your wake.

SLIPPING

Spiders cling to the corners
in the bathroom
socks proliferate
carrots go to seed
a forest of parasols.

And words.

I can't recall the single word
shorthand we used for years
to greet the morning
his smile the timbre
of his voice lost
days before he died.

AUTUMN EQUINOX

The equinox passed unremarked.
I was too busy balancing
on crooked floors to note the earth's
still moment of slack tide when night
equals day or day equals
the night I've spent
sleeping since December.

A MONTH OF MEDITATION ON THE BREATH

The thought of you is never more
than a breath away.

If only

the breath of you were
only a thought away

TERRA LANA ®

Like something out
of Brueghel
dark and lumpen
with many layers of clothes
you set out in
an empty landscape

your footprints
an unsteady track
to the village
for winter fuel.
Roads are blocked
and voices

muffled in the snow
but the light
eyepriking
and the land so still
sleeping under its blanket
its terra lana

smoothing the contours
like insulation
a first amendment
to make your life
without him a tad less
inhospitable

WIDOWISH

(after John Burnside)

I live in a separate country, white as the frost
that lines the roof edge, makes prickles of leaves

sharpens the hills and coats the lawn with glitter.
Here the birds are silent.

I speak a language known to those who've lost their mates.
No chance of this one dying.

IN THE STICKS

I thought that living in the sticks
meant Styx, its murk
and Charon's ferry to the underworld
of everywhere that wasn't capital.

His workshop's full of sticks
scraps, discards from the lathe, offcuts
forms of bowls where a knot furred
rendering it unworkable.

Deodar, rimu, Osage orange
too good to burn but I start to use them,
start the fire.
When they're half

burned through their shape glows scarlet
skeleton of interrupted craft
his bench a charnel ground
the hearth my home and crematorium.

GOOD AT SOME THINGS, BUT

bad at cars
chainsaws
remembering to bleed
the water pump
bad at cleaning gutters
or sowing veggies at the right time.

These roles we fell
into are all mine now
transgendered
subject to gravity
slumped into the grave
morass of non division.

He has no grave –
always cold
to have him lain in chilly earth
would be severer
punishment than death.

Glad instead
we consigned him to the fire –
warm at last he'd say
his tongue rolling on the r
rolling on the ah.

SUTTEE

widow
without
outside
lacking
the converse
of both
within
and with
cast out
without
the walls
of life
together
pariah
should have
stayed
with him
within
the crematorium
gone with
instead
I stay
without

ONE DAY AT A TIME

pipes freeze
though the water butt hasn't cast
a skim of ice

the crystal in the window
subsides to stillness Rainbow chips lie
on walls and ceiling

late rising you'd say
not a sock washed not a wain fed
as if it were reprehensible

no frost
for the first time in a week Sun glowers
under a brow of cloud

if you had really loved me
how the fuck could you leave me
in this mess

sun's high again
drying out wet ground
steam and rainbows

silver glint in my car
as the black road curves and curves
the moon ahead behind and left

you kept in touch with friends of sixty years
knew that ties stay current
through constant passageway

after two days at the hoe
laying old carpet seems
an attractive proposition

in the house-become-enormous
I can't decide
where to work

although we're half way through the year
I still think 2012 is the future
as if time stopped

waste not want not I'm bundling hop bines
into nests like tagliatelle
till now more my metier

bare trees hide the distinction
between the living and the dead
exposing their form

a sort of half-life
I still talk to you behind closed doors
your jackets hang

DON'T BRUISE

There was a woman in the café
wearing the same boots as me the grey
elegant boots with red tops detailed
with cunning stitches clack-clacked
the wooden floor towards the toilets.
After eating I stopped beside her
said such good taste you have in boots and
pointed to mine. I'd have liked to like
her but she was big and brassy not
someone I wanted to share my boots
or anything else with her clothes ill
fitting failed to flatter perhaps she
thought the same of me stuck up English
cow after 25 years my vowels
still straight off the county plane. I should
learn to keep my mouth shut.

I put on
my boots with care my public face as
others hide private griefs the woman
in my boots for instance her patterned
fabric soles no doubt at least as worn
as mine in the café where the bar
is made of disassembled apple
crates set on their side and printed with
Don't Bruise it's safe to be who I am
with my widow friend we don't have to
dissemble disassemble ourselves
and there aren't many you'd want to keep
on and on talking to about loss
and missing mostly we're better at
engineering our appearances
so concerned friends think we're doing okay
as the bootwoman too – my sister
my twin – cherishes her own heartache
but knowing that doesn't shrink the gap
reduce the magnitude of earthquake
lessen the subsequent tsunami
it can't rewind the film so houses
rebuild themselves in reverse re-peel
the banana nor does it repeal
the universal law nor revoke
the dead restore them to the living.

SURFACE TENSION

The label on the plastic bottle says water
will always find a way and so it does this rainy season

No sooner have I taken three barrowloads of leaves
from the roof to staunch a cataract than I hear drip

drip indoors. It must have travelled
indiscernible fall of joists to find this small hole

where it waits and swells waits elongates and finally lets go
its hold its surface tension and drops
onto my floor.

Molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, always the exact same ratio
how brilliant how ingenious this fine balance.

So we hold and hold it all together on the surface
till the night can hold no more

nor the earth more dark and the Matariki moon
has no choice but crescent rising.

III

*Bearwas blostmum nimað, byrig fægriað,
wongas wlitigað, woruld ðnetteð;*

The groves take on blossoms; cities grow fair; the plains
made beautiful; the world revives. (*The Seafarer*, lines 48-9)

SALT, ROCK

Remember Lot's wife and how she longing and
longing for her married daughters to follow
looked back

and saw what she shouldn't have seen descending
fire and brimstone too much for human eyes
to stand

*How can I not look back when this time
last year already pumped with toxins
coloured like poppies & buttercups*

Immured like rock she stood where rain dissolved her
cattle rubbed against her licked her salty wound
after the brimstone, all that was left. No wonder

my grandmother never looked back to
her city that every few years burned
to the ground the smell of embers drowning

for once the smell of fish salting on the flakes
below tumbling houses the colour of
jellybeans

*like Escher's stairs incrementally
going down when we thought
we were going up*

No wonder she looked east into fog
sailed right through it never looked
back left

forever The Rock that juts into
the Atlantic but in her nineties
wandering

waking asked May I face the horses
today as if transported back to
holidays

at the bay trundling in the trap round
the jagged coast many miles more than
the gannet flies

icebergs to their right hands peat bogs to left
flowering all the way to Trinity
locked in

*Deserted I'm still walled in with fog
and back's the only place to look
I your rock hiding
salt of tears*

the last fate she would choose
with salt and ice

LIFELINES

We grasp at lifelines, congratulate
each other on getting through the year,
the first year, the hardest year, each
a lifeline to the other, clutching
our own lies.

Hah! I meant to write, thought
I'd written *lines* but *lies* seems fitting
somehow so we'll stay with that, see where
it leads, where they lead like sounding leads
cast to the bottom and coming up
with clay, sand or gravel from the bed
stuck to the lump of tallow.

How big
a sea does it take to carry men
overboard? This big? This big? Black waves
splitting hissing bursting into foam
across the deck, night encompassing
our little ship. The smallest men sent
sixty feet aloft to reef the sails
in heavy seas, scared and suffering
mal de mer, four or five men on the
footrope of the yard, the roll
and pitch
unpredictable.

In the worst seas
even a manline couldn't save them.

On rocky shores the women watch, wait
wanting to believe death is somewhere
else, perpetual elegists, keepers
of memory, repositories
of grief. What ever is the truth
but our opinion of it?

We cry
easily, suffer *mal de coeur*, dread
close anniversaries. One moves out
of her 'master' bedroom, another
puts her house on the market, the third

breaks her back shovelling compost. Life
doesn't yet look how we imagine.
Nothing does. We're lost at sea, adrift.
Our hearts have been pulled out
of shape and don't fit us any more.

CASTING THE LEAD

They call it the blue pigeon
cast by the leadsman standing in chains
against the shrouds

its heel armed with tallow
plummets
he calls the marks and deeps

draws up the line hand over hand
reads distinct marks down to the bed
of sand, rock or speckled shell.

2 fathoms: 2 strips of leather
5 fathoms (thy father lies): calico
7 fathoms: red wool

A fathom - 2 outstretched arms
(will I ever be enfolded again?)

‘The most unlikeable job was sounding
on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland
where for nights on end we lay

at anchor on the main steamship route
in dense fog – how desperately we rang
our tinkling bell when a great steamer’s

foghorn bellowed closer
closer. And often we could see above the fog
the masts of a hull-less ship

hear voices
of a disembodied crew.’

My ship is wrecked and mastless
I long to hear his voice

The coast is treacherous with uncharted rocks.
I’ve lain for nights on end in deep fog
felt the chains

ventured too close to shrouds
plumbed unfathomable depths
sounding

and now I'm hauling back
hand over hand. In the tallow heel
among the sand and speckled mud

glints of rich and strange.

LIVING ALONE

Last night under a full moon the cat
brought in a mouse not the usual sort
of discombobulated wretch that
he or I can catch but on the ball
and fighting.

The cat lost interest.
The mouse ran between the sink and fridge.

I talked to it explaining this was
a bad option that it would have done
better letting me catch it restore
it to life outdoors but it wasn't
to know that (though on the other hand
here's food and shelter so who's to say
its natural habitat was better
living?)

But now there's strife: me listening
to the small scrunch of mouse teeth the cat
watching. I talk to mouse talk to cat
I talk to the house the day sunshine
a small jogging commentary that fills
the spaces and the greatest thing is
I don't have to wait for an answer
or interpret the response. It all
just disappears into the ether
and if the neighbours hear they can think
oh yeah it's just the crazy woman
on the hill.

AT THE DOOR

Caught on the slant of wind
distant voices sometimes
his timbre his intonation
I stop and listen
turn my head to the breeze
to locate the exact
source of sound
and he's there by the door

holding it open for me
the inclination of his head
no-one else would see
but I recognise as code
let's get out of here leave
these people and noise
for our own sweet bed.
We'd make our goodbyes

and be alone together picking
apart the threads of evening.
Spring mornings when I think
I hear his voice I'm ready but for now
it's only the valley sounds –
lambs
the creek
wind in the wires.

STANDBY

So that's where they all went.
I never saw the door till he slipped through.

On my desk the candle shrinks, its brief flame
fallen. There. Gone.

I went with him as far as I could
right to the departure gate.

Standing on the threshold
I don't know how to go or how to stay.

There's no frontier but like the Yellow River
more water here than silt – here more silt than water.

I've stepped onto the travelator. No booking yet
but a standby ticket in my hand. Conveyed

on the same path my grandparents took
and theirs, and theirs. I'm coming.

Wait for me.

ACROSS THE FACE OF THE SUN

The crashed starling at the window has a choice.
She's still breathing as I cup her in my hand
drip Rescue in her beak seeing the cusp
her passageway from here.
Maybe she's David again
new hatched.

Death comes
between us as the moon
passes in front of the sun
dark chill descends
between lives or else
lives pass between deaths
which is our proper home
all the rest are crossings
from one shade to another
as on a hot day we traverse
shadow to shadow
leaving as little of us exposed
for as short a time as we can.
Dark is home and comforting.

I told him it was time to leave
that he was more than this frail
form he had no use for anymore.
Go I said go.

The lion sun yawns.
Leaves make pinholes and cast
crescents of light across the verandah
that wane as heat prickles
less on the skin. Birds sing
come to bed and a light breeze cools
as if night is round the corner.
Although a lion is most likely to eat you
a few days after the full moon
and although this moon is only new
we are consumed
with the spectacle as it passes.
And now the lion

begins to close its mouth
the crescents of light
like a fast moon wax again
the hole almost grown over
sun restored to its bright disk
its stinging heat.

‘This day proved as favourable to our purpose
as we could wish. Not a Cloud was to be seen
the whole day, and the Air was perfectly Clear,
so that we had every advantage we could
desire in observing the whole of the Passage
of the planet over the Sun's Disk.’

Transit – you think of trains
you think passive
commuters being shunted
from one side of a great city
to the other or to Auschwitz
the individual lost
in the vast number and compelled.
This is the transit lounge
the holding pen between flights.
The rest is just illusion
our delusion.

Transition – you think emerging
eg. from chrysalis to flight
you think gradual progression
you think natural process.

Three days it should have been
but there were only 44 hours
from the moment of his crossing
to the crematorium. I should
have brought him home but left him
in the mortuary.
He always felt the cold.
Death becomes us.

‘We very distinctly saw an Atmosphere
or Dusky shade round the body of the planet.’

All early this year, kowhai, camellias, quince,
way markers in my crossing.

The garden shifts from open and bare
to closed in with greenery.

How it changes the light.

I remind the starling she can choose
green shade or fly into bright.

Her eyes open

a little shake

she launches

is gone.

ADMISSION

51 weeks after
my lover died
my father falls

in the hospital
his first time
in 95 years

his blind hand
soft with inactivity
gropes for touch

there's only one
letter different between
partner and parent

Last spring – the last spring – appears still sharp
like looking through Waterford crystal
each day tulips coming into bloom
crab apple and camellias fizzing
into froth. Those evenings I came home
to the welcome of cats and birdsong
the gold kowhai alive with tui
I recorded it all to show you
next day

less to keep you anchored here
(it didn't occur to me you weren't)
than to remind you there was a world
beyond your four white walls

I want to
keep talking to you but talking to you
makes me cry. I want to tell you how
the fluoro orange azalea
is just swelling

the crepuscule rose
and Aotearoa are in leaf
and the hedge needs a trim

He was away when I found the house
a former dairy farm, trad vla,
3 br, 1 bth, 4 ha fenced,
est gdns, sheds 3-ph pwr.
Built in 1897 on
the rise between two streams

never dry
And the trees: they didn't mention trees –
totaras the girth of many arms
birches older than I'd ever seen –
nor the way the house whispered buy me
buy me I'm yours

the plunge of the slope
beside the creek where I imagined
hot afternoons lying in the grass

For the first few years we planted trees
dogwood catalpa maple

carried
buckets from the creek through months of drought

danced naked finally when rain came
at dusk we walked the intimate rooms
we'd made from open pasture

his eye

for form

my filling in with colour.

Spring came in increments as we watched
the rhododendrons in the patients'
garden bloom

and he took a few more
steps each day. I took to him the scent
of earth and air

videos of cats

birds flowers a tour of our garden
to bring him home

Bringing him home
the shining star we followed. Let's aim
for Christmas they said and we assumed
It wasn't hope we felt because hope
implies the possibility of
unsuccess

We assumed

If we'd known

we'd have said all the unsayables
undone the barbs

misunderstandings

By the time we knew

he was hurtling

towards death

beyond all talk

beyond

the exchange of memories

beyond

being asked

beyond being able to tell

I'd have asked about the pump and what to do
with gutters grease traps the septic tank
and drains

It's all water

We named the fields (unable with our
origins to call them paddocks) for
their trees: totara

chestnut

big elm

and Avoca

not a tree but where
the waters meet. He planned a Pelton
wheel to draw up water for the garden
felled a poplar for a bridge

scattered

cardiocrinum seeds

phormium

and tried for years to sow the bright blue
meconopsis

imports and natives
mish-mashed like us in our adopted
home.

The other bridge he made upstream
has washed away this wet winter

left

the handrope stranded from tree to tree
and nowhere I can cross

Everywhere

his handiwork

each curve his muscles'

bow and flex

his sweat.

Sweet taste of him

How could I leave (him) when he's still here?

Who knows what half hidden face will turn
and show itself on this day of wind
and rainbows?

I take a slasher down
the ghost of his steep steps

hacking through

the invasion of poplars and broom
toward the meeting of the waters
where the skeleton of his work hides
under a skein of cleavers. I dig

a long furrow
 easy in soft ground
arrange a pair of trousers, work boots
a shirt and one of his many pairs
of holey socks, lay them as if he
were lying *skinny as all get out*
(even at the best of times it was
like sleeping with a bicycle) lie
with him
 my lover
 my old lost land
before I fill it in
 know his clothes
will keep him here. I long to not let
his ashes go
 lay them on my tongue
all that's left of bone
 loved ivory

In the end you left nothing to my
imagination
 each joint apparent
the way your jawbone hinged
 your cranium
your sharp hips. Hard to believe my calm
nor how I saw such hideous beauty
in your dying bones.

EIGHT BELLS AND ALL'S WELL

For twelvemonth and a day
I was encompassed
with fog. Early morning's calm,
sun just on the water.

When they got clear of the iceberg
the bells were sounded
and then the joyful cry, 'She Floats'
echoed through the ship.

Rose petals mixed with ash swirl grey
and float downstream. We take the river
to the sea, to sky, cloud and rain.
Transpires he comes along with me.

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Whaleroads: the first phrase is an adaptation of a line from Alice Fulton's poem 'Some Cool'

Stamps of Dominion includes extracts from the 1897-99 journals of my maternal grandfather, Captain L.G. Garbett RN, as do *Casting the Lead* and *Eight Bells and All's Well*

Soft: *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams was first published in 1922. Garth Williams' book, *The Rabbits' Wedding*, was published in 1958. Both are classics of American children's literature. The *Lough* is Belfast Lough; *lambeg* – a huge drum played specifically by Unionist marching bands; *Orange* refers to the Orange Order of Unionists; *Stick-in* – a mass drumming event held on 12th July; *Fenian* is an often derogatory term for Irish Catholics and Republicans

Billets Doux: 1.618 = Phi, the Golden Ratio, also known as the golden mean and the divine proportion, was defined by Euclid and occurs widely in nature, art, architecture and music. Closely related to the Fibonacci sequence, it depicts the proportions which are supposedly most pleasing to the human aesthetic. Mathematically the number sequence in the golden ratio is 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13 *et seq.*

Terra Lana: the opening is taken from John Burnside's poem, 'Hyena'; Terra Lana is the brand name of a wool insulation for ceilings

Widowish: the first phrase is taken from John Burnside's poem 'Dope Head Blues'. According to an article in the National Geographic, one language dies every 14 days. By the next century nearly half of the roughly 7,000 languages spoken in the world will likely disappear.

Salt, Rock: refers to St John's and Trinity Bay in Newfoundland, where my maternal grandmother spent the first thirty years of her life.

Across the Face of the Sun: extracts are taken from Captain Cook's journals recording the Transit of Venus

Eight Bells and All's Well: the title is a saying on ships to mark that a watch had ended without incident, also used metaphorically referring to the death of a seaman

The epigraphs at the beginning of each section are taken from the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*. The original text is from Whitelock, Dorothy (ed.): *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967. The translation of the first two sections are from Gordon, R.K.: *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. London: Dent, 1970. The translation of the third extract is my own.