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**The imperfection of healing:
crafting lyric poetry from personal family challenge**

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

of

Masters
of Creative Writing

at

Massey University, Manawatū
New Zealand

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2018

Abstract

How can lyric poetry be used to communicate a father's changing perceptions and emotional growth in caring for a child with autism? In writing about family health issues, we face many challenges as poets. Given the very particular nature of any given health situation, such as autism, we face the challenge of lifting the purely personal into one with broader significance. And given the entanglement of such experience with the trajectory of the circumstances, we face the challenge of engaging with that narrative without allowing it to subsume the impulses and pleasures of the lyric.

The key questions that I wish to investigate are, firstly, how can we write autobiographical lyric poetry from these intensely personal family events while evading polemic or tragedy-based narratives that lack the nuance of the experience? Secondly, how can we create the emotional distance from the circumstances that inspired the poems to incorporate important narrative elements within the lyric, which elevates experience and perception? Finally, how can we create a narrative sequence from individual lyrical poems, in particular the trajectory of the narrative journey of the parent learning to deal with the challenges of a child's health problems, be they mental or physical? I would contend that, especially for these works, the boundary between narrative and lyric elements is often blurred. This thesis is comprised of two parts: a critical essay (30%) and my own creative work, a manuscript of original poetry (70%).

I am interested in several ways that poets create two sorts of distance. One I am calling an "emotional distance" in that they use various techniques to forestall sentimentality or conversely, the development of anger narratives that lack nuance. The other is what I am calling "aesthetic distance" in the sense that they use other formal strategies to depart from a narrow investment in the circumstances of the poems in order to link them to broader issues of significance, a form of moving from the particular to the universal. April Salzano's collection *Turn Left Before Morning* will be discussed as an example of poems that lack emotional distance, leaving the narrator portrayed as a victim. I will then discuss in detail how aspects of emotional and aesthetic distance are successfully manipulated by three other poets within the their poems and collections: Anne Kennedy's *Sing-song*, Siobhan Harvey's

Cloudboy and Jessica Le Bas' *Walking to Africa*.

I contend that for these poems that are based in autobiographical narratives, the emotional heart of the poems must remain consistent to the struggle of parenting a special needs child. However, while the lyric should gain prominence in individual poems, a narrative sequence and a coherent tone across poems can be developed within the overall collection. The challenge has been to bring these techniques into my own work, which comprises the creative portion—and not only to balance detail with lyrical impulse but also accomplish a nuanced portrait of my son. While I prefer to reject the tragedy based narrative, I have tried to portray the some of the nuance of parenting a special needs child. The aim was to create a unified collection of autobiographical lyric poetry that communicates the unique angle of vision of this father of an autistic child.

Acknowledgements

For finding the perfect balance between being encouraging and never being satisfied, I wish to thank Bryan Walpert, a truly exceptional mentor and teacher. Thank you. If rough edges remain in this thesis, then that is due to my stubbornness rather than Bryan's supervision. It has been my privilege to have your support throughout this journey.

The emotional heart of this thesis is my family, and I am thankful for the unconditional love and support they give me. Thank you, all of you.

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Exegesis

**Autism, family and poetry:
using forms of emotional and aesthetic distance
to craft lyrical poetry from personal family
challenges**

Autism, family and poetry: using forms of emotional and aesthetic distance to craft lyrical poetry from personal family challenges

1. Introduction

How can lyric poetry be used to communicate a father's changing perceptions and emotional growth in caring for a child with autism? In writing about family health issues, we face many challenges as poets. Given the very particular nature of any given health situation, such as autism, we face the particular challenge of lifting the purely personal into one with broader significance. And given the entanglement of such experience with the trajectory of the circumstances (e.g. the development of the autistic child and challenges faced at different ages by both child and parent) we face the challenge of engaging with that narrative without allowing it to subsume the impulses and pleasures of the lyric—without allowing events to overtake experience. I wish to write beyond a voyeuristic account of tragedy and family crisis and find moments of lyricism in my intensely personal voyage. I wish to develop techniques that will allow me to use these lyrical moments to craft an over-riding narrative that charts my often rocky progression in understanding my son's autism, what his personal cognitive experience might be, and relate some of my own growth as a father and a care-giver. To achieve this, I have used this craft essay to explore the methods and techniques several poets have employed to write about family and some of the problems that may be encountered.

The key questions that I wish to investigate are, firstly, how can we write autobiographical lyric poetry from these intensely personal family events while evading polemic or tragedy-based narratives that lack the nuance of the experience? Secondly, how can we create the emotional distance from the circumstances that inspired the poems to incorporate important narrative elements within the lyric, which elevates experience and perception? Finally, how can we reconcile the necessary freedom of artistic endeavor with the reader's expectation of an authentic narrative in poetry that we are invited to read as autobiographical?

It is useful first to draw out some fundamental characteristics of the lyric poem. The definition of the lyric has received much critical attention (Patricia Parker 11).

Anne Williams (7) discusses some of the challenges inherent in defining the lyric poem, and notes that many critical definitions are grounded in Romantic theory and practice, while others reassert a “more primitive” association with music. Some definitions focus on a poem’s brevity, non-narrative nature or single perspective. However, Williams contends there are poems that are judged as “intuitively” lyrical that violate some or all of these criteria. Of particular relevance to this essay, Williams suggests that the lyric poem is “balanced on a paradox: it is a representation of an act of self-expression” and offers a ‘unique angle of vision’ on the world (13). This is the aspect of the poems that I wish to investigate: how the poets have crafted the representations of their literal experiences to create moments of compelling lyricism. Jacob Korg (147) states the problem as “that of shaping authentic emotions derived from personal experience into poems of independent status and general significance.” For the purposes of this essay, I will use Northrop Frye’s (33) economical concept that the lyric poem represents a meditative mental focus that “turns away from sequential experience” and superimposes an “intense concentration of emotion and imagery”. Still, this must be complicated by the nature of the collection themselves. For poets writing about family health issues such as life threatening medical issues, mental health problems and autism, there is a challenge in finding moments of universal significance in such specific and personal circumstances without sacrificing the particular textures of that experience. That is, there is a challenge within a lyric poem of communicating the specifics of a medical condition necessary for comprehension of the circumstance without losing the “intense concentration of emotion and imagery”. Further, a balance needs to be found between the intense personal emotion of the parent in these circumstances and the aesthetic demands of a lyric poem to transcend the particulars of the event and transform them into a creation that resonates with wider human experience. Finally, the poetry collections I examine here all create a narrative sequence from the individual lyrical poems, in particular the trajectory of the narrative journey of the parent learning to deal with the challenges of a child’s health problems, be they mental or physical. I would contend that, especially for these works, despite Frye’s argument that lyric “turns away from sequential experience,” the boundary between narrative and lyric elements is often blurred. David Lindley (86) notes that many narrative poems have lyric elements and the converse is true in these poems when

viewed as collections.

The issue of narrative also touches on another—the extent to which such poems, so founded in their personal narratives, must be true to facts in order to be authentic. Stefan Kjerkegaard (185) addresses this issue by defining two types of autobiographical poetry; autobiographical narrative poetry, which remains true to experience, and autobiographical lyrical poetry that “has some roots in events in the poet’s life, but the rendering of those events in poetic lyric transforms them in a few ways”. These transformations include a reduction of narrative and emphasis on lyricity: “the question *who speaks?* becomes pertinent at the same time as this question is distorted by the lyrical transformation”. Similarly, Karen Simecek (498) argues that lyric poetry is essentially “non-narrative in structure and promotes personal engagement”. She contends that providing a narrative structure to emotional events is not enough to provide explanation of those emotional experiences, that only lyrical works prioritise the “perspectival features” that allow a more complete “insights into the emotions” (497). Simecek uses a definition of narrative as “a particular kind of organization of events, consisting of thoughts, feelings and actions that are represented as part of a spatio-temporal sequence. We construct narratives to represent connected individual events, by selecting those episodes that appear relevant to this organizational structure, which help to form the coherence of the set of episodes” (499).

However, Simecek offers a definition of perspective as capturing “a particular complex orientation (a general evaluative attitude) towards experience, which acts as a ‘tool for thinking’, since such an orientation will govern how we go about making sense of our experience as well as directing the thoughts and feelings we have in response to what we experience” (501). Simecek is thus arguing for lyric poetry that “presents us with images, ideas, concepts, which connect in such a way that makes the experience of the whole poem meaningful with a deep sense of significance” (503).

Still, Stanley Plumly (33) contends that the “most effective poets, it seems to me, understand that their art depends on their access to their original narratives, those life studies that, involuntarily, inchoately, dream their way back to us.” But he suggests this is a matter of balance, where he postulates that the autobiographical poet should attempt to: “remember with passion and write with separation, a combination never

easy, ... to understand that the important stories cannot be willed but must be met and greeted". In other words, the lyric imperative, or emotional heart, of a poem should be followed rather than an absolutist commitment to empirical narrative fact.

It is precisely Plumly's notion of "separation" that interests me in the collections I will discuss—the ways they create various kinds of distance to achieve the "complex orientation toward experience" that Simecek calls for. An approach to poetry that manipulates the distance within a poem from its genesis in circumstance to a greater universal significance is one method that allows such complex orientation.

Specifically, I am interested in several ways that these poets create two sorts of distance. One I am calling an "emotional distance" in that they use various techniques to forestall sentimentality or conversely, the development of anger narratives that lack nuance. The other is what I am calling "aesthetic distance" in the sense that they use other formal strategies to depart from a narrow investment in the circumstances of the poems in order to link them to broader issues of significance, a form of moving from the particular to the universal.

In relation to emotional distance, I am interested in how poets have used forms of distance to engage readers in the emotional impacts of these moments, and yet avoid their works falling into self-indulgent sentimentality or self-pity and permit the work to rise beyond the particular narrative circumstances they describe to appeal more generally. April Salzano's collection *Turn Left Before Morning* will be discussed as an example of poems that lack emotional distance, leaving the narrator portrayed as a victim. I will then discuss in detail how aspects of aesthetic distance are, in contrast to Salzano, successfully manipulated by three other poets within the aesthetic literary construct of their poems and wider poetry collections: Anne Kennedy's *Sing-song*, Siobhan Harvey's *Cloudboy* and Jessica Le Bas' *Walking to Africa*.

First, I will examine how these other poets have created emotional distance from intensely personal events by using a sustained narrative persona, such as the eczema-mother in Kennedy's *Sing-song* and Cloudmother in Harvey's *Cloudboy*. Next, I will investigate the use of language as a form of aesthetic distance in these poems. Here I am interested in how these poets use aspects of language, such as the use of unfamiliar medical vocabulary juxtaposed with more prosaic terms, to create

emotional distance within the poem from the immediate harsh reality of coping with a child with a major medical problem. In this particular focus, I am interested in those poems that relate to mental health challenges, and for my own work, autism. Third, I will examine the portrayal of the speakers' relationships with healthcare workers, including the use of religious allusions that help to provide aesthetic distance in the poems and links the poems to wider universal themes of the human condition. Fourth, I will examine the use of recurrent metaphors that bridge individual poems to create a sustained aesthetic distance within a collection. In this regard, I am interested in how these metaphors within the collection of poems can be used to transform the significance of individual perception to more commonly shared concerns. For this discussion, I will contrast two collections about parents and autism, Salzano's *Turn Left Before Morning* and Siobhan Harvey's *Cloudboy*. Fifth, focusing on lyricism I will explore how the parent's unique perspective on specific family health issues can be communicated within the poems without sacrificing lyricism for the sake of didactic monologues. Finally, I will discuss how poets have sustained a wider narrative in a lyric sequence, drawing examples from Harvey, Kennedy and Le Bas. The question raised by the balance of narrative and lyric in these collections is how we can portray the nuance of life as parents with special needs children. Specifically, how can we present these challenges authentically as more than tragedy, and portray the intense pleasure and rewards of parenting these children through lyrical perception? These techniques form the foundations of my argument that poets can use forms of aesthetic distance as a method of creating poems that engage with the lyric perspective but transform the personal into poems of general significance.

With regard to the application of these ideas to my own poems about my son's autism, I would like to consider a term, "umwelt," that is used in comparative animal cognition studies. This use of animal behavior science may sound demeaning, but I do not wish to imply that autism equates to the animal experience. In human medical literature and child development studies, the concept of umwelt has been at the heart of understanding neurodiversity and the different perceptual worlds of people with a variety of "conditions" including autism (Clancy and MacBride 198; Kozima 168; Allen 137). Similarly, I would like to draw a comparison, namely my own desire to understand my non-verbal son and scientific attempts within the field

of animal behaviour to understand the cognitive experience of their study animals. The term *umwelt* is from the German word for environment or surroundings (Frans De Waal 7-13). The use of the term in animal behavior science is often translated as the perception of a self-centered world. At its heart, the comparative theory suggests that organisms can have different *umwelten*, even though they share the same environment. The *umwelt* of different animals is not just a function of experience, but also relates to their sensory and neural physiology, that is, the functional way that each animal perceives its surroundings. This raises the question of whether we can truly understand the *umwelten* of another creature. For example, how can we understand the cognitive experiences of a bumblebee or a blue whale?

In applying this to the human experience, this variation in cognitive experience seems a self-evident truth. Our perception of the same situation varies between people. Indeed, this might be considered the very basis of lyric poetry, as an attempt to use language to show the diversity of individual perception. Williams (12) suggests that lyric poetry offers “glimpses into realities, not subject, by definition, to articulation by the consciousness which experiences them”. By this, Williams is arguing that the poem is more than a soliloquy in a play, but instead may help to reveal the “shadowy zones of consciousness” or the personal *umwelt* of the narrative voice. Or, more simply, “lyric represents experience and that the lyric mode causes one to know that experience from within” (15). To a father, the idea of *umwelt* suggests how it may be more useful to view autism as a difference, rather than a deficit. Current neurophysiological theories suggest the condition we term autism may relate to both structural and functional differences from the neurotypical (Steven Silberman). Rather than being a deficit, some theories postulate, an autistic mind is experiencing a rich flood of sensations and emotions that can result in an overwhelming of the senses (Arthur Fleischman).

This detour into the notion of *umwelt* is therefore intricately bound to one other concern with poems that deal with autism and other such conditions: in addition to my concerns about moving beyond the particular circumstances to avoid sentimentality or self-pity and my concern that narrative, so important to these journeys, not dominate lyric, it is important for poetry that deals with autism to show that condition for all of its nuance.

To explain why this perspective is so bound to a condition such as autism, I

need to briefly divert away from the craft of poetry to give some context on current views of autism, in particular in popular culture. People who are diagnosed as autistic have either been portrayed as mentally challenged and dangerous sociopaths, such as Stig Larsson's protagonist in his 1979 novel *Autisterna* (Jenny Bergenmar, Rosqvist and Lönngren 202) or conversely as savants with amazing intellectual abilities that are paired with awkward social abilities, as typified by Dustin Hoffman's portrayal in the film *Rain Man*. (Silberman). However, autobiographies are emerging by people who identify with the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum (for example Temple Grandin, Fleischman) and a more nuanced portrayal of people with autism is emerging in literature (Claire Barber-Stetson 147). Health professionals generally view autism as a disease to be cured. However, within the autistic community there is a belief that, while the effects of autism can be socially crippling, this may relate more to the way that the general populace deal with difference rather than being an inherent defect in autistic people (Silberman). That is, autism needs to be viewed as an aspect of neurodiversity that can create disability but is not a disorder that requires a cure or treatment (Simon Baron-Cohen 744).

An example of how the idea of autism is often treated as a disease is the approach of doctors and therapists to one of the signal conditions of autism. People with autism often show behaviour that is directed at narrowing or filtering sensory inputs through repetitive actions and stimulations. These can include hand-flicking, rocking, or whirling behaviour. These stereotypical actions are referred to as self-stimulatory behavior by health professionals working with autistic people and can be difficult for the neurotypical mind to interpret. Some therapists try to extinguish self-stimulatory behaviour, while others allow it in small controlled amounts as an isolating but calming behaviour. From limited reports by autistic people themselves, these behaviours are described as essential to calm functioning when their minds are overwhelmed (Fleischman; Silberman). In animal behaviour terms, the Umwelt of the autistic experience is so different from the human neurotypical that applying standard interpretations of behaviour is meaningless, and well-meaning attempts to enforce neurotypical behaviour patterns may be detrimental to the welfare of the person with autism (Mikl South, Tiffany Newton and Paul Chamberlain 398).

What autism teaches us about the cognitive experience of humanity is that there is no shared mental norm. The average human perceptual experience is

sometimes described as the neurotypical and this may be just the median point on a spectrum of mental functionality and divergence that exist within humanity. In other words, autism represents part of a spectrum of mental functioning and should not be viewed as an absolute condition. To rigidly define the autistic experience as one extreme or another is to simplify this component of the spectrum of human experience.

For this parent of an autistic, non-verbal child, the only journey that I can express, the umwelt that I can report on, is my own, rather than my son's. So I will discuss collections of poetry that attempt similar journeys and in doing so, attempt to find the craft techniques centered around forms of aesthetic distance that will enable me to forge a path to my own "angle of vision". The goal of these explorations is to guide my own work: to seek to engage authentic personal perspectives of fatherhood and transform these intensely personal moments into works of general artistic and lyrical significance.

2. *A failure of sufficient emotional distance*

April Salzano's chapbook of poetry, *Turn Left Before Morning*, is crafted around the poet's experiences with her autistic son. In this collection she presents autism as an antagonist and the autistic child as a life catastrophe, an ending to the poet's hopes and dreams, which become subsumed to the care of her child. The tone of the collection is grim, unleavened by hope for relief or for a better future. The overwhelming narrative that emerges from this collection is of parental resentment and the destruction and chaos that autism can cause:

When they found it. When my days started to end
long before I was ready, when my hopes
for a career were tossed into the yard like dog shit, buried, forgotten.

"Clarabel" (11)

Recurring metaphors of damage and despair create a unifying bleak tone for the collection. Specifically, recurring metaphors that are used in the individual poems are of trauma, the refuse of the body and defilement. Physical trauma metaphors are abundant, for example "an occipital bone breaking", "I have fed you to the wolves" ("Prayer for a bad day", 8), "Handfuls/ of hair torn from my scalp" ("Purse Puppy", 17), "Bashing me against walls", and a linkage of paternal and parental abuse:

Memory is a kind of incontinence
an unexpected leaking between one
world and the next. From the grave,
my father is my autistic child.
My body is
recalling how to bend into a blow

"How the Body Remembers" (22)

Metaphors referring to the refuse of the body and defilement suggest, in her child's

loss of bodily control, the poet's loss of control more broadly: "the intrusion of dog shit, piss and puke" ("Clarabel", 11), and "your mouth/ print on the front window, your dings/ in the drywall", "the same stained pajamas,/ the ink dotted underwear" ("Waiting", 15), and "the stench/ of dog piss" ("Purse Puppy", 18).

The over-riding sentiment of this collection is resentment, anger and frustration. This is a strong example of a tragedy model approach to autism (Carol Potter, 948): the anguish of a parent who believes in autism as a crippling disease to be cured or at the very least ameliorated. That if we, as parents, can just hold on long enough, the miraculous resolution offered by the snake oil merchants and other purveyors of false hope will occur:

I know one day the world is going to
slide into place with a click, flip
right side up and make perfect sense.

"Heartbreak #999" (39)

The poems capture the moments of despair that the parents of autistic children face when they doubt their own ability to cope and their fear that their child is suffering, and will continue to suffer both with them, and later face an uncertain future without them. The last words in the collection reinforce this tone.

...Your body never stops moving.
It will grow until I can no longer cover it
with my own.

"Heartbreak #999" (39)

In Salzano's work, the cruelties of autism and the human frailties of mother and child over-ride the narrative. Importantly, from my perspective as a poet writing about autism, Salzano makes little attempt to lift us beyond her personal suffering, and without some degree of aesthetic distance to generalize the challenges of the narrative, a reader might struggle to feel anything other than pity for this poetical cry

for help. I contend that due to a lack of emotional or aesthetic distance, this collection has not only, in casting the poet in the role of victim, offered an experience without nuance, it has in aesthetic terms failed to transcend the specifics of the poet's circumstances.

How can this be avoided? Can we use forms of distancing to reflect that life with a special needs child is a form of derailment from the normal expectations of a parent? Oswald Hanfling (94) suggests that distancing naturally occurs within any work of art as a function of form. Though "in actual life we are at the mercy of unpredictable contingencies," he argues, "the work of art is not open to such contingencies; it is a finished object and in that sense 'closed'." As I will suggest in what follows, it is possible to use techniques of deliberate distancing to express this sense of estrangement from normal life, balancing the tension between the artistic construct of poetry and the authenticity of an autobiographical poetry that retains a lyric focus.

3. *Creating distance through narration*

One form of emotional distancing entails avoiding directly addressing the larger emotional impacts of events, but instead addressing them obliquely. Brian Henry contends that “because so much personal poetry relies on circumstance, it fails to transcend the circumstantial in its aspirations towards the ‘universal’” (168). By creating emotional distance, the poet can focus less on the circumstances, and more on that perception that defines human experience.

A technique used to achieve emotional distance in collections of poems is the sustained use of a narrative persona that helps distance the speaker from the poet. In particular, in poetry about parents and their children, a personal narrative voice that mirrors a parent’s perspective, can be used to manipulate the mediacy of a poem. Mediacy here means the extent to which and manner in which events are mediated by a narrator. That is, the story is “openly transmitted through a narrator who functions as a teller of the tale” (Jan Alber and Monica Fludernik, 2) which can be used to describe the parent’s *umwelt*—e.g. the gradual loss of their previous identity and immersion in the problems of their child—indirectly. Such an indirect form of mediacy is most easily recognised by the use of a third person perspective, where the use of “she” or “he” distances the poet from the more personal open narration of the lyric “I”.

Anne Kennedy, for example, creates the “eczema-mother” as a personal narrative identity in her collection of poems *Sing-song*.

But she *was* an eczema-baby and the mother

by association, an eczema-mother.

She first heard this when a fellow eczema-

mother told her that ‘eczema-mothers
sometimes abandon their eczema-babies’.

Who looks after them then? She asked.

Social Welfare, which they don't call by that name anymore.

The eczema and the mother separated
neither of them going away.

“Christening” (50)

This conjunction of the disease with the identity of the parent and, again, the disease with the identity of the child is an effective technique that portrays the all-consuming nature of a child with special needs. For example, later in the collection, the dissolution of eczema-mother continues:

She used to read *Landfall* but now things
matter. The eczema-mother subscribes
to a magazine of plump blonde children in Pumpkin
Patch clothes running through fields of daffodils

“The magazine of white children” (58)

The parent's further loss of identity in their driving need to help their child is also conveyed by this technique. In “Holy War” (67), “The eczema-mother must become/ a fundamentalist, a freedom fighter” and “the eczema-mother works/ with a mission and hopes and hopes/ that this will cure her.” (68). This is extended in the poem “I was a feminist in the eighties”, which begins with the lines “To be a feminist you need to have/ a good night's sleep”. There is clear separation here of identity over time. The characters of the narrator are split into what she was before the child—and “I” per the title and then what she has become when immersed in the child's health problem, and then finally the narrator poet looking back over these events. There is of course, a further distancing of speaker and character via the use of so many third-person monikers, (i.e. the feminist, the eczema mother, the poet that used to read *Landfall*, and the one speaking). There is an implicit suggestion that the poet speaker is able to write with the perspective of distance from this immersion. This splitting of

characters allows the poet to remove herself and by extension her readers from the close emotional impact of the loss of identity that she felt during the time of her child's disease while at the same time enacting that loss of identity through the use of multiple third-person terms.

In Harvey's work, *Cloudboy*, the human frailties of the characters are often subsumed by the ethereal imperatives of the personas that she uses for her son, Cloudboy, and her narrator Cloudmother. For example, there is no indication that Cloudboy is as disruptive as the teachers in the collection contend. Is this likely? Or is this a deliberate choice by Harvey to protect the child's lofty portrayal within the collection? Teachers are portrayed as earthbound, limited and rigidly locked into a neurotypical frame that prevents them from seeing the genius of the child:

But this is what I know:
A boy who pictures life so,
his mind always elevated,
his eyes hungry for belonging
in the harsh light above
two jigsaw pieces of land,
isn't anything other than
in need of grounding.

"A Migrant Teacher Considers Clouds" (40)

So there is a danger of transforming Cloudboy into an angelic being, misunderstood by the earthbound clods around him. Yet Harvey's collection avoids being a hagiographic work because of her own self-awareness, something that Salzano fails to communicate. While this wry self-awareness permeates much of Harvey's collection of poems, it coalesces in the poem "Cloudmother," where she acknowledges her own experiences are shaping some of the conflict in Cloudboy's relationship with the rigidity of the schooling system. Here I am arguing that the speaker's perception of the child's persona can be used to create emotional distance for the speaker herself. This technique of reflecting on her own memories and

experiences overlain with the event of Cloudboy's attending school is rich in perceptive imagery and creates a non-linear narrative that blends maternal past and the child's future:

When Cloudmother escorts her son to class, everything
he is yet to bear and be pained by unfurls in her

like a hailstorm. Drear mornings of multiplication
when Cloudboy's eyes float outside to nimbostrati dark

and static as the wings of dead wasps or caged starlings;
lunchtimes of lonely drifting around the playground

when reaching out towards faint cirrostrati refracted
into halo phenomena is easier than making a friend;

"Cloudmother" (35)

The personas of Cloudboy and the Cloudmother speaker create sustained emotional distance throughout this collection of poems by allowing the speaker to separate her perceptions as a mother and a poet. These techniques permit separation of the literal from the figurative characters and allow the poet to forestall sentimentality within the poems. In contrast, the blending of mother and child perspectives creates an emotional sympathy between mother and child. I contend that Harvey's use of such a distancing persona is effective in shifting the focus from a single autistic child to the more universal themes of loneliness and isolation. The cloud metaphors for the persona of the child are the most compelling example of this technique in creating a sense of distance and isolation.

It is worthwhile to consider the contrasting technique of distancing used to frame the narrator in "Walking to Africa" by Jessica Le Bas. In this collection the identity of Le Bas' speaker remains conflated with the poet throughout the collection and is only referred to as the self-referential "You". While Harvey and Kennedy shift

perspective and mediacy throughout their collections, Le Bas remains relatively fixed. The second person seems less confessional than the first person perspective, but Jennifer Ashton (94) argues that it can be an acknowledgment of sincerity of the poetic voice, in other words that the second person perspective can be a more accurate portrayal of the artificial construct of the poem and its depiction of events—its relation to reality. By this I contend that the emotional distancing inherent in the second person perspective can be used to reflect the difference between the speaker and the poet. Ashton argues there is a tension in the use of “you” between the personal and the impersonal, sincerity and authenticity, and “between denying and asserting the poem’s relation to a reader”. Le Bas’s use of second person perspective effectively creates emotional distance, while maintaining an emphasis on the *umwelt* of the lyric, avoiding poetry that is too partisan (such as Salzano’s anger and self-pity or the opposite, which Harvey courts, of being too sentimentally appreciative) and therefore without nuance.

Le Bas’ collection follows the deterioration and subsequent partial recovery from undiagnosed mental health issues in a child that include depression and suicide attempts. It works as a moving narrative of a mother and child’s journey through a mental health breakdown and yet as a poet she holds us at a distance from the narrator’s emotions. By maintaining an emotional distance the impact of these events is heightened by obliquely addressing these extremely disturbing moments rather than providing more straight-forward narrative descriptions, but the cost is a potential loss of engagement with the narrator/poet. The mother narrator in this collection is more passive observer than participant and the end result is a deliberately distanced narrative approach to the child’s mental health journey. There is no doubt of the commitment of the mother to the child, but the emotional anguish of the parent is restrained in this collection. Consider this passage:

The night she takes all the pills you are writing fiction in a cupboard
You are inventing a narrative arc
You are not inventing a flood, the end of a world
It comes anyway

The phone does not ring from A & E

At midnight they take her to a respite home

respite

The next day you add the word to your notes

you plan to research it

for greater understanding

“Summer, by Another Name” (6)

Here the emotional connection between parent and child is distanced by the conjunction of the poet concerned with the craft of writing and the meaning of words, on the one hand, and the narrator as parent on the other. The use of second person narrative is a component of the emotional distancing that allows Le Bas to approach the difficult issues of mental health obliquely, allowing the poet to emotionally distance her narrator from self-indulgence or to portray herself as a victim.

The emotional distance creates a unique dispassionate “angle of view” to the journey where we are left to infer the true impact on the narrator. For example, in the poem “Whatever” (16) the narrator’s perspective is almost completely distant:

She says whatever

She says go away

She says

I hate you

I want to die

You knit.

There is a tacit suggestion here that the narrator’s role is simply to endure. There is a conception that a cure for her daughter lies in the narrator’s own capacity to remain unaffected by this trauma. In the poem “This is Bernard’s Answer”, subtitled “Remedy #9” (20-21) this idea is fleshed out:

Imagine a whiteboard (it must be clean)

clear your mind

of everything
think only of the whiteboard
now count
1 to 39
- backwards

Now start talking to her
Tell her she is doing fine
she will get well. She will

The emotional impact of these events is addressed in an oblique manner in the metaphors of the mind as a blank whiteboard, and the simple repetition of the speaker's hope that her child will get well. These lines portray not only the emotional distancing of the speaker, but also a deliberate distancing of the mother from her emotions so that she can continue to support her child.

Even when the poet directly addresses the narrator's feelings, we are misdirected to her external observations instead. For example, in the poem "4. Another Autumn" (28):

through the fear you once had for flying

Worse things happen

The psychologist asks you about your own mental stability, and your relationships. How you see the world. How you see yourself
You like mostly how the pot plant above his desk still hangs pale,
one limp leaf leaning to the right, and how the screensaver on his
computer is still replicating pipes – still tangling, untangling. You
want to ask him if these are significant props, and how best you
should respond to them...

In this stanza, Le Bas seems to be implying the mother's needs are no longer important, that all her personality and personal traits have been sublimated in the

needs of her daughter. The sustained use of second person narration is a technique of distance that effectively turns the narrator into a blank canvas. By this, I mean that the speaker is deliberately emotionally distanced or mediated by the use of the second person perspective. I am ambivalent about this. On one hand, the creation of this aesthetic distance is effective in obliquely emphasising the trauma of the daughter's depression and the shock and helplessness of the parent. But on the other hand, I find such passivity difficult to engage with. It is important to remember that as a poet Le Bas is under no obligation to reflect the reality of her situation, and that the aesthetic construct she has created from her personal experience may simply reflect a deliberate decision to focus on the child's journey and distance her own.

4. Creating distance through language

One technique that is used by some of these poets to create both emotional and aesthetic distance in poetry is the use of unfamiliar vocabulary, technical jargon or arcane diction. For the poems we are discussing, the juxtaposition of medical terminology and everyday language can serve to provide emotional or aesthetic distance, especially if poets use the techniques that allow for figurative rather than just literal meanings of technical terminology and jargon.

A clear example of this figurative use of medical diction occurs in the poem, “Newly Discovered Sites on the Moon” (67), where Le Bas takes the names of psychotropic drugs and links them to natural images that metaphorically suggest the struggle of mental health issues:

Fluoxetine is a dry river-bed
Moclobemide is a long dark valley
Risperidone is the highest mountain she climbs
Epilim is the rock shelf she falls on
 overlooking a forest of Citalopram craters
Quetiapine is the blue lagoon
 in starless light
Lamtrigine is a crater lake purged by the blistering flow
 of Olanzapine
Efoxor is not the fox she thinks she heard
Blinded, she did not see the port of Lithium
Dazed, Lorazepam passed by

The unfamiliar drug names, in combination with the images of exploration, create a metaphor of journeying through the strange landscape of mental health treatment. The journey is not pleasant, the river bed dry, the valley long and dark; we fall, are blinded, purged and dazed. The aesthetic scene that is constructed here bears no semblance to reality. The exotic drug names create a counterpoint for the strangeness of the landscape of the poetic construct. They are forbidding evocations that have

been aesthetically distanced from the literal meaning of the drug names. Here, the technique of distancing avoids a too narrow focus on circumstance, and lifts this mental health journey of a particular child, into universal themes of the challenges of human existence.

In another poem, “5. Voices” (36) Le Bas uses similar pharmacological and behavioural therapy terminology and alienates them further by joining them into one long stanza:

A jumble of voices arrives from a foreign place -
fluoxetinelithiumrisperidonequetiapinetricyclicsbenzodiazepinesserotonin
reuptakeinhibitorselectroconvulsivetherapycitaloprammoclobemidetardive
dyskinesiacognitivebehaviourtherapy

You have never been there
There are whole cities
You have never seen them on a map of your world

CAMHS CBT ECT TCA SNRI IPT PST SSRI OT TD MRI CAT EEG ECG

You are an alien in an alien world
She says whatever.

The effect of this jumbled terminology and medical acronyms serves to convey the narrator’s bewildering sense of disempowerment and estrangement from the medical decision-making process. The unbroken flow of words and incomprehensible acronyms creates distance between the literal and figurative meanings of the medical language and the dislocation from reality to create the sense that we are strangers in a strange land. The alien landscape evoked by these words presented in this way, distances us from the pain of the medical procedures, but it also creates an aesthetic distance within the collection as the figurative nature of the language is emphasised here. The formal aesthetic distancing of the language here is suggestive of the poetry movement known as “Language Poetry”, where the aim is to “perceive each linguistic event as elements in themselves that arise and pass away without being

gathered up” (Rapaport, 118). This aesthetic focus on language is being used here to transform the particular events of the poem and give them larger artistic significance—that is, the focus is not on the medical terminology and its referent—the medical interventions themselves—but on their effect, which is a sense of alienation they create, a sense of being estranged.

In *Cloudboy*, Harvey tends to incorporate terminology from science, philosophy and the classics more often than the language of medicine, per se. For example, in “The Gifted Ideologist is Placed in a Naughty Circle” (47), we see a juxtaposition of philosophy and classical texts with the reality of primary school discipline. “On day one, he sits in a *chiton* of white tape/ reading *Republic*. You’re naughty, his new teacher snaps” and;

On day two, the gifted ideologist returns to his prison.
Within its *houppelande* of white tape, he reads *The Prince*.
He reflects upon just resistance, *weltpolitik*,
and the liberation of the oppressed.

On day three, in white-taped ruff, he’s locked indoors
at break, endures heavy heat and contemplates *Leviathan*.
Its fiery rhetoric dreams him a new world
of social contracts and equitable rule.

The vocabulary uses the intellectual and conceptual (social contracts, equitable rule, rhetoric) to displace the emotional—there is little emotive language, at least little that expresses the speaker’s point of view. Moreover, the links to the classic events and philosophical treatises connects the events in the poem to wider human condition, carrying these across time and cultures. This poem contrasts the difference between the otherness of the child and the rigidity of the school system. The “*chiton*” is a type of ancient Greek clothing providing synergy with Plato’s *Republic*. The “*houppelande*” is the long outer garment worn by medieval scholars, combining with the reference to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. “*Weltpolitik*” refers to the imperialist foreign policy of the German Empire from the 1890’s onwards, while *Leviathan* and the ruff are references to Thomas Hobbes’ 1651 work on the structure of society and

legitimate government. This confluence makes us consider that a child's introduction to fairness and justice and tolerance of diversity within society all begin in the schoolroom. The use of these unfamiliar terms takes us out of the schoolroom to consider the implications of this injustice in wider society. In this aesthetic construct, the schoolroom stands for the world. And it suggests, perhaps, a hope that the son himself might be able to use the larger ideas suggested by such ideas as "the social contract" to distance himself from the pain of his particular situation. In this way, the introduction of philosophy and its technical terminology provides both emotional and aesthetic distance: It is a means to distance the speaker from her feelings, evading their expression through language that is not expressive but conceptual while—in suggesting an effort at distance it simultaneously, without sentimentality—reinforces the very power of the feelings she resists. And it enlarges the poem from its particulars, suggesting it is linked to a long tradition of oppression and investigations of equity.

In the epilogue poem of her collection, "Upon Medicating My Son" (77), Harvey does use medical diction but juxtaposes modern psychiatric diagnoses to archaic apothecarian terms and allusions to witchcraft :

No exorcism for this.
How each limb fights
its puppetry is shadow-show
without relief. Like St Vitus' Dance
the physic is veiled in such curses
as my dark poetry no longer orates.
So now, the doll and pin, the pit and fire
are summoned in silent superstition
each morning the teacher cavils again
about my son's cacoethes, the snare
of his murmuration and twitchery.

No infusion for this.
Forget the wisdom of ergot and vinca,
adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,

lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
intuition is the wildest remedy.
So now, the school-bell ringing its elegy,
A mind-man brews strange words
like *impulsivity* and *hyperactivity*,
while a medicine man prescribes
my son synthetic *herba benedicta*.

No spell for this
survives the centuries of mothers
who smouldered through the stake
and lore our lost relatives were bound to.
So now my son swallows chemical curatives
and sleeps as if the past never was
while the coven of night bewitches me
with the charm of his transformation.

The archaic terms used are all of exquisite relevance to the medical treatment of Cloudboy. For example, cacoethes refer to uncontrollable urges to do something malignant, but its etymology in Latin is of a malignant disease. Autism and Asperger's syndrome are characterised by compulsions to perform stereotypic movements (Baron Cohen, 746). *Herba benedicta* refers to the plant Avena, *Geum urbanum*, because it is an old herbal remedy that was believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits and venomous animals, suggestive of modern attempts to medicate people with autism and Asperger's syndrome with a variety of psychoactive agents, but also bringing in the idea of the possession and poison at the root of difference. Ergot and vinca are psychoactive plant and fungal alkaloids with links to the Salem witch trials. Further conflation of modern psychiatric practice with witchcraft is developed through the use of language such as "twitchery", "the doll and pin, the pit and fire", the "snare" and the "smouldered through the stake". The language here also juxtaposes current medical diction such as "*impulsivity* and *hyperactivity*" to archaic medical terms. The effect of such comparisons is to convey the mother's sense of unease with medicating her son obliquely—by implication—

rather than directly and emotively And in reflecting the concerns of the autistic community that neurological difference is being treated as disease, but also as something malign, something to be feared, something “other,” the use of archaic language provides an aesthetic distance here that allows Harvey to move from the purely personal issue of medicating her child to the larger theme of persecution of difference within society.

5. *Creating distance through character description*

Another technique the poets use to manipulate the emotional distance between the poet, her narrator and her material is in the portrayal of relationships between the narrator and peripheral characters. In these collections, this technique is often applied to the attitudes of health care professionals, juxtaposing them with perceptual descriptions from a parent's viewpoint. These descriptions in various ways evade the particularity of individual medical practitioners to focus on their emblematic character—in some cases through figurative language, e.g. transforming them into religious or other symbols of hope or into images of fear or destructions, and in other cases focusing on their parts, e.g. a hand, to suggest a metonymic connection to the profession. In the collections of poems that I am discussing here, health professionals including doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, homeopaths, kaumātua and priests are all represented in this fashion. They are not fully realised as characters, but instead the narrators' perceptions of them are portrayed in symbolic terms, mostly as beacons of hope and possible messianic deliverance, albeit tinged with the fear that they, like all others before them, will fail to deliver on this hope. The portrayal of these characters can be used to create either aesthetic or emotional distance. Where these characters are transformed for aesthetic distance this allows more universal themes such as faith, dependence and religious worship to be evoked. In other cases, an emotional distance created by treating an individual medical practitioner figuratively is used to prevent the lyric from slipping into blame or anger and impinging on the *umwelt* that the poet would like to portray.

As an example of characters being transformed for aesthetic distance, Le Bas represents some of her more sympathetic characters as tinged with religious connotations:

Doctor Beam may not be the person you are hoping he is
As he turns you look for wings
None

Perhaps the sandals are a clue
and should not be discounted.

“Talking to Doctor Beam” (10)

Here the hope of the parent is distanced by the wry search for clues to how helpful each medical professional will be. The doctor’s lack of wings equates to his failure to work miracles, while his sandals, which I interpret as an allusion to the sandals of Jesus Christ, represent the hope, desperate as it is, that remains. Similarly, selected nursing staff are presented as angelic if they are helpful:

The nurse grows wings
small knobbly bits at first, in the hinterland of her back
unfolding like the puckering of a smile.

The Ghostman takes off when the nurse arrives
with her little whispers and new wing-things

“O Another Winter” (32)

And in the following poem:

The angel/nurse
grows round like a globe of the world
There is a little dark space behind her eyes
enough for stars, and other worlds
She has seen other worlds

“The Angel/Nurse” (33)

I contend that these transformations are part of a formal strategy to depart from a narrow investment in the circumstances of the poems in order to link them to broader issues of significance, a form of moving from the particular to the universal. In this case, the transformation of the nurse into an angelic being changes the real human nurse involved, in part, to a symbolic character that helps to convey the helpless faith

that parents and patients surrender in broader terms to medical staff and the gratitude that is felt when contact is made with a compassionate and competent care-giver.

Kennedy does not use this kind of transformation, but instead creates emotional distance from the speaker's anger by building wry detail in the descriptions and tone around the character of the homeopath that she ultimately blames for worsening her child's eczema:

The children sat on the floor
sorting through the desultory

box of broken toys in his surgery.

The blinds were drawn, shutting out
the great ugly world of steroids and
feature films. They sat in the kind of

half-light that will preside after a
nuclear accident. He spoke so quietly
the mother had to lean forward to
hear him, close enough to see

the big cable knit in his organic cotton
socks through his exercise sandals
his breathing feet. She didn't like him
thought he was distant, but just a feeling

“Quack” (34-35)

Note the language used here around this character, the “broken toys”, “half-light”, “great ugly world” and even a “nuclear accident”. These all connote failure (broken, half) and danger (ugly world, nuclear accident). The stark, “She didn't like him” is hardly necessary, but completes the parent's perspective on the homeopath. Later in the collection, she presents a similarly useless dermatologist, but

emotionally distances her speaker's feelings by only peripherally describing him by his hands:

The mother is hoping he'll have
something to say other than steroids
will wave the manicured, scrubbed-up hand
that went through Medical School...

“Christ, not another rite!” (92)

This minimal but critical description serves to dismiss the specialist and his prescription that brings a “dreadful aftermath” as minor players in the narrative, but also helps bring emotional distance from blame and anger. Kennedy still communicates her speaker's anger and this perhaps reflects the poet's opinion of conventional medicine, but by distancing her portrayal of these characters in these minimalistic and oblique descriptions, the speaker is dismissing their importance to the narrative. Beyond the personal encounters with the medical profession the humour and belittling of these characters serves to move beyond the individual encounters with particular people to a general conception that the medical profession's faith in their own competency is sometimes not matched by their results.

6. *Creating aesthetic distance in collections using recurring metaphors*

For this thesis, as I noted at the start, I am defining aesthetic distance as the use of formal strategies to depart from a narrow investment in the circumstances of the poems in order to link them to broader issues of significance. One such strategy that poets use to create an aesthetic distance is the fashioning of a cohesive literary construct that is built within poems and then sustained between poems in a collection. The primary aspect of this that I wish to examine is the tone created through recurrent metaphors in a collection that help bridge the individual poems and unify the collection around common themes. This technique can give a collection of poems a wider significance than might be suggested from the individual works.

One aspect of this strategy of the deliberate fashioning of aesthetic distance within a collection relates to using recurring metaphors to create a sustained tone across the collection. A general definition of tone in poetry is that it expresses an attitude towards a subject (Abrams, 430). While there is some debate about exactly how craft affects tone in poetry, for the purposes of this essay, I will use the definition offered by Ellen Bryant Voigt (84) that “tone in a poem expresses the form of the emotion in that poem and is lodged primarily in the poem’s non-discursive elements” such as “the sounds in the diction, syntax, formal manipulation of rhythm, and the arrangement of vowels and consonants – simultaneously with the denotative verbal information and the visual cues”. Voigt’s explanation of the function of tone within a poem is to provide a context to the language that informs on its “central meaning, or purpose, or identity” (79). While Voigt then goes on to emphasise how the musicality of the poem influences the tone, here I am more concerned with how the recurring metaphors used across poems in a collection creates an over-arching tone, which in suggesting how the speaker perceives the situation, suggests the speaker’s central attitude or feeling toward it.

Collections of poetry written by the parents of autistic children take different approaches. In these comparisons, we see the diversity of the autistic child’s and the parent’s *umwelt* in two extremes, comparing what Potter (958) refers to as a “strengths based commentary” to an “overwhelming deficit oriented narrative” (960) or “tragedy model approach” (949). In my previous discussion of Salzano’s

collection, *Turn Left Before Morning*, we have an example of the tragedy model approach where the narrator and child are portrayed as victims of circumstance. Now, I wish to look at the ways in which some poets have delivered more nuanced strengths-based commentaries that while acknowledging the challenges of autism, also recognise and celebrate the inherent strengths of these children and the parents who rise to support them in their difference.

In contrast to Salzano's collection, for example, Siobhan Harvey's *Cloudboy* presents an empowered and optimistic tone, reinforced by the extended ethereal metaphors of the air, including birds, storms, and the recurrent theme of the autistic child considered as both a variety of clouds and a student of them. Here the autistic child is presented as a gifted demi-god, some kind of other-worldly being who is able to transcend language, space and the mundane intelligence of teachers and other authority figures. For example, in the opening poems "Cumulus" and "Cumulonimbus", Harvey sets the tone for the collection of contrasting moods and the conflicts that are faced by the parent of a high functioning autistic child. She begins softly in "Cumulus" (13):

Such shape, soul, creation and caesura.

Such softness, halation and omniscience.

and follows immediately with "Cumulonimbus" (14) where the metaphor crackles with unrestrained energy

Such mettle, spleen, spit and fire.

Such turbulence, charge and disease.

This contrasting of states between peace and energy is familiar to the parents of autistic children as a metaphor for the wildly varying moods of the child, but they also can be read to encompass a nuanced view of a parent's perspective. Caring for a child with special needs will swing you from one extreme to another. A collection of poetry that only acknowledges either the tragedy mode of Salzano's work, or an unrelenting optimism and strength-based commentary is going to fall short of effectively conveying the challenges of parenting these children. The cloud metaphor

balances the negative and the positive with mood changes like the weather, uncontrollable, tumultuous and yet still something natural. Beyond this, though, Harvey's cloud metaphors build a sustained literary construct that transcends the individual poems to create a synergistic tone in the collection that is optimistic yet conveys a sense of separation and sometimes loneliness.

The unusual term "nephology" for the study of clouds is repeatedly used without explanation in a manner that reinforces and emphasises the extended metaphor. The identities of the mother and child protagonists are clearly established by this technique and both are portrayed heroically throughout the collection. This is a narrative that is pushing the boundaries of portraying the autistic child as post-human, a being above and beyond the understanding of neurotypical teachers and doctors.

Here are other synchronicities: each cloud is an outcast child befriended by a label – "gifted", "difficult", "troubled", "trouble"; each cloud exists at the edge of its emotions and obedience; each cloud knows all there is to know about Paleontology, Egyptology, Astronomy and Nephology.

"The Gifted Nephologist Goes to School" (33)

Note the plural form of synchronicities here, signaling that this work can be read not only as a personal narrative, but also for its more universal significance. I argue that here, Harvey is assigning the cloud metaphor to each and every person that has ever felt outcast. That is, all of us exist at the edge of our "emotions and obedience". In other words, Harvey has used a formal strategy to introduce aesthetic distance into her collection of poems that helps us move from the particular circumstances of the poems to broader issues of significance.

Another effective formal technique that builds cohesive aesthetic distance in these collections is to vary the emotional distance between the speaker and the child. Harvey provides a skilled example of how this aspect of distancing can be manipulated within a collection of poems. Harvey varies the emotional distance between her Cloudmother speaker and Cloudboy throughout her literary construct,

but nowhere more carefully than in the opening poems of her collection where she compares the moods of her child to varieties of cloud. In “Cumulus” (13), the opening poem of the collection, Harvey closes the emotional distance between the cloud mother speaker and child with lines like “The tongue is rich in poetry. / The arms come open to embrace” and “The skin that’s sensitive and sore”. Here is another example of Harvey varying the emotional distance in the perspectives of poet, narrator mother and child in a way that brings emotional sympathy to the relationship. Harvey is using sympathetic language to reinforce the bond between the mother and child. For example, the lines that tell us her child’s “tongue is rich in poetry” suggests that for this speaker there is an inherent empathy between the poet and her son’s language, that the maternal caring instinct is there to embrace and soothe his “sensitive and sore” skin. Here there is a closeness between mother and child.

Harvey then moves us to middle distance with the next poem “Cumulonimbus” (14) where the child is transformed to a less sympathetic figure:

The body is a hive buzzing with electricity.
The brain is fluent in storm.
The tongue is slick with blue-bladed invective.
The fists come clenched and swinging.

Here the child is portrayed as an uncontrollable force, with unrestrained energy and causing harm to those around him with his swinging fists and swearing tongue. This is a rare moment in Harvey’s collection where the image of the autistic child as a problem that needs to be mastered or weathered is given voice. These poems demonstrate the tension that Harvey is manipulating, the emotional distance between narrator and child. “Cumulus” suggests a closeness of the narrator and child, while “Cumulonimbus” tears them apart.

Then in the third poem “Stratus” (15), Harvey invokes a sense of emotional distance in the child character that suggests to me an emotional gap between mother and child, a sense that the speaker will need to work to understand this child. She contrasts the wild energy of “Cumulonimbus” with the following lines:

But stratus has no impulse, no ties, no lure.
It is a flat grey body, barely breathing
grey air, leaching grey thoughts, exuding
grey aspect, grey words and grey noise.

Note the restrained diction and tone. The repetition of grey, four times in the stanza, bleaches colour and movement from the stanza, giving an impression of heavy stillness.

Harvey follows this distancing with a line, repeated in the next two stanzas, “Just out of our reach is the Cloudboy, we know”. In three successive poems, Harvey has varied the emotional distance between narrator and the child and in doing so has introduced the difference necessary to invoke the otherness of the autistic child.

7. *Conveying the umwelt of family health issues*

One of the challenges faced in writing about a specific medical condition is a need to communicate the *umwelten* or unique perspective that the specific effects of the medical condition affecting their child force upon a parent—but to do so without resorting to didactic monologues that would overtake the aesthetic and lyrical construct of the poems and without being so technical that the problems are too particular to the poet. In these collections, the poets take different approaches to this, and some are able to achieve this in ways that maintain the lyrical focus of the collections.

Kennedy introduces the condition of eczema gradually throughout the collection and then by an escalation of symptoms. In an early poem, “Myths and legends” (4) the theme is introduced obliquely with the line “*Maui’s brothers bloody the epidermis*”. It is then not until much later in the collection that the eczema is introduced in the poem “Quack” (35) as an “itchy patch the size of two twenty cent pieces”. This followed immediately by the haiku “Lamentation” (36):

That night a new blush
reddened near the white sand dunes.

Endless burning bush.

This is the only haiku in the collection, and its brevity and shift in form draws attention to the importance of this mild dermatitis to the narrative arc of the poems. From here the child’s itchiness rapidly increases as does the mother’s focus on the condition and possible causes and remedies:

All changed. The world now her skin.
The Maori-Pakeha girl the colour of
wounds. She’s torn open all over
by her own nails, lives in a frenzy

of concentrated itching, infected
like a cat after a night fighting.
She's tired beyond endurance, sleeps
only when more exhausted than itchy.

“and effect” (42-43)

These evocative stanzas plunge the reader into the impacts of the disease on the mother and child. This gradual morphing from mild symptoms that deteriorate quickly into all consuming pruritis is an effective way of making the disease and its effects accessible to the naïve reader, but it also evokes a more universal religious metaphor of the “endless burning bush”. Here we have a lyrical poem rich in perceptual detail that manages simultaneously to suggest the symptoms without bogging down in technicalities and to evoke more universally the all-consuming nature of a child's health problems.

In *Walking to Africa*, Le Bas immerses us directly in the world of mental health issues, and uses an early onset of vertigo as a starting point in her narrative arc. This may be interpreted as evoking the disorientation and loss of balance inherent in all mental disorders for both child and parent:

The room spins when she stands up, the sky circles and her stomach revolves
- round and around, till no food can find its way down
and she is cold and alone in the big house
wraps a blanket around her body, and another, as she grows thin . . . and
dizzy

“1. Was This the Beginning” (1)

This is followed by two poems, “Autumn” and “Winter”, where the mother and daughter move from medical specialist to specialist without a diagnosis being made. However, the concept that this is more than vertigo emerges in the poem “Winter” in a suicide attempt:

No spirit lifts

A small knife lifts
in her hand

It's not a bad bleed really

They find her in her room
with her pink cellphone

- whispering 1111 1111 1111 1111 1111 1111

“Winter” (4)

Le Bas has rapidly escalated the seriousness of her daughter's mental health issues to give a sense of the problem without providing discursions into technical or medical details of her daughter's condition.

In Harvey's collection *Cloudboy*, Asperger's syndrome is introduced through a poem titled “Cirrostratus” (23) where Harvey chooses to describe the more difficult features of Cloudboy's behaviour:

These are the rare days
when the child is quiet and compliant,
when there's no translation of Russian
or Sanskrit, no constant questioning, no
forceful negotiations at the dinner table
(*I only eat broccoli at weekends . . .*), no devouring soap,
being Superman, writing acrostic poems, composing
symphonies, painting, choreography, launching body
into frozen water.

This depiction of the otherness and leaping intellectual pursuits of high functioning autism conveys something of the wonder of the diverse cognitive functioning and the paradoxical worry of the parent when these are muted. Here without stating the medical definitions of Asperger's syndrome we are given an accessible portal into the world. The use of negative emphasis, that is, what

Cloudboy is not currently doing, helps to inform the reader of Cloudboy's potential yet avoids a hagiographic description. Here, Harvey creates an emotional distance for the narrator and reader from Cloudboy, and I contend that this makes us more sympathetic to both the narrator and child than a descriptive poem of his abilities would. That there are days when Cloudboy does not do these extra-ordinary things, suggests that these days are the "rare" exceptions. Harvey's technique allows her to introduce a list of Cloudboy's achievements and challenges in a way that encourages the reader to re-evaluate the idea that autistic children are fixed in their mental states. Harvey is able to connect the audience with the effects of autism, conveying the umwelt with resorting to didactic monologues that damage the aesthetic literary construct of the collection.

8. *The balance between narrative and lyric*

Hanfling (93) contends that one distancing feature of poetry is to transform the commonplace into something extra-ordinary. This is directly relevant to my thesis that these poets use forms of aesthetic distance to create a literary construct both within poems and between poems in the wider collection that transform the intensely personal challenges of family health issues into moments of lyricism. Kjerkegaard defines autobiographical lyric poetry as having its roots in events or circumstances in the poet's life, "but the rendering of those events in poetic lyric transforms them" (185). Kjerkegaard separates this type of poetry from autobiographical narrative poetry, where narrative takes precedence over lyric, but acknowledges there is extensive hybridization between the two proposed forms. For Kjerkegaard, the lyric form is concerned with communicating "experientiality" rather than facts.

Still, Hanfling also emphasises the risk inherent in taking the transformation of reality too far, something he refers to as "over-distancing" (98). For Hanfling this includes the abstraction of characters that results in a loss of their grounding in reality, or the simplification of characters into caricatures. However, for my argument I am more concerned with the loss of authenticity that can occur if the portrayal of the reality of parenting a child with health issues is abstracted too far for the purposes of the poem. For some critics and certainly some readers, there is an implicit covenant between the reader and the poet writing poetry that invites an autobiographical reading that the emotional content of the poems is based in truth. By emotional content here, I am referring to the poem's centre or emotional heart. As Kjerkegaard contends, "we have become accustomed to the fact that the narrator in a story may easily be fictional, but the same is not true for lyric poetry" (190). Though there is some debate among critics over the extent to which a poem that invites an autobiographical reading must be true, for readers the situation can be more straightforward. McHale (233) discusses an extreme example of literary impersonation where a series of poems "purportedly written by a Japanese poet and survivor of the Hiroshima bombing named Araki Yasusada. In fact, no such person as Araki Yasusada ever existed, and the poems published under his name were

written by someone else.” These poems were almost universally condemned as an illegitimate impersonation once the truth of authorship was discovered. and as a parent of an autistic child, I would angrily dismiss any work of poetry that purported to portray the experientiality of parenting a special needs child from someone with no real experience of this. Still, Kjerkegaard suggests that the “reader’s conceivable expectation of narrativity (and experientiality) must be handled differently in relation to lyric poetry, as well as autobiographical lyric poetry, thanks to the way the devices of poetry contribute to the general signification of the poem” (186). In other words, there is a recognition that for lyric poetry, the poet cannot remain mired in the originating circumstances of the poem, but should be able to follow the imperatives and pleasures of the lyric. So how far can this covenant of reader’s implied trust in the narrative components of autobiographical poetry be stretched in the service of the lyric?

In lyric poetry, Simecek (501) argues that any narrative framework is less important than the perspective that carries the emotional heart of the poem, or in the terms of this essay, the *umwelt* of the speaker and child. “Perspective affects what we will attend to, the connections we will make and how we will organize our thoughts in order to make sense of our experience. We should therefore think of a person’s perspective as a set of implicit beliefs, commitments and values, and thus determining not only what information becomes the focus of our thinking, i.e. what we will bring to the fore, but how we will organize that information in bringing those features to the fore” (501). So for the poems examined in this essay, I contend that as long as the perspective remains plausible and grounded in the poet’s personal truth of experience of parenting a child with health issues then the aesthetic distance created by transforming reality for lyric purposes will not alienate the reader.

Nevertheless, there is tension for the poet between creating art and reflecting reality. The poem is by its nature an aesthetic literary construct that defies the sequential experience of reality. Plumly (50) states it plainly as follows: “Poetry, as verse, as we know, is pretense. But did I or did I not walk down the mountain? Of course I did, because I am, at this moment, walking down the mountain in the heat—because I say I am“. Korg (147) states the problem as “that of shaping authentic emotions derived from personal experience into poems of independent status and general significance” and that one solution is to “draw a clear line between factual

and fictional material”. If a poet wishes to maintain trust in the veracity of their parenting experiences in these collections, one strategy is to offer signals to the reader about the distance between reality and art in the literary construct of the poems early in a collection.

Le Bas, for example, begins her collection with the poem “1. Was This the Beginning?” (1) whose opening stanza establishes our trust in the veracity of her emotional centre but also acknowledges that more mundane facts will be shaped by needs of the poetry:

In ordinary New Zealand – it could be Otahuhu, Porirua, or St Kilda by the sea

- on an ordinary New Zealand day, an ordinary 14-year old girl at an ordinary school, with an ordinary family who love her to bits, becomes extraordinary

That phrase in the first line, “it could be”, can be interpreted as a signal to the reader that some facts have been changed to suit the story, but that the collection is centred in the “ordinary” emotions and entanglements of New Zealand life. So this can be read as a signal to the reader that the emotional centre of the poems can be trusted but that some facts, as opposed to truths, may be manipulated.

Kennedy’s collection is introduced with a prologue poem, “Da da,” in which she provides a summary of the narrative arc of the collection:

She’s a latecomer to singing
And I’ll tell you why. It was
the move to a dark house, dark
mortgage and winter lingering

and things turning out like the fifties
after all and nothing to be done

Da da (2)

Note the title of the poem *Da da* is evocative of the Dada artistic movement. The focus of this movement was “not on crafting aesthetically pleasing objects but on

making works that often upended bourgeois sensibilities and that generated difficult questions about society, the role of the artist, and the purpose of art” (The Art Story). The origin of the Dada name is controversial but one suggestion is that it “echoes the first words of a child, and these suggestions of childishness and absurdity appealed to the group, who were keen to put a distance between themselves and the sobriety of conventional society” (The Art Story). If this interpretation is correct, it is a fitting introduction to a collection of poetry in which main themes include racial stereotyping, feminism and the poet’s struggle not to lose her identity in the conforming strictures placed on her as “eczema-mother”, that is, parenting a child with a prolonged medical condition. In terms of our topic of distancing, this title sets out the relationship between art and reality in the collection. The poet is asserting that the narrative arc is true, but that the poetry, the art, is significant as well. In other words, by linking her preface poem to the formal traditions of the Dada artistic movement, Kennedy is asserting that the emotional heart, the *umwelt*, of her poems is grounded in reality, but that she is engaged in a work of artistic transformation and that these are not just poems about the eczema-mother’s struggles, but instead are seeking to convey themes of general significance, which for Kennedy include wider societal strictures and prejudices. By using these techniques of aesthetic distance, Kennedy finds a balance that allows lyric to gain prominence in individual poems, while developing a narrative sequence and a coherent tone across the poems within the overall collection.

Following these ideas, I contend the poems I am considering are all essentially lyrical poems, with the narrative formed by the accumulating sequence of the individual poems. Take for example one of Harvey’s poems from the collection *Cloudboy* titled “Cloudboy Sees the Sky Break” (57):

The morning sky breaks with flight.

A plane appears. Banking,

a hawk hovers over pohutakawa

and kauri, fuscous like wood

or sand at twilight. Bleak

crescent moon, hawk turns, falls.

Sparrows and fantails disperse like rain.

Later, two hawks sky-dance.

The sight of them courting air
is such rare pleasure, Cloudboy sways.

This poem adds nothing to the collection in terms of narrative and autobiography, but the lyrical perspective of a child lost in pleasure watching the sky engages us with Cloudboy and reinforces the ethereal bridging metaphors used throughout the collection. So Harvey uses a combination of purely lyrical poems and poems that suggest narrative throughout her collection to both construct a spatio-temporal sequence of events in Cloudboy and Cloudmother's life and to provide the perspective needed to understand the complex emotional life of these intertwined characters. I suggest that this lyrical poem has enhanced resonance because we understand the narrative of Cloudboy that has been developed across poems in the collection, that would be lost if the poem was read in isolation. It is the sustained tone and narrative arc of the collection that allows this poem its lyric potential.

This narrative arc is developed in Harvey's collection through a clear structure that supports this mix of narrative and lyrical imperatives. The first section "1. The Autistic Child Considered as a Cloud" contains poems that are autobiographical and lyrical rather than narrative driven. The second section, "The Gifted Nephologist Goes to School" shows a stronger narrative imperative with a clearly delineated temporal sequence. The third section "3. Meditations of a Cloudboy (Without Drugs)" contains character driven perspectival and lyrical poems. The final section, bar the epilogue poem, is a short group of lyrical poems, "4. Cloud Manifesto" with only a tenuous link to the rest of the collection, but whose resonance with the narrative arc has been established by the recurring metaphors and tone of the collection when viewed as a whole.

To understand how the structure of poems within a collection can be used to create aesthetic distance, I would like to contrast this grouped structure of Harvey's collection with the clear spatio-temporal sequence that Le Bas uses for *Walking to*

Africa, and Kennedy uses in *Sing-song*. Le Bas' collection is more clearly and deliberately structured as a linear autobiographical narrative. This intention is supported by her comment in the "Notes and Acknowledgments" (86) where she writes "This narrative tells one journey through one set of eyes. It does not purport to represent other journeys, nor the views of others." So in the techniques of structure used in these two poetry collections we can interpret something of each poet's intent in balancing the tension between lyric and narrative, and perhaps through these the emphasis in each collection on *umwelt* and universality. Le Bas' clearly defines her collection as narrative, and the simple linear structure of the narrative parallels the autobiographical journey of the poet. Harvey's collection is more amorphous, with elements of autobiography, narrative, polemics and lyricism. In Kennedy's collection, the journey of the mother and child shows a clear linear narrative path, though there are extensive diversions into pure lyricism throughout. I contend that the poets are able to order poems within the collections, to build narrative arcs, and that this allows them to focus on lyric imperatives within the individual poems. Yet the structures of the collections varies from the simple spatio-temporal narrative arcs to more complex interweaving of unique angles of perception and wider shared themes.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have used these four collections of poems by Salzano, Kennedy, Le Bas and Harvey to examine the challenges of writing about parenting a child with a serious and life changing health issue. Because the experience of parenting an autistic child (or a child with significant eczema that resists treatment, or a child with mental health issues) is such a particular experience, one so tied up with specific symptoms and behaviours, writing about such health issues poses a challenge for poets who want to engage with the narrative experience in ways that engage lyrically with *umwelt* over detail and who want to present an authentic experience without sacrificing an appeal to general significance.

The use of techniques which manipulate forms of emotional and aesthetic distance allow the poets to deal with these challenges. The techniques to manipulate these forms of emotional or aesthetic distance within the construct of the poems include the sustained use of a narrator persona for the speaker in the poems, careful use and juxtaposition of medical language with vocabulary and similarly the portrayal of support characters in the narrative in ways that evoke more universal concerns. Aesthetic distance within the collection of poems can be created by the use of recurring metaphors that help bridge the individuals poems and contribute to the narrative arc. Emotional distance can be varied in a collection between the parent and child to portray with nuance the subtleties in the *umwelt* of both. These techniques help to convey some of the difficulties in parenting a special needs child and the facts needed to understand the specifics of the health issue that the family faces. While these collections are grounded in the *umwelt* of the specific family challenges, they manage to find moments of lyricism that connect us with moments of universal human experience. And because I believe the strongest poems will offer the most nuance, I find a greater affinity for those collections that present the relationship between parent and child as a strength-based commentary rather than the tragedy model approach, that is often associated with autism.

As I said initially, what autism teaches us about the cognitive experience of humanity is that there is no shared mental norm. The average human perceptual experience is sometimes described as the neurotypical and this may be just the

median point on a spectrum of mental functionality and divergence that exist within humanity. In other words, autism represents part of a spectrum of mental functioning and should not be viewed as an absolute condition. To rigidly define the autistic experience as one extreme or another is to simplify this component of the spectrum of human experience. For my writing, trying to express my growth in understanding that my son's autism is an essential part of who he is, is a core driver of my creative expression. The struggles in my own writing are to find enough distance to balance the perspectives of parent, speaker and child.

This triad of parent, speaker and child creates challenges but also opportunities within the poems to manipulate emotional distance between the circumstances of the poems and the lyric perception of these events by the development of narrative personas that are developed through the collections. This is often coupled with variations in the mediacy of the narrative voice and blurring of the distinctions between the perspectival views, truth and the reality of autobiography. I contend that for these poems that are based in autobiographical narratives, the emotional heart of the poems must remain consistent to the struggle of parenting a special needs child. However, while the lyric should gain prominence in individual poems, a narrative sequence and a coherent tone across poems can be developed by the placement of poems within a collection and the use of recurring and bridging metaphors and narrative personas and characters. To effectively portray the *umwelt*, the poet must rise above narrative and surrender to lyric imperatives. The challenge has been to bring these techniques into my own work—and not only to balance detail with lyrical impulse but also accomplish a nuanced portrait of my son.

In my poems, I have tried to build a sustained narrative through the collection. It begins with the first diagnosis of problems while he was still in utero and charts the changes in my emotional *umwelt* as the father of an autistic child as he grows into a boy who struggles with language and masters the scooter. I have tried to avoid a tragedy-based approach to the poetry, while simultaneously not shrinking away from the challenges of parenting a child with special needs.

In terms of the aesthetic literary construct of the collection, the “Sentence” section focuses on the period of the pregnancy and a time of intensive care in the neonatal unit that followed his birth with a diaphragmatic hernia that carried a very grave prognosis for survival. The second section, “Wounding” documents the

diagnosis of my son's autism and our family's struggles to come to terms with the changes in our lives, both literally and perceptually. The final section "Wheels" builds a narrative around our acceptance of my son as an individual with disability rather than disease, our growing understanding of his umwelt, and my growth as a father. These poems build a narrative framework, but through the use of a largely optimistic tone (while acknowledging the struggles) and recurring metaphors of movement and my boy's scooter, I have strived to create a literary construct for the collection that evades such a particular focus on our circumstances that these details swamp both the lyrical focus on umwelt and the engagement with general significance.

I have tried to develop narrative personas for myself as a father, and for my son, but shied away from labels such as Cloudboy or Cloudmother. In the poem "Outing" I developed the idea of the Spaceboy, but ultimately rejected it as maintaining this approach through the collection was limiting in developing the lyric potential of the individual poems. I have used language, structure, form and rhythm in poems such as "Apoptosis" and "With wheels he is free" to develop aesthetic or emotional distance and to counterbalance the more narrative poems of the collection.

While I prefer to reject the tragedy based narrative, I have tried to portray the some of the nuance of parenting a special needs child in poems such as "We heal imperfectly and call it a scar" and "The moment after you have screamed at your son". These poems are necessary within the narrative arc to reflect my own umwelt with authenticity. The guilt that we feel when we as imperfect humans fail to cope as parents needs to be included.

As though
screaming at the innocent
could do any good,
as though
a freak down-draft
a lazy mechanical failure
the wings falling off
could ever be their fault.

I reach out in tactile apology,
my son's stiff shoulders,
resonating with sound

"The moment after you have screamed at your son"

I have tried to balance the negative tension of these poems, with those that reflect the more positive aspects of my relationship with my son in poems such as the poems "With wheels he is free" and "In which I learn the fine art of scootering from my son". In this last poem, I hoped to end the collection on an optimistic tone, using the final instance of the recurring metaphor of my son's freedom on a scooter to convey my hopes for his future. Not only this, but a move to the mindset that I have as much to learn from him as he has from me.

He looks only at the next obstacle
the coming crack in the road
the mud-slicked gutter ahead.
He has shown me how to plant
the off-side foot firmly, smoothly
and at the perfect moment, to push
lifting the scooter over
the coming hurdle.

"In which I learn the fine art of scootering from my son"

The aim was to create a unified collection of autobiographical lyric poetry that communicates the umwelt of this father of an autistic child. I leave it to the reader to judge whether I have succeeded.

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The imperfection of healing

by Brett Gartrell

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Sentence

Sentence

The sonographer
sucks in her breath.
Silence in the room
which had echoed
with professional patter,
the gentle easy sweeps
of her lubricated probe
stilled.

We are all
between
what might have been
and what will be.

Lips pressed,
she is withholding
a verdict
she is not meant
to deliver.

Before the boy came we had lost another

Scent of stale coffee fills the ute's cabin.
You drive to your garden,
I lounge at your side.

Your face reflects in the rear-view mirror,
cracked and distorted,
in need of repair.

Your right arm, coffee-stained freckles,
lies bedded in the open window
through the long lazy drive.

The trees bare their cover, retreat from summer,
The falling leaves swirl as we pass,
driven like the lost.

We spread old grinds under swollen new buds.
The coffee, you tell me,
sparks new life in the soil,

along with the dead roses
you'd scavenged, dry petals scattered,
around a stark empty urn,

now gathered with a gardener's resolve
your cracked and tanned hands
kneading them

like a healing salve, a balm.
I am not used to manual labour, but for you
I rub my hands raw

on the shovel, pick and sledgehammer,
as we mark out lines, hammer in posts,
build our small plots for the new year.

Aubade

A coffee still steams by our bed.

I shift your pillow, hollowed
by the weight of your head,
closer to me.

My hand reaches out for
the stretched and faded
rock band T-shirt,
The Living End,
that used to be mine alone,
a last relic of my solitary life,
unmourned.

I spoke of lost hope to you,
the unthinkable nadir
of termination.
You sat in the morning chair
sunlit hands resting on
the flawed boy you carried inside.

What strength enabled you
to rise, caress my cheek and smile,
like it was any other day,
the steam misting from the bathroom
renewing you,

so that you could
once again
carry us all.

Apoptosis

The cells
die first
vivid neon
fuel
desaturating
inside as lipid
layers dissolve

what neurology
was just lost
mouth to suckle
eyes to focus
impulses needed
for the future

furthest from the artery
crinkling with hypoxia
numbers signify
in my son's blood
oxygen
cell membrane
function falters

memory or junction
pathways enabling
tongue to twist
lines of script
for this boy
to speak?

The godless suffer in vain

*Should intermitted vengeance arm again
His red right hand to plague us?*

- Book II of Paradise Lost, by John Milton

In all faith
some come to us
to affirm the benign face
of their own God.
They tell us
He (always He)
has sent us this trial

because He knows
we can cope,
a plan that we
are too small to see.

It is the small
things that matter now:
the decimal point
in the nurse's calculations
as he provides the analgesic
sleep of Morpheus;
the dexterity of the intern
as she chases
the elusive vein
in the child's ankle;
the skill of the surgeon
as she unscrolls
the shrunken diaphragm
inside my infant's chest;
the steady engineer who made
the machine that breathes
like clockwork for our child.

We pin our faith
on the small competencies
of earthbound angels,
fallible, flawed humans,
scrubs instead of wings.

Hallelujah and hosanna.

The Sharp Point

I stand at the door of the bedroom,
watch my son sleep.
Despite the months it's been
since he came home
off the ventilator
and the CPAP
and the supplemental oxygen
I have no expectation
that the next breath will come.

When I worked the family farm
the job I hated most
was repairing the fence
that kept the bull from the cows.
His one tonne muscled bulk of beef
could easily snap the shining steel
but he had been hurt repeatedly
by small sharp barbs.

Barbed wire works
not because it will maim
or cause permanent harm
but because we lack the will
to push through.

I thought I knew how he felt.
I would lift the constricted coil
of wire from the hayshed
my palms sweat-slicked in anticipation
of a ragged unraveling.

This is what keeps me frozen
in the boy's bedroom door
unable to break through
the small ache of
apnoea between each breath.

Wounding

Words fail

He lost his words
somewhere between the garden
and the toy room where
he had lined up his matchbox trucks
in perfect symmetry.

His was not a precocious
verbosity, no running
dialogue that narrated his days.
His few words condensed
into hard functional stones
that built bridges between
the father and the boy.

It's hard to remember now
the full range
of lost language.
But all we have left
is up, go, bye.

Each remaining word is a trial,
a conscious effort
exponentially harder
for lips and brain
to work together.

Lost treasures
each new word,
reaching out
to share,

tiger
chocolate
scooter

dad.

Binary

We used to count slowly,
unfurling each finger
steady as a metronome
ticking off beats
synchronising
our digits together
in 4/4 time.
Enumerating
the base ten code,

though some believe
the most complex
convoluted tangle
of chaotic data
can be reduced
to a set of switches
that oscillate between
two binary settings.

Off and on.

Zero and one.

They say memory
might be as simple as this:
A channel in a cell membrane
receptive to an impulse
deep in the cortex
shuttling between two positions
suddenly evoking

the sharp iron smell
of umbilical blood
as you cut his cord,
the velvet feel of a comfort blanket
lost in the wash,

or the warm slippery soap
running through your fingers
as you bathe his head,
the boy's first bath.

Think of it: all sensation, literacy, numeracy
contingent on a simple neuronal spark
that can fail to ignite, or reignite,

As it fails us now:
my thumb unfurls
and he touches it,
eyes wide,
the concept of One
fading like

an old map

you thought
would take you both
somewhere new
but whose once divergent paths
now coalesce
into a simple choice:

Stop, or go on.

Bob the builder is on endless repeat

Today is a day of obsessive repetition
On the boy's ipad, the same youTube clip:
Can we fix it
Can we fix it

Can we fix it?
The imbalanced gender politics inherent in children's television?
The talking sentience of machinery and animals?
The way this jaunty song is burning its way into my cerebral hemispheres?
The poet endlessly reworking his lines?
The autist stereotypically moving his fingers?

My lover is late home again.
I sit on the toilet with head in hands
while the boy rips the pages of *Sport 44*
into smaller and smaller pieces
as I try to make sense of what's left.

There goes a Jenny Bornholdt poem,
another lost conversation
on boys becoming men.
CK Stead's line breaks
are further separated,
words broken apart
in ways the poet never intended.

My son is teaching me
a zen-like detachment
from material objects.

Kali-like, a young god of the deconstruction
of literature. Nothing escapes
his critical grasp.
There goes a poem by Manhire
broken into senseless fragments.

A New Programme

from “The Spectacular Bond: Reaching the Child with Autism”

by Blank, Goh and Deland.

For example, you could
create a daily schedule
fill out checklists
re-arrange your home

select your people carefully
constrain displays of affection
make no requests
that the child cannot fulfill.

Let's think about it this way,
People are often the issue:
reduce complex language

prevent significant injury
limit yourself to the home
fill the empty space
with whatever you have left.

You desire an acceptable
period of calm:
Did you select a seat
that makes it easy
for you to leave?

You could always,
more simply, just
lock the door.

The technological solution (one for the geeks)

The robot sits inert now
plastic legs in the lotus position,
uncharged for months,
the neon blue highlights
of his cunningly articulated frame
powered down.

Where is the promise
of the android who dreamed
of electric sheep,
the emerging consciousness
of the digital mainframe
who either saves or damns us
to the robot apocalypse
the Butlerian Jihad
or a universe of self-replicating
Von Neumann probes?

Never mind. The wireless connection
with his creators in Paris
has expired and they
refuse all communication.

This robot tutor
was too slow to react
too glitchy
too limited in response
to reach the autistic child
as advertised.

It is retired to the shelf
with the Encyclopaedia
of New Zealand Sign Language,
the Teacher's Guide to ABA,
and the Poetry Handbook.

They got some things right:

the inert eyes designed
not to meet mine,
the face smooth white,
plastic curves
and too-obvious speakers
in the place of ears.

The designers understood
the uncanny valley
and walked away
from the Turing test,

understood well
that sometimes we
accept the alien
better than those
who try too hard
to be human.

We heal imperfectly and call it a scar

I am taking a moment
for myself, writing
and polishing
the fragments
of our lives
when I hear, like an echo,
the shatter of glass.

Too far from him,
not fast enough,
I find him sitting
cross-legged
on the kitchen table,
a small Buddha
chewing on shards.
The broken wineglass
stained with shiraz,
fresh blood, cascades
from his torn mouth.

In the bathroom
I make him
rinse and rinse.
Red spatters, white porcelain.
I wipe bloody froth
from his punctured lips
as he spits out fragments.

Do not, for a moment,
think that you know
the whole shape of it.
My splintered conceit.

My son's hands

have thick cracked calluses
on the ball of the thumbs
and the lateral margins
of the first knuckles,
from obsessively rubbing
rubbing, rubbing.

When I take his small hands in mine
he traces out my own scars,
the mashed knot of fibrous tissue
on the palmar surface of the third finger
where the tree stump took its toll,
the deep furrowed line
on the edge of the fourth
where the horse's lead
ripped free
by the five hundred weight
of rearing
frightened horse.
Solid muscle,
bone and sweat
breaking away.

As a boy, I worked
with my own father
in a hot tin shed
surrounded by broken parts
lying scattered
in pools of slowly blending
oil and water
on a cracked concrete floor.

In a dry summer
with parched stock
and wilting fruit trees
a water pump had failed.

This self-taught mechanic
would resurrect
time and again
the obsolete engines that
kept our farm running.

He had held a live wire
in his bare hands
and did not feel
the spark that bit
like a spider
into the tip of my finger
when he passed it to me.

The skin of his hands were tanned leather
knuckles swollen
by a thousand cuts and scrapes.
He wrestled against metal
in grease and oil
and felt no harm.

Let calluses
on my son's hands grow
into keratotic armour
shielding
against casual trauma
and the chaos
that drives him
to this petty self harm.

As if the hurts we self-inflict
can protect us,
the analgesia
of the repeated wound.

The moment after you have screamed at your son

It's 3 am.

For hours my son
has been vocalising
a broken atonal hum,
an aircraft engine
missing beats in flight,

a comparison which leaves me
wondering if a point comes,
as the mountain looms
in the cockpit window,
when even the most experienced pilot
removes his Captain's hat
becomes just a man
screaming at his passengers.

If only you had
stowed your trays,
brought your seats
to the upright position,
switched off the fucking cellphone
when I asked you.

As though
screaming at the innocent
could do any good,
as though
a freak down-draft
a lazy mechanical failure
the wings falling off
could ever be their fault.

I reach out in tactile apology,
my son's stiff shoulders,
resonating with sound
that I must,

if I am to captain,
hear as the merciful breath
that lifts the plane beyond
the rocks of the killer peak.

Outing

Marmite on seeded bread
instead of vegemite
on multigrain toast
is just the beginning
of the downward spiral.

Driven to this outing
by dim recollection
of Sunday brunch together,
just you and I,
lingering over the paper
debriefing the week of work
and the problems that seem
so trivial now.

My son sees no harm
in taking the chips from others' plates.
He rocks on the chair,
balanced precariously
on one thin wooden leg,
flips a spoon across the neighbouring table,
upends the sugar, licks the salt cellar
and the window.

We forestall him
from squeezing the small
child of a fellow diner
in a bone cracking hug
as parents cluck,
gather their young
perfectly straightforward brats
under their wings.

It's going quite well.

The Financial Review

in his suit throws a glare,
ruffling his broadsheet
as to flick us all away.

The elderly couple
whose manners are meant
as a masterclass in etiquette
shake their heads
to pronounce the boy's need
for, one imagines, a clip around the ears.

The slim black-clad waitress
with a mouth puckered for air
whisks our plates away with our forks
still halfway to our lips.

All of them in poses that pose the same
non-question question.
Why come out at all?
Why bother?

Your assistance is appreciated

No, please do go on.

Tell us again of
the refrigerator mother
the gene defective father
the thimerosal adjuvant in the vaccine
the mercury in my mother's fillings
the pesticides in the apples
that my father grows.

Preach to us of
God's great plan
how we were *chosen*

Your miracle cure is amazing
no truly it is astonishing
that mainstream medicine has conspired
to reject its obvious truth.

Your deep insights on
magnetic straight jackets
Mongolian horse trek bonding
musical alignment of defective neural pathways
electroconvulsive conversions

Fill our empty wells with the deep wisdom of
the friend's brother's child
that someone else knows
who ate his way through it all
using gluten free, avocado smashed
organic puree smoothies
blended furiously, desperately,

by the parents of the boy
with his hands over his ears.

After the principal calls

he sits too quietly in the back of the car
pressing into the headrest of the child seat
he is quickly outgrowing,
his thoughts locked inside,
while mine keep returning
to the livid bruise on his cheek.

Bringing my son home early from school,
I have to turn off the radio
cutting off the lurid details:
teenage boys posting
Facebook videos
of drunken rape and abuse,
the casual call-sign
of the Roastbusters,
or another cornershop owner
brutally stabbed for small change
by someone's child.

*Students within your school are showing
a high degree of bullying?
Have you considered that your child may be at fault?
Does he show weakness or roll to his back
exposing his soft underbelly to the pack?*

Once home, I can lock away the terriers,
deprive them of their nonhuman rights
to hunt, kill, rend and tear
the vegetarian companions
that share this small garden.
They will snarl, snuffle and whine, separated
from carnivorous desires by the width of a slatted paling fence.

The predators can scent fear, don't you know.

*As a parent it is your duty to expunge the fear
from your child but you may
also consider undiagnosed vision or hearing problems
as a potential cause of the difficulty.*

Every year we renew
a flock of five brown shaver hens who
spend the first precious days
of new found freedom cowering,
released from the cloistered horror
of their battery cages.

They fear the open sky,
ignorant that they have escaped
the inverted crucifixion, the electrical stunning,
the throat slitting, soup bone end of their cage mates.

The average hen will lay 530 eggs in her lifetime
and the seed of every egg is present in her ovary at birth
awaiting a swelling of golden yolk.
As ethical owners of backyard chickens we mind our flock.
When the eggs stop rolling down the uterus
bred for high production and not longevity
we provide a gentle passage.

The etymology of euthanasia, eu – thanatos; a good death,
intravenous barbiturates, harder to come by.
In this progressive land
85 people have been executed by the authorities,
Minnie Dean, the only woman hanged,
guilty of infanticide, another failed parent.

I grip the steering wheel a little tighter
consider the perils of main-streaming.
In the rear-view, he takes comfort
from the blur of the street.

The dogs broke into the hen house
stringing two birds out in bloody feathered scraps.
My son cornered the panting terriers
washed the blood from their lips
as they licked the tears from his eyes.

Wheels

I watch my son in the playground

He has no words.

No.

This is not some post-confessional poetic voice.

He. Has. No. Words.

Locked in, tongue tied, dumb.

He seeks high places from which to watch.

There is no bridge.

See, though, his fierce intent
when he watches their rough play,
the harsh shrill cries broken with shrieks of laughter.
They are kelp gulls scavenging the tip.
They flock by him, laughing wildly.
Wait, they aren't gulls.
They are a murmuration of starlings,

a mass of living organisms
moving together in a violent
swirling motion
whose complexity and control
is beyond us both.

I flinch when they brush by him.
If they are the bullying flock
then I would have him be the falcon
stooping through the coherent midst
of their communion
to burst their formation from the air.

He climbs to the top branches,
bouncing a little on his toes,
unable to risk the fall
that comes before flight.

With wheels he is free

scooter wheels
 hum
 crossing
 graffiti concrete
 pools of water
 furrow
 in his wake
 cold air
 slipstreams
 speed incarnate
 arrow
 in flight.
 Zeno's
 fragmented
 path
 noise
 shards of light
 cascade
 reflect
 fractured planes
 angled
 surfaces
 fleeting
 motion glimpsed
 at the corner
 of the eye
 shriek and blur
 others move
 around him
 he
 ramrod straight
 gliding through
 intervening space
 miraculously
 avoiding
 collisions
 one point

to the next
transfixed
if he can
perfect
the geometry
like
Einstein's
passive
observer
he will
break through
this inertial
barrier
the event horizon
the slingshot
manoeuvre
the relativistic
distance
exponentially
diminishing
to his
father's arms

The Ruamahanga Wilderness Area

is really more of a park,
flat greens of mown grass
rows of elms, manicured pines
and elegant silver beech.
The concrete paths slope gently
to wind by the muddy river
in full polluted flood.

In afternoon sunshine
I walk in the middle, strung
between the forward running child
muted without choice
and the one full of complaint
lagging behind.

A black furred Labrador
grey in the muzzle
threads between us all,
ignoring the domestic leash,
snuffling in scents
of rabbit and gorse.

I am remembering a trek
in the mountains of south-west Tasmania,
the distant youth I was,
last century.
Another group of three, and again
one who never spoke when she should
and the one who never shut up.

We rope-hauled packs across
the world's roof, a stone spine
fossilised from the vertebrae of
Jörmungandr.

On a ridge between peaks

lost above clouds
an eagle, wedge tailed and curious
circled three times
like a blessing
before flicking his rufous tail
and ruddering away.

My son is a runner.
At a lapse of attention
he'll sidle away
set forth like Cortés
burning his boats
to explore his new world.

Sometimes I imagine
abandoning my pack
losing my map and compass,
giving in.
A surrender
to the wilderness
as the easier path
to follow.

The Labrador would
also prefer to be away,
ears pricked like a pup,
following a scent,
or chasing some tail.

With wheels he is free II

Today he moves in wide arcs
circling the pool as a shark,
weaving between kids.
Neurotypical
they jump, bomb and scream
in and out of the water.

To another he will appear aloof
lost in a sea of his own creation
but I see the quick glance, the hunger
as he passes a schooling group
of small boys splashing
like shoaling tarakihi.

They roil away, disturbed
at his awkward approach.
His wheels leave ephemeral trails
in the pools of water
left behind by the boys
vanishing
in the early summer sun.

Whatonga

My pakeha boy smacks the metal paddle
of the galvanized warrior,
postmodern toi whakairo.
The hollow body produces a waiata
of resonant protest
into this remnant forest.
Steady drips of high country mist shroud
totara, supplejack, wildling pine.

The statue of the guardian,
kaitiaki of mana and mauri,
separated from the earth
by a thick slab of concrete.

Against the orders of therapists,
I have left my son's augmentative
alternative communication device,
his ever-present touchscreen talker,
back in the car.

I can see the scattered feathers
pale in the weak light
of a fantail. Piwakawaka,
messenger of the gods
squeezed by Maui
for not speaking true.
The godless rat-king
has you now.

My son sits here,
his back to Whatonga,
pulls off his muddy boots
and wishes for his iPad,
unaware of the connection
that has been lost.

The assist

For every downhill
free-wheeling glide,
there is an uphill slog,

cracked paths,
tree roots as we roll
round the streets.

My scarred knuckles
fit neatly in the small
of his back. The gentle

application of steady force.

If I can be there
at the right time.

He will
sometimes
accept this small help,

lifting up and over
these small public hurdles
barring the way
to the gentle slope home.

Parental duties

My son's scooter
rattles over
the verandah boards,
demanding attention,
frightening into flight

the dusty blackbird
that had hopped about my feet
as I sat on the verandah this morning
sipping coffee,
crumbling the brownie,
making the moment last
listening to Fat Freddy drop.

The bird's plumage was tattered,
one wing hung askew.
The breastbone protruded,
a clear sign of fading strength.

The power of flight
depends on the anchor
of the keel, the leverage
of pectoral strength
to grip the thin air
extend the wings and
create the lift to fly.

In his chipped beak he had gathered
an even dozen invertebrates.
Worms hung limply
beside a still squirming millipede,

the remains of a dismembered spider.
It was difficult not to sense a frantic
tension to his movements

as he tried and failed to scoop up
one more morsel before
drawing away,
towards his mate, his nest,
his demanding young.

In which I learn the art of scootering from my son

Time makes mockery of childhood vows
but at the time we thought we were inseparable:
Red, Scotty and I learning skateboard tricks
under the porch-light on hot antipodean nights.

My son won't have friends like these.
So I try to fill that gap, best that I can.
His mother has told me that dignity
is the first casualty
for those afflicted with parenting.

I know, just how ridiculous
is this fat balding man, nearing fifty,
scootering.
I can see it in the offended faces
of the current crop
of surly teens we push past.

He needs to feel this freedom, take these risks,
exhilarate in his speed and grace.
For he is graceful. He never falls
and he drives the scooter hard,
the front wheel lifting with each pulse
of his leg, pumping propulsion.

I keep up, mostly. There was this time,
when a ledge no thicker than your thumb,
clutched my front wheel with the ardency

of, say, an unexpected diagnosis that
wrenches your life from its chosen path.

I fell, and my boy, unencumbered by my sudden
absence from his side, travelled on regardless.
The cracked rib, the fracture of my patella took
some time to heal, my courage longer.

Now, when we ride,
my eyes are blinded, bewildered
mazed by looking too far,
trying to foresee.

He looks only at the next obstacle
the coming crack in the road
the mud-slicked gutter ahead.
He has shown me how to plant
the off-side foot firmly, smoothly
and at the perfect moment, to push
lifting the scooter over
the coming hurdle.

I will fall again,
and my son will travel on
weaving between cars,
steamrolling trucks,
forging his path, alone
on that far-off future road,
a bend too sharply
curved for me to see.