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The Poetry Sequence as Sustained Meditation

A critical and creative thesis presented in partial fulfilment
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Abstract

This thesis examines the poetry sequence as sustained meditation. It uses two investigative methods: a critical essay and a poetry manuscript containing four discrete sequences and an epilogue. It explores, both creatively and critically, how a sequence works, what holds it together.

The critical essay (30 percent) examines poetry sequences by two contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand poets: “Reprogramming the heart” from Helen Heath’s collection *Are friends electric?* and “Tender” from Janet Newman’s collection *Unseasoned Campaigner*. Each sequence comprises a female speaker’s contemplation of loss and grief, which seemed apt as correlatives to my creative work. I analyse how the poems speak to one another via repeated images and motifs to operate as sequences, creating a whole greater than the constituent poems. Specifically, in both cases, the echoing images and motifs support the development of extended elegies, with an emphasis on a version of the traditional movement from lament to consolation in Heath and an emphasis in Newman on a contemporary version of the elegy’s traditional praise movement, one that declines to idealise.

My poetry manuscript (70 percent) explores two connected family tragedies. I use the findings from the critical essay to inform the methodology in the practice of my creative work, notably the recurrence of image and motif. The first sequence, “Fragmented”, tracks my paternal grandmother’s cognitive decline following an undiagnosed head injury sustained after being struck by a car. The second, third and fourth sequences, titled “Intensive Care”, “Valuables” and “Reclamation”, trace the aftermath of my family’s involvement in a fatal car accident which was precipitated by my grandmother’s death.

“Intensive Care” is set contemporaneously to the crash, containing aspects of a child’s perspective, whilst in “Valuables” and “Reclamation” the speaker attempts in the present to elucidate the impact of the crash from some measure of critical distance. The epilogue contextualises the subject matter with more recent material. Writing the manuscript has challenged me to shape emotional response to deeply personal experience into an artwork, to seek the universal in the specific.

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Introduction to the thesis

This thesis is 70 percent creative, 30 percent critical. Part one is a critical essay which explores the poetry sequences of two contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand poets, Helen Heath and Janet Newman. Specifically, I examine Heath's sequence "Reprogramming the heart" from her award-winning second full collection *Are friends electric*, and Newman's sequence "Tender" from her award-winning debut collection *Unseasoned campaigner*. The second section is the creative component, a manuscript of my lyric poetry ordered into linked sequences. These sequences are biographical in content, exploring personal and political aspects of family relationships and childhood loss. I place these two parts in the order they appear because my study of Heath and Newman's works informs my own creative practice, as detailed in the preface to the poetry manuscript included in part two of the thesis.

I selected these poets as study subjects because their sequences were elegiac in subject matter, and this seemed most closely relevant to the poetry I sought to write in the creative component. I admired the aesthetic strategies used in their sequences of short lyric poems to create a narrative centred around loss in the case of Heath, and a biographical portrait of a father, and the speaker's relationship with him, in the case of Newman. This latter was aligned to what I hoped to achieve in the creative component, though our perspectives differed in fundamental ways.

My choice of Helen Heath and Janet Newman, and sequences from their very recent collections (2018 and 2021 respectively), as study subjects meant that there was limited existing primary scholarship available. This comprised a small group of reviews and interviews. Although many of these were of high quality and provided useful insights, this paucity of existing criticism specific to the sequences created a challenge. However, it was

also liberating, in that I was able to immerse myself in close readings of the sequences, to establish how they work lyrically. I was interested to establish how the poems are tied together beyond narrative or chronology, what they achieved over and above the individual lyric poems, and how I might utilise my findings in my own creative work as I sought to write a collection composed largely of elegiac poetry sequences. Hence my critical thesis presents not so much a literary-critical argument as a poetics-focused close reading from my perspective as a writer of sequences. Use of secondary texts, however, proved invaluable in placing the collections within the literary contexts of lyric poetry, poetic sequences, the pastoral, in the case of Newman's work, and the elegy as a time-honoured but evolving form.

The elegiac poetry sequences
of Helen Heath
and Janet Newman

Introduction

This critical component explores the nature and function of the modern poetry sequence. It seeks to identify the essential elements of poetry sequences, and to examine how specific individual sequences operate. I investigate the work and technique of two poets, Helen Heath and Janet Newman, who have developed their poetry into sequences. I selected these poets, and their respective sequences, partly for their subject matter, which is elegiac in nature, as is my creative project. Each poet has also earned significant acclaim for the collection from which their poetry sequence comes.

Helen Heath is a contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand poet who has published two collections of poetry. Her first collection, *Graft* (2012) won the NZSA Jessie Mackay Best First Book of Poetry Award in 2013. It was also shortlisted for the Royal Society of New Zealand Science Book Prize, the first poetry book to be shortlisted. Her second collection, *Are Friends Electric?* (2018) won the Peter and Mary Biggs Poetry Award at the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards in 2019. Heath holds a PhD in creative writing from Victoria University Wellington - Te Herenga Waka's International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML). Nicholas Reid, a prominent Aotearoa New Zealand poetry reviewer observes that Heath's poems "have a forthright voice, such exact imagery and clear-headedness allied to a humane sensibility" ("Something new"). I investigate the sequence "Reprogramming the heart" from *Are Friends Electric?* here.

Janet Newman is also an award-winning contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand poet and essayist; she holds a PhD in creative writing from Massey University. Otago University Press published Newman's debut poetry collection, *Unseasoned campaigner* in 2021. The manuscript was a runner-up in the 2019 Kathleen Grattan Award. The published book won the 2022 New Zealand Society of Authors' (NZSA) Heritage Book Award for poetry. In

making the award, NZSA described *Unseasoned campaigner* as “a nuanced take on the complexities of a farmer’s life and the realities of the role.” (“NZSA Heritage Book Awards 2022”). The collection comprises three sections, entitled “How now?”, “Tender” and “Ruahine”. An early iteration of “Tender” won the Kathleen Grattan prize for a sequence of poems in 2017. I consider the complete sequence “Tender” as it appears in *Unseasoned campaigner* here.

Heath’s sequence “Reprogramming the heart” orders the poems as a narrative. Newman’s sequence “Tender” has a chronological progression. But my interest, as a poet interested in writing sequences, lies in what holds together these sequences beyond narrative or chronological progression. First, I establish a working definition of the poetic sequence from limited existing scholarship. Kevin Clark asserts that “the contemporary poetic sequence, simultaneously unifying and fragmenting itself, captures the anxieties of contemporary life...in fact, the sequence may be the best form for expressing both a chaotic culture and destabilized identity.” (523). Rebecca Seiferle defines the poetic sequence as “an extended form in which disparate realities – personal experience, cultural threads, or texts – can intersect and flux and ebb across formal boundaries.” (“Beyond Perfect”). In *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, Rosenthal and Gall define the modern poetry sequence as “a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and dramatic elements, ... but its structure is finally lyrical.” (9). *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* relies on Rosenthal and Gall’s definition of the modern (British and American) poetic sequence (728). While I could argue that each sequence I study “captures the anxieties of contemporary life”, and that “disparate realities”, particularly in Heath, “intersect and flux and ebb”, I have found Rosenthal and Gall’s definition most directly useful to my

investigation of how the sequences work in practice, and how that may inform my own work as a writer of sequences. It is therefore the poetics, this “interact[ion]” between poems, and how that creates of the sequences an “organic whole,” that I examine here.

I investigate how these specific poetry sequences achieve the lyrical structure Rosenthal and Gall identify. I argue that each poet employs other poetic techniques beyond narrative or chronology to support the sequence’s function. These are primarily, but not limited to, the use of recurring images and motifs. I argue that these elements strengthen both individual poems and the sequences as a whole, such that the poems in the sequences interact with each other, entering into a conversation that underpins the narrative or thematic elements.

Because the sequences I examine each have elegiac elements, I place them within that poetic tradition as well as the tradition of lyric poetry. The elegy takes its name from the Greek “*elegeia*”, a poem or song of lament. Its origin as a poetic form is in the third century BC, with the Greek Theocritus’ “*Woes of Daphnis*” in his first “*Idyll*”, and later, Virgil’s *Eclogues V and X*, written in Latin (Norlin 294). These early elegies had pastoral settings, a formal structure and meter, and were written to be sung. The first elegies written in English appeared in the sixteenth century, Spencer’s “*November*” being a notable early example, followed by Milton’s “*Lycidas*” and others. The early English elegies used the conventions of the form as laid out in the classical predecessors (Norlin 295-7).

Traditional elegies include three elements: lament, praise and consolation. This consolation drew on classical ideas of apotheosis – that the dead lived on in another form and place – which the English elegies adapted to fit Christian beliefs (Norlin 309-310). But as Ramazani notes of the traditional form, “the dead were visible only through the thick shroud of pastoral codes and abstract ideals” (18). Perhaps elegists over the centuries have

felt the need to escape traditional constraints in order to produce work that reflects a real individual and that individual's attendant relationships. The form has evolved over the centuries such that modern elegies (of the twentieth century and beyond) often emphasise one or two of the traditional elements (lament, praise, consolation), and some actively eschew praise in favour of criticism, or balance praise with critique. Abrams makes no mention of "praise" in defining the elegy's "most common present usage" as "a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person, usually ending in a consolation." (104). Whilst early elegies consistently used formal meter, as Brewster notes, "by the nineteenth century it [elegy] was designated lyric" (123), although this did not preclude the use of formal meter. In the course of my reading of their work, I examine how, and to what extent, the sequences of Heath and Newman fit into the elegy tradition.

I use the following definitions of the literary terms I employ in the course of my investigation. Abrams defines the image as "[an] object and quality of sense perception referred to in a poem..." (172), and the motif as "a conspicuous element... device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently" (229). "Theme" is defined as "a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader" (230). I examine the way in which these devices interact in each poetry sequence such that they strengthen not just individual works but the "organic whole" identified by Rosenthal and Gall. I further examine the ways in which these techniques reflect, or serve to inform, the sequences as modern elegies.

Helen Heath's "Reprogramming the heart"

Helen Heath's second poetry collection *Are Friends Electric?* comprises two poetry sequences. I consider the second sequence, "Reprogramming the heart" here. Specifically, I consider the use of narrative, but beyond this, the ways in which Heath's use of image and motif supports the sequence to "interact as an organic whole" such that the sequence is "finally lyrical" as per Rosenthal and Gall's definition. I further consider the place of the sequence in the elegy tradition.

"Reprogramming the heart" follows a female speaker's journey through grief precipitated by the sudden loss of her husband. The narrative arc of the sequence begins just prior to the loss, moves through the initial processing of grief, and covers the speaker's various attempts to bring her husband back. These include trying to hold onto and consolidate memories; dreams and fantasies; her decision to bear his child via IVF; and to use technology to create an electronic facsimile of him. Heath devotes several poems to the detail of the technological process used to create this facsimile, and to the result, which ultimately proves unsatisfactory to the speaker. The later poems describe the "freeing" of the electronic "husband" from the computer which holds him. The speaker bears their child, a daughter, while moving through her grief to acceptance and optimism.

The individual poems in Heath's sequence are "lyrical" in Abrams' sense of the term. He defines the lyric as "any fairly short poem uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling" (202). The poems in Heath's sequence meet the criteria of being "fairly short"; of the 35 poems, only one exceeds a page in length. The "single speaker" is present as a lyric "I" in twenty-eight of the poems, and in others the speaker's presence is implied via reference to a universal "you". I argue that each of the individual poems expresses a "state of mind or a process of

perception”, which taken together illustrate the speaker’s progress through grief during a specific time period. I further argue that the sequence, as a whole, does the work of the lyric, as it expresses the speaker’s “state of mind or a process of perception” at different stages on her grief journey.

Narrative is the most evident way this is accomplished and is the most obvious link, with some poems functioning primarily to move the narrative on. But if narrative is the most evident connection, Heath also employs other techniques to link individual works such that they “interact as an organic whole”. These are primarily, but not limited to, recurring images and motifs. I argue that, underlying the narrative, these images and motifs create a subtext. I characterise that subtext as human desire for genuine connection, and for permanence in a transitory world. Connection and permanence are recurring themes. The speaker pursues genuine connection and permanence during the course of the grieving process. The poems thus enter into a conversation with one another that explores the nature of connection in its various forms, and supports the grief narrative which underpins the sequence. The recurring images I discuss are physical touch in its various forms, including kisses; dream and nightmare images; ships and waves. The recurring motifs are the nature of memory as a method of achieving permanence and as a form of connection; the implications of bearing a child for the same reasons; and the impact of technology on the grieving process, including the opportunity to create an electronic version of a human as a substitute for genuine human connection. I argue that these images and motifs work together to support the sequence’s narrative, and, further, that the narrative follows the progression of elements of the traditional elegy, which moves from lament to consolation.

The most notable recurring images involve touch, a physical human connection, in one form or another. Nineteen of the thirty-five poems in the sequence refer to touch, and

four of these poems contain a kiss between the speaker and her partner. These link the poems and illuminate the speaker's shifting state of mind at intervals during the chronological narrative. I consider, in turn, each of the poems which contain a kiss.

Heath juxtaposes a goodbye kiss, a genuine form of human connection, with its near-antithesis, the farewell kiss to a corpse in "That's it" (poem 3). The poem depicts the speaker's final moments with her partner as she kisses him goodbye when he leaves for work, then the immediate aftermath of his sudden death. The kiss goodbye is "a peck on the cheek and that's it"; both parties think this is just a normal day (55). Later, the speaker identifies her husband's body and kisses his corpse goodbye. Heath repeats the phrase "and that's it", to link the contrasting kisses: "We kiss goodbye in the morning – / a peck on the cheek and that's it", followed by "The next time I kiss you goodbye / you are cold and still, and that's it." The poem's final lines articulate her state of mind at that time: "The carpet is a cloud that barely holds me / as I walk across it, any minute I may slip / through in an endless freefall." The kiss imagery supports the grief narrative; the placement of the contrasting kiss images in proximity within a single poem invites the reader to consider the nature of genuine human connection and its opposite. They also illustrate the speaker's emotional transition from composure to internal turmoil, precipitated by the sudden death.

"Memory that brings form" (poem 6), contrasts the peck on the cheek with an intimate kiss, the only such account in the sequence. But it is a fantasy in which the speaker, like a modern-day Prometheus, creates a clay effigy of her partner. She likens the process to a sculptor who said he "released the being that was / already there in the marble", as if she were digging her partner back out of the earth. This is an allusion to Michelangelo's assertion: "In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me... I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely

apparition to reveal it” (Shaikh 75-76). The speaker describes the kiss, which comes at the end of this sculpting process, as “so exquisite / it feels as if part of my soul is being stolen” (58). However, the kiss is the product of wishful thinking rather than the genuine connection the speaker experienced while her partner lived, as detailed in “That’s it” above. The action, which culminates in the kiss, illustrates the speaker’s emotional state at this point, as she struggles to accept the reality of his death.

Heath uses repetition to illustrate the speaker’s grief as she fixates on “a memory embedded – a kiss goodbye” in “Reiteration” (poem 11). Here, Heath repeats the phrase “I play it over” several times in the poem (64). In stanza one, the speaker expresses how the embedded memory makes her feel: “It makes me feel bad so I play it over. / Sometimes it makes me feel good, so I play it over, I play it / over, I play”. Later, Heath uses excerpts from the phrase, or jumbled versions, to reflect the speaker’s distress. By the final two stanzas, language has broken down to apparent nonsense, as the speaker struggles to articulate her grief, with the second reference to the kiss: “head me a kiss, have over, over so embedded –”. Repeated snatches and reordered words from the phrase “It makes me feel bad so I play it over”, referring to the memory of a kiss, reveal the speaker’s chaotic state of mind, in which language is breaking down as she struggles to express her grief. The words of the penultimate line, “have me over, over so over” articulate the speaker’s despair in a moving way, because of, not in spite of their apparent lack of eloquence. The speaker’s struggle to express herself reflects her emotional state. Ending the poem on the incomplete phrase “Sometimes I –” illustrates the speaker’s frustration and inability to convey her feelings. The poem’s language illuminates and mimics the speaker’s state of mind, the circularity of her grief, as she obsessively replays the “kiss” memory in response to that grief. The recalled memory of the kiss speaks back to the poem “That’s it”, but its

presentation reflects the speaker's deep grief at this point in the sequence. Further, the fact that this repetition references a kiss goodbye places it in traditional elegy, in which repetition plays a role in acceptance of the death being mourned (Sacks, 23).

"Saying goodbye" (poem 33), near the end of the sequence, also speaks back to poem 3, "That's it," as it reprises some of its details. Here the speaker is emotionally "letting go" of the virtual version of her late partner by imagining him walking away on his way to work, as her partner did on his last day in "That's it". The phrase used in "That's it", "a peck on the cheek" is repeated, but in this instance, the speaker is knowingly imagining saying goodbye to her partner, as opposed to the real parting depicted in the earlier poem. She is aware that there is no real human connection, and has rejected the virtual substitute. At this point in her grief journey, she's reached a measure of acceptance, an ability to "say goodbye", as illustrated in this passage:

Perhaps it's better to imagine him
walking away, stopping at the door so I can kiss him –
a peck on the cheek – before he leaves for work, he's got a lot
to do today. (86)

The speaker illustrates her emotional movement to consolation as she takes comfort from a happy memory.

The four 'kiss' poems, then, interact as a group across the sequence to illustrate the progression of the speaker through grief, from lament to consolation, underpinning the elegiac narrative. The recurrence of these kiss images reinforces the speaker's need for genuine human connection. "That's it" (poem 3) depicts a "real" kiss during a moment from the partner's final day, a genuine connection. The next lines relate a scene from the morgue, as the speaker identifies and farewells him, which is the antithesis of such

connection. “Memory that brings form” (poem 6) and “Reiteration” (poem 11), both early in the sequence, depict forms of self-torture as the speaker indulges in the fantasy of bringing her partner back: this reluctance to accept his death, to reconcile herself emotionally to it, is manifested in her obsessively replaying memories of a goodbye kiss. By the time the speaker reaches the emotional state illustrated in “Saying goodbye” (poem 33), which echoes the goodbyes of “That’s it” with a deliberately imagined kiss, she has regained autonomy and taken control of her grieving process. The tone has a measure of acceptance, as the speaker has worked through the compelling but ultimately unsatisfactory attempts to connect with her partner via a virtual copy. Thus, the kiss images trace and underpin the speaker’s grief arc from initial heartbreak, through denial and circularity to this acceptance, a movement from lament to consolation.

A further fifteen poems contain depictions of other forms of touch. Heath uses the touch motifs to link the poems by highlighting the ways that contrasting types of touch (human to human versus human to object) affect the speaker. Six poems depict the touch of a non-human entity. These elucidate the unsatisfactory nature of non-human touch, illustrating that it lacks the genuine human connection essential to emotional healing, and that the speaker comes to realise this. In “In this machine” (poem 5), the speaker characterises her husband Mark’s phone as a virtual version of him, his “mouth, his mind, his eyes. The screen he ran / his finger over” (57). She then muses on the dangers of touching the phone: “Don’t reply to messages, don’t accidentally like a Facebook post using his phone.” This suggests she is aware that the phone is not, in fact him, but that anyone using the phone would appear to be Mark. It also looks ahead to the sequence’s later poems, in which the virtual version of Mark is created. “Uncanny” (poem 19) depicts the theoretical touch of an android. Here, the speaker comments that “we are repulsed by

those who look / sick or unhealthy or wrong”, going on to say that the android “puppets mortality. A corpse – stuffed or wrong”, despite being anatomically correct (72). The speaker makes it clear that touching the android is a poor substitute for touching a human being, that the genuine connection needed for healing is absent.

A passage in “Two too many” (poem 24) encapsulates the unsatisfactory nature of this type of touch, as it fails to help the speaker connect with human beings, to help her move forward through her grief. Here, the speaker regrets that “Stroking the screen is not quite / the same as stroking your cheek” (77). She goes on to speculate that if she upgrades herself with internal microprocessors, “maybe then I’ll feel something, / something real.”

By the time the sequence reaches “Reject the one code that translates perfectly” (poem 31), the speaker has created an electronic version of Mark, but has accepted that there is no genuine connection in touching an electronic device. Here, the speaker’s almost-disembodied hand reaches for her phone “of its own accord” (84). The hand then types a message initiating the deletion of the electronic version of Mark, as though this has been decided for the speaker without her conscious input. This allows the speaker to distance herself emotionally from the decision she knows to be the right one. The echoes between these poems, provided by the touch images, reinforce the inadequacy for the speaker of using non-human touch as a substitute for her husband, of her growing realisation of this inadequacy, of its inability to help her move through her grief to consolation.

In contrast, poems which depict touch between humans do so in positive terms. Heath is exploring the nature of connection and permanence in these interactions. Four poems relate an instance of touch between the speaker and Mark. The first poem, “You”, depicts the speaker caressing Mark’s face when he’s still with her, but goes on to ponder

whether this is still the same person when cells are replaced over time and his skin is renewed. The speaker shows concern from the start that the connection she seeks may be false or tenuous. This is reinforced in “Reprogramming the heart” (poem 2), in which Mark is undergoing heart treatment: “I place // two fingers on your wrist to feel the pulse. / This is my evidence” (54). This “evidence” appears to mean evidence of Mark’s existence as a real, living human being. After Mark’s death, in “A handful of dust” (poem 16), the speaker recalls herself “collecting the patterns your hands / traced on my skin” as she tries to use the memory of touch to hold onto him (69). In “Two too many” (poem 24), the speaker revisits her memories of stroking her husband’s face: “No matter how recently you’d shaved / there was always stubble to worry at / with my fingertips” (77). Whilst these intimate acts contrast with the touch associated with non-human entities above, Heath is also pondering the nature of such human connection.

The sequence also portrays touch between the speaker and her infant daughter in overtly positive terms, the touch both offering her a reason to move past her grief and manifesting that movement. In “Inner space” (poem 17), the speaker anticipates her daughter having been born. In the context of an antenatal scan, she notes “I rub my belly and talk to her” (70). She then looks ahead to when her daughter will “lay her eggshell / head on my chest and murmur.” This projected sense of touch is echoed in “The wave” (poem 28), which marks the speaker’s transition toward healing, depicting a change in her state of mind, and the positive impact on her of motherhood. Stanza one portrays her taking note of the small details of nature, revealing a shift towards wellbeing; she is noticing and engaging positively with elements of the outside world for the first time since Mark’s death. This marks a movement towards consolation. Stanza two depicts the speaker’s experience of childbirth:

I'll admit this much –
my body excelled at child
birth, I carried her so well
blooming, birthing fast.
The labour lifted me out
of myself. (81)

It culminates with the lines “I slackened my jaw / to let my uterus sing the baby out.” The language and startling imagery reflect the speaker’s renewed optimism and sense of empowerment at having done a good job of carrying and giving birth to her and her late husband’s child, Ariel. The physical human connection between the speaker and her baby is depicted here as genuine and positive, emphasising its healing power. These poems thus contrast the false consolation of electronic touch with the true consolation of human connection.

This shift is explicit in “Possession” (poem 30). In the context of the speaker discussing whether to delete the electronic version of her husband (“Maybe / I should delete him off LoveCloud / or just let the contract lapse”), the poem depicts touch between the speaker and her newborn daughter in positive terms: “Ariel sleeps wrapped / to me, head to heart” (83). In “Cooking the hantu” (poem 32), in which the file deletion is in progress, Ariel again is present as a counterpoint to that action, suggesting that human touch has superseded the need for artificial connection with an electronic Mark: “Ariel wakes and cries to be fed, and my whole / world is rhythmic suck-suck and keyboard tap-tap” (85). The images presented in these poems are intimate, speaking to the healing that having her child, and physically interacting with her in the intimate act of breastfeeding, brings to the speaker. In contrast with her other attempts to “bring back” her partner, these are

satisfactory and fulfilling. These poems echo one another across the sequence via the touch images, tracing the speaker's path from lament to healing and consolation.

If images of touch are a dominant means of linking poems emotionally in the sequence to suggest the elegy's progression from grief to acceptance, they are also linked by recurring elements of dream, nightmare or waking fantasy. This serves dual purposes. The dreams and fantasies illustrate the speaker's grief process, at times depicting her mind torturing her as she works through her loss. The dreams also represent another form of connection, another attempt at permanence, resonating with the other ways she attempts to bring back her partner. The first of these is "A rise of starlings" (poem 4), a "found poem" that uses lines from a Deren Rees-Jones poetry collection *Burying the Wren* to explore several connected fantasies (56). Heath employs the technique of apotheosis, the elevation of the dead to godlike status, in her placement of the speaker's husband among the stars. This is a feature of traditional elegy, usually associated with a movement toward consolation (Norlin 309). The poem centres on four images. The first is the constellation Orion, embodying the fantasy that Mark is using heavenly bodies to connect with the speaker from beyond the grave:

You
have drawn new maps
across the darkness, through
wild celestial fields, tracing
messages to me in particles
of dust and light. (56)

This fantasy that Mark is communicating with the speaker from beyond the grave anticipates other poems in the sequence, particularly those that deal with the creation of an electronic version of Mark. The second image depicts the speaker's body as "lopsided",

giving physical expression to the harm that the loss has caused her. This looks ahead to “My body as a leaky vessel” (poem 8), which I discuss below, in which the speaker imagines her body’s destruction. The third image depicts her as “a rise of starlings”. The following line “can you catch me in your coat?” conjures an image of the coat as the night sky into which the birds would rise, their plumage against the coat’s lining resembling the night sky. The implication is that the speaker is imagining joining the fantasy version of her husband in the night sky. Finally, Heath refers to Mark’s body as a longboat as she draws the poem to a close:

This way of leaving aches,
this black night, into which
I must send you out in the longboat
of your body, seems endless. (56)

The speaker’s wistful return to reality in these lines acknowledges that communication from beyond the grave is a fantasy, and therefore an inadequate form of connection.

The nightmare-like narrative of “My body as a leaky vessel” (poem 8) functions as an analogue of the grief process. It employs striking visual images to suggest the speaker’s metamorphosis or annihilation through grief. The title refers to the Renaissance idea that women were “leaky vessels”, unable to control their bodies because of emissions like tears and other bodily fluids (Bradley 261). At times the narrative lacks logic, in keeping with an actual nightmare. The story unfolds as follows: The speaker inhabits a ship which has run aground. She cries an ocean. The ship drifts. The speaker falls into the water and transforms into a whale. She is harpooned, eaten by sharks and washes up as bones on the shore. The “vessel” of the title implies that she is the ship, but she is also separate from the ship in the poem, possibly disintegrating bodily through grief. As Mark Bradley notes, “Weeping in

Homeric epic is frequently depicted as a loss of vital substance which is linked to psychological turmoil” (260). This is the speaker’s fate during the dream. Heath draws on these historic ideas to illustrate the speaker’s distress at this stage of the sequence, early in her grief journey.

“The forest” (poem 34) may recount a nightmare, but also represents the speaker’s grief journey. It appears to draw on one or more fables with its reference to a woodcutter’s cottage, a monster and a bird (possibly melding Hansel and Gretel and the story of the Woodcutter and the lucky bird). It comprises two short sentences with repetition of key phrases:

In the forest
a little bird
and a monster
and a path
overgrown
and dark
and in the forest
you can’t see the
wood for the pixels.
There’s a virtual tour
of the woodcutter’s cottage
each room slightly more
ominous than the last
through the window
framed
a monster
and a path
and a little bird. (87)

Heath departs only twice from the language of the fable, when she uses the phrases “you can’t see the / wood for the pixels” and “virtual tour” to reference artificial reality. The word “pixels” which replaces the word “trees” of the saying “you can’t see the wood for the trees”, departs from the fantasy world the poem is creating. It would seem to comment on the speaker’s state of mind while the electronic “Mark” existed, suggesting that she couldn’t see what was important while fixated on creating and interacting with the electronic version of her late husband, which may be represented by the monster in the poem. The forest can be read to represent grief itself, and the “virtual tour” the grieving process. The lack of a lyric “I” suggests distance between the speaker and the narrative, implying that she now has some perspective, and is reflecting on the grief process by this point. If the “little bird” of the poem represents the speaker’s daughter Ariel, it suggests a movement towards consolation. In sum, the dream/fantasy poems serve to trace the speaker’s evolving state of mind at different points in the sequence, speaking to one another via their fantasy imagery. The early poems, “A rise of starlings” and “My body as a leaky vessel” depict deep, destructive grief, while “The forest” marks a shift toward the speaker’s critical distance on the loss and the grieving process, a move away from the lament of traditional elegy towards consolation.

Heath also employs recurring images of ships and waves to speak to the impermanent nature of existence, the difficulty of human connection when humans are in a constant state of flux. References to ships first appear, albeit via allusion, in “You”, the opening poem in the sequence, which questions whether we stay the same person as our surface skin cells replace themselves. The question alludes to the ship of Theseus, a famous thought experiment which concerns the nature of identity. The thought experiment asks whether, if a ship is maintained such that, over time, all its parts are replaced, it is still the

same ship (“Ship of Theseus”). The poem is structured as a series of rhetorical questions, which are at the heart of the sequence’s grief narrative, essentially asking about the nature of existence and identity. First it asks: “How much / can a [skin] cell fit into thirty days?”, suggesting life’s brevity (53). It then explores the idea further:

You look the same,
you sound the same, but is it you?
If I can’t tell if it’s you or not
is it you?
Is that you? (53)

Here the speaker is asking this of her living husband – wondering whether he is the same person when all of his cells change. The poem’s concluding questions acknowledge the lack of a definitive answer.

In “The house” (poem 15), in which she visits her late parents’ home, the speaker describes the way the house “creaks like a ship at sea” (68). This phrasing – to be “at sea” is to be lost – reflects the loss of permanence and connection engendered by the death of her parents. The speaker’s lament is self-conscious, countered by self-deprecating humour: “Here I can cry and sob and wail in peace / and the weather chimes in like a crowd of hired mourners.” She goes on to describe her grief in waves as “inevitable, as inevitable as shells being / pounded into sand.” The image of the destruction of seashells, which closes the poem, speaks to her parents’ deaths, but also comments on human mortality in general.

Heath places small echoes of the waves motif across other poems in the sequence, to provide subtle links via word choices or single images. Examples of this include “Reprogramming the heart” (poem 2), which refers to “unseen / forces travelling on a wavelength” (54); “A handful of dust” (poem 16), which speaks back to it with “the

vibrations of your soundwaves / curling through my ear canal” (69); “Things that decay” (poem 13), which begins its list of items that decay with “bluebottles washed up on the beach” (66); and “Inner space” (poem 17), which describes Ariel in utero with “The moon tugging at her tidal pool” (70). “A rise of starlings” (poem 4) speaks back to the ship of Theseus image when it refers to the speaker’s husband’s body as a “longboat” (56).

The ship is also a dominant image in “My body as a leaky vessel” (poem 8), discussed above. The speaker’s metamorphosis from sailor to whale follows the loss of the ship, but that same ship then returns and harpoons her. The ship may represent mortality, working as a metaphor for human existence, the illusion of permanence overlaying transience and instability. Ships appear outwardly stable and permanent, but are in fact on an unstable base (water). The wave image in “The wave” (poem 28), analysed earlier, seems to represent the speaker’s acceptance of the loss that this transience causes, or at least a re-engagement with the world coinciding with the birth of her daughter: “the world / is a wave breaking / over me and I am alive.” (81). The recurring images of ships and waves reinforce the futility of the speaker’s desire for permanence, and her gradual acceptance of this fact. They thus work together to help the sequence cohere around a movement from grief and denial to acceptance and resolution, in keeping with traditional elegy, so that it is not just what happens – events – in the narrative that suggest this emotional journey but the echoes across poems of image and metaphor that suggest viscerally how the speaker’s feelings are changing.

Another motif linking the poems is the nature of memory, its ability, or lack thereof, to create a reliable permanent record. As with other images, the speaker’s efforts to create such a record – to hold to her own memories and to create a digital record – and her attitude toward them shift through the sequence in ways that manifest her movement from denial to

acceptance. “Things that decay” (poem 13) references both human memory and computer memory in its list of “things”: “The memory of your hand / at the small of my back” contrasts with a reference to computer memory in the poem’s closing lines: “Data in memory when the small // electric charge of a bit in RAM disperses. / A flash drive after too many write/erase cycles” (66). The title acknowledges that the speaker recognises the impermanent nature of both types of “memory”. The lines reference different meanings of the word “decay”: the poem suggests that her memories of her husband’s touch will slowly reduce over time, while the computer data loss she refers to in the final lines may be sudden and complete. This anticipates the deletion of “Mark” later in the sequence.

The tone in “Return home” (poem 14) is more optimistic than “Things that decay”, as the speaker anticipates the birth of her child. It employs computer programming terminology within the description of the process of the speaker’s developing pregnancy: “He and I and she and me and we will be / inscribed, recorded, memorised, / coded, written, and rewritten in my belly” (67). The references to coding and writing are used figuratively in relation to the biological process. But the reliability of both human memory and computer storage has been undermined in the previous poem, calling these assertions into question.

“A handful of dust” (poem 16) illustrates the speaker committing details to memory, in an attempt to create a permanent record of her partner while he lived. It echoes phrases which appear in several other poems, providing links and resonance with those poems. The title echoes line thirty of “The Wasteland”, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (Kermode and Hollander 477). This line also harks back to a line from John Donne’s *Devotions*, “[Man] consumes himself to a handful of dust”, (Donne and Raspa IV. Meditation 7-5) and echoes the “dust to dust” of the Church of England burial service (“At

the burial of the dead”). Each of these focusses on the fleeting nature of human existence, the lack of permanence and genuine connection. As with “The house”, the poem is set in the former home of the speaker’s parents, vacant since the death of her father. At this point in the grieving process, the speaker notes that she’s tried to commit details of her partner to memory while he lived. She consciously employs the five senses in her efforts to create this record:

I watched you
for years, memorising...
I recorded, took note,
collecting the patterns your hands
traced on my skin. The places
at which your eyes landed
on turning points of my body,
the vibrations of your soundwaves
curling through my ear canal
and tapping my tympanic membrane,
the taste of you in grey light –
so hard to separate from the scent
of you. (69)

“A handful of dust” addresses the theme of permanence: it comments on the difficulty, and ultimate inadequacy, of trying to create a “permanent record” via enduring memories. In the poem’s closing lines, the speaker asserts that she’ll use a range of recording techniques to bring Mark back to her: carving moments in clay as she also did in “Memory that brings form” (poem 6), baking them into bread, whispering them into a seashell. That the techniques are increasingly less permanent, more whimsical or wishful, indicates a growing self-awareness of the futility of her efforts. The poem closes with the phrase “bring you

back to me”, which echoes lines from “Conceived” (poem 12): “going home would fix / everything, would magic you // back” (65). At that stage in the grieving process, the speaker had been fantasising that her husband would literally come back if she returned home after her IVF procedure. It also anticipates the later poems which address the creation of an electronic record of Mark. Taken together, the three poems represent a meditation on memory, a lament that acknowledges memory’s inability to create the reliable permanent record that the speaker seeks.

Heath moves away from memory as a technique the speaker uses to hold onto her husband, to employ another prevailing motif, the human connection, or lack thereof, provided by an electronic version of him. She covers this in the group of seven poems from “In the lineage temple” to “Clarity” (poems 20 to 26), which function as a sub-sequence. The first three poems detail the creation of the e-record; the next four deal with interactions between digital “Mark” and the speaker. Later poems beyond the sub-sequence detail the deletion of the record. Though this narrative is an obvious way the poems in the sub-sequence are linked, I consider here how the images in these poems interact as they contribute to the grief narrative and to the subtext Heath builds around the nature of human connection.

In this sub-sequence, Heath contrasts images of living bodies with the electronic paraphernalia of the virtual “Mark” to emphasise the disparity between the speaker’s husband and the virtual copy. “In the lineage temple” (poem 20) details the macabre process of creating a “spirit tablet” of “Mark” from existing files, texts and Twitter feeds. Heath uses the persona of a company representative as speaker, who comments that “this is more than a multimedia / chatbot; this is your husband” (73). Heath contrasts images of “Mark’s” face with images of the clinical technology behind it, thus undermining the

speaker's assertion. The speaker notes that "We think his face looks right, mostly. We / can make his nose smaller or teeth whiter – it's up to you", making the uncomfortable suggestion that a human could be customised to meet others' preferences, that the sequence's speaker might entertain that idea. They note that "your husband's / beauty is nano-deep" as though this were a positive thing. The speaker further reveals their detachment when discussing the options to age "Mark":

We can age your husband to look
how he might if he were alive today, or you can talk to him
as a child...Let's start with
him the same age as you for fun. (73)

Later, they detail some of the technology behind the creation of "Mark", a bewildering series of images of machinery, noting that: "nanobots weave these spools into memory cards" and "Liquid crystals rotate polarised light, switching pixels on or / off." Again, at the end, they seem to make no distinction between "Mark" and his e-version: "When we've completed programming / you can take him home with you." By juxtaposing images normally associated with human bodies with those of the "spirit tablet" in this first poem in the sub-sequence, Heath begins to establish that this is a travesty of humanity, not a genuine opportunity for human connection.

In her interview with Radio New Zealand, Heath asserts that versions of the spirit tablet already exist. A recent *New Zealand Listener* article discusses the development of an Artificial Intelligence chatbot based on a dead man's texts, which was made available as an app. The article notes that the deceased man's friends found chatting with his digital version "therapeutic" ("Back from the dead"). The sub-sequence engages with this idea,

questioning whether such connection can be genuine or satisfying. Each poem in turn uses imagery to develop the argument that it is neither genuine nor satisfying for the speaker.

“Tiny hands, nimble fingers” (poem 21) reinforces the contrast between human connection and the connection between people and machines. The speaker is touring the facility where the “spirit tablets” are made, and notes an interaction between herself and Meihui, the computer programmer working on “Mark”: “I catch her eyes for a moment, / perhaps it’s just wishful thinking but I imagine / a connection between us in that moment” (74). This genuine human connection is juxtaposed with an interaction between Meihui and the tablet itself: “Meihui’s head is bent over the microscope / as she wrangles nanobots on the workbench.” The use of the word “wrangles” undermines any sense of positive connection between Meihui and the nanobots. In the same poem, Meihui cautions the speaker: “reject the one code that translates perfectly – / rewrite – reconfigure.” The implication is that a perfect copy of a human will lack the nuance of real humanity, that it will not ring true. The speaker begins to understand that a virtual copy is an inadequate substitute for real, human imperfection.

The speaker’s discomfort with the discrepancy between human and virtual connection shifts to a more direct acknowledgement that the digital Mark is a painfully inadequate substitute. In “Never-dead, never-born” (poem 23) the speaker notes “As / I built a baby, so they built him”. But as she attempts to connect with the tablet at a human level, she laments that “it wasn’t him at all” before going on to illustrate their somewhat chilling interaction:

He took a lengthy pause,
searching for a response before selecting the appropriate
programmed family cliché. When I say ‘I’m pregnant’, there

are several moments of silence, then the response: 'Plus ça change... ' (76)

The image of the growing baby contrasts with the “building” of the simulated “Mark.” By including these contrasting images across the sub-sequence, Heath illustrates that the speaker is coming to realise that this electronic connection is false and unsatisfying.

The interaction between the speaker and “Mark” in “Two too many” (poem 24) develops this idea further:

When I stare
into your eyes, your face on the screen,
I see the reflection of my face
layered over your face, and there
are moments when our expressions
match, creating a new experience
of coupling. (77)

However, the speaker concludes that this interaction is unsatisfying: “One is not enough, two is too many.” The next poem, “Spilling out all over” (poem 25), details the speaker asking “Mark” whether he would like a body. He gives a programmed response:

'No I'm beyond bodies now,
I'm ready to be fluid...
to spread myself so thin that I'm
a membrane over the world.' (78)

This contrast between his virtual form and human capacity is reinforced by the speaker's reaction; she walks barefoot across grass, engaging with the world in a physical way: “I take off my socks and shoes and walk / over a patch of grass very slowly. I stand ... and wriggle my toes”. This genuine connection contrasts with her stilted interaction with “Mark”.

Concluding the sub-sequence, “Clarity” (poem 26) reads like a monologue, or one side of a conversation. The language could be uttered by a disillusioned partner intent on ending a relationship, but it is actually “spoken” by virtual “Mark”. The poem depends on its placement in the sequence for interpretation. It consciously echoes a series of clichés (“you feel trapped”, “you / want to start seeing other people”) (79). At lines five to eight, the speaker relays what “Mark” has said about his feelings:

you’ve started to see things differently
it’s like you’ve opened your eyes
and now everything has clarity. Why should you
sit around waiting for me anyway? (79)

These images serve to illustrate that “Mark” can do none of these things. He lacks eyes to open, and the ability to “sit around waiting”; these are human actions requiring a human body. They emphasise the contrast between a human and an electronic facsimile. Heath may be suggesting that the speaker needs the proxy “Mark” less as she progresses through the grief process. The source of the final line in the poem, “This space is too small now”, is ambiguous: it could be coming from either “Mark” or the speaker herself. “Space” appears to refer to more than just the electronic storage containing “Mark”, to imply that the two characters are cramped or held back by their interactions. This attempt at permanence has proven to be illusory, alongside the speaker’s earlier attempts. It anticipates poems to come in which the electronic version of “Mark” is wiped from its storage. The poems in this sub-sequence echo one another with their images of human bodies versus “Mark’s” virtual body, to illustrate the disparity between genuine connections and false interactions with the “spirit tablet”. Beyond this, the arc of the sub-sequence mirrors elements of the larger

sequence. As the speaker has tried and rejected fantasy and memory as ways to bring back her husband, so she tries and then rejects the electronic version of her husband.

Heath's "Reprogramming the heart" sequence has a clear overarching narrative, a near-chronological portrayal of the speaker's journey through grief from denial to acceptance, as she tries and rejects a number of ways to bring her husband back from the dead. Of these – fantasy, memory, the electronic copy of him, bearing his child – the one successful technique she finds to create genuine connection, and a measure of permanence during the sequence, is via her child, Ariel. This connection to her husband via his genes, a form of replication, marks a move to consolation that characterises the emotional movement of traditional elegy. Beyond narrative's evident means for linking the poems, the individual poems enter into a conversation with each other via the use of repeated motifs, images and ideas, providing echoes and connections which support that emotional narrative. The images are grounded in the physical, particularly drawing on touch and the physical body, as the speaker seeks human connection and permanence at a time when the loss of her husband has forced her to consider the nature of both those things. The recurring images, (e.g. touch, ships) and motifs (e.g. the nature of memory, the impact of technology), mirror the grief process, with its obsessive mulling of events and memories, its circularity as it moves the individual forward towards healing. The sequence is thus tied together by more than its overt narrative, in that the recurring images and motifs build a subtext which contemplates the nature of human connection, and the difficulty, or impossibility of creating permanence. In this way the sequence, in the words of Rosenthal and Gall, "interact[s] as an organic whole", employing elements of the traditional elegy as it traces the speaker's emotional movement from lament to consolation.

Janet Newman's "Tender"

Janet Newman's poetry sequence "Tender", from her collection *Unseasoned campaigner*, comprises twenty-two free verse poems. The subject matter addresses life growing up on an Aotearoa New Zealand dairy farm, with particular focus on the speaker's father. That single subject, viewed from multiple perspectives, is the most evident element which makes the poems work as a sequence. There is also a chronological progression through the sequence. The early poems depict the father as a young man and the speaker as a small child. Later poems refer to the father's aging body and the speaker's increasing responsibility for caring for him. The last few poems deal with the father in old age, then relate his death and its immediate aftermath. The time period covers some fifty to sixty years, from the post-World War II years to the early part of the twenty-first century. Only two poems within the sequence, "On pie day" (poem 9) and "Praises" (poem 10), move the attention away from the father character. These touch on the speaker's mother and the speaker's experience at a funeral respectively. Though this chronological ordering of the poems is distinct from the "narrative" referred to in Rosenthal and Gall's definition – and in this way is in contrast to the narrative structure of Heath's sequence – it imposes a logic to the sequence which contributes to its functioning as a three-dimensional portrait of the father, and the speaker's relationship with him, and to the poems' "interacting as an organic whole", as Rosenthal and Gall phrase it.

Beyond consistency of subject matter and chronological progression, however, I will argue that Newman uses a range of other elements and techniques to support "Tender" functioning as a sequence. She employs recurring motifs, reinforced by imagery, to strengthen both the sequence and the individual poems, providing links across the work

such that the poems speak back and forth to one another. These links further allow the poems to cohere into an “organic whole”. Though Newman has placed the collection within the tradition of ecopoetry in the introduction to her PhD thesis, *Imagining Ecologies*, I would argue that is not the “whole” that the poems in “Tender” create (3). In “Tender”, this aspect of the work manifests as more of a backdrop than a focus. Newman defines ecopoetry as “the term given to new nature poetry written in opposition to human denigration of nature” (11). She acknowledges that no universally-agreed upon definition exists, but goes on to say that “Ecopoetry neither subjugates nor idealizes nature, and often exists within a context of awareness of human-caused loss or denigration of nature.” (11). “Tender” does make reference to environmental issues, such as the ubiquitous presence of rabbits, and the loss of shelter belt trees: “lines of macrocarpa broken / ...where the westerly tore through” (“Man of few words”, poem 4), but these are contextual rather than the subject matter of the work (50).

Instead, the “organic whole” the sequence amounts to is an elegy for Newman’s father, and to an extent, his generation of returned servicemen, though it does not seek to idealise him or exclude the elements of his character that made him hard to live with. Instead, Newman develops a three-dimensional portrait of a man who had a tough public side, but exhibited a more tender, if complex, private side. The title, “Tender”, in this context implies compassion, but also pain; the father character behaves with kindness at times, but is touchy, or tender, at least in part as a result of his past war service. This tenderness manifests itself most in his relationship with his daughters, but is also part of his relationship with the animals he farmed, and the pests he sought to eradicate. Though traditional elegies, as Ramazani notes “concealed most blemishes”, Newman’s elegy belongs among modern adaptations of the tradition in which elegists are “ever more

articulate about their intimate and contradictory feelings toward the dead, who [become] in turn ever more distinctive because of their complex portrayals.” (18). This shifts the focus away from the dead in isolation to a consideration of the speaker’s relationship with the dead (Ramazani xii-xiii). If Newman’s sequence constitutes a lament, containing mixed praise, and a move toward consolation, it seems more to mourn the inadequacies and difficulties of the relationship, at least partially occasioned by the father’s war service, than his death per se. I argue that its exploration of the father’s complex reality and apparent contradictions places it among modern elegies and will show here how the use of repeated imagery and motifs supports this lament and works to tie together the poems as a sequence.

Newman titled the Creative component of her PhD “Anti-pastoral”; this was an early iteration of the manuscript which she shaped into *Unseasoned Campaigner*, in which the sequence “Tender” appears. Abrams defines the traditional pastoral as “a deliberately conventional poem expressing an urban poet’s nostalgic image of the supposed peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting” (268). Newman’s work can be characterised as “anti-pastoral” because it presents farming life in close-up, less photogenic, with its attendant complexities honestly addressed. There’s hard graft, unpredictable and sometimes extreme weather, tough decisions, brutality and death. There are also moments of beauty and tenderness in the sequence, which sit within the pastoral tradition, even while tempering it with realism. While Newman characterises the collection as a whole as “anti-pastoral” (*Imagining Ecologies* 3), I argue that the sequence “Tender” does speak to the elegy tradition’s use of pastoral settings. Classical elegies used idyllic pastoral settings; Newman’s more realistic use of the family farm as context brings the setting up to date in keeping with its at times more critical attitude to its subject.

Newman depicts her father's nature as both tough and "tender", often within the same poem, using imagery to reinforce these contrasting elements. Newman also probes "tender" memories; the speaker's feelings towards her father manifest through the work as both loving and hurt by some of his behaviours, not just by his loss. As Newman elucidates in conversation with Bevan Sanson in thebigidea.nz: "Dad was a hard man. A man of his generation. Physical work in a time where farm machinery was scarce and there was not a lot of money around. He went through the war – that experience shaped that generation. But there was also a tenderness there. He'd tell us that our pet lambs had returned to their mothers, when in fact we were eating them" ("Poetry from the paddocks").

The motifs used to link poems in the sequence to support the subtextual narrative of the father's tough and tender sides, and the complexity of his relationship with the speaker, fall into the categories of war, animals, digging and physical presence versus absence. These motifs are reinforced with recurring images, notably physical bodies and clothing, rabbits, cattle, tools and drinking. I discuss each motif and its function in that order. If war service is the catalyst for the father's behaviour, the other motifs support the presentation of the effect war had on him.

The father's history as a World War II veteran, whose present is impacted by that service, is a prevailing motif. Some poems deal primarily with war as a motif, while others refer to it obliquely, or include only a single reference or detail, but together these references help to illustrate the war's impact on the father and his family, and show how the experience as a soldier has shaped the father's character. This links the poems, building a picture of the father as outwardly toughened but suffering internally due to his military service, yet still capable of showing tenderness at times. I have grouped these influences of the war as ethical, mental and physical impacts. I consider each of these ideas in turn.

Newman elucidates war's ethical impact in "Parade ground" (poem 6). She relates details the father has shared with the speaker:

his mates laughed
through dysentery, bed bugs, hunger,
the corpses absent from his yarns

though he banned guns from the toybox (52).

Even if the laughter described is real, Newman depicts the father as protecting his daughters from war's realities in the details he selects. The final stanza describes his reaction to footage of the Vietnam war on television:

his cheeks filled red and round
as poppies, his words wilted
our petal ears, hung like ghosts
with all the dead in the living room.

Though he is reticent about his war service, and a "Man of few words" as per the title of poem 4, the poem illustrates that the father's ethics sometimes compel him to speak out. There is not much humour evident in the father here, despite the relayed wartime laughter.

"Parade ground" speaks back to "Tender", the sequence's opening and titular poem, in which Newman details her father's response to a young rabbit. In "Tender," she initially describes her father's frustration dealing with rabbits, employing a military simile: "he tramped to the shed...swearing like a sergeant". But the speaker then counters this with: "he lifted from his pocket / the kit spared from the hay mower / by his Geneva Convention". The choice of "Geneva Convention" as terminology places the father's response in the context of his war experiences and the way they have shaped him. The implication is that the father's personal ethics (figuratively, his own "Geneva Convention")

reflect those experiences. The descriptions of these ethical impacts do more than flesh out the father's character; "Parade ground" provides pertinent background information which strengthens "Tender" and influences its interpretation.

Newman elucidates the mental impact of war most keenly in "Sixty years" (poem 13), one of two prose poems in the sequence. It contains a moving central image of the father crying, with the speaker looking on, aware that she's intruding but "so taken aback I / could not look away." (60). Though the precise cause is not specified, the uncharacteristic crying seems prompted by a war memory: "All I could think was the memory was old and sixty / years must have gone so fast."¹ The speaker contrasts "this show of such ordinary humanness" with her assertion that the father was "my mother's hard man, the belt-behind-the-kitchen- / door-man." The image speaks to the two sides of the father that the sequence illuminates, the outwardly tough farmer with the "tender" internal life.

Other poems address indirect mental impacts of the war. The title of "Post-op" (poem 12) references the father in hospital following surgery, but also suggests post-military operations. The poem deals with the father's drinking, hinting that it may be a response to traumatic experiences during his military service. It lists a number of contexts in which the father drinks alcohol, without spelling out whether the drinking is at a problem level: "at the end of the day / the grubber angled against the shed, / he has a beer." (58). Then he drinks "after burying the steer drowned in the drain, / dragged by the leg with the tractor". These illustrate times of hard graft, but they're also emotionally charged as the father deals with burying dead animals. That these might remind him of wartime killing and

¹ This fits with the father's approximate age at this point in the sequence; two poems further on ("Stepping stones") the father is adjusting to his wife's death. Newman states in her PhD thesis that her father died in 2008, which would have made him mid to late eighties to have fought in World War II (*Imagining Ecologies* 162).

losses is suggested by what follows: the penultimate stanza describes the father drinking when “Uncle Tim comes by to talk the war out”. The speaker is up late listening to her father talk about the experience:

Trieste...
wine in barrels
... Monte Cassino ...
purple death ... (59)

This last refers to a well-known brand of bad wine. The mental impacts described in the two back-to-back poems – “Sixty years” (poem 13) and “Post-op” (poem 12) – appear to be in opposition, one a show of emotion and the other avoidance of emotion, but the images of crying and heavy drinking inform each other. Set against the crying, the images of the father’s drinking are more clearly perceived as avoidance of painful memory. Thus, each poem and its attendant imagery strengthens the other and the sequence’s holistic portrait of the father.

The physical impact of war on the speaker’s father appears to be confined to his hearing. Newman addresses this in consecutive poems, “Tinnitus” (poem 7) and “Gunner” (poem 8). The two poems interact at an overt level via their subject matter, and more subtly via the wartime imagery. “Tinnitus” begins with an image of the father as an innocent boy:

He rode the mail truck
to school, bare feet surfing
the running board, one arm

flapping. Flying,
he was lighter than air (53).

Newman then juxtaposes the childhood scene with a wartime one: “At Monte Cassino / the sky was black with planes”. The penultimate stanza suggests the irony of a German language warning on a weed spraying gun with “ACHTUNG Schutzkleidung tragen / (DANGER Wear protective clothing)”, when her father received no such warning (or ear protection) while manning an anti-tank gun during the war. Newman then describes the impact of his lack of ear protection: “Sometimes, he could hear / the grass breathe / between the roaring.” The ambiguity of the phrasing in that passage allows this moment to be read either as occurring while spraying the weeds (the roar of the weed gun) or during the war (the roar of artillery). This invites multiple interpretations. It’s possible that the father’s ability to hear is variable, or that the “grass breathing” alludes to the “breathing” of his buried comrades. He could be “hearing things” or mishearing the actual sounds around him. These latter possibilities suggest an interaction with the war’s mental impacts depicted in the poems discussed earlier.

Newman gives a clear account of the father’s hearing loss in “Gunner”, which speaks back to “Tinnitus”. The portrayal is both sad and comical. Referring to his war service as a gunner, the father describes the powerful sounds of the guns: “...you had to make sure you were standing right or the / kickback would dislocate your shoulder. They weren’t given / earmuffs or told to put their fingers in their ears.” (54). The final lines describe the effect on his hearing:

Later, he
heard the roaring and echoing inside his head all night long.
Mother took to using a high-pitched shriek and in moments of clarity
he’d shout: ‘Do you think I’m deaf?’ (54)

The use of the word “later” suggests that the “roaring and echoing” stays with the father his whole life, that the physical hearing loss interacts with the war’s psychological impact.

Newman concludes the war references in poems 18 through 20, which cover the father’s last days and the speaker’s viewing of his body at a funeral home. These references reinforce the idea that the father’s war service was a lifelong burden that coloured his character to the last. Despite its title, “Father’s funeral” (poem 18) does not discuss the funeral, but rather what may have been his last day. It contains one reference to war service, a single image of the father farewelling his family during an earlier visit. It occurs when the speaker recounts the things her father didn’t do on possibly his last day:

we didn’t see you leaning
against the corrugated corner of the shed, one leg
bent across the other like a soldier waiting
by the flap door of the mess tent
or one arm raise up when you turned for the gate (67).

“Next day” (poem 19) refers to the physical mark left by the father’s death on the ground: “On the path / the red stain where he fell.” (68). The use of the word “fell” to describe the father’s death, or an actual fall which precipitates his death, echoes the description of the mother’s death (or fall) in “Stepping stones” (poem 15). But it also subtly recalls the euphemistic terminology used for war deaths in such ubiquitous expressions as “For the fallen” on war memorials. The final reference to the father’s war service appears in “The undertaker gave me” (poem 20), when the speaker refers to her father’s prone body, “his face a perfect calm, / arms by his sides at parade rest” (69). Newman’s choice of “parade rest”, a formal military position, implies that her father remains impacted by his military service, and calls into question whether he is “at rest” even in death (“Join the Military:

Understanding Stationary Drill”). This reference provides an end stop to the war imagery in the sequence, which coincides with the account of the father’s death. The multiple war references provide a connecting thread across the sequence to underpin the depiction of the father, suggesting that his war experience is integral to his behaviour and character, shaping both his toughness and tenderness, and reinforcing the sequence’s complex elegiac portrait.

Newman also uses a recurring series of animal images in the sequence. Stock (cows, bulls, sheep), working dogs, chooks and pests (rabbits and hares) all make appearances. But farm life is not just used as a nod to the convention of nature poetry; rather, the animal images used across “Tender” are part of the elegy the sequence creates. They help to illuminate the father’s character and his relationships with his wife and daughters. Newman states that her father “was often in tension between empathy for animals and the necessities of farming” (*Imagining Ecologies* 166-7); this is particularly manifested in three poems: “Tender” (poem 1), “Dehorning the calves” (poem 3) and “This life” (poem 5).

Each stanza of “Tender” conveys an aspect of the father’s character through his interaction with rabbits and his family. The first stanza alludes to eating rabbit, conveying both the father’s frugality and his bluntness about his wife’s cooking: “my father said the rabbit / was tough” (47). Newman juxtaposes this with his kindness in shielding his daughters from reality, even when this involves telling white lies about the source of their family dinners: “He told my sister it was chicken, / said our pet lambs / went back to their mothers.” The second stanza relates his lifelong attempts to eradicate rabbits from the farm:

Every time he found a burrow
he tramped to the shed
for the spade, a length of chicken wire,
swearing like a sergeant. (47)

Yet the final stanza relates his act of compassion towards a kit: “he lifted from his pocket / the kit spared from the hay mower”. This single poem encapsulates what the sequence as a whole accomplishes, as it provides a three-dimensional elegiac portrait of the father’s “tough” and “tender” character.

Newman depicts the father as outwardly detached and practical in “Dehorning the calves” (poem 3), as he gets on with the necessary dehorning job. The opening lines read: “Most went willingly into the crate, / urged by my father’s voice.” (49). This suggests that the animals trust him, or at least are prepared to obey him. However, she then describes the brutality of the process:

slight bodies crushed
between wooden boards,
noses manacled with elastic rope,

the hot iron bit into their heads. (49)

Newman’s description of the effect on the calves is equally candid:

spines arched,
legs seized, mouths fell open
retching tongues white as ghosts.
Shocked, guttural groans.

The shed stank
of scorched hair and burnt flesh.

Though Newman does not make an explicit connection to his wartime experiences, that context potentially illuminates his responses in the latter part of the poem; though he has conformed to societal expectations, he has seen the consequences of that conformity. The speaker states that “Every year, one or two could not bear it”, that the spirited calves would

injure themselves trying to avoid the iron: “Limbs flailed / against steel rails, bodies / bruised on concrete.” She then likens herself to these calves, and places the father’s response to her leaving home in that context:

my father called them the wild ones...

the way he called me
rebellious before I left
then independent afterwards...

The concluding lines highlight the complexity of the father’s nature: he affords the “wild” calves, and the speaker, a grudging respect for the strength of character that their behaviour exhibits.

Newman further uses animals to illustrate the father’s tough exterior, but hints at a tender interior life in “This life” (poem 5). Sorting cattle for slaughter, the father “considers / the roundness of rumps” using “protective electric shock” to herd them into the truck (51). The speaker suggests that the father feels guilty for sending the cattle off, noting that he “tries / to wash the dirt away”, along with another apparent attempt at absolution: “[he] puts mineral blocks / beside troughs / for those that remain.” The speaker is in the role of observer, not needing to make difficult calls herself, but she perceives her father’s struggles in the aftermath of those decisions, revealing his inner compassion. Taken as a group, “Tender”, “Dehorning the calves” and “This life” interact via animal imagery to elucidate the two sides to the father being developed in the sequence.

Several poems allude to dead or injured stock. These show farm work as mentally and physically tough, and reveal the father’s response to it. Newman uses these responses to shed further light on the father’s complex character. “Talking to my father” (poem 2) makes reference to “graves for chooks, dogs, calves” (48), which the father digs

with typical pragmatism, while in “Man of few words” (poem 4), Newman describes her father’s speech as a “flighty heifer enjambed / with a low rail.” (50). The term “enjambed”, used to suggest that the heifer is caught between paddocks, is generally associated with poetry. The metaphor implies that the father’s language is similarly trapped, resulting in terse remarks left to others for interpretation, and forcing his actions to speak for him. The poem finishes with the father’s response – “*fuck, fuck, fuck*” – to “a dead bull in the drain”. But it does not clarify whether this is distress caused by the death, by the additional work involved in the burial, or by the economic impact of the loss. The father’s choice of words does not distinguish between sadness and anger. This leaves the speaker, and the reader, to interpret where the father’s response lies in relation to those emotions, and suggests that the father is isolated by his inability to communicate his pain to others.

An image of “burying the steer drowned in the drain / dragged by the leg with the tractor” in “Post-op” (poem 12) speaks back to the image of the dead bull above (58). There’s no sentimentality from the father or the speaker, just intimation of the need to get on with dealing with the problem. However, the focus on drinking in “Post-op”, as elucidated in the analysis above of the poem, in relation to war, suggests that the death and its grim aftermath may be a greater emotional burden than the father lets on. Thus, the references to dead animals across the sequence, and the father’s response to them, allow the poems to illuminate one another, elucidating further the tough and tender aspects of the father and developing the complex contemporary way this sequence engages with the conventional “praise” movement of elegy.

Images of digging feature in four poems, two of which make it the focal activity. These images of digging take on a metaphoric resonance across the sequence, working together to craft a picture of the father’s character as a man who lets his actions “speak”,

who demonstrates his love for his family through his work. They also inform the relationship between him and the speaker. The speaker “digs” over her father’s life, using her “few words” to convey her love for him by producing a three-dimensional tribute that does not shy away from harsh realities, including the hard physical nature of her father’s work, and the severe conditions.

“Talking to my father” (poem 2) depicts the father as strong, physical and pragmatic: he “held a shovel as though / it was a spoon” (48). But it also hints that the father lets his actions speak for him. The reference to a shovel – “bowl blade / worn as a mouth” – acts as a description to suggest that the tool is partially worn away, while simultaneously suggesting that the shovel is the father’s mouthpiece, that he speaks through his actions. Newman’s language is spare and down to earth, which mirrors the subject matter. She brackets the action with wry, understated humour, beginning the poem with “Most people called him Doug / and he did”. Her concluding lines also have a note both of humour and respect for the father’s direct mode of expression:

To cut square edges
he used a spade,

called it
a spade. (48)

Still, though the holes he digs are mostly for practical farming purposes, the hard work is also an expression of his love for family, as he digs “Tree holes, post holes, drains, / a swimming pool”. The inclusion of a swimming pool for the family on the list speaks not only to the father’s pragmatism but to the way he communicates, via work rather than language, his feelings for family. Thus, the poem further reveals the father’s complexity.

“Digging” (poem 21) echoes elements of a eulogy. It is set on the day of the father’s funeral, but looks back to the speaker’s youth and the recent past. The title is both literal and figurative. The father is depicted digging, filling in holes to safeguard his “city-born / grandchildren” from drowning, and to grow potatoes for their Christmas dinner (70). Newman is “digging up” memories which elucidate her father’s character and their relationship. The tough, physical nature of the father’s work is again to the fore in the first stanza:

All winter he had dug, boot
against the shovelhead slicing
frozen orchard clay, shouldering
the barrow (70).

Newman juxtaposes this image with one of the speaker reading in the warmth of a cozy lounge, where she has the luxury of time to “mourn...the lost Gravenstein” which the father has been digging up. It’s not clear what age the speaker is in that recollection, but sufficient time has passed for her to have some critical distance on the action as she writes, to show respect and admiration for her father’s hard work. In the concluding stanza, Newman returns to the digging motif as the speaker helps to lift her father’s coffin. She considers the situation:

how I came to be
the one to decide
where to dig
and when to fill in.

The implication is that this responsibility includes deciding where to place her father’s grave. The phrase “when to fill in” also seems to convey a self-awareness on the speaker’s

part that she controls the narrative; her decisions about what details to include, and what to leave buried, shape the sequence and the elegiac portrait of her father.

The father's digging demonstrates his love for his family through action, where he is unable to articulate that love. Digging references, then, whether literal or figurative, speak across the sequence, facilitating the poems' interaction as an "organic whole" as they illuminate the father's character and his daughter's evolving understanding of that character.

Beyond references to digging, the father's physical presence is often to the fore. The sequence chronicles his transition from strong young man to frail old age and death, when his absence speaks back to his earlier robust, reliable presence. These physical descriptions are inseparable from, and serve to inform, the contrasting aspects of his character. In the early poems such as "Tender", his strength and toughness are implied in the language choices: he "tramped to the shed", he "would always come in...shouldering the shovel or grubber", as he combats rabbits and tames the farmland (47). By the middle of the sequence, "His bones" (poem 11) describes the father's physical deterioration, his bones compared to "thin columns" "silted away at elbows", which force him to walk "with an awkward, / angular gait" (57). It immediately precedes "Post-op", in which the father's drinking is depicted as a response to trauma, and "Sixty years", with its scene of the father crying; together these poems act to reveal the father's vulnerability, where earlier poems emphasised his toughness. The fact that the speaker notices the father's physical deterioration so closely also speaks to her love and concern for him.

The last few poems reflect on the father's absence. They speak back to the earlier poems, in which the father is a reliable, if formidable presence. "Father's funeral" (poem 18) lists all the things the father habitually did, but does not do on what may be his last day:

“you didn’t move, / didn’t toss a bone through the wire kennel / with a soft ‘tucker time’ (67).” The father’s outward toughness is there in the description of the father not priming the mower in his “thick boots / and gruff voice”. But more to the fore are depictions of the father’s tenderness, and the speaker’s appreciation of it. She explains:

[you] didn’t follow us
down the concrete path to the car, a sugar sack
of new potatoes you grew behind the slat fence
clenched in one fist, a plastic bag of beans
picked this morning, dappled with condensed
dew, swinging loosely in the other. (67)

Not only is the father revealed in this flashback showing his tender side in his quiet generosity towards the next generations, but he is carrying the heavy potato sack without complaint while accompanied by younger, more able-bodied family members. Though subject to physical deterioration, he remains mentally and physically tough.

“Next day” (poem 19) anticipates the final poem with references to the father’s redundant clothes after his death: “Beige corduroy slippers / toe by toe on the mat, // that darned green jersey” (68). There’s pathos in the empty clothing, alongside wry humour in the use of the word “darned”, which could mean repeated mending, but could also be an adjective of affectionate mockery, that suggests the possibility that the father was attached to a garment considered by the speaker to be too worn out. Beyond this, the jersey’s state suggests the father’s toughness in exhibiting the extreme frugality of the war generations, his use of an old jersey in place of a thicker, warmer new one. He is neither self-indulgent nor generous to himself. It contrasts with his tenderness, his generosity towards the younger generations in his actions, as illustrated in “Father’s funeral”.

Newman moves from images of empty clothing to an empty body in “The undertaker gave me” (poem 20), as she describes viewing her father’s body and being handed his watch. The description “I saw my father – as much like my father / as anything else” implies that the speaker doesn’t connect the body with her living father; the word “anything” rather than “anybody” designates it as an object rather than the shell of a loved father (69). Yet the description of the watch she is handed as “a moon without a sky” suggests not only that the watch has been separated from its owner, but how the speaker feels in his absence, as though her father provided an essential context for her own life. The speaker explains “I held [the watch] in my hand into the dim chapel”, suggesting that she draws strength and comfort from holding her tough and tender father’s watch.

“Father’s beanie” (poem 22, which concludes the sequence), uses a hat as metaphor, both for the dead father, and for the sequence’s portrayal of his complex character. The poem depends on the poems that have gone before for interpretation, while also bringing the sequence to a moving conclusion. It comprises three short stanzas, just thirteen words in total:

Limp as
a shot hare,

pilled, frayed,
oil-stained brim,

loose ends
of stitch. (71)

The language is spare, the description entirely visual. The speaker is holding or observing the hat as evocative object, a reminder of its absent former owner and imbued with pathos,

while simultaneously conveying an awareness that this is just an old, worn hat to an outsider. The use of white space and short lines encourage the reader to pause and consider the hat's significance. Breaking up the simile in the first two lines invites a pause which increases the impact of the image of the "shot hare", as do the onomatopoeic qualities of the words "shot hare", which mimic the sound of rapid gunshots. Newman creates the effect that the speaker is casting about for an appropriate comparison, and coming up with a confronting one. The image of the shot hare provides a melancholy echo of the final image in the sequence's first poem "Tender", when the father holds out a baby rabbit to his daughter, bringing the sequence full circle.

The adjectives employed to describe the beanie are negative ones: "limp", "pilled, frayed, oil-stained", "loose". Like the "darned green jersey" of "Father's funeral", the state of the beanie speaks to the father's toughness. Only the poem's placement in the sequence communicates that the beanie is limp because it is empty, its owner having died. The concluding stanza, "loose ends / of stitch." suggests not just the shabby state of the hat, but the necessarily incomplete nature of the depiction of the father that the sequence creates. It acknowledges the impossibility of summing up a life, and its attendant relationships, through a sequence of poems or otherwise. Yet the references to the father's physical presence versus absence, articulated in part by allusions to his clothing, further illuminate the father's frugal and complex character. Thus, they contribute to the sequence's "organic whole", an elegy that is both realistic and affectionate, evoking the father's tough and tender sides.

I have argued that the group of twenty-two poems in "Tender" operate as a sequence per the Rosenthal and Gall definition in several ways. Most obviously, they are placed in a chronological order with a focus on a single subject. But this is strengthened by

the use of a series of recurring images and motifs, notably war, animals, digging and physical presence. The war images illustrate the impact of war on the father's character, which is manifested in his interactions with family and animals, and through his work ethic. These enable the poems in the sequence to "interact as an organic whole", a form of elegy for the speaker's father; the "structure is finally lyrical" in that it "expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling" per Abrams' definition – it suggests not an objective portrait but how the speaker sees her father, the complexity he presented to her. Together, the poems provide a nuanced elegiac portrait of the father strengthened by its unflinching approach to the father's complexity, and to the difficulties of the speaker's relationship with him. Its determination to provide a three-dimensional portrayal, which acknowledges the father's tough and tender aspects, and the speaker's complex feelings about him and his death, place the sequence among modern elegies which favour honesty over idealisation of their subject.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the work of contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand poets Helen Heath and Janet Newman. Specifically, it has analysed elements of Heath's poetry sequence "Reprogramming the heart" from her collection *Are friends electric*, and Newman's "Tender" from *Unseasoned campaigner*, through a series of close readings. I was interested to investigate how they operated as sequences, specifically what techniques the poets used to link the poems such that the sequences create a "whole" beyond the individual poems.

Where Heath employs a clear narrative progression through her fictional poetic sequence "Reprogramming the heart", Newman's biographical sequence "Tender" places the poems chronologically. Beyond this, each sequence is held together by lyric elements – recurring images and motifs – that speak back and forth to one another across the poems; this is key to the emotional movement in the sequences. Heath's sequence presents a speaker exploring her way through grief, and employs elements of traditional elegy to move from lament and denial to consolation. Newman's speaker, conversely, explores her father's character, and her difficult relationship with him, as she develops an understanding of the "tenderness" behind her father's exterior toughness. This exploration, which does not shy away from uncomfortable truths in its exploration of the relationship between subject and speaker, sits within modern (twentieth century and beyond) developments of the "praise" aspect of the elegy tradition, in which the dead are presented, to paraphrase Ramazani, with candour, flaws and all, to create an honest, three-dimensional elegiac portrait (18). The lyric elements support and strengthen the elegies that the sequences comprise.

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Reclamation

Nicola Thorstensen

Preface

This essay considers the process I followed in examining the work of two Aotearoa New Zealand poets, Helen Heath and Janet Newman, and in my own creative research, as I set out to write a collection of lyric poetry founded in the poetry sequence. My critical research was an investigation into how Heath and Newman's sequences worked lyrically, on what techniques the poets used to achieve cohesion, such that the sequences became more than a set of individual poems. I sought to use what I learned from this investigation to inform my approach to crafting sequences of my own poetry.

I wanted to write sequences to weave elements of my lived experience into a collection of poetry. I was drawn to contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand writers whose work was elegiac in subject matter, because this was the material most directly relevant to what I wished to write. This was irrespective of whether the subject matter was fictional, as was the case in Heath's sequence "Reprogramming the heart", or based on personal experience, an attempt to express a personal truth, as Newman did in "Tender". Each sequence contained both personal and political elements, something I was also keen to achieve in my poetry. In each of these sequences, I observed that the poets had augmented a cohesive chronology with textual echoes achieved via recurring images and motifs, such that the individual poems "spoke" to each other via these devices. In the words of Rosenthal and Gall, critics of the modern poetry sequence, the poems in each sequence "interact[ed] as an organic whole" (9). I was drawn to understand more about how these techniques contributed to the sequences' success, as I sought to emulate these aesthetic strategies such that the sequences I wrote would also work lyrically as a whole.

The poetry sequences I studied influenced my approach to my creative work in multiple ways. As I sought to analyse the individual poems, and their resultant sequences closely, to discover how they worked lyrically, I found that I applied my findings implicitly in my poetry. I employed a chronology to the placement of my poems, which are divided into sections based on their subject matter. I also took the findings, the fact that each sequence used recurring imagery and motif to allow the poems to speak to each other at that level, and consciously applied it in my creative work. My intention was to allow the poems to echo and converse with one another, allowing them to interact as an “organic whole”. Beyond this, each sequence I studied engaged with the elegy tradition; as I looked to understand how this manifested in their sequences, so I sought to develop that element of my work.

In a few individual cases, I chose a poem from the sequences I studied that I particularly admired for its aesthetic strategy, and sought to emulate that strategy in one of my own. For example, Heath’s poem “Things that decay”, from “Reprogramming the heart”, reflects on a number of mutable items drawn from nature, to provide the context for its central conceit, that memories of the dead erode over time (66). She embeds the couplet “the memory of your hand / at the small of my back” among references to washed up bluebottles, food scraps and a buried cat, to suggest that the speaker’s memories of her husband are similarly fragile. This placement among seemingly insignificant items serves to highlight the importance of the fading memory to the speaker.

I was mindful of Heath’s techniques in “Things that decay” when crafting my poem “Transmutations”. The poem lists a series of transformations, which are intended to interact and inform each other. I placed the central concern, the loss of the father, and the speaker’s recall of details about him, among stanzas about inundated sandcastles and spider webs

being cleared away, akin to the way Heath positioned her key lines. This juxtaposition of the important details with apparently minor ones was designed to emphasise the crucial lines.

I also used “A rise of starlings”, the fourth poem in Heath’s sequence, as inspiration in my creative work. Here Heath depicts the speaker’s late husband residing among the stars alongside Orion, communicating with her “in particles of dust and light” (56). Heath employs the elegiac technique of apotheosis, the elevation of the dead to godlike status (Norlin 309). I drew on the idea that the dead might journey among the stars in drafting the poem “Voyager” in the sequence “Reclamation”. I sought to use the image of the Voyager One spacecraft, and its journey out of the solar system, as an allegory of the pathway followed by the speaker’s father after death. My intention was to imbue the details about the spacecraft with the capability to be interpreted as being also about the father in the sequence. I used information about the craft’s characteristics and mission to attempt to craft a poem about more than the spacecraft itself, to comment on mortality in general, and specifically the journeys that the speaker and her father embark on after his death. The poem morphed during the critiquing process, such that the Voyager spacecraft became the occasion for the poem rather than the analogy I had initially intended to draw. I aimed to capture something of the speaker’s desolation following her father’s death; “A rise of starlings” provided a model for an approach to this.

Heath’s poem “A handful of dust” uses the five senses to illustrate the speaker trying to commit details of her husband to memory while he lived, and lamenting the inadequacy of such efforts after his death (69). My poem “Reclamation” addressed a similar theme, also using the five senses to attempt to create a recalled version of the speaker’s father. Like “A handful of dust”, it attempted to articulate the futility of trying to

“bring back” the dead, either literally or via clear recollection. My poem “Search for the huia” also presented a lament at the futility of trying to hold onto details about the dead.

I used Newman’s final poem in her “Tender” sequence, “Father’s beanie” as a reference point for my poem “Dad’s shirt”. I sought to emulate the stark brevity of “Father’s beanie”, to use the garment to evoke the wearer, to use understatement and critical distance in place of overt emotion. The imagery in “Father’s beanie” speaks back to earlier poems from the “Tender” sequence; “Dad’s shirt” similarly references a running shirt which I allude to several times in my poetry sequences.

Beyond taking inspiration from techniques employed in specific poems, I sought to emulate the use of recurring images and motifs more holistically in the sequences I wrote. This was the case in my first poetry sequence “Fragmented”. The six poems are a tribute to my paternal grandmother, charting her slow cognitive decline following a head injury sustained after being struck by a car at the age of fifty. My memories of my grandmother are sparse, particularly those that relate to the time when she appeared to be well. I’ve drawn on anecdotal information, and sometimes embellishment, to construct the poems about this time. “Schmetterling” relates a real doctor’s visit, where my grandmother was tested for dementia, but I’ve used research to create the specifics. “Forget-me-not” and “Breach” cover events relayed to me, rather than remembered. “Grandma’s dressing table” takes a piece of information, that she could not remember whether my sister was a girl or a boy, and shapes it into a poem. The last two poems, “Old hands” and “(Re)cognition” draw on my memories, however fallible. The moment I relate in “(Re)cognition”, when my grandmother roused from her non-responsive state for a moment, and appeared to recognise my father, saying his name clearly, is a distinct memory, for the momentary hope it engendered, that she was “back”. Whilst most detail in the sequence comprises a

combination of lament and praise, aspects of traditional elegy, this may be as close as the speaker comes to consolation, which typically concludes traditional elegy.

My work on the critical thesis informed my strategy for these poems. I placed them chronologically, in line with Newman's "Tender" sequence, rather than aiming for a narrative structure as in Heath's "Reprogramming the heart". Beyond this, I sought to create connections that would allow the poems to speak to and illuminate one another. Specifically, I used repetition of images such as hands, flowers and mirrors, and word choices so that the poems might echo and interact with each other.

Newman's "Tender" sequence was a useful reference point, as its subject matter and focus have similarities. The perspective is very different; the intervening years, and my very young age at the time of interacting with my grandmother, have limited my ability to recreate her in a perceptive way. I have only written about the years when I knew her, which were after her accident. It became a portrait of an unwell woman, rather than a biography that spoke to her earlier life. Where Newman has made the creative decisions around "where to fill in" (70), I've needed to use the very limited material I had, and flesh it out as best I could. I aimed to capture something of my grandmother's essence as I remember it, but also speak to the implications of her accident.

In the sequence "Fragmented", references to hands, both overt and subtle, are used as motif. All six poems in the sequence either contain images of hands or implied references to hands via action. Taken together, the images contribute to a portrayal of the grandmother's evolving confusion and powerlessness as her dementia progresses through the sequence's chronology. "Schmetterling", the opening poem, is one of the more notable examples, containing four references to hands. The opening lines contain an image of a clock face that the grandmother has drawn from failing memory. The clock lacks hands, in

keeping with dementia sufferers' recollection of clocks. The following stanza has the grandmother looking at her own hands "as though she's trying / to place an acquaintance". The reference reflects the changing relationship between her mind and body; she is losing the ability to distinguish her body from the outside world. The final stanza depicts the grandmother trying and failing to raise her hand, both to seek help, and to show that she can answer questions she failed to manage in the doctor's surgery. Thus, I hoped that the references to hands in the poem would chart a movement in the grandmother toward increasing isolation.

"Breach" takes images of hands and intimate touch and works to invert their usual connotations. Here, the grandmother's husband is washing the dishes, but she fails to recognise him, mistaking him instead for an intruder. To her diseased mind, he's a stranger with his "hands on her good china". She manages to dial for help with "sweat-slicked hands", but her actions appear somewhat automatic as she 'haul[s] the code from some deep-buried place". In the penultimate stanza, her husband's touch fails to reassure her because she can't remember who he is; instead, his presence frightens her. Her attempt to "read" via touch the inscription on her wedding band in the final stanza resembles an act of braille as she "tr[ies] to decipher the script." The implication of this image is that she's looking for clues to her husband's identity and the nature of their relationship.

By the time the sequence reaches "Old hands", the grandmother's hands have become "strangers", "useless" to her. She can no longer pick up a sandwich to feed herself the unappetising food on offer in a dementia care ward. This image contrasts with the speaker's nostalgic recall of times when her grandmother would "hold my hand / as you led me into your garden", a place where the grandmother was able to nurture her granddaughter as she is no longer able to do in the sequence's present, showing her how to "burnish

[plum] skins to magical mirrors”. This heightens the pathos in the image of the grandmother’s “rice paper hands /contorted against blue wrists” which opens the poem. The treatment of the hands images thus parallels, I hope, the grandmother’s deterioration as her hands become less functional and others’ hands become a source of fear rather than comfort.

The sequences “Intensive Care”, “Valuables”, “Reclamation” and the epilogue “Circling” in the creative component of my thesis comprise thirty-one poems, the focus of which are mainly my father and my experience of his loss. My father died in the aftermath of my grandmother’s death, in a head-on collision with a drunk driver, which also injured other family members. Although I wasn’t fully aware of this when I started writing about my father, I have few clear memories of him. My sharper recall, what I perceive as accurate memory, is focussed around events the night he was killed and its aftermath. This makes sense. I was aged twelve when he died; four decades have elapsed since then. I didn’t create a written record of my memories of Dad soon after he died, or at any intervening time, nor did I keep a diary as a child. I thought I’d always be able to access memories.

Compounding this, my extended family’s response to the trauma was to hold a hasty funeral while my family members were in hospital, to stop talking about Dad, to behave as though he hadn’t existed. This appears to have been closer to a cultural norm than I had realised. Commenting on attitudes to death developing in the early twentieth century, Freud talks of “an unmistakable tendency to put death to one side, to eliminate it from life...to hush it up.” (Ramazani 11). Ramazani goes further, stating that “the social practise of mourning...was incompatible with the frenetic pace of the new urban, industrial, capitalist order” (12). I have some photographs, which have triggered memories, and given rise to content in such poems as “Facsimile” and “Memorial”, using a process akin to ekphrastic

poetry. My recall of the time around Dad's death feels sharp, partly because it was traumatic, and partly because I have revisited the details countless times over the years, from evolving perspectives. I've particularly drawn on these memories in my sequence "Intensive care".

While Newman writes candidly about her relationship with her father, mine was a very different relationship, and a relatively short one, and our approach to elegising our subjects differs on that basis. My father and I were always close, and I thought he was a great dad. I still think so. The challenge for me has been to flesh him out, to do him justice, with so few concrete memories available, and with so much time elapsed. I felt the responsibility to create as accurate a portrait as I could, using individual poems to evoke aspects of his character, to weave these into a cohesive whole in the sequences. I've attempted to include enough information to allow the reader to infer biographical detail, but also aimed to create poems that stand individually and as part of the sequences. My approach evolved as my technique developed. Where many poems initially focussed on trying to "tell the story", in later iterations I sought to use biographical detail as the occasion for the piece, rather than its main subject matter. I used a series of recurring images to evoke aspects of my father, particularly referencing his marathon running and training, his skill as a craftsman, his love of fishing and the sea. These were intended to tie the poems together as Heath and Newman had done with their imagery, to develop a cohesive whole.

References to running, especially marathons, and to running clothing are a recurring motif. The motif speaks to the father's character and the speaker's perception of him. Marathon references are also used to suggest perseverance and self-discipline, elements of my father's character that I wished both to highlight and honour, consistent with the

“lament” and “praise” elements of traditional elegy. The poems interact via this subtext, which helps to build the portrait of him. In the first instance of this, “Trespasses” in the “Intensive care” sequence depicts the speaker invading her parents’ room in the wake of her father’s death. The title is intended to operate on two levels; she is knowingly trespassing, but the family has also been “trespassed against” by the perpetrator of the fatal crash. The first image shows the speaker seeking a final connection with the father she knows she will never see again, by picking up the used running gear and sniffing it. She admits: “I press your shirt to my face, / inhale stale sweat, / hint of Blue Stratos.” The second image of the running gear concludes the poem: “I lay the crumpled shirt / across your shorts, where it rests / like an arm flung around heaving shoulders,” which I intend to suggest the speaker’s need for consolation.

The father is in the act of running in “Shoelaces” from the “Valuables” sequence; this is reprised in the epilogue. The speaker admires her father’s dedication: “Dad, the endorphin junkie, / is off doing some extra laps of the Domain, / as though he has time to burn.” His children are posing for a photo, tying (or attempting to tie) the shoelaces of their running shoes in the poem’s present, which anticipates the mother’s last recollection before the crash, bending down to tie her shoelace. Returning to the present, the speaker acknowledges that the shoelaces in the photo are long gone: “the shoelaces we bent to tie / gone to some landfill site, / long buried.” The shoelaces stand in for the father, highlighting the speaker’s lament for his loss.

Running gear, characterised again by smell, also appears in “Stages of grief”, in which the speaker uses distancing language to avoid the emotionally confronting truth:

Reluctance to launder
sweaty running gear

will resolve itself
at the odour detection threshold.

She notes too that tying shoelaces “may manifest as both insurmountable and pointless.” In the poem “Reclamation”, in the sequence of the same name, the speaker notes the father’s “tendency to chuck your sweaty gear / at me after your morning run”, the tone suggesting wry humour and a kind of backhanded praise. “Dad’s shirt” describes the shirt as “grey with age” in contrast to the father’s youth, ending with the wistful line “*I run because I can.*”

The epilogue “Circling” marks a shift in the treatment of the running references. The speaker’s father is present, running a series of marathons, but he appears in only some stanzas; the memories are contextualised among other material. In stanza seventeen, which references Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “One art”, my speaker instructs herself to “*Write it!*”, the “it” being the fact of her father’s death. Whether or not this marks a movement toward a form of consolation in line with traditional elegy, it does at least amount to a form of acceptance. Stanza nine, in which the speaker compares her father with Pheidippides, the original marathon runner, could arguably be perceived as a form of apotheosis. It wasn’t consciously conceived that way. However, that interpretation would allow the sequences to chart an elegiac progression through lament and praise toward consolation.

“Circling” uses a methodology employed by U.S. poet Alice Fulton, the fractal, as its basis. I analysed the way Fulton had crafted her poem “Fuzzy feelings” from her collection *Sensual Math*, observing its multiple, but connected subject strands, the ways she had shaped them into a poem in which each apparently discrete subject informs and references the others. This had parallels with the poetry sequences I had been studying, in that each part was strengthened by its interaction with the whole. Whilst I didn’t set out to

emulate elements of ars poetica in Fulton's "Fuzzy feelings" (Miller, 601), I did wish to consider aspects of craft, of the way in which I was approaching my subject matter, and what I might wish to achieve with my poetry. The final line "We need another approach," whilst ostensibly referring to the poem's setting onboard an aircraft, consciously throws down a challenge to myself as a poet to find new modes of expression. The image in stanza twelve, "I'm aiming for a sugar-glass jar / containing a mosquito", is intended to characterise the aim of my work.

In writing the creative work, I was mindful of the ethics of writing about others, some of whom are living, in my poems. I decided not to presume to write from others' perspectives, an approach I had initially intended to take. I also decided not to include any direct content about the other parties to the two road accidents that precipitated the losses behind these poems, out of respect for their right to privacy, and my ignorance of their lived experience. I did have some biographical information about the man responsible for my father's death, but I deemed it problematic to use with my current skill level. However, in telling aspects of personal loss, I did intend to contribute to cultural conversations around Aotearoa New Zealand's drinking culture. It is a culture I have been raised in but remained largely ignorant of as a child. I deem it to be harmful in many respects, and it is my perception that those that suffer the effects of its toxicity are often our most vulnerable members of society. I hope that the creative component of the thesis will join the discussion.

Studying Heath's "Reprogramming the heart" poetry sequence and Newman's "Tender" poetry sequence has informed my approach to my own work, helping me to understand how successful poetry sequences operate. Beyond narrative structure (in the case of Heath) and chronological progression (in Newman's sequence), the poems speak

back and forth using recurring images and motifs. The sequences thus achieve a lyrical structure, interacting as an “organic whole”, as Rosenthal and Gall phrase it. Each sequence also engages with the elegy tradition. Heath’s movement from lament to consolation emulates the traditional elegy, whilst Newman’s work uses mixed praise and an updated pastoral setting to achieve a modern take on the elegy. My aim has been to strengthen my individual poems, and the sequences as a whole, using the techniques I have learned from studying the sequences of Heath and Newman. I have sought to apply this knowledge when writing and structuring my own poetry sequences, attempting to achieve a progression through lament and praise to an element of consolation.

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The following poetry manuscript is dedicated to the memory of

Edith Alice Thorstensen

and

John Lawrence Thorstensen

I: Fragmented

Schmetterling

The clock face she's drawn
is a Daliesque teardrop, hands
missing, numbers dripping
from the page.

Grandma stares at the hand
holding the pen, prone in her lap,
as though she's trying
to place an acquaintance.

Now she's intent on the dusty light shaft
striking the desk's polished mahogany.

If the desk knows who is Prime Minister,
or the fact that it's Thursday, it isn't telling.

House, motorcar, butterfly, the doctor prompts.

Danger ... Grandma offers ... kerb ...

She finds herself sitting on the back seat,
the car keys having given her the slip.
She tries to raise her hand,
to whisper *papillon, Miss, le papillon,*
but she can't find her mouth,
and her hands are heavy, leaden wings.

Forget-me-not

I remember the clover-clad lawn
thrummed with bees,

the snapdragons,
the way their jaws clamped velvety-soft
on my fingers.

I remember the grape hyacinth.

I don't remember you
naming the blooms
as you led me around your garden,

can't say whether the names were true,
whether you hesitated, or mistook,

and yet I place you there
in your blue-green dress,
showing me your gladioli,
your beloved irises –

here is *Paradise valley*,
this white one is *Immortality* –

and I have you arrange a bouquet,
let its chaos speak,
as if my own memory's sparse cuttings
might make of these cowslips a neater wreath.

Grandma's dressing table

has a set of three hinged mirrors.
When she tilts them just so,
corridors form, stretching away forever.

Dozens of copies of her blue-green dress
grow ever more distant,
dozens of my handknitted twinset,

matched with the same plaid skirt
above small bare knees.
Every angle, a composite 360

of Grandma and me, each overlaid
with another, our matching eyes meeting.

Three times this morning, Grandma has asked
whether my pink-swaddled baby sister
is a girl or a boy.

Next time we try the trick,
Grandma knocks the mirrors askew.
I try to put things to rights,
to hold the illusion.

Breach

The day she found the man
in her kitchen, standing
over the sink, hands on her good china
as though he owned the place,

did the cake of Sunlight soap
grey-ridged over its yellow heart,
the gingham tea towel
slung over Grandad's shoulder,
give her any reassurance?

She must have pushed down dread
long enough to dial her son,
gripping the heavy Bakelite receiver
with sweat-slicked hands,
hauling the code from some deep-buried place.

Was there nothing familiar about the man
wearing her husband's clothes:
brushed cotton shirt, dark belted trousers?

When he touched her gently,
did she know his roll-your-own
tobacco smell?

As he spoke his name,
did she worry at her wedding band,
run her fingertips over its markings,
try to decipher the script?

Old hands

Your rice paper hands
contorted against blue wrists
are strangers to you, useless
even to draw the white hospital gown
around your gaunt shoulders,

much less grip
the oily peanut butter sandwich
the carer sets down.

I mourn in a corner of the ward, remember
that you would hold my hand
as you led me into your garden,
that your beloved sweet peas
draped the porch
in a clamour of colour,

that as we picked plums, you would show me
how to banish the fruit's dull haze,
to burnish the skins to magical mirrors.

(Re)cognition

It wasn't that the untouched
peanut butter sandwich
lay curling in the sun,

or that your teeth,
jewelled with tiny bubbles,
were unmoored in your water glass,

that your open bedside cabinet
mirrored your vacant gape,

that the marks on the bed-end chart
were free falling,

or even that your bones,
pushing against thin skin,
evoked my broken doll.

It was the fact that this time,
like cloud cover lifting,
you looked straight at your son,
and, with total clarity, said *John*.

II: Intensive Care

Rolling, rolling, rolling

The Presbyterian Minister standing in
for his Methodist colleague
on this graveyard shift
riffles the onionskin pages of his black bible.

He spares a thought for the man
driving through the night
to deliver such grim news.
He turns to Ecclesiastes.

He reminds the girl in worn-out pyjamas
of a broken umbrella.
A railways ad loops in her head
as she tiptoes past,
the theme from Rawhide:
Rolling, rolling, rolling,
its hypnotic forward momentum
a laden freight train.

In the close space of her bedroom,
she recites TV stock phrases
to quell the tune:
just cuts and bruises,
held overnight for observation,
no casualties,

but some things are already ordained.

The Doppler effect

describes the apparent change in frequency
of a sound wave
where the source is moving
in relation to a listener,

an ambulance siren for example,
the sensed pitch at its lowest as it passes,
whether or not the driver knows
he's not going to make it,

or the shriek emitted
by a child in shabby pyjamas,
fleeing unwelcome news.

The faster she runs away, the lower
the perceived frequency of the sound,
so that at maximum speed,
the scream resembles a howl

that may prompt attempts to seek clarity
with such wary enquiry as
Was she very close to her father?

Swingball

Bone-jolt impacts.
Forehand. Backhand. Forehand.
Smash. Bash. Miss.

All my energy and attention
targets that small yellow ball,
my need to whack the living daylights out of it.

There's a chip off the edge of the bat.
Sometimes it catches mid thwack
and it's Not. Annoying. At. All.

Someone has to identify the body.
Smash. Crack. Snap.
The crash of bat on ball
can't drown out words that strike head-on.

I'll be out here until the slideshow
in my head gives way
to an endless stream of fuzzy tennis balls
that won't know what hit them.

Mourning after

It was you, wasn't it
shadowed in the hospital carpark,
tugging the string,
the single helix that bound us.

I had to fight the need
to follow the figure
clad in familiar clothes:
blanched cotton shorts,
fading fishing jersey, unravelling.

So it couldn't have been you
lying on the gurney's cold steel
with its curled spillproof lip

no matter what was written
on the tag with its tidy bow
fastened to some stranger's toe.

Brother: Intensive care

Each class has that one kid
who wants to answer every question,
whose incessant zest for learning
tries the teacher's patience.

A nurse meets us at the door.

Your appearance – somehow smaller,
skin the colour of ash –
displaces my projection of you
haring around the children's ward on crutches.

I'm clutching chocolate bars.
You're *Nil by mouth*.

A raft of machines beep,
tracking your vital signs.
You have a wound in your side.
For once, you're quiet.

If you get to raise your hand in future,
imagine how you might regale
your Year 7 teacher
with fascinating facts:

that *traction* means
six weeks immobilised,
leg suspended with a pulley,
drip not an insult, but a lifeline,
the spleen not a vital organ,

the legal blood-alcohol limit for driving
80mg per 100ml,
the one test that failed you.

Loose end

I found myself
on hands and knees, pain-hobbled,
staring at the puddle,
the black ice, that felled me.

The swiftness of the shift
from whole to harmed
struck me, the way

the last thing Mum remembered,
sitting in the back seat,
was reaching down
to tie her shoelace,

before waking on the orthopaedic ward,
plastered arm resting
heavy on her chest.

Her first question to me –
Why aren't you at school? –
owed something to concussion,
something to morphine's seductive confusion.

I nursed my knee all winter,
struck too by healing's leaden pace,
its refusals.

Trespases

Your Father's Day *Kool Mints*
sit unopened on the dressing table.

I press your shirt to my face,
inhale stale sweat,
hint of *Blue Stratos*,
your run cancelled.

The night before, you were salty
with a whiff of fish.
I didn't hug you goodbye –
it was a routine departure –

just as I'd shunned your hug
after the Rotorua Marathon
because you were stinky and wet.

Once, the run finished with a barbecue
at Hamurana. For years, I believed
that was the origin
of the hamburger.

I lay the crumpled shirt
across your shorts, where it rests
like an arm flung around heaving shoulders.

Voice

The day after the crash,
my uncle sounds so perky,
surely he must be about to clap
Dad on the back and suggest a beer.

Maybe he's misread
my sister's facsimile of carefree play
as she dresses her dolls' wounds.

As he climbs the stairs, his voice
is a shade high-pitched, a little too loud.

Maybe if he maintains the façade,
yesterday's phone call
will prove to be a case of mistaken identity.

Perhaps he's honed this look,
this tone, in the mirror,
set his jaw to strongman.

My sister attends to her injured dolls,
applying new bandages to their frozen features,
each strip across the face a miniature gag.

Eulogy for a nobody

Prodigy. Virtuoso. Polymath.
Dad was none of these things.

Aoraki stood unclimbed,
Cook Strait uncrossed.

He discovered no new species,
nor brought one back from the brink.

He wrote neither textbook nor symphony.
No military medals massed across his chest.

He didn't inscribe the Bible on a grain of rice.

He never played a comic or tragic lead,
his turn too brief for a moving deathbed speech.

But he showed us how to coax a gleam
from the most worn of leather shoes.

With his guidance, we conquered
Pirongia, in our roman sandals.

He taught us to bait a hook,
paint a fence,
paper a room,
to stake tomatoes and pinch the suckers off,

never to be late.

I'm told his Boys' Brigade cadets
formed a guard of honour,
stood tall to salute his coffin,
every one in shoes that shone
like burnished granite.

Papering

Clydesdales take the strain
in one half of the room,
haul black Cobb & Co coaches
across the wallpaper's textured terrain.

This side of the curtain,
two walls are repapered,
a coffee stain design,
no sharp lines, an easy match.

Months back, the room buzzed with industry.
We kids applied size to the walls
using broad brushes
while Mum and Dad pulled paper
through the paste trough
mounted on an old door.

Plumbline steadied,
they worked each length into place,
coaxed out air bubbles,
trimmed slivers of waste
with the orange Stanley knife.

Now Mum wants to hire a paperhanger
to finish the task.
Without Dad, she says she can't face
the last wall's blank plaster.

But some skills slow-seep.
Copying Dad's cadence,
I sang before I could speak,
standing on the pew,
hymn book upside down.

Mum and I make a good job of it,
this papering over,
this carry-on.

III: Valuables

Gem Iron

Listen for the sizzle
as butter fizzes on hot metal.
Inhale the tang of ginger
as it meets syrupy sweetness.

Let baking soda perform its alchemy:
batter froths and bubbles its way
into the miniature-loaf cradles,
rolls its shoulders as it settles.

Peek through the glass as the gems rise.
Turn them out to cool
when the tops spring back.
Wait. Pour yourself a glass of milk.

*

Gem irons – the proper cast iron kind,
not those aluminium chancers –
are quite pricey on Trade Me.
Nostalgia sells.

Slowly, slowly,
rust released its grip on dark corners
as I scrubbed with the soapy pad,
exposed them to long forgotten light.

*

Bite into a gem.
Do you find yourself smoothing down
the skirt of your gingham school uniform,
hands free of sunspots?

Will you take home the spoils
in your plastic lunchbox
to share with your still-intact family
(nuclear is what they call those)

or will your grown-up self
pull out the tatty photo album,
turn the pages, only to find
you've scoffed the whole batch?

Shoelaces

We're training for that oxymoron,
a fun run, when a Bay Sun reporter
spots us as a photo op. She orders us,
Sit on that fence and tie your shoelaces.

The youngest hasn't yet learned how,
so she mimes the moves, the same ones
Mum will make later that year,
moments before the collision:

the chance copy of the brace position
as she stoops to tie a shoelace
may be what saves her life.

Dad, the endorphin junkie,
is off doing some extra laps of the Domain,
as though he has time to burn.

I run my hand over the yellowed clipping,
the smooth faces in foreground,
the cars in the background
now absurdly out of style,
bordering on museum pieces,

the shoelaces we bent to tie
gone to some landfill site,
long buried.

Fish pie

The waft of someone's leftovers
mocks the workplace ban,
breaks my concentration
on this cash flow forecast, returns me

to that long-ago knock at the door,
covered dish thrust into my small hands,

the neighbour's swift departure
leaving me to lift the cloth
shrouding the pie.
The generous complement of dead-eye
peas stared back.

Dad's death had inflicted fish pie on me,
with peas. The horror. The comedic relief.

I turn back to my report,
try to take an interest
in the firm's financial woes,
the whereabouts of its pilfered petty cash.

The pie-heater fishtails
back to his desk with the spoils.

1971 Mattel talking doll

Plastic head, yellow hair,
if you pulled her body down,
she'd spout

one of her recorded phrases:

I'm sooooo silly! Are you silly too?

I can fit in your pocket!

Carry me, I'm portable!

Her selections were random, not looped.
Even she had no idea what she'd come out with
next. We could have run a sweepstake,
but we were Methodists.

Perhaps she took a dip
in the Para pool, or short circuited,
because she started saying things like
Are you silly pocket? with the same zeal,

remained her perky little self
through each upheaval:
the move from Te Awamutu to Tauranga,
Dad's metamorphosis into pocket-pack of ash.

I saw one just like her on eBay
the other day:

Face intact but a little faded.

Please view the pictures to see flaws.

Overall, very nice condition for its age.

I do keep going on.
Small talk isn't my strong point.
I'm prone to pulling out
the wrong stock phrase.
After the funeral, someone asked me how I was,
and I replied, *Carry me!*

Facsimile

In the sun-bleached print,
Mt. Maunganui beach
in its pink zinc phase,
the family sits around a picnic table,
Dad in his old green jersey,
Phoenix palm, that noxious interloper,
in the background.

In the graduation pic,
I'm shivering, gripping a scroll
against the classic clocktower backdrop,
so I breathe Dad into the shot,
snuggle into that same old jumper.

Here I've framed him
in the bridal car window,
though even in my mind
the touch of Dad's arm is so slight
as the *Trumpet Voluntary* starts,
that he is hardly there at all.

In this one I've planted Dad
watching the granddaughter
he'll never meet totter
in a floral sundress across grass,
feeling the blades under her feet.

Nothing happens in this last shot.
It's hard to remember taking it,
why I wanted to recall the banal
in-between, the exquisite time-frittering
as if there were always tomorrow.

Memorial

kua hinga te kauri o te wao nui a Tāne

Tramping, we once stumbled across
a kauri stump. All four kids fitted
inside its hollow centre,
you perched on the cut surface
for Mum's shutter-click.

While the kauri lived,
slow-grew across millennia,
it prepared a place for lesser trees –
rimu, nikau, rewarewa, miro,

nurtured tree ferns, orchids, grasses,
liana tumbling like tears
down its scarred flanks.

Here at McLaren Falls,
another kauri, your memorial tree, stands
alone.

A simple plaque
nailed to a plank
marks your thirty-seven years.

When we scattered your ashes,
this kauri was a sapling,
its girth a child's handspan.

This visit,
no sign of dieback,
it shoulders cloud,
pushes apart earth and sky.

Four branches rise
from the wound
where its central trunk
once grew.

Valuables

Wedding ring, gold, signet style, worn.

Wristwatch, wound, superficial scratches, working order.

Size 9 shoes, unserviceable.

House keys, duplicate car key, obsolete.

Clean driver's licence, small change,
sheepskin car seat cover, torn and marked.

Meths, smoker, gutted fish.

Pile of soiled running gear.

Two rolls wallpaper, Stanley knife.

Strains of your strong tenor
in your grandson's voice,
in the way your son finds his footing,
bearing now the heaviest pack.

Dad's shirt

Soft as
a kidskin glove,

pulled
out of shape,

grey with age,

faded logo:
I run because I can.

IV: Reclamation

Harm garden

Mum warned us about nightshades,
plants easily taken for potatoes,
berries enticing yet deadly,
lustrous as blackcurrants,

the monkey puzzle tree
with its year-round spines
hidden in grass, mimicking moss,
surprising the barefoot child,

and about oleander, its delicate pink flowers
scented with apricot, so toxic
that a brief brush risked
nausea, slurring, blurred vision, or worse.

No one warned us about the neighbour
who kept a sherry flagon sloshing
in the footwell of her Hillman Imp,
for emergencies.

Painting Teasdale Street

A memory fragment,
that '70s working bee
when a bunch of Dad's mates
helped us paint the house white.

The kids worked at the front, assured
that we were instrumental to the task,
not relegated to the back
where no one need see the mess.

Dad taught us to use long,
even strokes along the boards.
I held the heavy brush in both hands,
tried not to slop pink primer on my gumboots.

At the end of the day, Dad shouted
a crate of beer, laughed as he told
the crew *I'm buggered*.
We played along, nervous.
He seldom swore, hardly ever drank.

Though my child's-eye view
allowed him no breathing room,
I glimpsed Dad fleshed out that day,

a figure in full colour, more real
than the tidy black and white images
in the photo album,
laced and bound.

Search for the huia

From the elegant sweep of curved beak
to the milk-dipped tips of inky tail feathers,
this dog-eared portrait in the field guide
is where the huia's narrative arc ends.

We were tramping the Billygoat track,
attending to sound as though the huia's survival were
plausible. This was once its domain.

Its distress signal,
uia, uia, uia – where are you? –
was a call for back-up, for its mate.
The question was never rhetorical.

Dad was in his element in the Kauaeranga valley,
showed us the soft forgiving side
of bushman's friend, its flocked underbelly.

Shaded under the kahikatea canopy
we tried to be patient.
We could distinguish bellbird, rifleman, tui,

but there was one cry with a mournful fall
we couldn't identify,
which we told each other just could be –

After Dad died, I could hear both kinship
and subtle difference
in his brother's voice as he arrived at the house –
a call awaiting a like response.

In a matter of days,
the distinction was lost,
my uncle's voice a dead ringer.

On Billygoat's descent, we made do
with the illustration in the tattered book,
with the other birdcalls, or their fading echoes.

Sand burial

Standing here
holding a tatty plastic bag,
a spadeful of sand
all that remains of Dad

I'm reminded of a Mt. Maunganui beach day,
when we tried to beat the tide,
dug deep moats around elaborate castles,

before the burial:
My sisters piled on sand
until my limbs lost form under the mound,
my disembodied blonde head
the only thing
above the surface,

the weight on my chest
a sudden sitting ghost,
a marble slab
squeezing blood and breath from me.

I panic-flailed for freedom,
sent sand flying across our picnic.

Grit in my mouth, my togs,
under nails, I watched
a rogue wave sweep in,
taking our fortress with it,
all that we'd built.

Pipi-ing at the Mount

September's last day, a Saturday:
seawater's slap is a cold shock
as we wade waist deep
to gather pipis for bait.

At low tide pipis feed in the shallows.
We do a whole-body wiggle
which telescopes into a toe-wriggle,
find the hard shell, then just reach down
to pull them up.

Dad sifts our foragings,
tosses the too-young back into the surf,
where they nestle into their blanket of sand.

Those deemed strong enough
are granted one more day,
in the blue bucket he half-fills
with salt water.

Tomorrow they will have the ride of their lives,
cross the bar,
only to be prised open with a dull blade,
their tender flesh exposed.

Last day

By the time we woke
you were long gone,
sailing pre-dawn on the high tide
to ward off disaster crossing the bar.

Overnight, the pipis we'd gathered
spat sand into the blue bucket,
waited in darkness
with no inkling they would soon be threaded
on a barbed hook.

You packed light:
chilly bin, tackle, filleting knife,
smelly old hessian sacks
for the catch.

There's no one to ask
whether the fish were biting
or whether you talked about Grandma's last days
as you sought to warm
Grandad's grief-chilled bones.

If I were to train a lens on the past
with a view to capturing
the two of you
fishing side by side,
backs silhouetted against clear sky,
I hope I wouldn't take the picture,
but would set the camera down
and leave you
together,

divvying up the sandwiches,
swigging tea from enamel mugs,
keeping an eye on the lines.

Voyager

Recent signals from somewhere
in interstellar space
suggest it is lost in the vast vacuum.

Perhaps the fragile line of communication
is subject to rogue code,
a slipped stitch,
but for now, it remains open.

The family buzzed
around a black and white TV screen
an age ago, as the unmanned craft
set off on its quest.

By the time the ship reached Saturn,
Dad was on his own final journey,
invisible to the naked eye.

Night after night I stared into fading light
hoping to catch a glimpse,
but the heavens were so immense.

I saw only shadows –
runner beans hanging off broken frames,
silverbeet I refused to eat, bolted –

Dad's parched garden
ravaged by white butterflies,
their speckled wings a night sky in negative.

Stages of grief

The subject may experience loss
of feeling in the extremities.

This may grow
to involve the chest cavity.
Do not excise the heart.

Reluctance to launder
sweaty running gear
will resolve itself
at the odour detection threshold.

Should the subject find herself placing
cutlery before the vacant chair,
she should return it to the drawer.

It is inadvisable to kick
rows of worn shoes, or
to address a deity with offers
to take the place of the deceased.

Melancholy may ensue. Tying shoelaces
may manifest as both insurmountable and pointless.
Ditto eating. Benzodiazepine
should be removed from reach at this time.
Avoid roadside white crosses.

The subject will find it therapeutic
to find a home for the redundant wristwatch,
to allow some new wearer to track his pulse.

Checkpoint

Blue and red flashing lights
on the main drag arrest
my attention: random breath testing.

A queue of cars snakes
its way to the reckoning.

I'm twelve years old
again, willing a benign reality into being –

cars pass each other without incident,
no screaming
metal, no bodies broken.

My sisters sleep on,
blind to the possibility
that a stream of blue uniforms
might course through our home.

Count back from ten, says the officer.
Unhappen, I say into the breathalyser,
my voice thick with yearning.
Unhappen, unhappen.

Days without

*Each night a spider's web grows /
it is made of absence. – David Howard*

The sign pinned to a student flat reads
Days without spiders: 28.
Even if you bear it
so carefully outside, release it
where the lawn should be,
a spider will devote itself
to finding a way back.
Dunedin winters are hard on the homeless.

I make it 16,128 days
since Dad left.
The calculation changes constantly,
and his homing instincts seem woeful.
In fairness I've lived in dozens of houses,
left no forwarding address.

At this place, it's a struggle
to keep the webs at bay.
They appear overnight, so finely knit
I'm blind to them until I become enmeshed
in their sticky futility.

Next time I drive past the flat,
the sign reads
Days without spiders: 2.
I'm inclined to cheer for the spider.

When I get home
the webs are back,
and I leave the spider
to the forlorn beauty of its fretwork.

Transmutations

The vague remains of the castle you and I crafted
in wet sand below the high tide mark.

A spider's fretwork
you swept away during spring cleaning.

Your quick craftsman's hands
which coaxed this desk from a timber slab.

This room, two walls into its makeover, waiting for you
to apply paste to the next length of paper.

Your falsetto rendition of *Hey big spender*,
that brought the house down, hushed,

your hands now at rest across your chest,
as if cast in grey plaster.

Reclamation

So few memory fragments:
your favourite foods –
foraged pipis, fresh-caught kahawai –

turns of phrase,
that habit of calling the cat Bones –
He's skinny as a streak of weasel's piss –

your tendency to chuck your sweaty gear
at me after your morning run,
the slow way you took off your glasses
to bestow the nightly butterfly kiss.

Perhaps if I lift the receiver
of this Bakelite telephone
your voice will echo down the wire

say something mundane,
maybe order me back to bed:
It's a school day tomorrow, young lady.

Could I get in a reply, issue a warning
before the line went dead?
I thought we had unlimited minutes.

If I use only the present tense
to reclaim you from the ancestors,

I might stir as the retro yellow station wagon
pulls into the drive, turn in my sleep
at your murmured conversation,

wake to hear you
rinsing your razor
under the tap.

Epilogue

Circling

From here, I can see the Cathedral
kneeling in its own rubble,
the crater of a city centre.

At cruising altitude,
I feel soft-bodied as the salmon-blush
furrows of cloud beneath us.

Two down: *word that reads the same
forwards or backwards.*

I tighten my belt, reread the safety card:
'Your lifejacket is under your seat'.
The cheque's in the mail.
Does anyone ever check?
During the quake, the scaffolding
smashed the Cathedral's rose window.

Speaking of palindromes,
I pop a Xanax.
'Xanax': straight out of Dr Seuss –
the Lorax's wastrel kid brother.
He won't save you or the environment,
but you'll stop caring about either.

Xanax is made for poetry,
elegant as the flight attendant's well-turned heels
as she glissades past,
inches above the carpet.
If in-flight safety were paramount,
stilettos would be banned.

I can write Xanax, sans serif,
with a line of symmetry:
XA∩AX.
The letter ∩ resembles the entrance to a tunnel,
the other letters the tunnel's approach,
latticed with lilacs and baby's breath.

On Xanax, alcohol is contraindicated.
When intending to drive,
alcohol is contraindicated.
Forget the moral high ground,
we're airborne.

Airborne between strides,
Dad was Pheidippides, in better shoes.
Clocking the miles, weaving time and distance,
the three-hour marathon goal advanced
and receded, fickle as tides.
The year I was born, he ran a 3:09.

In turbulence, I stagger to the bathroom,
make eye contact with my mirrored twin.
After the surgeon excised the ectopic,
I was alabaster pale, blue lipped,
a heroin-chic Halloween corpse.

The drug isn't having the desired effect.
My head's full of cumulus.
Was it a sugar pill?
From the Latin, *placēbō*, I will please.
I'm sure I could step outside,
caper across the cloud surface.

Someone once said,
Poetry is an egg with a horse inside.
I'm aiming for a sugar-glass jar
containing a mosquito
(but longer lived and less whiny),
not writing's Kinder Surprise.

An adult mosquito is an *imago*,
which also means
an idealised concept of a loved one,
formed in childhood and retained as an adult.
With only gagging silence,
Dad remains deified.
Deified – palindrome and straitjacket.

To a child,
my vocabulary is already stilted.
Words have a half-life,
die and are replaced, like cells.
A traveler back from the dead
would need disambiguation,
a phrase book.
What would 'selfie' mean
to a man of the '70s?

The Rotorua marathon circles the lake,
ends where it began,
but the runners are changed in the running.
Six months before he died
within kilometres of his birthplace,
Dad ran a 3:30.

Palindrome, from the Greek *palin*,
again, or back, and *dromos*, running.

Our primary school exercise books
had a back cover that depicted –
in six boxes, a literal 'graphic novel' –
a crash victim's last moments.
The final box read 'You are now dead'.
Well, that's true.
Elizabeth Bishop urges me, '*Write it!*'

But I refuse to write about
sharing a four-bed ward
while my baby slow-seeped
into cold stainless steel,
or the roommate with the botched abortion
who –

Where do we go from here?
To acknowledge these half-lives
leaves me too exposed.
I need to make deep cuts.

At the turn of the millennium,
I hiked the Kepler,
lugged a bottle of bubbly
up to Luxmore hut.
At midnight Te Anau's fireworks
lit the lake, following the countdown.
So many left behind.
I'm not ready to raise a glass.

Fulton says 'slumber room' is a euphemism
for the morgue. 'Slumber' connotes cozy cots,
flannelettes, pleasant dreams.
I'd prefer to tiptoe away
with that image in mind.
Fais de beaux rêves.

A hard-hat crew
demolished the hospital.
It was an earthquake risk.

My fellow passenger
plans to name her baby Ava.
'What a lovely name', I say.
I think, *A palindrome!*
With a line of symmetry!

I rifle through my handbag
to find that first baby picture:
four plump cells
projected on a screen.

On the day of the quake,
the new Christchurch Women's hospital
rocked gently on its raft foundation,
lulled its cradled infants
while the city fell.
Born there that week,
my great-nephew was named Laz –

Is your little girl going to pass out –

The flight attendant proffers
a basket of stained glass shards
wrapped in cellophane –

the lollies?

The aircraft banks,
describes a tight arc,
circles back.
We need another approach.

Notes to the poems

The blood-alcohol statistic referenced in “Brother: Intensive care” is the 1978 limit, the year of the event.

Marathon time statistics used in “Circling” derive from rotoruarunners.co.nz; thanks to Pam Kenny for providing historical data.

The quotation “Poetry is an egg with a horse inside” in “Circling” is attributed to a third grader in an article on ars poetica by Jennifer Richter at Oregon State University.

The quotation “*Write it!*” in “Circling” comes from Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “One art”.

The allusion to Fulton in “Circling” references Alice Fulton’s poem “Fuzzy Feelings”, in which she calls the morgue a “slumber room”.