Miniatures of Reality:

An inter-photo-textual investigation of ekphrasis of photographs

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

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Creative Writing

at Massey University, Manawatū

New Zealand

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2021

Abstract

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This creative thesis comprises a critical study of contemporary ekphrastic poems about photographs and a manuscript of original ekphrastic prose poems that focus on photography or are inspired by photographic technique. The balance of the thesis, approximately 60/40 in favour of the critical study, reflects how the creative manuscript was informed by my investigation of critical theories of ekphrasis and photography.

Ekphrasis, commonly defined after James Heffernan as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3), is a relationship traditionally cast as a struggle for dominance between image and word. However, this thesis is inspired by contemporary poet Cole Swensen's challenge to this perspective in her essay "To Writewithize" (2011), in which she expands the term to cover works in which the encounter between poet and artwork is of "fellow travelers sharing a context" (70). In this mode of ekphrasis, art is no longer sequestered in a museum or gallery but has become an element of the poet's world, providing them with "a model for formal construction" (71) for their work.

In the critical portion of this thesis I argue that the visual turn of the twentieth century, and the invention of photography in particular, has contributed to developments in ekphrasis that Swensen identifies. Specifically, I argue that the context sharing that Swensen describes is particularly productive in prose poem ekphrasis of photographs, an intersection characterized by aesthetic and theoretical synergies.

A sequence of lyric ekphrasis by Carol Snow, whom Swensen identifies as a "writewithist" poet, provides an introductory case study for my research, and

provides a lens through which I consider Natasha Trethewey's lyric ekphrasis of photographs in *Bellocq's Ophelia* and a further sequence from Snow. These case studies provide a reference point for my exploration of the aesthetic intersection of prose poetry and photography via close readings of prose poetry ekphrasis in Mary Jo Bang's *A Doll for Throwing* and prose poem selections from Kathleen Fraser's *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling.*

The creative component, *Miniatures of Reality*, is a collection of prose poems that presents the life experiences of an implied speaker via ekphrasis of photographs. In writing these poems, I set out to creatively explore the questions raised in my critical component by producing "writewithist" ekphrasis in which the poems demonstrate aspects of the aesthetics and theory of photography in both form and emotional content. The poems, largely presented in linked sequences, consider aspects of the speaker's life story as memories transformed by a "camera vision" which shapes the way these experiences are recounted. An underlying subtext to all the sequences is the notion of "hidden motherhood" inspired by Victorian "Hidden Mother" photographs. Notions of hidden motherhood occur throughout, e.g. in poems about the speaker's grandmother who died when the speaker's mother was a child or in poems suggesting the speaker's ambivalence about motherhood and mothering. A further creative imperative is represented by my use of the prose poem as a form to represent what Fraser describes as the "the average female's habituated availability to interruption" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 9). This notion of gendered experience contributes to both the internal structure of the poems and to the structure of the collection as a whole as the speaker revisits events from her life through the medium of photography and often retells them from differing perspectives.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge my supervisors Professor Bryan Walpert and Associate Professor Ingrid Horrocks. Throughout my doctoral study they have been unfailingly supportive of my critical and creative fascination with ekphrasis, and ekphrasis of photographs in particular. They have extended my academic and creative thinking in ways I had not anticipated.

I am grateful to Massey University for the doctoral scholarship which enabled me to "retire" from full time work and to focus on research and poetry. I also feel fortunate to have received a Massey University Conference Presentation Grant which enabled me to attend and present a paper in 2019 at the annual conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programmes.

My heartfelt thanks to my family for their enthusiasm and support. To my husband Tony, for always allowing ekphrasis to come first and for his wholehearted support of my desire to be a late-in-life student. Thanks also to my sons: To Ben for the chocolate and the helpdesk support when my computer skills let me down, to Tim for his excellent telephone counselling and to Matt for demonstrating how to knuckle down and get on with work.

I owe a huge debt to my mother Ann Lesley Hamlin (1927-2019) who was a lifelong learner, reader, and artist. She introduced me to the works of great artists and demonstrated in her own art that creativity comes in many forms. Above all, she set me an example by never giving up despite failing eyesight and health.

Thanks to my fellow students Janet Newman and Jo Aitchison for their support. Thanks also to Alan Cocker for the photographs and to Tara Jahn-Werner for her encouraging reading and feedback.

Thanks to the following publications where some of the work in the creative thesis has appeared: *Landfall*, *Meniscus*, *The Perfect Weight of Blankets at Night* (*NZPS Anthology 2019*) and *Poetry New Zealand Yearbooks 2018 and 2019.*

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Preface

Poet and critic Cole Swensen opens her essay "To Writewithize" with the claim that not only has poetry become "primarily a visual experience" (69) but that "one of the implications of this shift toward the visual is an increased emphasis on the visual aspects of language, which in turn requires that we change the way we talk about visual/verbal relationships" (69). Swensen's essay is about ekphrasis, a poetic form commonly defined after James Heffernan in *Museum of Words* as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3). Heffernan's definition is aligned with historical perceptions that literature and art are essentially paragonal (competing for dominance), but the ekphrastic practices Swensen considers in "To Writewithize" are represented by works "that don't *look at* art so much as *live with* it" (70). She identifies new modes of ekphrasis where poet and artwork are "fellow travelers sharing a context" (70), where poem and artwork are collaborating rather than competing, or where works of visual art are not identified but instead have offered the poet a "model for formal construction" (71) of their work.

Such new modes of ekphrasis are representative of an era in which images of art "surround us in the same way as a language surrounds us" (Berger 32). Taking his lead from the German literary critic Walter Benjamin, art critic John Berger suggests in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) that advances in technology, beginning with photography, have contributed to a change in the perceived authority of works of visual art. That is, modern reproduction technologies mean that visual artworks are no longer part of a special preserve, whether sacred or secular, and have instead become "ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free" (32). This development is one aspect of a wider social and cultural change represented by technological advances in reproduction commonly referred to as "the visual turn" of

contemporary culture. When Swensen suggests in her essay that some contemporary ekphrasis reflects visual art as being an "inseparable part of the daily—and the poetic—weave" (70) rather than the object of cloistered consideration in the context of a gallery or museum, she is reflecting this commonplace.

This idea also underpins Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux's book *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts.* Loizeaux, writing in 2008 about "twentieth-century poetry's varied and intense involvement with the visual arts" (1), offers two explanations for the contemporary popularity of ekphrasis and the development of practices of interweaving poetry and visual art, which are also identified by Swensen: "First, poets, like the rest of us, look at images because they are everywhere" (3) and ekphrasis is "a way of engaging and understanding their allure and force" (4). Secondly, in ekphrasis a poet responds to a work of art which "constitutes a statement already made about/in the world" (5) and their audience, potentially as familiar with the work and its contexts as the poet, are able to understand the purpose of the artwork's evocation and share that experience. Loizeaux focuses specifically on the "social dynamics of ekphrasis" and the reasons for its increasing popularity in the twentieth century. The term "social dynamics" encompasses the "changing and various relations among poet, work of art and audience that structure the ekphrastic poem" (1) which Loizeaux describes as not a form "but a rhetorical situation and a set of practices and tropes that offer non-prescriptive possibilities for exploring that situation" (10). Loizeaux's description of contemporary ekphrasis as a rhetorical situation rather than a form, combined with her observations about the impact on poetry of the proliferation of images in the twentieth century, provides a helpful elucidation of the conditions that appear to

have prompted Swensen's essay, which I discuss in detail in the chapters of the critical essay that follows.

"To Writewithize" is a short and quite general essay in which selected poetic works are referenced but not discussed in detail. Nevertheless it provides a useful set of propositions and observations regarding contemporary ekphrastic practice that point to how modes of ekphrasis have developed that relate to the universal availability of images of art in contemporary life. In the case studies in the chapters that follow, I identify ekphrastic strategies that I label "writewithist." Swensen does not use the term "writewithist" herself, but it is a helpful means of identifying strategies that illustrate Swensen's contention that forms of ekphrasis have developed in which "the operative relationship is not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (71). When I describe a poet's stance as "writewithist," I am highlighting how poem and artwork demonstrate that they are "fellow travelers sharing a context" (70) or that visual art has provided the poet with a "model for formal construction" (71). Swensen uses these analogies to explain how the traditional ekphrastic relationship that implies a viewer *looking at* a piece of visual art is replaced by one in which the artwork has instead become part of the poet-viewer's psyche. In this mode of ekphrasis, visual art provides the poet with a model for interpreting the world.

Chapter one begins with an overview of traditional ekphrastic theory contrasted with a case study of writewithist ekphrasis represented by Carol Snow's sequence "Positions of the Body" from her 1990 collection *Artist and Model*. I argue, through close reading of Snow's work, that the modes of ekphrasis outlined by Swensen in "To Writewithize" demonstrate means of engaging with the visual

arts that reflect contemporary experience of visual images. Swensen references *Artist and Model* in passing in "To Writewithize" and it is an elaboration of her reference to Snow that I take up as argument in my analysis of Snow's work. I enlarge on Swensen's discussion of Snow's work by showing in detail how Snow's sequence, "Positions of the Body" demonstrates one poet's engagement with the "allure and force" (Loizeaux 4) of images of visual art that constitutes an ekphrastic position that is collaborative rather than paragonal.

In chapter two I expand on Swensen's essay by discussing how photography, the precursor of the visual turn of the twentieth century, has impacted on ekphrasis. In this chapter, I argue that Swensen's alternative modes of ekphrasis are particularly evident in ekphrasis of photographs because the camera and associated technologies have affected the way we represent and describe our visual experiences. By considering the photograph through the lens of photography theorists like Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, I argue that schema such as Barthes's *punctum* and *studium,* and Benjamin's "optical unconscious" and "aura" provide models "for formal construction" that are particularly relevant for writewithist ekphrasis of photographs. I explore how such schema, and ideas associated with "camera vision" (North 3), are evident in both the emotional content and the formal construction of poems about photographs in Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia* and in "Artist and Model," a further sequence from Snow in her collection of the same name. Trethewey's collection is about photographs and the act of taking photographs. The titular Ophelia is one of a number of biracial prostitutes photographed by E. J. Bellocq in New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century. Ophelia begins as a subject of Bellocq's lens but within the fiction of the poems becomes a photographer herself in a move that Trethewey uses to explore how *punctum* (in

Barthes's terms, that aspect of a photograph that wounds, pricks or is poignant to a viewer [27]) enables a poet to move away from the frame of a photograph and "enter the realm of the imagination" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). Snow's "Artist and Model" is inspired by a 1939 Brassaï photograph of the artist Henri Matisse at work in his studio. In "Artist and Model," a photograph and the art of photography become both subject and model for the formal construction of the sequence via the implied speaker's identification of *punctum*.

In chapter three I extend the argument of chapter two by exploring prose poem ekphrasis of photographs, a field which critical study and creative practice has largely ignored. Prose poem ekphrases from Mary Jo Bang's *A Doll for Throwing* and prose poem sequences from Kathleen Fraser's collection *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling* provide case studies for my exploration of the aesthetic intersection of prose poetry and photography. I begin this chapter by defining the prose poem as a form that resists generalization: It is composed in sentences and paragraphs rather than lines and stanzas, it incorporates the aesthetics of poetry with the utility of prose, and its origins as a poetic form in the early years of Modernism reveal, as critic Margueritte Murphy explains, an early self-identification with the visual arts (Murphy 31). Murphy points to the way that early twentieth-century prose poets attempted, like their counterparts in the visual arts, to represent modern life in literature. The prose poem offered them "a vehicle for capturing the sensation of the modern that seemed to fit the accelerated pace and fragmented sensations of the early twentieth-century city" (Murphy 32). In my case studies of the work of Bang and Fraser, I explore how this notion of "fragmented sensations" links the prose poem with photography, an artform that represents a moment extracted from a continuum. Bang's *A Doll for Throwing* is not only about a photographer (Bauhaus

practitioner Lucia Moholy), but it also presents writewithist ekphrases of Bauhaus photographs in a form that Bang chose because she felt that its block shape on the page resembled Bauhaus architecture (Bang, *Poetry for All* 7:14-8:11). The sentences and paragraphs of Kathleen Fraser's ekphrastic sequence "Soft pages" and her long poem "You can hear her breathing in the photograph" are distinguished by her desire to explore resistance to the received norms of poetry and by her use of cinematic effects such as jump cuts and flashbacks to represent female experience as fragmented and interrupted. In the case studies in chapter three, the operative relationship between prose poet and photography can be best understood as one in which photography has provided the poets with a mode of thinking and perceiving that is reflected in the formal construction of their poems.

The fourth chapter, "Fragments of Female Experience: Introduction to the Creative Component," describes how the critical essay has informed my approach to writing sequences of prose poem ekphrases of photographs for my own manuscript of poetry, *Miniatures of Reality*, the creative component of this thesis. The poems, largely presented in linked sequences, consider aspects of the speaker's girlhood, adolescence and adulthood as memories transformed by a "camera vision" which shapes the way these experiences are recounted. In writing these poems, I set out to creatively explore concerns of the critical thesis by producing writewithist ekphrasis in which the poems demonstrate the aesthetics and theory of photography in both form and emotional content. A further creative imperative is represented by my use of the prose poem form to represent what Fraser describes as "the average female's habituated availability to interruption" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 9). This gendered experience contributes to both the internal structure of the poems and the structure of the collection as a whole as the speaker revisits events from her life through the

medium of photography and often retells them from differing perspectives. In turn, ideas to do with interruption and fragmentation revealed themselves to be important components of the synergies I had perceived to exist between photography and prose poetry and which I explore in both critical essay and my ekphrasis.

Chapter One

Ekphrasis in the Era of the Visual Turn

Introduction

Carol Snow begins the lyric ekphrastic sequence "Positions of the Body" from her poetry collection *Artist and Model* by describing the angels in Giotto's *Lamentation* as representations of grief and suffering:

> You can see they are inconsolable—in their
> attitudes of suffering
> or suffering-with:
> backs taut, hands flung
> open or rending or mutely clasped; the gestures
> carried to apogee—held
>
> without comfort
> (since comfort is a learned thing). (poem "I" 5)

Giotto's *Lamentation* is a part of a fresco cycle in the Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel in Padua. The angels are mirroring the grief-stricken gestures of the human figures in the foreground of the painting; it is a device which Giotto repeats in the *Crucifixion* from the same cycle. In a similar manner, Snow returns throughout her poetic sequence to depictions in visual art of the gestures of writhing, hand clasping and bodily contortions in order to evoke her subject's or speaker's suffering or desire for comfort. Giotto's *Lamentation* and *Crucifixion* are among a number of works of

art and photographs which Snow calls on in "Positions of the Body." She also evokes works as diverse as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure* and Käthe Kollwitz's *Mother and Child* as examples of how artists have depicted the body in attitudes of grief, suffering or repose.

Snow's use of such a rich variety of visual works in this sequence is a consequence, as John Berger describes in his book *Ways of Seeing,* of the way modern means of reproduction in the era of the visual turn have enabled images of art to enter "the mainstream of life" (32). But it is also a demonstration of what poet and critic Cole Swensen describes in her essay "To Writewithize" as the operative relationship in some modern ekphrasis. Nodding to Snow as a recent example, Swensen says this "relationship is not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives…instead of using visual art as subject matter, works such as these increasingly use it as a model for formal construction, thus underscoring the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving, rather than as static objects" (71).

Snow's stance toward the art works referenced in "Positions of the Body," for example, is only occasionally that of traditional ekphrasis where the viewer is "literally standing across from it, in a kind of face-off, in a gallery or museum" (Swensen 70). Instead, poem and artwork are more like "fellow travelers sharing a context" (70). In one poem from the sequence, for instance, the speaker is depicted in a museum and part of a crowd looking at Giotto's *Crucifixion*: "You stood / in the duecento, expecting icon only…" (poem "VIII" 13) but seven lines later, Giotto's work—"the wounded torso and bent legs, bowing forward" (poem "VIII" 13)—is abandoned, and her thoughts and the poem turn instead to a photograph of "the exhumation of murdered nuns // in El Salvador, priests and cameras / called to a

makeshift grave" (poem "VIII" 13). In the poem that provides the epigraph to this chapter, Giotto's artwork has provided a context for the speaker to describe her distress at an event taking place in the real world. Snow emphasises this connection by pointing to similarities in the positions of the bodies depicted in painting and photograph and by attributing to her speaker the same gestures for anguish that Giotto had depicted in the angels. In other poems in the sequence, artworks are named specifically, or an artist's style is evoked (Paul Cézanne's landscapes [poem "VI"]) as images for how the body enacts innate and learned gestures of horror, grief, despair, or the need for comfort. In such poems Snow's speaker draws on a mental store of visual images derived from the arts as analogies for both confronting situations and for those which offer respite from grief or pain and in doing so, encourages her readers to recall those images for themselves. In this way, Snow invites her readers to share a context with both artworks and speaker. Also implicit in many of the poems in this sequence is the idea that the world can be visualized in terms of works of art, whether it is Cézanne's "blues and greens / and ochres of proximity and distance" (poem "VI" 11) or Henry Moore's black marble figure of a woman as "…eloquent // as bone, shell / stones worn beyond contradiction" (poem "VI" 10). Swensen cites Snow's collection *Artist and Model* as an example of a work in which the poet does not "*look at* art so much as *live with* it" (70) and it is this kind of collaboration between poem and visual art that is the principal focus of my investigation of Snow's work in this chapter.

Ekphrasis: collaboration or competition?

Swensen begins "To Writewithize" by stating that no matter how often the readers of her essay might attend poetry readings, "poetry is primarily a visual experience"

(69), in other words, an experience derived from the pages of a book. She argues that among the implications of this shift from aural to visual is an increased emphasis on the visual aspects of language and that "poetry and visual art are both changing in response to their new interactions" (69). These assertions introduce a short discussion of "[t]he engagement of the visual arts by poetry…traditionally known as ekphrasis" (69). Swensen comments that the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of ekphrasis (not provided in her essay) is "enormously vague" but that current usage of the expression is more precise. In current usage, she explains, ekphrasis is "understood as 'writing on art'" for instance or defined as "'the painting of pictures with language'" (69). Swensen states that such ekphrasis "implies a mirroring action, carefully positioned and constructed, and can be, because of that, revealing, almost reflective, of both poem/poet and art/artist" (69). She argues that this stance, which "accentuates the separation between the writer and the object of art" (70) comes with limiting implications of opposition and rivalry. Such comments are also an acknowledgement of, and challenge to, twentieth-century ekphrastic scholarship. Swensen initiates this challenge when she eschews the most commonly offered critical definition of ekphrasis—James Heffernan's "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 3)—in favour of dictionary definitions like "writing on art" or "the matching of words to images" (Swensen 69) and in her use of expressions like "interactions" and "engagement."

Interaction and engagement are terms that signal notions of collaboration rather than competition and are in direct contrast with traditional ekphrastic theory, which casts poetry and art in forms of opposition through distinctions such as those between movement or stasis, temporality or spatiality, being mute or voiced. Thus, in order for the critical and creative implications of Swensen's stance to be

appreciated, her comments need to be understood in relationship to the ekphrastic scholarship she is challenging. This contextualization is all the more important because many of Swensen's comments seem to refute or offer alternatives to widely accepted ekphrastic theory. It is important to acknowledge that Swensen is not suggesting that the new modes of ekphrasis she identifies are in any sense in competition with more traditional modes of ekphrasis:

> This is not to deny the sincere homage in such works, nor to speak too slightingly of this relationship—merely to pose it as but one mode of ekphrasis in order to consider some others that take the term in different directions. (70)

The "different directions" Swensen alludes to are a consequence of what she identifies as contemporary changes to visual/verbal relationships.

Swensen's observation that poetry has become "primarily a visual experience" (69) has implications for a study of ekphrasis because it raises questions about how "we talk about verbal/visual relationships" (69). Swensen is both acknowledging the verbal/visual relationship at the heart of ekphrasis and implying that contemporary ekphrasis is changing to accommodate a change in the relationship. Ekphrasis, in fact, has a long history of change in both practice and perception. Histories of ekphrasis inevitably begin with a description of it as a rhetorical (and aural) form that was transformed over centuries in arguments which pit poetry and visual art against each other in a struggle for status. The critical association of word and artwork which is now associated with the term ekphrasis is a relatively modern occurrence. According to classics scholar Ruth Webb in her essay "*Ekphrasis* ancient and modern: the invention of a genre," it is inaccurate to ascribe a "continuous tradition" (9) to what is in fact an ambiguous term. "*Ekphrasis* as

defined in antiquity emerges as a type of discourse that differs radically from the 'description of a work of art' we have come to expect" (9). Ekphrasis has a creative and critical literary history which traces its antecedents to the Greek art of rhetoric and the speaker's skill in vivid description. (From the Greek *ek* [out] and *phrazein* [explain, point out]). Homer's description in the *Iliad* of how the god Hephaestus made a shield for Achilles is the most frequently referenced classical example of literary ekphrasis for its vivid and detailed depiction of the shield's making and of its appearance. Homer's description is an example of the classical notion *enargeia* which originated in rhetoric, "where it was used to describe the power that verbal visual imagery possessed in setting before the hearer the very object or scene being described" (Hagstrum 11). In a discussion of the work of ancient writers on the subject of ekphrasis, Webb notes that it was a "form of vivid evocation that may have as its subject-matter anything…What distinguishes *ekphrasis* is its quality of vividness, *enargeia*, its impact on the mind's eye of the listener who must, in Theon's[1] words be almost made to see the subject" (13). In antiquity, then, neither ekphrasis nor *enargeia* were confined to the evocation of objects of art, although works of art were sometimes described.

Still, while ekphrasis in antiquity was clearly considered to be a rhetorical device and not limited to verbal depictions of artworks, Webb suggests that "the ancient rhetoricians' discussions nevertheless raise questions about the interaction of word and image, text and imagination" (9). By the time of Plato and Aristotle in the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, poetry and art were often the joint subjects of critical thought. Two philosophers of antiquity, who post-date Plato and Aristotle, provided concepts which have continued to inspire scholarly debate until the present. The

[1] Aelius Theon was an Alexandrian rhetorician and teacher of the first century CE.

comment "painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture" is attributed by Plutarch to Simonides of Ceos (556-467 BCE). Horace (65-8 BCE) is responsible for the frequently cited phrase *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry). This phrase is significant to the history of ekphrasis because it was seen to imply that the two art forms were linked, and that poetry is like painting or should aim to be like painting. This understanding of the phrase influenced debate about the relative merits of painting and poetry from antiquity through the Renaissance and into the twentieth century. However, in his book *The Sister Arts*, Jean Hagstrum argues that the phrase is misunderstood. Hagstrum argues that Horace was merely indicating that both poetry and art often required further examination for their meaning or intent to be appreciated (Hagstrum 9). Nevertheless, *enargeia* and *ut pictura poesis* are both concepts that need to be considered as background to the notion that poetry and art are participants in a paragonal struggle for dominance between image and word. The concept of comparison and contest (*paragone*) between rival arts can be traced from the Renaissance to contemporary ekphrastic theory and continues to depend on the idea that image and word are in paragonal competition as rationale for working through how each form does the work of representation.[2]

Hagstrum, whose *The Sister Arts* (1958) is an often-cited text for the history of the relationship between poetry and painting, explains that *paragoni* or struggles between rival arts were an integral component of Renaissance critical thought. When Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) wrote his *Treatise on Painting*, he argued for the superiority of painting over poetry, pointing to the painter's use of the sense of sight and repeating "the Neoplatonic notion that the painter resembles, more closely than any other artist, the Creator…" (Hagstrum 67). Leonardo related painting to science:

[2] See Hagstrum 3-36; Heffernan 9-22; Preminger 320-321, 332.

"Like science it explored, rendered, and in its rendering explained nature, the source of all truth…the painter, who deals with things, is superior to the poet, who deals with words" (Hagstrum 68). Hagstrum explains that during the Renaissance, painting was considered the superior art form:

> Painting was in fact superior to poetry during the Renaissance in Italy, and it is understandable that a poet should be urged to look to it as the exemplary art. The Horatian dictum [*ut pictura poesis*] was launched on its career in modern Europe with the prestige of Renaissance painting behind it. It went forth under the banner of an art that had discovered perspective and had taken great strides in producing brilliance and permanence of colour. No other art could surpass painting in obeying the ancient command to imitate nature. (68-69)

When Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published his *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* in 1766, he continued the paragonal debate and provided ekphrastic scholarship with a set of defining arguments which have continued until the present day in the work of modern scholars of ekphrasis. Lessing uses the classical statue depicting Laocoön and his sons being attacked by a sea serpent to demonstrate how a poet would have different and conflicting imperatives in the construction of their work than a sculptor or a painter. Beginning with an argument to refute what he considers to be the common misinterpretation of *ut pictura poesis,* that poetry should be like art, Lessing contends that each art has its "true function" (5) and deplores the "mania for description" (5) in which poets attempt to write a speaking picture and the "mania for allegory" (5) in which artists attempt to produce silent poems in painting.

Lessing's argument in *Laocoön* revolves around the importance of the depiction of physical beauty and concepts of temporality, spatiality, signs and symbols and their application to visual and verbal representation. Lessing distinguishes between the arbitrary symbols and signs of speech and poetry which must be decoded mentally for the scenes or ideas which they depict to be perceived and the natural signs of painting. Painting is a natural sign because what is being represented (in an era before abstract painting) can be immediately understood. Painting uses "figures and colours in space" (78), while poetry makes use of "articulated sounds in time" (78). Thus, the sculptor of the *Laocoön* shows the moment of the serpent's attack (Laocoön and his sons are depicted spatially, frozen in time) while the poet's role is to describe the temporal unfolding of the event. The "succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter" (91).

Lessing maintains that the two art forms should remain distinct:

> …as two equitable and friendly neighbours [who] do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions which, in haste and from force of circumstance, the one finds himself compelled to make on the other's privilege: so also with painting and poetry. (91)

Lessing's arguments about spatiality and temporality in particular continue to provide a reference point for contemporary ekphrastic scholarship, principally represented by the work of much-cited mid to late-twentieth-century scholars of ekphrasis including Murray Krieger, James Heffernan, W.J.T. Mitchell, and Michael Davidson. The work of these critics has particular relevance to Swensen's argument

in “To Writewithize” despite the fact that she does not cite them in her essay. The definitions for ekphrasis they provide and their discussions of ekphrastic theory provide the historical and critical context for understanding Swensen’s argument that a variety of developments, including a shift in the experience of poetry from aural to visual, means that modes of ekphrasis have emerged that signal a shift from a paragonal model to a collaborative one. Beginning with the work of Krieger, my discussion focuses particularly on the implication to ekphrasis of the “visual turn” of the twentieth century and on critical ideas that are relevant to my research into lyric ekphrasis of photographs, the focus of chapter two.

Krieger’s work is cited by both Heffernan and Mitchell as having a singularly influential effect on ekphrastic criticism (Heffernan, *Museum of Words* 2; Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 153 n8). Krieger developed arguments derived from Lessing’s ideas on temporality and spatiality with his 1967 essay “*Ekphrasis* and the Still Movement of Poetry or *Laokoön* Revisited” which later became an appendix to his book *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992). Krieger acknowledges Lessing’s concerns that the temporal and spatial arts should observe their own boundaries, but argues that in ekphrasis, poetry as a temporal art actually aspires to a spatiality similar to the visual arts by arresting or “stilling” the movement of such art in language and form:

> *Ekphrasis* concerns me here, then, to the extent that I see it introduced in order to use a plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature’s turning world to ‘still’ it. (265-6)

He offers Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as an example of such “stilling” by pointing to Keats’s opening lines: “Thou still unravished bride of quietness” (268).

Krieger's critical model for this analogy is Leo Spitzer's essay "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or Content vs. Metagrammar." Krieger notes that in this essay, Spitzer describes Keats's poem as "circular or 'perfectly symmetrical'…thereby reproducing symbolically the form of the *objet d'art* which is its model" (Spitzer, qtd. in Krieger 268). Krieger investigates other examples of poetic "stilling," in his essay as he details his desire to theorize what ekphrasis achieves when it encounters the spatiality of artworks and to extrapolate from this "a general principle of poetics asserted by every poem in the assertion of its integrity" ("*Laokoön*" 284). He explains that despite the seeming contradiction of his work to Lessing's tradition of boundaries between the sister arts of literature and art, literature does still maintain its status as a time-art:

> For literature retains its essential nature as a time-art even as its words, by reaching the stillness by way of pattern, seek to appropriate sculpture's plasticity as well. There is after all, then, a sense in which literature as a time-art, does have special time-space powers. (285)

It is this idea that language in literature might be capable of imitating and being as still as a work of visual art that distinguishes Krieger's theoretical approach to ekphrasis.

If Krieger maintains that the ability of ekphrasis to overcome Lessing's distinction between temporality and spatiality is a principle that applies to the whole of poetry, Heffernan identifies a "storytelling impulse" (5) in ekphrasis. This impulse "delivers *from* the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication" (5). In Heffernan, this impulse is paragonal, in that word and image are rival modes of representation. Heffernan considers Krieger's application of the term ekphrasis to

"literature's turning world" (Krieger 266) as too broad. He coined his now ubiquitous definition of ekphrasis ("the verbal representation of visual representation" [3]) in his 1993 book *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* in order to clarify that ekphrasis "explicitly represents representation itself. What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representational*" (4). In other words, the subject of an ekphrasis should not be a manufactured object such as a bridge because such objects do not represent anything. Heffernan, for instance, specifically excludes Hart Crane's poem "The Bridge" because it is about the actual Brooklyn Bridge and not about a representation of it (4).

Heffernan's definition excludes many types of poems about visual art. Heffernan explicitly excludes both iconicity and pictorialism, for instance, and does not discuss poems that deal with abstract art. Heffernan's objection to iconicity, and specifically pattern poems like George Herbert's "Easter Wings" in which the arrangement of words on the page resembles the subject of the poem, is that iconic poetry does not "*represent* pictures," so much as it "apes the shapes of pictures in order to represent natural objects" (4). Pictorialism, which Heffernan defines as poetry that "generates in language effects similar to those created by pictures" (3), is also excluded because while poetry like Spenser's *Faerie Queene* can be analysed for its evocation of visual effects such as "focusing, framing and scanning … Spenser is representing the world *with the aid of* pictorial techniques; he is not representing pictures themselves" (3).

Heffernan also excludes works linked to the style of a particular painter rather than being about a particular painting. Here, Heffernan discounts William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow." While acknowledging the poem's

debt to the photographic style of Alfred Stieglitz and photographer-painter Charles Sheeler, Heffernan argues that because it is not about an actual photograph and does not reference either artist, it is not ekphrasis. The poem instead "uses the verbal equivalent of pictorial precision in order to represent a set of objects" (3). In a footnote, Heffernan comments that Lessing "condemns as servile, the poetic imitation of an artist's style…and would have faulted 'The Red Wheelbarrow' for its photographic *manner* of representation" (192).

Heffernan's arguments for representation as the only legitimate subject of ekphrasis is in direct contrast to Swensen, who cites contemporary versions of iconicity and pictorialism in her discussion of contemporary modes of ekphrasis. This contrast highlights Swensen's focus on ekphrasis as a relationship between "verbal and visual modes of experience" (71) rather than strictly between a poet and an artwork. In the ekphrastic world of Heffernan's *Museum of Words* the poem and artwork are in opposition, but in Swensen's "To Writewithize" they are collaborating and sharing contexts. This distinction is important. Swensen's argument is based on her identification of the way new modes of ekphrasis represent the ubiquity of the visual arts in multiple facets of contemporary life, while Heffernan's title, *Museum of Words*, points to a relationship between poem and artwork that results in "a gallery of art constructed by language alone" (8). He argues that twentieth-century ekphrastic poems "typically evoke actual museums of art along with the words they offer us: the whole complex of titles, curatorial notes, and art historical commentary that surround the works of art we now see on museum walls" (8). In other words, Heffernan's argument assumes a degree of sequestration where artworks are more likely to be in a gallery or museum and perceived as an "other."

W.J.T. Mitchell's 1994 essay "Ekphrasis and the Other" provides a further exploration of ekphrasis and its relationship to the semiotic "others" of texts, "those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or 'spatial' arts" (156). Mitchell employs Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as a verbal representation of visual representation to introduce the idea of ekphrasis as a "problem" (152), albeit a fascinating one that can be explained in a study of its "otherness." Mitchell explains that "otherness" incorporates the oppositions which are a familiar component of ekphrasis: spatiality and temporality; conventional (arbitrary) and natural signs; visual and aural media. (156). Part of the "fascinating problem" of ekphrasis is a reflection, then, of how otherness can be seen as a component of a paragonal struggle.

Mitchell explains the fascination of ekphrasis as "three phases or moments of realization" (152), acknowledging the contribution to ekphrastic theory of Krieger, Hagstrum and Lessing. The first phase is "ekphrastic indifference;" despite the existence of ekphrastic scholarship and literature, it is common sense that word and image are completely different modes of representation and words simply cannot do the work of images, ("Words can 'cite,' but never 'sight' their objects" [152]). The second phase, "ekphrastic hope," reflects the kind of rhetorical understanding that can trace its origins back to the *Iliad* and the shield of Achilles. "Ekphrastic hope" signals that it is possible to describe visual images in such a way that a reader or listener will be able to "see" them: "the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor" (152). Mitchell describes this moment as the point at which the meaning of ekphrasis, instead of referring to an "exceptional moment in verbal or oral representation" (153), begins instead to be applied to any act of description intended to enable the visualization of an object, place, or person.

Mitchell extends his discussion of ekphrastic hope to Krieger's description of the "stilling" capabilities of ekphrasis. He explains that for Krieger, "the visual arts are a metaphor, not just for verbal representation of visual experience, but for the shaping of language into formal patterns that 'still' the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial formal array" (154). Ekphrastic hope, then, points to a paradigm in which words do allow us to see, whether it is because as Krieger suggests, literature is able to arrest time as a spatial artwork does, or because words enable us to imagine what they portray.

"Ekphrastic fear," Mitchell's third phase, expressed in *Laocoön* by Lessing's admonition to observe the borders between the two arts, is for Mitchell "the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the first, 'indifferent' phase of ekphrasis) a natural fact that can be relied on" (154). Mitchell explains that Lessing considered that poets who made use of the techniques of art were degrading their work while artists who gave their work a voice via superstitious symbols were inviting idolatry, making them "'objects of worship' rather than what they properly should be—beautiful, mute, spatial objects of visual pleasure" (155). Michell notes that a contemporary view of ekphrastic fear is revealed "in a wide range of literary theorizing, from the Marxist hostility to modernist experiments with literary space…to the romantic tradition's obsession with a poetics of voice, invisibility and blindness" (155-156). Mitchell explains that in this mode of understanding ekphrasis, all the possibilities indicated by "ekphrastic hope" "begin to look idolatrous and fetishistic" (156), and like deceitful illusions (156). Elsewhere in *Picture Theory*, in a discussion of Romantic iconophobia, Mitchell argues that many romantic writers found visual images to be problematic:

> …for Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, 'imagination' is a power of consciousness that transcends mere visualization…Coleridge dismissed allegory for being a mere 'picture language,' Keats worried about the temptations of description, and Wordsworth called the eye 'the most despotic of our senses'" (115).

Mitchell argues that "our confusion about ekphrasis" (159) is related to our perception that the visual arts are "inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely" and that they "bring these things as a gift to language" (160). Conversely, then, we perceive that language brings "arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives as gifts to visual representation" (160). Mitchell points out that such "gifts" are not exclusive to either form of art: "paintings can tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas; words can describe or embody static, spatial states of affairs, and achieve all the effects of ekphrasis…" (160). He extends his argument by considering ekphrasis from the perspective of semantics, pointing out that "there is *semantically* speaking (that is, in the pragmatics of communication, symbolic behaviour, expression, signification) no essential difference between texts and images" (161).

Mitchell's work beyond "Ekphrasis and the Other," encourages moves toward understanding the relationship of word and image as a "dialectical trope" that has implications for both art history and literary theory. Concerned with the relationship of language to visual representation, he proposed the term "pictorial turn" (often conflated with "visual turn") to account for the way "that pictures form a peculiar point of friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry" (*Picture Theory* 13). In an interview with Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes, Mitchell makes a distinction between the trope of "the pictorial turn as a matter of mass perception, collective anxiety about images and visual media" and that of the

emergence of what he calls “image science” represented by “a turn to images and visual culture within the realm of the intellectual disciplines, especially the human sciences, but also to a remarkable extent, within the natural sciences” (Mitchell, “Images and their Incarnations” 191). In other words, he is distinguishing between a recurring public anxiety about new image technology whenever it eventuates and his observation that as scientific images accumulated so did opportunities for interdisciplinarity, evidenced by topics such as visual culture, media studies, or visual anthropology (191).

Elsewhere, Mitchell describes the relationships of word and image in regard to interdisciplinarity between art history and literary theory as one that is “like two countries that speak different languages but that have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange, and other forms of intercourse” (“Word and Image” 53). In such a paradigm, the word/image relationship is not so much a matter of protecting or dissolving the boundaries between the two, as it is a description:

> …it is the name of a problem and a problematic—a description of the irregular, heterogeneous, and often improvised boundaries between ‘institutions of the visible’ (visual arts, visual media, practices of display and spectation) and ‘institutions of the verbal’ (literature, language, discourse, practices of speech and writing, audition and reading). (“Word and Image” 53)

I argue that much contemporary ekphrasis, and ekphrasis of photographs in particular, embraces this problematic by actively seeking to engage with such “irregular, heterogeneous, and often improvised boundaries.” In Swensen’s terms this engagement is illustrated by an operative relationship which underscores a view of the “arts as modes of thinking and perceiving, rather than as static objects” (71).

This is an engagement in which the relationship between poet and visual image is less a matter of representing otherness than it is of eroding the boundaries between the institutions of the visible and the institutions of the verbal.

Swensen's writewithism however, has not appeared in isolation. In his 1983 essay "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem," critic Michael Davidson points to examples of postmodern poetry that are more concerned with what language does than what it represents. Rather than concern itself with its ability "to emulate those qualities of sensuous vividness (*enargeia*) and naturalness available to the painter" (69), such poems are concerned with their ability to be "productive rather than reproductive" (69). Davidson argues that critical evaluation of such poems reveals a movement away from concerns with temporality and spatiality derived from Lessing's work and goes further to argue that "[i]n order to read contemporary poems about paintings (and indeed to read contemporary poetry at all) we need to un-do the rhetoric of spatiality that has been developed" (71). He describes this rhetoric as "the extreme 'laöcoonization' of modern criticism" (71).

Davidson's essay focuses on *painterly* poems rather than poems which are about a painting. A painterly poem is a poem that is not so much "about" the painting as it is a poem "which activates strategies of composition equivalent to but not dependent on the painting… the poet reads the painting as a text, rather than as a static object, or else reads the larger painterly aesthetic generated by the painting" (72). In other words, the poet might make use of verbal collaging of phrases where the painter had used visual collage or might "read" the artwork for the painter's intentions and produce similar effects in words. Extreme examples include the work of Gertrude Stein; "more subtle versions, however, can be found among the poets of

the New York School for whom the world of painters and paintings constitutes a virtual encyclopedia of formal problems and realizations" (72).

Davidson discusses painterly poems by Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, two poets of the New York School, to show how such poems "attack a static *ekphrasis*" (72). However, it is his discussion of O'Hara's "On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art," that best clarifies how in an ekphrastic poem the poet could be seen to be emulating aspects of the painter's treatment of their subject. Rivers's 1953 painting is based on an 1851 Romantic history painting by Emanuel Leutze that depicts Washington as a revolutionary hero in the mould of Napoleon.[3] Rivers's painting is abstract, with blotches of colour and sketch marks visible beneath the paint. The painting subverts Leutze's glorification of the hero of the American Revolutionary War by presenting Washington's crossing of the Delaware as a "national cliché…I saw the moment as nerve wracking and uncomfortable. I couldn't picture anyone getting into a chilly river around Christmas time with anything resembling hand-on-chest heroics" (Rivers, qtd. in Davidson 74). Davidson describes O'Hara's poem as taking the painter's "strategies of layering, blurring and collaging totally into a verbal realm so that he may speak directly to the 'subject' (George Washington) of the canvas" (73). In O'Hara's poem, Washington is "our hero…come back to us / in his white pants and we know his nose / trembling like a flag under fire" (O'Hara, qtd. in Davidson 73). Davidson argues that O'Hara's "chatty, discursive style contrasts with the serious matter behind it, and it is in this disparity of tone and content that the poet

[3] Leutze, Emanuel. *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11417
Rivers, Larry. *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. MOMA, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78504

most emulates strategies in the painting" (73). The poem ends with a pun: "Don't shoot until, the white of freedom glinting / on your gun barrel, you see the general fear" (O'Hara, qtd. in Davidson 73). O'Hara's poem, then, encapsulates the intent of Rivers's painting while providing its own commentary on a signature event in American history.

Davidson notes that in both the Ashbery and O'Hara examples "a painting serves to trigger a series of reflections, the working-out of which depends upon semiotic and stylistic factors within the canvas":

> One of the things that this working-out discovers is the uneasy status of the painting regarded as an object. In order to render the instability of this artifact, the poet becomes a reader of the painter's activity of signifying. This act of reading is never passive, never recuperative since its function is to produce a new text, not to re-capture the original in another medium. (77)

In O'Hara's case, Davidson illustrates how, rather than represent the painting as painting, the poet has re-presented the painter's intentions in producing the painting in the first place. As such, the poem does not stand in place of the painting but provides a new means for considering the subject matter.

My discussion above of the theoretical background to Swensen's "To Writewithize" suggests both the ways she is departing from recent conversations on the topic and the ways in which she builds upon it. In "To Writewithize," Swensen acknowledges traditional ekphrastic theory's tendency to emphasize paragonal conflict and suggests that it is "but one mode of ekphrasis" (70). Swensen's alternatives, and indeed, the poems about late medieval and early Renaissance paintings in her 1999 ekphrastic poetry collection *Try*, are works which, to use her own terminology, "live with," "collaborate with," "grapple with" and break down the

frames of the visual works they reference. By "taking the term in different directions" (70), Swensen's writewithist ekphrasis sets out to actively transgress Lessing's historical boundaries between art and poetry. In doing so—though the essay never identifies these theorists specifically—it effectively challenges the defining characteristics of the mode of ekphrasis identified by Heffernan, Krieger, and Mitchell and in particular the notion of paragonal conflict. Instead, her arguments suggest how poets are more recently engaging with Davidson's aesthetics of the "painterly poem."

"To Writewithize"

In "To Writewithize" Swensen identifies three new directions or modes for the genre of ekphrasis in the work of selected contemporary poets and conceptual artists. Two of these modes, modernist developments in concrete poetry and works which experiment with the concept of books/texts as artworks, are outside the scope of my investigation. I intend to focus on the mode that Swensen describes as being closest to the traditional "verbal representation of visual representation"—works "that don't *look at* art so much as *live with* it" (70). Such ekphrasis constitutes a quite different experience for both writer and reader from that of traditional ekphrasis in which the poet often reflects on an artwork from a position in which they are "literally standing across from it" (70) and, in some measure also mentally distanced from it. Swensen acknowledges that "despite the apparent homage [in traditional ekphrasis], there's frequently an element of opposition, a tinge of rivalry and/or challenge" (70). Writewithist ekphrasis, on the other hand, encourages collaboration— "poem and artwork… are fellow travelers sharing a context" (70).

The works that Swensen uses to illustrate her argument for the existence of new modes of ekphrasis all engage with visual experience by situating art, not as the "other" of poetry but as "just one more, albeit crucial element of the everyday world" (70). Swensen illustrates such ekphrasis by citing Laura Moriarty's *Nude Memoir* and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's *Sphericity* alongside Snow's *Artist and Model*. Swensen argues that "instead of using visual art as subject matter, works such as these increasingly use it as a model for formal construction, thus underscoring the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving rather than as static objects" (71). The three works are quite different and demonstrate differing degrees of relationship between poet and artwork. Moriarty's *Nude Memoir* "grapples with" (71) Marcel Duchamp's *Given* (an installation showing the torso of a nude woman that can only be viewed through a peephole in a door), Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and aspects of the author's autobiography. For example, *Given* is referenced both directly by name in the text and indirectly as a woman's body is described in the position of the body in the Installation. References to Duchamp's life, his fellow surrealists and the characters from *Vertigo* appear throughout the poem in a situation that requires the reader to make the connection between poem and artwork. Swensen describes the work as one which is not about Duchamp's installation or Hitchcock's movie as such but which "makes art both vehicle and substance of an odd truce between daily life and its troublesome undercurrents" (71). Berssenbrugge's *Sphericity*, a collaboration with artist Richard Tuttle, does not mention specific art works at all, but according to Swensen, all the elements of art and life are there "—color, line, surface, form, and motion. And so are all the questions that traditionally animate a work of art; distance, interpretation, perspective, illusion….so that the

reader is constantly aware of the presence of the visual arts without being able to delimit them" (71).

Of the three works Swensen references, Snow's collection is closest to traditional ekphrasis in that works of visual art are named, described, or otherwise evoked throughout the poems. Two sequences from *Artist and Model* are the subject of close readings and analysis in this chapter and the next for the manner in which Snow represents the emotional state of her speaker by evoking a variety of artworks including paintings by Giotto, and Picasso, sculpture by Henry Moore and Käthe Kollwitz, and Brassaï photographs of the artist Matisse at work. Snow's work in these two sequences is distinguished by the way the structure of her poems reflects the artwork they describe, and this feature of her work along with the many artworks her speaker calls to mind contributes to the sense that in these poems, art is an "inseparable part of the daily—and the poetic—weave" (Swensen 70).

Though Swensen references titles and authors to back up her assertions in the body of "To Writewithize" she offers no detailed analysis in support of her argument. However, the essay serves as a preliminary overview to an idea that has invited further discussion and can be placed firmly in the field of contemporary ekphrastic scholarship as an alternative to traditional ekphrastic criticism. Lynn Keller's discussion of Swensen's collection *Try* in the light of "To Writewithize" in her essay "Poems Living with Paintings: *Cole Swensen's Ekphrastic* Try" is often cited alongside Swensen's essay, while poet and critic David Kinloch comments in "Hide and Seek: Mimesis and Narrative in Ekphrasis as Translation" that at a 2013 conference "Writing into Art": "[p]aper after paper…foregrounded the approach of writers and artists happy to take their cue from the imaginative neologism 'to writewithize'"(156).

At the heart of the ekphrastic practice Swensen describes in "To Writewithize" is the notion of context sharing and collaboration between verbal and visual modes of representation. The distinction Swensen makes between artwork as a physical object and as a visual mode of experience is an important one as it indicates a blurring of Lessing's boundaries between the domains of word and image or between verbal and visual representation. Swensen signals this blurring as a series of key actions performed by poet and poem in the epigraph to the essay, in which she describes what it means to "writewithize": "(as in 'to hybridize,' 'to harmonize (or ritualize),' 'to ionize,' etc.)" (69).

Swensen does not elaborate on these terms—hybridize, harmonize, ionize—but Keller provides a useful explanation of their meanings in the context of Swensen's own ekphrastic strategies in *Try*. Keller describes Swensen as "hybridizing" or mixing "the information of several senses or 'modes of experience'" (101). The ekphrasis in *Try* "harmonizes" visual and verbal realms through collaging techniques where, for instance, ekphrasis of works of visual art is juxtaposed with biblical text and children's rhymes: "… the juxtapositions are not between visual and verbal, between image and word; rather, these realms are combined to allow participation in and movement through the revelations and disturbances in each" (101). Keller argues that "ionize," derived from a scientific term denoting a process of generating change, motion and interactivity in atoms and molecules is particularly resonant in *Try* (101). She compares the notion of molecules that have been ionized and are therefore chemically active to poems in this collection that are "concerned with touch and with forces enabling or preventing contact" (101). Using this analogy, she reads the poems in *Try* for the way that they

undermine "notions of ekphrasis (or indeed artistic representation generally) as a stilling of movement" (101).

The strategies of living with or collaborating with that are implicit in the terms "to harmonize," "to hybridize" and "to ionize" illuminate both writewithist poetic practice and writewithist readings of ekphrasis. Such readings look for evidence in ekphrasis of writewithist poetic practice and evaluate the poem for the manner in which the poet appears to be living with or collaborating with the artwork being referenced. In the next section of this chapter, I explore writewithist poetic practice through close readings of selected poems from Carol Snow's sequence "Positions of the Body" from *Artist and Model* which I will contrast with the more traditional ekphrasis of W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts." By discussing the writewithist approach to ekphrasis in Snow's poems about visual art, my intention is to provide a lens through which to discuss a writewithist approach to photography in the second chapter.

Carol Snow's "Positions of the Body" as writewithist ekphrasis

Carol Snow is a North American poet who has published four collections of poetry, most recently *Placed: Karesansui Poems* in 2008. Her first collection, *Artist and Model* (1990) was selected by poet Robert Hass for the American National Poetry Series and is the source of the ekphrastic sequences "Positions of the Body" and "Artist and Model" that I read in this chapter and the next through the lens of Swensen's writewithism. Reginald Shepherd, the editor of *Lyric Postmodernisms* (2008) in which Snow's work from *Artist and Model* is anthologised, places her among a group of experimental "post-avant" poets from different poetic camps, whose work "crosses and transcends the boundaries between traditional lyric and

avant-garde experimentation" (Shepherd, "My New Anthology" np). In her "Artist's Statement" in *Lyric Postmodernisms*, Snow describes herself as "one whose work would engage with experience as Matisse's engages with visual reality or Stravinsky's with consonance" (203). In a further statement about her work, she describes her "early poems" from *Artist and Model* as not only singing "from point of view; 'point of view' is often their subject" ("My Lyric and Time" 66). This characteristic is one that Swensen highlights in her discussion of Snow in "To Writewithize" when she describes *Artist and Model* as a collection in which "issues of framing, perspective and resemblance filter throughout… The implied viewer shifts constantly; at times it's the 'I,' which sometimes looks and is sometimes looked at, framed in a window or otherwise arranged as a composition" (Swensen 70).

Snow's "Positions of the Body" is a long lyric sequence of ten poems identified by Roman numerals. Two narrative threads link an anonymous and mentally ill girl in an institution "held mute in a dwindling / litany of positions" (poem "X" 15) and a speaker who is situated variously in museums (sometimes named), a café, and a truck stop, or driving through a landscape which reminds her of the artist Cézanne. The poems share a thematic concern with gestures of grief and terror, or of comfort and solace, of how these feelings are expressed by the body, and of how they are depicted in visual art.

Throughout the sequence, Snow's use of the second person serves to implicate we, the readers in the action and thinking in the poems. In poem "II" we are invited to imagine how *we* might find comfort in positions of the body, "As half-asleep, one arm / bent, fist to the lips, both / legs together and folded up" (6). But

later, Snow expands on this search for comfort by suggesting how such actions might be both a means for seeking comfort and expressing horror:

So, the exhumation of murdered nuns

in El Salvador, priests and cameras
called to a makeshift grave (you had watched
in tarnished light): how the bodies

were awkwardly moved
(your hands clasped tightly together),
how they tangled and did not cover themselves. (poem "VIII" 13)

The full impact of the repeated images and ideas requires the sequence to be read in its entirety, but a writewithist close reading of three poems (contrasted with more traditional ekphrasis from W.H Auden) will illustrate, first, how Snow's poetry "lives with" and collaborates with the artworks she references and, secondly, how her work reflects an operative relationship that is "not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (Swensen 71).

Swensen describes the traditional ekphrastic stance as one in which the writer "remains not only mentally outside the visual piece, but often physically in opposition to it, literally standing across from it, in a kind of face-off, in a gallery or museum" (70). This traditional stance can be illustrated by Auden's poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts" which Heffernan, in *Museum of Words,* notes as an example of how modern ekphrasis continues to enact paragonal conflict within the context of the museum. The significance of Heffernan's introduction to Auden's poem is that he is

distinguishing Auden's poem from work that can be described as "notional ekphrasis," that is, an ekphrasis of an "imaginary painting wrought wholly with words" as is the case with Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess," which is set in an imaginary private gallery owned by an imaginary Renaissance Duke. (Heffernan 146).[4] However, Auden's ekphrasis has a particular relevance to my discussion because the poem's speaker is, to use Swensen's words, "literally standing across from [works of art] in a kind of face-off, in a gallery or museum," and like Snow's speaker, is concerned with the depiction of suffering. Auden's speaker is in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels and apparently looking at a collection of Breughel paintings.[5] Heffernan, in fact, notes that Auden could not have seen all the paintings in the same location but argues that the museum curator's label on the Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is an important component of the poem's overall effect (152).

The poem, written in 1938 and first published in 1939 as Europe prepared for the Second World War, famously begins with the observation, "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters: how well they understood / Its human position." The "human position" inferred in this poem is one of indifference to suffering: "it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." Auden had been a witness to events of the Sino-Japanese war of 1938 and some research suggests that aspects of his experiences can be discerned in this poem.[6] "Musée des Beaux Arts" consists of two stanzas; the first offers a

[4] The poem's epigraph is "Ferrara" and Heffernan acknowledges that the poem is "partly based in historical facts about an actual Duke of Ferrara" (141).
[5] Breughel is sometimes spelled Brueghel. Auden's poem refers to Brueghel, but Heffernan's discussion of Auden uses the spelling Breughel. In my discussion of Auden's poem, I follow Heffernan's spelling.
[6] Alexander Nemerov argues for this point of view in his essay "The Flight of Form: Auden, Bruegel and the Turn to Abstraction in the 1940s."

general description of aspects of four Breughel paintings establishing Auden's thematic concerns of indifference to suffering, while the second stanza focuses on one in particular, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.* Heffernan associates two Breughels, *The Census at Bethlehem* and *The Slaughter of the Innocents* (also known as *The Massacre of the Innocents*) with the first stanza. Other critics have also discerned details from *The Adoration of the Magi* and *The Road to Calvary* in Auden's descriptions.[7] Academic criticism of this poem dating from the 1960s provides detailed citations of books containing Breughel artworks so that readers can see the paintings referred to in the poem.[8] This information seems quaintly outdated in today's era of web searches, but it reinforces a perception of the painting as being not immediately available for viewing except by its representation in the words of the poem. In other words, it is a traditional ekphrastic verbal representation of visual representation.

In the first stanza, Auden uses the subject matter of Breughel's paintings to imply that the miraculous and the horrific occur while the world simply goes about its business unconcerned, as these lines referencing *The Slaughter of the Innocents* demonstrate:

> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
> Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
> Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
> Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

When Auden moves on to the second stanza, his speaker notes how Breughel depicts Icarus's fate as being unnoticed:

[7] See Bluestone 332-333.
[8] Bluestone 331-336; Kinney 529-531.

> In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
> Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry;
> But for him it was not an important failure…

The version of the painting that was hanging in Brussels at the time that Auden is known to have visited shows Icarus in the distance as a pair of white legs falling out of the sky into the sea while a ploughman, shepherd, and fisherman go about their business; meanwhile, an "expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on."

Heffernan's discussion of the paragonal qualities of Auden's poem focuses on the significance of words and text within both painting and poem. He notes that Breughel is believed to have used Ovid's account of the Icarus myth as inspiration for his painting. In traditional ekphrastic terms, then, Breughel has spatially represented a temporal narrative. However, when Auden viewed the painting, its subject (the white legs) would have only been obvious because of the curator's label naming the painting, as all the business occurring in the foreground of the painting with its ploughman, shepherd, and sailing ship overwhelms the small detail of the legs in the distance. Heffernan describes the relationship between poem and painting as a struggle between the "assertive power of the word" (151) and the image, by looking at the way that Auden represents Breughel's depiction of the crew on the sailing ship and the ploughman in the field as appearing not to notice Icarus falling:

> The assertive power of the word over the image in this narrative becomes all too clear as inferential subjunctives—mere conjectures about the story told by the picture—turn into unequivocal indicatives: the ploughman *may* have

> heard the splash and the cry, but for him it *was* unimportant; the ship *must have seen* an amazing sight but *sailed* calmly on. (151)

Heffernan's argument here is partly based on the grammatical construction of Auden's lines, but he is also pointing to the way that Breughel had added details such as the sailing ship to his painting that were not in Ovid. Heffernan argues that Auden uses those details and the museum curator's identifying label to "turn the painting itself into a verbal narrative of suffering wilfully ignored" (151). Heffernan argues that by representing the painting in the light of all the texts that surround it—Ovid, the museum curator's label that identifies the subject of Breughel's painting—Auden "remakes the picture in words as a museum-class specimen of how the Old Masters could represent suffering, as a story of private anguish, publicly ignored" (152). Heffernan's reading of the poem emphasizes the museum context of the painting and the poet's response to that viewing experience. In contrast, as I will demonstrate in my reading of Snow's ekphrasis of Giotto paintings of biblical scenes of distress and death, the difference between traditional ekphrasis and a writewithist stance is very much that of the degree to which the poet can be seen to be "living *with*" works of art rather than just "looking *at*" them.

Swensen defines "living with" in terms of how the poet demonstrates that art is no longer "isolated in a frame or institution, but an inseparable part of the daily—and the poetic—weave" (70), and by how the poem demonstrates "the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving, rather than as static objects" (71). Swensen argues that poems demonstrate these schemas when "[s]pecific artists are evoked, but are not the subject of the poems" (70) as such, or when poem and artwork are demonstrably sharing a context in terms of subject matter or form (collaging for instance) in order to express ideas or points of view. Swensen also points to poems in which the poet

"engages *with*, grapples *with*, visual art" (71). She describes this relationship between poem and artwork as collaboration. Poets who engage with the techniques and forms of visual art in a collaborative sense are expanding "upon traditional ekphrasis by deviating from it at the referential level, which is its habitual realm" (71). We can see this at work in Snow's "Positions of the Body," where rather than look at artworks only in the context of a museum as Auden's speaker does, Snow's speaker, in a writewithist sense, demonstrably lives with art.

Among Snow's writewithist strategies, all of which imply that her poems are "living with" and collaborating with works of art, are her evocation of multiple artworks, her translation of the formal elements of artworks to her poetry by using them as "models for formal construction" (Swensen 71) and her depiction of works of art as "just one more, albeit crucial, element of the everyday world" (Swensen 70). These strategies can be seen in three poems in particular: poems "IV," "VIII," and "X."

Snow begins poem "VIII" of "Positions of the Body" with her speaker declaring:

> You had wanted to go back, to
>
> step
>
> back in time, through art: before *Guernica;*
>
> *The Raft of the Medusa; Executions of 3rd May,1808*;
>
> before the weight of Christ's body,
>
> failing the rigid geometry of the cross,
>
> documented suffering. (poem "VIII" 12-13)

Here, by simply listing the paintings by title and in date order as if their relationship is obvious, Snow signals that she trusts that her readers will either know the

paintings or be able to locate reproductions of them. Secondly, in a move that demonstrates one way in which the arts become "modes of thinking and perceiving" (Swensen 71), Snow also depends upon the reader's understanding that quite specific depictions of the human body in attitudes of suffering are what is front of mind for the speaker of the poem. In Picasso's *Guernica*, for instance, women weep and wring their hands. Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* depicts dying shipwreck survivors in attitudes of supplication adrift on a raft. And in Francisco Goya's *Executions of 3rd May,1808* a French firing squad of the Peninsula War fires upon Spanish prisoners, one of whom stands, arms outstretched.

Having evoked these images, Snow's speaker encounters Giotto's *Crucifixion:*

… and Giotto

had chosen a greenish cast for the skin,

straining the upheld arms, skewing

the wounded torso and bent legs, bowing forward

the still face… (poem "VIII" 13)

It is helpful to note here that Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* is painted in sombre, murky greenish tones and the limbs of his semi-naked survivors are depicted straining upwards or bent over lengths of wood. In other words his figures call to mind depictions of Christ's body on the cross. In Goya's painting, the central figure with his arms upraised is clothed in a white shirt, making him stand out from the figures surrounding him who are depicted in dark clothing and with their hands to

their faces in gestures of despair and horror. Here, too, the central figure in this painting assumes a Christ-like pose so that it becomes clear that Snow has chosen paintings for this ekphrasis that evoke images of the Crucifixion. This movement "through art" that the speaker wishes for in the opening lines of the poem is both a physical and a metaphorical one, a move revealed in the last section of the poem in which the speaker recalls seeing a photograph "in tarnished light" of "the exhumation of murdered nuns // in El Salvador" in which the bodies "tangled and did not cover themselves" (poem "VIII"13). The idea of "tarnished light" implying something darkened, blemished or perhaps corroded seems to refer back to the dark shadows and sombre hues in the paintings that preceded the mention of the photograph, while the figures in the paintings presage the tangled bodies of the nuns. I am identifying this poem as writewithist ekphrasis because of the manner in which it shares contexts with the paintings it either evokes or describes. In poem "VIII," art is demonstrably an "inseparable part of the daily—and the poetic—weave" (Swensen 70) of the speaker's life. By collapsing the frames that separate painting from viewer so that it is not clear where painting and commentary begin and end, Snow makes art an integral part of her viewer's life. In this way, artworks provide her with a means for illustrating the relationship of the speaker to the girl introduced in poem "I" of the sequence who is being "held / in the ward, distracted and //failing" (5) and whose body makes the gestures for comfort that the speaker transforms into gestures of horror and grief as the sequence progresses.

A further demonstration of writewithist poetics occurs in poem "IV" where compositional elements of a painting become a metaphor for action and reflection within the poem. Poem "IV" is an ekphrasis of Giotto's *The Arrest of Christ (Kiss of Judas)*, which like *The Lamentation* and *The Crucifixion*, is part of the Scrovegni

Fresco Cycle. My reading of this poem, as a contrast to Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," explores how Snow's representation of formal elements within the painting demonstrates that in this poem, unlike Auden's, the arts are "modes of thinking and perceiving" (Swensen 71).

Auden begins his poem by naming the location of the paintings in the title and explicitly alludes to art by referencing "The Old Masters" before embarking upon a description of the ways in which Breughel depicts suffering in his paintings. Auden's stance is that of spectator engaged with the paintings within the context of a museum. In contrast, Snow's poem focuses not on the narrative depicted by the painting but on its compositional elements. As a result, the poem is not about the subject of the painting or the artist but instead, by focusing on its composition, is a meditation on stillness, movement, and balance in keeping with the thematic concerns of the other poems in the sequence.

One way that Snow signals that the narrative of the painting is not the focus of her poem is through her treatment of the human subjects who are referenced not for their religious significance, emotional evocations or even by name or title (Judas, Christ) but for form and colour before she moves on to give equal weight to the compositional elements of the painting. Poem "IV" begins with a one-line description of just such an unnamed man:

> The ill-shaven man is in profile
>
> Lips puckered, arms outstretched
> in a gesture of embrace so the bearded man,
> all but his face, is hidden in the yellow robe… (poem "IV" 8)

Viewers who understand the religious significance of Giotto's painting readily identify Judas and Christ as the focal points. Judas's yellow robe is opulent, richly folded and as eye catching as Christ's identifying halo. The gaze of the onlookers in the painting is fixed on the two central subjects and their spears and torches provide an almost electric energy which pierces the dark of the sky. In contrast, Snow mentions the "ill-shaven man" (Judas), the "bearded man" (Christ) and Judas's yellow robe in passing as she directs her reader's attention instead to the verticals of the torches and spears and their resemblance to masts:

> all but his face, is hidden by the yellow robe—the
>
> verticals
>
> of torches above them, the fanning
>
> of clubs and spears that helmeted men
>
> wield across sky. (Masts,
>
> shifting at the marina, angle
>
> and cross like that—abstract
>
> and perfect as the balance Giotto
>
> has captured in fresco: beyond fable or ritual
>
> embodiment;
>
> beyond the expression on Christ's face
>
> or on Judas's face, as their eyes meet.) (poem "IV" 8)

Snow accomplishes her ekphrastic move away from the narrative elements of the painting by her placement of the words "the verticals" and "masts." By separating

“the verticals” from the rest of line 4 with a long dash (made more noticeable by editorial decisions regarding layout) and then using a stanza break to further isolate the words in the white space of the page, Snow draws attention to the words. She makes the same compositional move with “masts” which is also placed at the end of a stanza. In this case, the word “masts” is enclosed by the first of a pair of parentheses between which Snow compares Giotto’s rendition of spears to masts in a marina. Masts that angle and cross in a marina are as “abstract / and perfect” as the compositional balance Giotto has achieved, which is “beyond” the meaning of the well-known narrative of betrayal that the painting depicts.

Snow later reactivates the metaphor of spears as masts “shifting at the marina” (poem “IV” 8) when she describes the visitors to the chapel shifting as they stand in front of the painting:

Visitors

line the Arena Chapel, crowded
before the artist’s work: they are still

and lost to themselves for a while; shifting;
lost for a while and still. (poem “IV” 9)

The perpendiculars of the spears and masts from earlier stanzas are now being mirrored by the figures of the visitors shifting in front of the “stilled” frescoes in the Chapel. Notions of perfect and abstract balance that the speaker discerns in the painting are mirrored by the syntactical similarities between the expressions “abstract and perfect,” and “angle and cross” describing the movement of the masts and the repetition of “still and lost” and “lost for a while and still” describing the spectators in the gallery.

Swensen comments that traditional ekphrastic practice implies "a mirroring action carefully positioned and constructed and can be, because of that, revealing, almost reflective of both poem/poet and art/artist" (69). Auden's poem, by focusing on the way that Breughel's ploughman and the sailors on the ship seem to be ignoring the events happening about them, can be read with hindsight as a reference to the impending war in Europe. Auden does not stray from the narrative of the paintings his speaker is considering. He finds material to illustrate his thematic concerns within the incidental narrative elements of the paintings by focusing his attention on children skating or dogs playing while massacres or Virgin births occur. Suffering takes place "[w]hile someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." In Lessing's terms, Auden's poem describes the temporal unfolding of the events that Breughel has depicted spatially frozen in time.

Snow's ekphrasis, however, takes a different path because Snow's speaker is interested in the depiction of position and stillness. Snow's verbal representation of Giotto's fresco and the act of viewing it, in sum, is an evocation of structural elements of the painting and its location rather than its narrative or themes. When she uses the painting as a kind of lens through which to look at the environment depicted in her poem (such as the crowds gathered in front of the painting) she is "underscoring the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving" (Swensen 71) rather than as modes in competition with each other. Keller speculates that the process of "living with art" with its implications of familiarity, whether of intimacy or resignation might "generate varying reconfigurations of the painting in one's thoughts" (105). This thought process might well incorporate knowledge of the religious significance of the scene depicted in Giotto's fresco but might equally evoke memories of the time and place of viewing or of tangential similarities

between artwork and physical environment such as those Snow incorporates into this poem.

The final poem of "Positions of the Body," poem "X," reflects on Picasso's *Guernica*. Here, Snow "lives *with*" Picasso's painting: that is, she uses it as a "model for formal construction" (Swensen 71) by collaging verbal phrases to mirror the visual fragments in the painting. *Guernica* is represented in this poem through the shifting, darting gaze of a viewer who notices more and more as her eyes navigate the artwork. Snow's construction of this poem resembles a texture of images scissored from the painting and placed on the page like the text Picasso implies in his painting with his newsprint-like black and white shading:

> (another woman—her shrill
> tongue a knife-edged scream she cannot loose, her child
> dripping from her arms—raises
> a tiny palm in her palm; and someone keeps
> burning, probably—hands splayed, eyes, face: everything pushing
> upward) … (poem "X" 15)

This poem is very much an example of what Swensen describes as "an operative relationship…not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (71). Snow verbally collages Picasso's visual symbols into her text in order to depict how the speaker is comparing the positions of the body of the girl in poem "I" to the "anguished, impossible / angle of panicked flight of the woman / caught in Picasso's *Guernica*" (15). In the extract above, Snow's verbal collaging also includes the use of parentheses to depict how the speaker is so disconcerted and horrified by some of the images in the painting—the woman with the "child dripping from her arms" and

the person “who keeps burning, probably”—that she needs to compartmentalise them to keep from being overwhelmed. In this poem, Snow merges the visual and verbal to convey grief and the desire for comfort. She verbally represents portions of the painting by reproducing Picasso’s images as words and by writing in a manner as disjointed as the images on his canvas.

However, partway through the poem, Picasso’s *Guernica* transforms into the predicament of “the girl / held in the ward” (poem “I” 5). Snow achieves this transformation in a section of six lines in which it initially seems that she is still referring to the woman at the centre of the painting, but it gradually becomes clear that she is attributing the gestures of Picasso’s figure to “the girl held in the ward”:

> … the body—
>
> dazed, in a debt of tears, a pale
> cartoon of grief—offers expressive
> gestures, importunate gestures;
>
> so that when there is no comfort, there is this: the willful
> body making its signs for comfort—
>
> *
>
> Say you were never that girl, taken and
> nameless, held mute in a dwindling
> litany of positions… (poem “X” 15)

In contrast, Auden's speaker never moves from his stance as a spectator of the Breughels in the museum. Auden focuses on the incidental details of each painting in order to make his point that suffering "takes place / While someone else is eating," but he doesn't reproduce the compositional qualities of the paintings, nor contradict the paragonal mindsight of traditional ekphrasis.

In sum, the traditional ekphrastic strategy as represented by Auden, focuses on the subject matter of the painting. Snow, exemplifying a writewithist strategy, "lives *with*" both the artist's techniques and the attitudes depicted in the painting by using each as a lens: the techniques as a lens on the painting and the painting as a lens on someone external to it. As many of the poems in "Positions of the Body" demonstrate, writewithist ekphrasis is not solely reliant on a reader's knowledge of named artworks for its impact. The author might instead rely, as Snow sometimes does, on a general evocation of the style of an artist or genre, or as Snow demonstrates in poem "X," the artist's intentions in creating the work in the first place. In writewithist ekphrasis, poem and artwork are involved in forms of collaboration.

I have dealt at length with ekphrasis of paintings in order to give a sense of the differences between traditional and writewithist approaches to ekphrasis. In "To Writewithize," Swensen extends the analogy of poem and artwork as "fellow travelers" by identifying works where, rather than using an artwork as subject matter for a poem, a poet has made use of verbal strategies equivalent to the visual strategies of an artist. Swensen describes this process as one of using the arts "as models for formal construction" (71) and as evidence that the arts are increasingly being seen as "modes of thinking and perceiving rather than as static objects" (71). The poetic exemplars Swensen uses in her essay are twentieth-century works that

represent a variety of different art forms, including sculpture, painting, surrealist installations, film, and photography. Aside from a brief description of Moriarty's *Nude Memoir* which "collaborates with" Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Duchamp's *Given*, and Berssenbrugge's *Sphericity,* which does not reference a work of art at all, Swensen does not provide a detailed discussion of what she means when she describes writers as using art works as "models for formal construction." In this chapter, then, I have focused on Carol Snow's sequence "Positions of the Body" as an example of ekphrasis that demonstrates writewithist strategies of collaboration, sharing contexts and living with art in contrast to more traditional forms of ekphrasis as exemplified by W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts." It is this mode of ekphrasis, and the notion of the "arts as modes of thinking and perceiving" that I intend to elaborate on in chapter two by exploring ekphrasis of photographs, followed by prose poem ekphrasis of photographs in chapter three. I will argue that the technology and aesthetics of photography have influenced how poets represent visual experience in ekphrasis of photographs and how readers respond to such poems. By viewing this development through a writewithist lens, I will argue that while photography has fundamentally changed our access to works of visual art by making them freely available out of the context of museum or gallery, photography has made a more significant contribution to ekphrasis by offering poets a model for how to represent modern life.

Chapter two

Ekphrasis and the Photograph

Introduction

Portrait #1

—*July 1911*

Here, I am to look casual, even
frowsy, though still queen of my boudoir.
A moment caught as if by accident—
pictures crooked on the walls, newspaper
sprawled on the dresser, a bit of pale silk
spilling from a drawer, and my slip pulled
below my white shoulders, décolleté,
black stockings, legs crossed easy as a man's.
All of it contrived except for the way
the flowered walls dominate the backdrop
and close in on me as I pose, my hand
at rest on my knee, a single finger
raised, arching toward the camera—a gesture
before speech, before the first word comes out.
(*Bellocq's Ophelia* 41)

The speaker in Natasha Trethewey's "Portrait #1" is one of a number of prostitutes photographed by E. J. Bellocq in the second decade of the twentieth century in

Storyville, an historic red-light district of New Orleans. The poem comes from Trethewey's 2002 book *Bellocq's Ophelia* in which Trethewey imagines a name and a life story for one of the anonymous subjects of Bellocq's photography project. Trethewey's speaker, the "Ophelia" of the title, is a conflation of several Bellocq portraits and is a light skinned black woman from one of the mixed-race brothels known to have existed in Storyville at the time. Like much of Trethewey's work, *Bellocq's Ophelia* is noteworthy for its portrayal and exploration of mixed-race identity in the context of North American social and political history. The issue of mixed-race identity is personal to Trethewey, who is biracial herself, and is an identity which she describes as "that liminal space of appearing to be one thing to people on the outside and having an inside that's different, something that people can't see" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). In one of the epigraphs to *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Trethewey quotes from Susan Sontag's *On Photography*: "Nevertheless, the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (Sontag 23). Sontag, who was writing about the role of photography in enabling us to understand the past, also argued that the photograph asks us to intuit "what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way" (23). Bellocq's photographs of women from the mixed-race brothels provide Trethewey with the means for exploring that reality in ekphrasis which uses photography and the camera as both metaphor and a narrative structural device. At the same time, Trethewey's ekphrasis also reveals how it is imbued with the many aesthetic and theoretical facets of what literary critic Michael North has termed "camera vision" (North 3).

Photographs have often provided Trethewey with material inspiration for her poetry; her collections *Domestic Work* (2000), *Native Guard* (2006), and *Thrall* (2012) also contain poems that reference photographs, photographers, and cameras.

My exploration of Trethewey's ekphrasis in *Bellocq's Ophelia* is partly from the perspective of photography as a pre-digital technology. In some poems, for instance, Trethewey's Ophelia refers to dark chambers, negatives, and plates. In other poems the speaker as poet notes how film deteriorates over time or how Bellocq's thumbprint is visible on a print. A second perspective is provided by the critical theory of photography. Trethewey is frequently asked about the relationship of photographs to her writing process, and her responses to such questions provide an insight into how a poet writing ekphrasis of photographs navigates a passage between photography and its associated theory, and the imagination. In an interview conducted in 2006, Trethewey described how her background research for *Bellocq's Ophelia* not only introduced her to the history associated with the photographs but also photography theory:

> This got me into trouble. When thinking theoretically about photography and the gaze, I would sit down sometimes and write poems that sounded like theory. At a certain point, I realized I had absorbed as much theory as I could…I pushed all the history and the theory aside and didn't look at it again until I began to revise and needed to fact-check. I don't want to misrepresent something, make it anachronistic. Therefore, when revising, I try to use whatever I've absorbed from the facts and theory, but also focus on the imagery. (Trethewey, "Kaplan Interview" 38)

Elsewhere, Trethewey stated that her interest in photographs was as much about what the photographer had cropped out of the image as what had been captured. She believes that "the photographic image is a way to focus our attention, and it can be the starting point for a larger exploration of what else is there" (Trethewey, "McHaney Interview" 108). This perspective is closely aligned to my discussion

later in this chapter of Trethewey's interest in Roland Barthes's term *punctum,* but it also illustrates how the author approaches photographs by combining an aesthetic response with intellectual inquiry.

In the first part of the chapter that follows, Trethewey's "Portrait #1" introduces a discussion of how the theorization of photography contributes to the construction and critical reception of poems about photographs. This discussion begins with an examination of the role played in ekphrasis by an "implied viewer" (Swensen 70) before expanding to consider how Trethewey's ekphrasis of photographs reflects Walter Benjamin's concepts of the optical unconscious and aura, and Roland Barthes's concepts of *punctum* and *studium.* I argue that in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, the "camera vision" (North 3) of Trethewey's implied viewer(s) supplies both metaphorical and emotional freight for an exploration of the reality of the lives of Bellocq's subjects. Further, Trethewey's ekphrasis reveals how her personal "camera vision" has allowed her to "live with" and "share contexts" (Swensen 70) with Bellocq's photographs.

My exploration of Trethewey's engagement with photography theory in her ekphrasis provides a platform from which to then consider Carol Snow's sequence "Artist and Model" from *Artist and Model* in the second part of this chapter. Snow's work in "Artist and Model" provides me with an example of ekphrasis that uses photography as both a mode of "thinking and perceiving" and as "a model for [its] formal construction" (Swensen 71). In chapter one, I explored Snow's writewithist ekphrasis in her sequence "Positions of the Body" from *Artist and Model* to investigate how the poems "lived with" the artworks that were the subjects of the poems. The artworks referenced in that sequence encompassed a wide variety of artforms depicting grief and trauma from Renaissance painting though to twentieth-

century sculpture. In “Artist and Model” however, Snow’s ekphrastic subject is one of a series of photographs of the artist Matisse at work in his studio taken by Brassaï in 1939. As with the artworks in “Positions of the Body,” Snow does not simply look at Brassaï’s photographs in “Artist and Model”: instead, she interrogates the image in order to use its photographic aesthetics—its vantage point, its framing of the scene and its detail—as a framework on which to construct her poems. Trethewey uses the camera and photography as metaphor in *Bellocq’s Ophelia*, but in “Artist and Model” the camera is subsumed into the implied viewer’s psyche. Such differences in approach to ekphrasis of photographs—Trethewey’s use of photograph and camera as metaphor and Snow’s work in which the reader is aware of photograph and lens as a component of the “camera vision” of her speaker—provide me with the means for elaborating on the writewithist ekphrasis Swensen roughly sketched out by showing how it might operate both as sharing a context (Trethewey) and as using the image as a model for the formal construction of the poem (Snow).

Sharing a context with photographs in Natasha Trethewey’s *Bellocq’s Ophelia*

Among the epigraphs to Cole Swensen’s essay “To Writewithize” is Gertrude Stein’s aphorism “I write entirely with my eyes.” Swensen’s use of this expression in an essay about modes of ekphrasis is an indication of the importance of the role of a speaker who is what Swensen calls an “implied viewer” (Swensen 70) and who, by implication, “writes with eyes.” While Swensen makes no references in her essay to the way in which the aesthetics and theorization of photography might impact on an implied viewer, in this chapter I will argue that photography has often provided ekphrasis with both the vocabulary and the visual experiences that shape how the act of looking is expressed.

By emphasizing the ekphrastic gaze as one which is fluid rather than fixed, Swensen indicates that the implied viewer is an active collaborator with the subject of the ekphrasis. Rather than being confined to the traditional "stand-off in a gallery or museum" (70), this kind of viewer selects vantage point and frame for her gaze from both within and without the artwork. The implied viewer(s) in the poems in *Bellocq's Ophelia* provide Trethewey's ekphrasis with multiple perspectives and, as Swensen remarked about Snow's ekphrasis, Trethewey's viewer sometimes "looks and sometimes is looked at" (70) as she speaks out of the frame of the photograph.

My discussion of *Bellocq's Ophelia* as writewithist ekphrasis is focused on the way that Trethewey's ekphrasis and Bellocq's photographs can be viewed as "fellow travelers sharing a context" (Swensen 70). The context in this case is photography: Bellocq's photography project which presented the biracial prostitutes of Storyville through a sympathetic lens, and Trethewey's poetic exploration of the aesthetics and technology of photography as a means for presenting the experience of being biracial. In her essay about Bellocq's photographs, Susan Sontag observed that the pictures were much more than voyeuristic images of prostitutes:

> Central to the impression the pictures make on us is that there are a large number of them, with the same setting and cast in a variety of poses, from the most natural to the most self-conscious, and degrees of dress/undress. That they are part of a series is what gives the photographs their integrity, their depth, their meaning. Each individual picture is informed by the meaning that attaches to the whole group. ("Sinful Flesh")

Trethewey's context sharing with these images is three-fold: the subjects of the photographs were known to be biracial, and Trethewey wished to explore the experience of mixed-race identity in her poems; her implied viewer becomes a

photographer and thus explores the technology and aesthetics of photography; and like Bellocq's photographs, *Bellocq's Ophelia* is a collection in which each poem "is informed by the meaning that attaches to the whole group" (Sontag "Sinful Flesh"). My exploration of *Bellocq's Ophelia* as writewithist ekphrasis considers how Bellocq's photographs provide Trethewey with both a frame and a source for the emotional centre of individual poems and the collection as a whole.

Bellocq's photographs are notable for the way in which his subjects appear to be collaborating with his camera by posing as if they are participating in a kind of photographic project. Some of the women are masked, others partly dressed or naked and many appear to be acting a part, albeit self-consciously, or sharing a joke with the photographer. When the images were discovered and exhibited in the 1970s and later collected in a reprint of the Museum of Modern Art catalogue with an accompanying critical essay, they were presented not as erotica but "in the morally acceptable art historical tradition of the female nude" (Rindge and Leahy 293). Trethewey's book traverses this transformation of the images by presenting Ophelia as an educated woman who becomes accustomed to being viewed through a lens and then takes up photography herself, aware of "…the way the camera can dissect // the body, render it reflecting light / or gathering darkness…" ("September 1911" 27).

Trethewey constructed a persona for Ophelia by casting her reading of Bellocq's images into Ophelia's voice in two sequences within the book. These sequences, "Storyville Letters" and "Storyville Diaries," tell slightly different versions of the same story reflecting the difference between an external version of the self which might be conveyed to others in a letter and a more private, internal version such as might be confided to a diary (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1029). The sequences are framed by three poems in a different voice that Trethewey

describes as being "the voice of the viewer, who is looking at the photographs, that voice which is closest to the poet's" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1029). Trethewey then has two implied viewers in *Bellocq's Ophelia* who represent quite distinct ekphrastic approaches—that of the speaker-poet and that of Ophelia. The "voice that is closest to the poet's" is more distanced, more focused on what she is representing but at the same time, as I discuss below, she reflects that part of the photograph that is emotionally appealing to a viewer. The voice of Ophelia, on the other hand, reflects the experiences of a subject of Bellocq's photographs who becomes a practitioner of photography herself. Her voice is that of an implied viewer who "shifts constantly: at times it's the 'I,' which sometimes looks and sometimes is looked at," as Swensen wrote about Snow (Swensen 70), but often it is a voice who represents her world as if through the lens of a camera.

Bellocq's Ophelia begins with the poet's voice, which introduces Ophelia in the titular poem, "Bellocq's Ophelia." In this poem, she compares a Bellocq photograph of a nude woman to John Everett Millais's 1850s Pre-Raphaelite painting of Shakespeare's Ophelia drowning and surrounded by flowers:

> a woman posed on a wicker divan, her hair
> spilling over. Around her, flowers—
> on a pillow, on a thick carpet. Even
> the ravages of this old photograph
> bloom like water lilies across her thigh. (3)

Trethewey, aware that Millais's subject had caught a chill posing for hours in a bath of lukewarm water, compares the painted Ophelia's passivity— "…Ophelia's final gaze / aims skyward, her palms curling open / as if she's just said, *Take me*." — to Bellocq's subject in whose face she discerns a "dare":

Staring into the camera, she seems to pull

all movement from her slender limbs

and hold it in her heavy-lidded eyes.

Her body limp as dead Ophelia's,

her lips poised to open, to speak. (3)

Trethewey's use of the term viewer to describe the "voice that is closest to the poet's" is closely aligned to her narrative intentions in *Bellocq's Ophelia*; this viewer has a structural role in the book that is predicated on her looking at and deciphering the images so that Ophelia can speak out of the photographs and reveal the unseen realities of her life. Swensen used the term viewer more globally, substituting the term "implied viewer" for the more usual "implied speaker" and applies it to the voice in ekphrasis. I argue that Swensen's use of the term has particular resonance for ekphrasis of photographs because the viewer's means of representing the visual world in poetry has been shaped whether they are aware of this or not by the invention of the photograph. Thus I will argue that, in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Trethewey's poems not only describe photographs, as the poet's voice does in "Bellocq's Ophelia" and in the final poem "Vignette," but when they are presented in Ophelia's voice, they "live with" and "share contexts" with the photographs by incorporating concepts and ideas derived from the aesthetics and theorization of photography.

In order to understand the role of the implied viewer in ekphrasis of photographs, it is helpful to consider some aspects of the camera's impact on literary description. In a discussion of "camera vision," Michael North argues that the invention of the camera has shaped the way visual experiences are described and that "certain oddities of the camera, especially its tendency to frame particular points of

view and to isolate one moment from another, have become second nature for human observers as well" (3). In *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Trethewey implicitly attributes to Ophelia this understanding of the camera's impact on visual experience by having her note, "On the crowded street I want to stop / time, hold it captive in my dark chamber—" ("(Self) Portrait" 46). In "March 1911" from the "Letters from Storyville" sequence, Ophelia thinks of herself in terms of a framed image bleached by the arsenic that was commonly used to lighten skin colour, "Whiter still, I am a reversed silhouette / against the black backdrop where I pose, now, / for photographs…" (20). In these examples, Ophelia's "camera vision" represents her understanding of how the "dark chamber" of the camera works, and the image described in the letter "March 1911," presages "Photography" a poem from "Storyville Diaries" dated October 1911, in which she observes:

> …In the negative
> the whole world reverses, my black dress turned
> white, my skin blackened to pitch. *Inside out*,
> I said, thinking of what I've tried to hide. (43; italics in original)

In these poems, ideas associated with photography are metaphors for Trethewey's exploration of "the liminal space" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028) of mixed-race identity. Trethewey's use of such metaphors illustrates North's contention that photography-based metaphors have become "second nature for human observers" (North 3).

The camera lens also records what the human eye cannot see, such as movement recorded in slow motion capture, or the details revealed by extreme closeups. In his canonical 1931 essay "A Little History of Photography" theorist Walter Benjamin described such attributes of photography as examples of "the

optical unconscious." Benjamin suggested that photography reveals the optical unconscious in the same way that psychoanalysis reveals the instinctual unconscious. He writes about photography revealing "image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams" (279). He praises the highly magnified plant photographs of Karl Blossfeldt in which nature appeared to show that it had the same forms as those of architectural or cultural objects such as "the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishops crozier in the ostrich fern" (279).

The camera lens in Benjamin's thinking augmented and amplified the eye and provided access to new knowledge about what was visible in the natural world. While Trethewey frequently mentions in interviews how her writing process was affected by her knowledge of Barthes's *punctum*, it seems that she is equally influenced, knowingly or unknowingly, by the properties of photography described by Benjamin. For instance, she attributes to Ophelia the knowledge of Benjamin's "image worlds." Ophelia is depicted as being drawn to things that shimmer and are iridescent like fish scales, gold letters on the apothecary's window and "the camera's way of capturing / the sparkle of plain dust floating on air" ("September 1911" 27). The poem "March 1912," subtitled "*Postcard, en route westward*," offers a series of miniature close ups—new leaves, "the wet grass throbbing / with crickets" (33) and in the last stanza, a description of the kind of highly detailed image that Benjamin admires in Blossfeldt:

> …Now,
>
> I feel what trees must—
> budding, green sheaths splitting—skin

that no longer fits. (33)

The "postcard" is an artefact which suggests a photographic image framed by the edges of the card on which it is printed. Ophelia, likening her new life to the new buds on the trees, suggests that her skin no longer fits with what she now knows about life. In making this analogy, she seems to be referring to what the photographer Blossfeldt demonstrated in his highly magnified photographs of plant forms and to the slow-motion capture of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge whose work Benjamin refers to but does not name.[9] In all these examples Trethewey attributes Ophelia with an understanding of the technology and thinking associated with photography. This move serves to give agency to Ophelia, so she is not relegated solely to being a subject of Bellocq's lens and a viewer's gaze. The Ophelia who understands photographic process is able to choose what she discloses.

The optical unconscious is not the only element of Benjamin's theorization of the photograph revealed in Trethewey's work. In the final poem "Vignette," Trethewey's ekphrasis evokes aspects of Benjamin's concept of "aura" and in particular his discussion in "A Little History of Photography" of aura in relation to nineteenth-century portraits. "Vignette" is an ekphrasis of a Bellocq portrait of a seated woman dressed in "white, a rhinestone choker, fur, / her dark crown of hair—an elegant image" (47). The woman appears pensive, slightly frowning, looking off to the side.[10] Trethewey has described this portrait as one which had initially piqued her interest because the woman seemed sad. The subject's furrowed brow made her think that Bellocq had waited for the moment when the "subject seems most real, most unguarded… [the moment when] she's no longer thinking about where she is.

[9] See "Little History of Photography" p. 278-9 where Benjamin describes slow motion capture of the human gait.

[10] Bellocq, Ernest J. *untitled.* ca. 1912. Museum of Modern Art https://www.moma.org/collection/works/44649.

She's no longer aware that Bellocq is taking her picture, and she has entered deeply into her own thoughts" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1029). Trethewey's practice was to begin with the photograph and "move to the imagination, which is an act of interpretation" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028) and the resulting poem imagines Bellocq putting the woman at her ease by telling her an anecdote about a circus coming to town:

> she's no longer listening; she's forgotten
> he's there. Instead she must be thinking
> of her childhood wonder at seeing
> the contortionist in a sideshow—how
> he could make himself small, fit
> into cramped spaces, his lungs
> barely expanding with each tiny breath.
> She thinks of her own shallow breath—
> her back straining the stays of a bustier,
> the weight of a body pressing her down.
> Picture her face now as she realizes
> that it must have been harder every year,
> that the contortionist, too, must have ached
> each night in his tent. This is how
> Bellocq takes her, her brow furrowed
> as she looks out to the left, past all of them. (47-48)

Trethewey's ekphrastic engagement with the woman's pensive gaze recalls Benjamin's discussion of aura as a consequence of a subject's gaze in "A Little History of Photography." Aura is a complex concept relating to the impact of the

advent of technologies of reproduction on the authority of works of art and is a concept that evolved over some years in Benjamin's writings as he frequently redefined and explained it. In her essay on Benjamin and aura, Carolin Duttlinger argues that Benjamin developed a particular concept of aura in "A Little History of Photography" that emphasises interaction between the viewer of the portrait and its subjects. In his essay, Benjamin introduces a discussion of three photographic portraits by observing that until the invention of photography, a viewer's interest in painted portraits survived after the sitter's death only as "testimony to the art of the painter" (276) and the subject was often forgotten. Photography introduced something different, something "that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in 'art'" (276). Duttlinger argues that Benjamin's discussion of a photograph of the photographer Dauthendey and his second wife,[11] endows his development of the idea of aura with "a particular interpretive dynamic" (Duttlinger 84) related to the gaze of the subjects. It is this dynamic that has relevance to my exploration of Trethewey's use of Bellocq's portraits. Benjamin was aware that one of Dauthendey's wives had committed suicide and that knowledge consequently colours his reading of the image.[12] He notes her gaze; how she sits beside her husband, "but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance. Immersed long enough in such a picture, one

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[11] Dauthendey, Karl. *Self-Portrait with Fiancée*. Telos productions, http://www.telos.tv/as-we-are/karl-dauthendey-self-portrait-with-fiancee-1857.

[12] See Duttlinger 84 n6. In fact, Benjamin was mistaken and believed that the portrait shows Dauthendey's first wife who committed suicide, whereas the portrait in question is of Dauthendey's second wife.

recognises to what extent opposites touch" (276). Benjamin argued that his reading of the portrait was a consequence of a "magical value" inherent in a photograph:

> No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible compulsion to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, the here and now, with which reality has…seared through the image-character of the photograph. (276)

When Trethewey tells her interviewer that she was drawn to the portrait that inspired the poem "Vignette" because of the way that the woman seemed to have "deeply entered into her own thoughts" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1029) she is, in a sense, responding to the photograph's aura in the same way that Benjamin responded to the portrait of Dauthendey and his wife. In the same way that Benjamin imagined that he could see the tragic future of Dauthendey's wife in the portrait, Trethewey uses her thoughts about the Bellocq photograph to attribute Ophelia with anxieties about her future. Ophelia is depicted as being anxious about how difficult it could be to continue to maintain the appearance that makes her desirable to the customers of the brothel in which she works. But, unlike Benjamin's analysis of his photograph, Trethewey gives Ophelia a more positive future: "Imagine her a moment later—after / the flash, blinded—stepping out / of the frame, wide-eyed into her life" (48).

Trethewey describes photographs as representing a moment that has passed and observes that she has "always been a little obsessed with the way photographs hold and create an object out of that moment. And I've often thought if you look at a photograph, if you really study the gestures and expressions that the people have in the photograph, you could see the rest of their lives, everything that's to come" (Trethewey, "Petty Interview" 364). While a similar belief inspired Benjamin to

analyse his portrait for evidence of what he thought he knew about the subjects, Trethewey used her image to augment her construction of the subject's imagined life.

Trethewey describes Benjamin's "irresistible compulsion to search for the tiny spark of contingency" in different terms when she was interviewed about *Bellocq's Ophelia*. She uses the expression *punctum* which she describes as "those little things within a photograph that often will draw you out of the immediate action of the photograph to contemplate all that is behind it or outside of it" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). If aura is a term associated with Benjamin's writings on photography, *punctum* and *studium* are terms from *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes's canonical work in which he set out to "learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself'" (3). The relationship of Benjamin's "spark of contingency" to Barthes's notion of *punctum* has been well traversed in critical literature[13] but *punctum and studium* are important terms for a study of ekphrasis of photographs because *punctum* inevitably contributes to the emotional content of the poem. Trethewey only refers to *punctum* when she discusses the theoretical imperatives behind her ekphrasis of photographs, but both *studium* and *punctum* are important to an analysis of the ekphrasis in *Bellocq's Ophelia*.

Barthes describes *studium* as that part of a photograph in which the photographer's intentions are clear to a viewer: "[t]o recognise the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with

[13] See Duttlinger 85-86 in which she notes that Benjamin's discussion of the "magical value" inherent in a photograph anticipates Barthes's theory of the *punctum*; Dant and Gilloch for a discussion of Barthes's and Benjamin's approach to how photographs evoke an historical awareness of being both in the present and in the past. They argue that Benjamin's "spark of contingency" is related to how viewers engage with the culture of an entire era, whereas Barthes's *punctum* is a personal emotional response to the photograph.

them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them…" (27-28). When Trethewey references the backgrounds in Bellocq's images in her poems, she is acknowledging the *studium* of the photographs. Thus, "the flowered walls dominate the backdrop" in "Portrait #1" (41) and in "Blue Book," "Bellocq's black scrim just covers the laundry – / tea towels, bleached and frayed, drying on the line" (40). The *studium* of Bellocq's photographs is undoubtedly linked to their historical interest—Trethewey notes for instance that research by others has identified that the wallpaper in the background to some of the photographs provides a verifiable link to Mahogany Hall, a brothel run by a mixed-race woman named Lula (Lulu) White (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). These details are historically interesting to a viewer looking for evidence of location or the photographer's practice in organising his shots and Barthes describes this kind of *studium* as the thing that interests him in many photographs because "it is culturally…that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions" (26).

Barthes defines *punctum* as that "accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). *Punctum* is often an incidental part of a photograph and its capability for "wounding" highly dependent on the person who is looking. Barthes describes *punctum* in different ways in *Camera Lucida* as he attempts to distinguish its wounding effect from the general interest of *studium.* He is clear, for instance, that *punctum* is not something that a photographer can deliberately make part of a photograph—it isn't an artifice—and further, *punctum* sometimes only become apparent when a viewer stops actively looking at an image and instead mentally recalls it:

> I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*. (53)

Barthes illustrates what he means by describing a portrait of a family group taken by photographer James Van Der Zee (43). Barthes first identifies as *punctum* the strapped Mary Jane pumps on one of the women in the image, but then later corrects this identification to her necklace which reminds him of one worn by his maiden aunt[14] and by association, "her dreary life" (53).

When Trethewey describes *punctum* as "those little things within a photograph that often will draw you out of the immediate action of the photograph" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028), she is providing an insight into her writing practice while also illustrating two interrelated elaborations on the power of *punctum* Barthes made in *Camera Lucida.* Barthes describes *punctum* in terms of its metonymic power (45) and also associates it with the "blind field" of cinema (57). Both concepts are represented in Trethewey's discussions about her work in *Bellocq's Ophelia*. Barthes introduces the idea that a *punctum* has a metonymic power when he describes how *punctum* have a "power of expansion" that enable him to recognise with his "whole body" the significance of the detail that had "pricked" him (45). Thus, a dirt road in a 1921 Kertész photograph of a blind violinist, captures Barthes's attention because it reminds him powerfully of his experiences in Central Europe.

[14] As Margaret Olin points out in her essay "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's Mistaken Identification," Barthes in fact recalls a thin gold necklace, whereas the subject of the Van Der Zee portrait is wearing a string of pearls. She notes that a portrait of the aunt exists in which she is wearing this necklace and that "[w]hen Barthes's memory replaced the pearls with the necklace that should have been there, the aunt…magically appeared" (80).

The metonymic power of *punctum* is further expanded if it is considered in terms of a "blind field" (57). Barthes begins his discussion of the "blind field" of a photograph by comparing photographs to film. He argues that film goers sense that the characters the actors play on screen continue living away from what can be seen at that moment on the screen: "a 'blind field' constantly doubles our partial vision" (57). That is, even when the film is focused on one character in particular, our imaginations allow us to believe that all the other characters are engaged elsewhere in their lives. A photograph, on the other hand, does not have a blind field unless there is a *punctum*. Without *punctum* the figures in a photograph "do not *emerge*, do not *leave*: they are anaesthetised and fastened down, like butterflies" (57). A viewer's identification of *punctum* enables a blind field to be created so that, for instance, once Barthes had noticed the necklace on the woman with her strapped Mary Jane pumps, she had "a whole life external to her portrait" (57).

It seems that for Trethewey, the "blind field" of the photograph, originating in its *punctum*, is what enables her to "enter the realm of the imagination…which is an act of interpretation" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). In a 2003 interview, she explained that she viewed *punctum* as "that little part that becomes an entrance into seeing the photograph as just a frame in a longer, ongoing narrative or a sequence of events…The photograph's just one frame, like in a film" (Trethewey, "Haney Interview" 19). One example of such an "ongoing narrative" occurs in the poem "Photograph of a Bawd Drinking Raleigh Rye," an ekphrasis of a Bellocq portrait of a woman wearing distinctive striped stockings. Trethewey notes that the woman appears to be twirling a shot glass— "that's the *punctum* for me in that photograph because she refused to hold still and thus the blur that occurs right there reminds us that this is not simply a moment that can be frozen and captured but that

it is representative of an ongoing sequence of events" (Trethewey, "Haney Interview" 19). The poem begins with the *punctum* that Trethewey identified: "The glass in her hand is the only thing moving— / too fast for the camera—caught in the blur of motion" (34). Trethewey describes this poem as being in Bellocq's voice (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1030), and it presents the woman in the portrait in a manner that suggests Bellocq's own gaze. Trethewey invites her viewer / reader to behave like a camera lens; to begin low with the woman's feet and "those striped stockings like roads, traveling the length of her calves and thighs" before focusing "on her bare shoulder and the patch of dark hair // beneath her arm, the round innocence of her cheeks / and Gibson-girl hair" (34). Next, the lens of the poem investigates the room, lingering on "trinkets on the table" and paintings on the wall. The speaker concludes, "It's easy to see this is all about desire" (34). In this poem, Trethewey has given agency to the woman in the striped stockings. She won't hold still, and she's depicted in surroundings she seems to have made her own. She has a life outside this captured moment.

Two further Bellocq photographs depict women who appear to be about to speak. The captured movement of lips or, in one case a raised finger, encouraged Trethewey to relate the photographs to her desire to give Bellocq's subjects a voice. Giving her subjects a voice was important for Trethewey who had seen in the photographs the opportunity to find a "persona through whom I might identify aspects of my own mixed-race experience growing up in the Deep South" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1027). In the poem "Bellocq's Ophelia" for instance, Trethewey notes the partly opened lips of the woman posing on the wicker divan, "Her lips poised to open, to speak" (3). In "Portrait #1," Ophelia has been captured with her finger raised:

… I pose, my hand

at rest on my knee, a single finger

raised, arching toward the camera—a gesture

before speech, before the first word comes out. (41)

In both these poems, the action of speaking out occurs in the last lines, as if in making a verbal representation of the image, Trethewey has saved her *punctum* for the last moment as a means of making clear that this gesture is the emotional centre of the poem.

The gesture of the raised finger in "Portrait #1," signals a poignant analogy between Trethewey's interest in *punctum* as the inspiration for her poetry and Barthes's search for the meaning of photographs. When Barthes was writing *Camera Lucida* he was in mourning for his mother, and her death prompted him to search for a photograph of her that captured the essence of her personality. He found such an image in a photograph of her as a young child, standing in a "Winter Garden" conservatory with her brother and posing with her finger enclosed in the other hand "as children often do" (69). His discovery and his focus on her finger enabled him to recall all the facets of her personality that other photographs had not elicited. While there are several photographs reproduced in *Camera Lucida*, this image is not among them because, as Barthes explains, a *punctum* is personal and for his readers the photograph could only represent *studium*. The Winter Garden photograph is poignant for Barthes because his mother's gesture with her finger enables him to recall "[t]he distinctness of her face, the naïve attitude of her hands, the place she had docilely taken without either showing or hiding herself…In this little girl's image I saw the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever, without her having inherited it from anyone" (69). In many ways, Trethewey's search for a persona in

the Bellocq photographs that would enable her to depict mixed-race experience and "investigate those recesses of the soul that might be harder to convey to others" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1027) has parallels with Barthes's discussion of his mother's photograph and of how the *punctum* of her finger became the catalyst for his memories of her. For Barthes, finding the photograph was a turning point—it achieved for him "*the impossible science of the unique being*" (71) and enabled him to articulate that a photograph derived its personal meaning from *punctum* and that *punctum* depended on a sense of "*that-has-been*" (77). Ophelia's raised finger in "Portrait #1" performs a similar function in Trethewey's poem. Where Barthes saw evidence of kindness and a degree of self-effacement in his mother's posture in her childhood portrait, "Portrait #1"—a verbal representation of visual representation—encourages us to see evidence of the speaker's self-awareness. Ophelia knows what she looks like in this photograph, and she wants to tell us about it. Her finger is "raised, arching toward the camera—a gesture before speech, before the first word comes out" (41).

My readings of *Bellocq's Ophelia* have been predominantly through the lens of photography and photography theory. This approach was encouraged by Trethewey's published explanations of her work, many of which focus on how she works with photographs in order to locate the *punctum* that opened the way for her imagination to enter the image. As I have shown, it is possible to locate examples of photography theory such as *punctum* or Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious in *Bellocq's Ophelia* and to attribute such knowledge to Ophelia in the poems where she has acquired a camera. In *Bellocq's Ophelia* and its associated critical responses, Trethewey demonstrates how photographs and the technology of the camera have provided her with a context in which to explore, via metaphor or in

the point of view of her persona, the "liminal space of appearing to be one thing to people on the outside and having an inside that's different, something that people can't see" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028).

Trethewey's approach to ekphrasis is also writewithist. Swensen describes modes of ekphrasis in which poem and artwork are "presumed to be going in the same direction and at the same speed; they are fellow travelers sharing a context" (70). In *Bellocq's Ophelia*, this shared context is Bellocq's Storyville photography project and, by association, the art of photography itself. Bellocq's Storyville portraits provide the subject for Trethewey's poems in which Ophelia appears as a willing and knowing participant in Bellocq's project. The subjects of Bellocq's photographs are prostitutes and many appear naked or partially clothed, but as Sontag notes, the fact that these photographs are part of a series gives them an integrity, depth, and meaning ("Sinful Flesh"). Trethewey's ekphrasis performs a similar function by affording the same integrity, depth, and meaning to the life story she has imagined for one of the women in Bellocq's portraits.

In the next section of this chapter, I explore Snow's sequence "Artist and Model" in which a photograph combined with camera vision has provided a model for the formal construction of a sequence of ekphrastic poems which also centre on a photograph of a nude woman.

Photography as a model for formal construction in Carol Snow's "Artist and Model"

As in *Bellocq's Ophelia,* photographs and photography are at the centre of Carol Snow's sequence "Artist and Model" from her collection *Artist and Model.* And, like *Bellocq's Ophelia,* a photograph of a woman posing nude provides inspiration and

an emotional centre for ekphrasis. While Trethewey's practice of using *punctum* as her entry point to an imaginative biography of her subject is well documented, Snow's approach to her originating photographs has not been the subject of similar critical investigation. In this section, my exploration of Snow's work is concerned with how a writewithist aesthetic is manifested in her use of photography as the inspiration for ekphrasis. As in her sequence "Positions of the Body," Snow's ekphrasis in "Artist and Model" is less about looking at an artwork, in this case a photograph, than it is about interrogating its aesthetics for how she can incorporate the photographer's strategies into her writing. Snow achieves this effect through her implied viewer's camera vision and by her creative exploitation of the metonymic characteristics of the photograph's *punctum*. In my analysis of "Artist and Model" I explore how Snow exploits the *punctum* of a photograph to create a sequence in which each poem reflects that *punctum's* capability for wounding.

In "Artist and Model," Snow intersperses three ekphrases of a photograph by Brassaï of the artist Matisse at work in his studio with three more personal poems in which the speaker considers the view from her window of houses in a street. These personal poems are linked thematically to the ekphrasis via recurring motifs of resemblance and metamorphosis derived from the myth of Daphne and Apollo. The sequence is notable for the manner in which Snow uses both the aesthetics of the photograph and excerpts from published accounts of Matisse's artistic practice as models for the formal construction of individual poems and for the sequence as a whole.[15] My exploration of "Artist and Model" considers the sequence in terms of both the linked emotional content of the poems and Snow's writewithist ekphrasis of

[15] In her acknowledgments Snow lists as her sources: Brassaï. *The Artists of My Life.* Penguin, 1982; Flam, Jack D. *Matisse on Art.* Phaidon, 1973. The statements attributed to Matisse in the poems come from these books.

the photograph. My discussion is principally concerned first with how Snow provides a sense of poem and photograph displaying mutual "modes of thinking and perceiving" (Swensen 71) that can be directly attributed to the inherent attributes of a photograph. Secondly, I point to the manner in which Snow uses the photograph as "a model for formal construction" (Swensen 71) of her poems.

The Daphne and Apollo myth is central to both the emotional content of the poems and their sequencing. For this reason I begin with a brief summary of the myth followed by a discussion of how it provides a recurring motif throughout the poems as context for my argument that the myth is embodied in the *punctum* of the photograph. Daphne is the daughter of the river god Peneus and a devotee of Artemis the goddess of hunting. Daphne has dedicated herself to perpetual virginity and has persuaded her father to allow her to remain unmarried. Apollo, the brother of Artemis, is the god of music, art, poetry, and the sun. He is also a great warrior and mocks Eros, the god of love, for his use of the bow and arrow. Eros retaliates by shooting a golden arrow into Apollo to instil in him a passion for Daphne and a leaden arrow into Daphne to make her hate Apollo. Apollo pursues Daphne, who flees from him and begs her father to help her by changing her form. Peneus changes Daphne into a laurel tree, a metamorphosis which enables her to escape the sexual desire of Apollo and preserve her virginity. Apollo vows to continue to honour her by making the laurel tree evergreen and adopting wreathes made from her branches as a cultural symbol for himself, poets, and musicians. My reading of the emotional content of "Artist and Model" is interpreted against the events of this myth and my discussion focuses on Snow's representation of ideas to do with sexuality, resemblance, and metamorphosis in the personal poems which then provide the emotional content of the ekphrases. I also argue that all the poems, and not just the

overtly ekphrastic ones, should be read as integral elements of Snow's writewithist ekphrasis because her speaker is demonstrably an "implied viewer" (Swensen 70) whose visual and verbal experiences are coloured by the "habit of seeing photographically" (North 3).

Specifically, the emotional content of the sequence is dependent on what the viewer sees and how she interprets it, such that the action in the personal poems is reflected in the ekphrasis with which they are interspersed. In the first personal poem, "The House Opposite," for instance, the viewer sits on her bed and notices that when she tilts her head, the view through her window of the houses in the street opposite is unstable. Shadows change and the white house opposite seems like a face, which she compares to "Picasso's eyes...those dark windows" (27). She imagines herself "betrothed" to the face and wants "to be watched sleeping" (27) as if she were a child or the subject of a fond and protective gaze. In the next poem "After Daphne," the second personal poem, the viewer refers again to the houses opposite noting that something in the view wounds her, a statement that reminds us of *punctum*. But the wounding is related to a children's game with paper and scissors, which seems to point to the speaker's desire for the safety of childhood:

> I saw the houses across the street and thought *paper dolls;*
> *a picket fence; the innocence*
>
> *of repetition* because houses
> have no business wounding me. (28)

"After Daphne" continues with the viewer claiming that she takes no pleasure in "the angles and planes which man makes" and that she wants to find refuge:

> I wanted refuge; and thought to take refuge—in

fence or *alike* or the dark of these dark

trees—as Daphne took flight. (28)

This desire for refuge in the innocence of childhood and the mention of dark trees, Daphne, and flight combined with the idea of betrothal in the first poem, suggests that the viewer is conflicted about something in her personal life. Being seen and desired in that "light / shared by the painted surfaces" (28) of the houses across the street is perhaps as unwelcome as Apollo's desire had been for Daphne.

Snow extends this analogy of viewer wanting refuge to Daphne wanting to escape from Apollo in "The Morning Exercise," the third poem and the first ekphrasis of the series. Brassaï took a number of photographs of Matisse in his studio, and two or more of these could be the subjects of the ekphrasis in Snow's sequence.[16] In each photograph, Matisse, an elderly, bearded and bespectacled man, formally dressed in a white smock over waistcoat and tie, sits on a chair close to a naked female model with his sketchbook open on his knee. Amongst the paraphernalia of the studio is a pitcher of branches and leaves which is sometimes in the background or off to one side and at other times more central. In "The Morning Exercise," Matisse is sketching the branches and leaves. He tells Brassaï:

'It is my habit

always to return to nature,'

…….

[16]Brassaï (Gyula Halász). *Matisse and his model at the Villa D'Alésia.* Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265163

Brassaï (Gyula Halász). *Matisse and his Model*. Mutualart.com, https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Matisse-and-his-Model/5C785BE58C62C30F

> ‘…not just a question of copying this branch, but of creating something equivalent to it.’ (29)

The notion of equivalence in this sequence is threefold, and Snow’s handling of the equivalences demonstrates Swensen’s claim that in some ekphrases, the arts are demonstrably modes of thinking and perceiving rather than static objects (Swensen 71). One such equivalence can be seen in the implied viewer’s understanding of the relationship between Matisse’s drawing practice and Daphne’s metamorphosis into a tree. Snow presents this equivalence throughout the sequence by describing Matisse’s desire to reduce whatever it is he is drawing, be it a branch or his model, to its equivalence in lines. In “The Morning Exercise,” the implied viewer notes how Matisse explains that his drawing practise is “…not / just a question of copying this branch, but of creating something equivalent to it” (29). The implied viewer who introduced the notion of Daphne’s flight at the end of “After Daphne” now returns to this idea in “The Morning Exercise” as she wonders about the “motive force of a branch” (29) or what it must be like to be a tree that is about to break into leaf— “the idea // of tree, or reach; to branch? to break into leaf?” (29-30). The implied equivalence here is in the implied viewer’s (the speaker’s) conflation of Matisse’s treatment of the studio branch—as a basis for transformation—with the idea introduced in the preceding poem of Daphne’s metamorphosis into a tree: What must it be like to be human and yet to be equivalent to a tree and “to break into leaf?”

The second equivalence in this sequence is a clear example of Swensen’s description of the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving (71). It is the equivalence Snow sets up between artistic practice (Matisse) and poetic practice (the

poet/speaker/implied viewer). It begins as a form of grappling with the practice of visual art in "The Morning Exercise," continues into the fourth poem "From the Model" and then is subtly transformed in the sixth poem "Artist and Model" into a meditation on the practices of writing. This equivalence is expressed throughout the ekphrases as a recurring theme of reducing the artist's subject to line. In "The Morning Exercise," Matisse first draws "(will reduce / to line)" (29) the branches and leaves and then, in "From the Model," reduces the model herself to a line— "('I will condense the meaning of this body by seeking / its essential lines')" (31) Matisse's practice is not the only instance of reducing the subject to a line. In a metaliterary move, the poet as implied viewer also reduces her subject (Matisse in the act of drawing the model) to a line. Specifically, in "From the Model" she considers how the lines of the poem fall into metric feet:

> a pitcher of branches
> and leaves; couch,
> chest, trochee, dactyl and dactyl—forgotten (overtaken
> as he is by a curve of thigh) … (31)

A trochee is a foot composed of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, as in "pitcher," and a dactyl is a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables as in "photograph." In "From the Model," Matisse is depicted as searching for the desire of the artistic line: "One must always search for the desire of the line, / where it wishes / to enter or where to die away" (31). Just as Matisse explicitly expresses an interest in how to turn his human subject into line, the speaker explicitly expresses an interest in how to turn Matisse and his drawing into poetic line. This transformation of artistic line to poetic line then reappears in the sixth poem, "Artist and Model." The implied viewer compares Matisse's passion for

the line to her own passion for the "complexity / of resemblance" (34) which she has been writing about. She compares his reduction of the model's body to line to her own act of reducing the photograph to poetic lines: — "for that curve / of thigh I see myself balancing book and paper against" (34). This is an important equivalence within the sequence and one, as I will argue in the next section of the chapter, which lies behind Snow's use of the photograph as a model for the formal construction of her ekphrases.

The third equivalence in the sequence is the equivalence between Daphne and the implied viewer. In the personal poems the implied viewer first makes a series of analogies between her own life and that of Daphne; in the ekphrases she makes similar claims for the relationship between Matisse's drawing practice and his model. This move can first be seen in "After Daphne" when the implied viewer rejects "the angles and planes which man makes" in favour of refuge in "dark / trees—as Daphne took flight" (28). In "The Morning Exercise," she muses on what it would be like to "break into leaf" (30). In this way, Snow aligns the implied viewer with Daphne. But she is also introducing an analogy between the myth and Matisse's statements about his practice by conflating Daphne's metamorphosis with Matisse's artistic practice. Through metamorphosis, Peneus rendered Daphne into the equivalent of a tree. In Matisse's drawing practice he performs a similar transformation when he treats the model in the same way that he treats the pitcher of branches and leaves. In "The Morning Exercise" he creates "something equivalent" to the branches and leaves by reducing them to line and he does the same thing to his model in "From the Model": "('I will condense the meaning of this body by seeking / its essential lines')" (31). In other words, the model is reduced to lines in the same

way that branches and leaves in the pitcher were transformed into lines. By implication model and branches have become the same.

Snow then elaborates on the analogy between myth and Matisse's artistic practice in the next two ekphrases. In "From the Model," the fourth poem in the sequence, Snow develops the Daphne and Apollo theme by elaborating on Matisse's statement that "[o]ne must always search for the desire of the line, / where it wishes / to enter or where to die away" (31). In this poem, we are introduced to the model for the first time. For Matisse, she is a "curve of thigh" to be depicted:

> (standing, ankles crossed,
>
> breasts lifted—
>
> the back is arched, the arms encircling her head; which is slightly
>
> turned and looking
>
> downward) … (31)

Matisse focuses all his attention on the model, with the pitcher of branches and leaves forgotten behind him. But he is also reducing the model to lines in the same way that he reduced the pitcher of branches and leaves to lines: "('I will condense the meaning of this body by seeking / its essential lines')" (31).

This reduction of model and branches and leaves to lines is further complicated by the implied viewer's description of Matisse as so engrossed in his creation that "to some extent he becomes her" (31). Here, Snow is undoubtedly reflecting the research into Matisse's art practice that provided her with the artist's statements about the need "to search for the desire of the line" with which she opened the poem. In interviews and personal essays, Matisse frequently referred to how the artist's model should "awaken in you an emotion, which in turn you seek to

express" (Flam 44). This emotion is so powerful that Matisse describes the experience as one where "I don't know what I am doing, I am identified with my model" (Elderfield, qtd. in Barris np). In Brassaï's photograph, Matisse is depicted intently absorbed in his drawing and sitting so close to the model that his own posture seems almost as contrived as hers does— as the speaker/poet puts it: "to some extent, he becomes her."

The significance of this observation is explored in the sixth poem and last ekphrasis, "Artist and Model" where it becomes apparent that not only is Matisse converting his model to the equivalent of branches and leaves (as Peneus did to Daphne) but that when the implied viewer remarks in "From the Model" that "to some extent he becomes her" she is introducing a chain of resemblances/equivalences: The viewer first compares herself to the model— "the dark-haired model I resemble" (34) — and then remarks that Matisse resembles her father and that she knows that she herself resembles her father:

> (in 1939, my father was smiling my smile for
> his high school photograph.
> I remember that picture; I studied that picture: I know I resemble
> my father). Matisse
> resembles, is not, my father… (34)

Thus, Snow has set up a complex chain of resemblance related to the Daphne and Apollo myth. The implied viewer resembles the model that Matisse—who in turn resembles her father—is transforming into the equivalent of branches and leaves. The model can be read as Daphne, and Matisse as Peneus and at the same time, the implied viewer should be read as Daphne and her father as Peneus. The implied viewer, then, does not wish for the resemblance between her father and Matisse

because she resembles both her father and the model: “and I think that I cannot be / or desire my father—being Matisse” (34). The implication here is that all these resemblances between fathers and daughters, painters and models might be somehow incestuous.

The myriad resemblances revealed in the sixth poem “Artist and Model” are made even more complex by the subject matter of “Likeness,” the personal poem which precedes it. “Likeness” is an apt title for a poem which falls between two ekphrases whose emotional content revolves around resemblances. In “Likeness,” Snow returns her implied viewer to her house where she eats a pear and continues to think about the view of the houses in the street:

She slices the pear,

and pear falls in white slabs

flat and blank as the fronts of houses

she faces sometimes and feels mirrored… (32)

These are the houses that in “The House Opposite” and “After Daphne” were likened to faces, and to which she “felt betrothed,” but from which she also wanted to flee “as Daphne took flight.” In my reading of these poems, the implied viewer seems conflicted about aspects of her personal life and wants the innocence of childhood, a desire that is mirrored in Daphne choosing to flee to preserve her virginity. In “Likeness” this impression is validated first by the viewer’s actions and secondly by the distance created in this poem by Snow’s use of the third person, as I explain below.

The implied viewer eats the pear by slicing it in order to lift it cleanly into her mouth. She explains that she wants the pear’s sweetness contained:

—her mouth

not having made a crater the shape of her mouth in the white

pear and the crater flooding; nor her mouth

flooding to answer its sweetness. (32)

Snow here uses the distinction between the viewer's desire to control the experience of eating the pear by slicing it rather than allowing its juices to flood her mouth as a metaphor for the way in which both viewer and Daphne repudiate sexual pleasure: "— so fearing the tenderness / of her body held open to pleasure" (33). This fear foreshadows the complex unravelling I described above of the troubling resemblances the viewer perceives in Brassaï's photograph.

One further complexity in "Likeness" is Snow's use of the third person pronouns "she" and "her." "Likeness" is the only personal poem in the third person and this authorial choice serves to further align the implied viewer with the model in the ekphrastic poems. We are never shown the model's point of view; she is always "her" or "she" and depicted only as the subject of Matisse's objectification. In "Likeness" however the "I" of the other personal poems (the implied viewer) becomes "she" and is depicted as "fearing the tenderness / of her body" (33). The poem "Likeness" personalises the problematics of the Brassaï photograph: that is, Matisse's objectification of the model, the implied viewer's concerns with sexuality and her preoccupation with resemblances.

"Artist and Model," the final poem in the sequence, needs to be read in the context of all that has gone before it. In this poem, as I explained earlier, it becomes clear that the viewer sees resemblances between herself and the model, Matisse and her father, and troublingly and confusingly, between herself and her father and by implication, between herself and Matisse who is depicted here as identifying with the

model. Snow sets out to untangle this troubling set of likenesses and resemblances by returning to the photograph and the implied viewer's initial reaction to it:

> Matisse has found a surface
> the line desires and regards a span of the woman's body with
> possessive attention
> or gratitude, not madness. (34)

We have seen that Matisse, and by implication the viewer's father, can be aligned to Peneus, Daphne's father, in the way that Matisse "condenses the meaning of [her] body by seeking its essential lines" in "From the Model" just as he treated the pitcher of branches and leaves in "The Morning Exercise." However, the viewer is disturbed by the idea of Matisse/her father/Peneus regarding the model's/her own/Daphne's body with "possessive attention:"

She concludes:

> And I think that I cannot be
> or desire my father—being Matisse;
> that is, having for this
> complexity
> of resemblance the passion Matisse had for line, for that curve
> of thigh I see myself balancing book and paper against. (34)

In these last lines, the viewer as poet compares herself to Matisse. Her poetic unravelling of the complexity of all the relationships that she has been identifying is like the passion Matisse had for line but is complicated by Matisse's avowed emotional and artistic obsession with the model— "The attention he gives to her, here in the photograph…to some extent he becomes her" ("From the Model" 31). This complication is a troubling conflation of the subjects from myth and photograph

with the implied viewer and her father. Once the implied viewer compares herself to her father, all these resemblances become troubling to her— "And I think I cannot be / or desire my father being Matisse" ("Artist and Model" 34). The less troubling but equally intriguing resemblance is that between Matisse as an artist and the implied viewer as poet. The photographs depict Matisse balancing his drawing folder on his thigh, and in this poem the viewer is depicted doing the same thing, albeit as a poet. In "From the Model," Matisse is described as overtaken "by a curve of thigh" as he seeks to condense the meaning of the model's body to line. In "Artist and Model" the implied viewer as Daphne and poet (and therefore aligned both with the laurel and with Apollo the god of poetry) is balancing her book against her own "curve / of thigh" as she condenses the photograph at the heart of the sequence to lines of poetry.

My reading of the sequence "Artist and Model" and the final, titular poem has been focused on Snow's treatment of ideas of resemblance and likeness made complex by the myth of Daphne and Apollo and Snow's depiction of similarity in the creative practices of Matisse and the viewer/speaker as poet. This final poem, then, offers a view of the ekphrastic practice of a poet who "lives with" rather than "looks at" works of visual art. In my reading of Snow's "Positions of the Body" in chapter one, I pointed to the manner in which she offered works of art as a means for illustrating her thematic concerns with depicting grief and distress. In "Artist and Model," the photograph at the heart of the ekphrasis has supplied a means for considering "likeness." But rather than simply being a matter of familial or coincidental resemblance, "likeness" incorporates ideas around artistic representation, metamorphosis, and the artist's/implied viewer's emotional identification with both the model and the artist. It is additionally significant in this

sequence that Brassaï's photograph operates like an intermediary between the poet as implied viewer and Matisse and his model. That is, the sequence is as much to do with Matisse as an artist and the unseen artwork the photograph implies as it is to do with the photograph itself. This doubling of the ekphrastic process has resulted in a sequence in which the poet, in Swensen's terms, is a fellow traveler sharing a context (70) with what the photograph reveals about the way artists (and photographers) depict likeness. By presenting Matisse in a pose that places him so close to the model that his obsession with "becoming her" is palpable, Brassaï's photograph has provided Snow with a context in which to explore likeness.

"Artist and Model" as writewithist ekphrasis.

As I have shown, the sequence "Artist and Model" is characterised by complex emotional content. It has been necessary to offer this reading in order to argue next that the series is characterized by a writewithist approach to ekphrasis, not only in that it "lives with" the photograph—but also, as I will do now, to show how Snow uses Brassaï photographs as a "model for formal construction" of the poems in the sequence. In "To Writewithize," Swensen argues that poems which use artworks as models for formal construction "underscore the arts as models for thinking and perceiving" (71). In the next section of my exploration of "Artist and Model," then, I investigate how Snow's merging of emotional and aesthetic responses to the photograph provides a sense of poem and photograph displaying mutual "modes of thinking and perceiving" (Swensen 71) that are evident in the formal construction of the sequence. I argue that in "Artist and Model" such modes of thinking and perceiving can be directly attributed to photography's inherent aesthetic attributes as

much as they can be aligned to the kind of critical and philosophical discussion of the photograph that I illustrated in my reading of Trethewey.

In Swensen's discussion of writewithist ekphrasis she indicates that poets like Snow use verbal strategies equivalent to the visual strategies of the artist who produced the work that is the inspiration for their ekphrasis. Such poets don't necessarily make direct reference to works of art but instead they make use of elements of art like "color, line, surface, form, and motion" and transform them into meditations on "distance, interpretation, perspective, [and] illusion" (71). To illustrate this argument, before applying it to Snow, we can turn to William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," from his 1923 collection *Spring and All* where it was originally entitled "xxii." Heffernan argues that "The Red Wheelbarrow" is not strictly an ekphrasis because, while the poem "uses the verbal equivalent of pictorial precision in order to represent a set of objects" (3), it does not represent a visual image. Swensen, however, contradicts Heffernan by specifically endorsing as ekphrases works "in which the reader is constantly aware of the visual arts without being able to delimit them" (71). It is to this mode of ekphrasis that I intend to align Williams's poem.

There is no photograph described in Williams's poem. Instead, he adopts a photographic clarity of focus based on the avant-garde photographic ideals of his era. In his book *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, Bram Dijkstra describes how Williams was influenced by the ideas, artwork, and photography he encountered among members of the group of artists, photographers and writers associated with Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz was a New York based photographer who championed the avant-garde arts world in the first decades of the twentieth century in his Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession and in his journal,

Camera Works which also published prose by writers such as Gertrude Stein. Among the artists Stieglitz promoted were Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, and Duchamp whose works were part of the International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Armory in New York in 1913. This exhibition galvanised the American art scene with its promotion of the avant-garde and also provided a creative jolt for writers. In his autobiography, Williams refers to the Armory Show as potentially a catalyst for his thinking about writing, "the poetic line and the way the image was to lie on the page… I was tremendously stirred" (Williams 138). Williams was also inspired by the debt to photography of art movements such as Cubism and was a frequent visitor to Stieglitz's gallery.

When Stieglitz began practicing as a photographer in New York in the late nineteenth century, his photographs were representative of the prevailing fashion for impressionistic and painterly images characterised by a hazy focus which was often achieved by scratching or softening outlines on the photographic plates. By the early twentieth century, however, Stieglitz's work had evolved from concern with painterly effects to a preoccupation with the camera's "ability to record elements of the visual world with a sharpness of outline and accuracy of detail unattainable to the painter" (Dijkstra 91-2). The camera also captures everything in a scene without discriminating and because of this Stieglitz argued that the photographer's role was to "select the single image which will represent the object under scrutiny most effectively" (Dijkstra 96). Stieglitz's photographs of New York demonstrate how he developed this artistic imperative in order to express "a maximum of detail with a maximum of simplification" (Edward Weston qtd. in Dijkstra 97). Dijkstra explains that in developing his photographic techniques towards a "precise observation of the objects of concrete reality" (100) and by presenting the qualities of such carefully

selected objects accurately, Stieglitz was able to "express his most intense and therefore most inarticulate emotions accurately in terms of the materials of life" (100). Dijkstra points to photographs like Stieglitz's 1893 photograph "The Terminal," which depicts a man tending to horses in a New York horse-car terminal, as not metaphors but the "objective equivalents to [Stieglitz's] loneliness" (99).[17]

It is against this background of influences that critics such as Heffernan discern a photographic quality in "The Red Wheelbarrow" reproduced in full here:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Dijkstra argues that "[s]ome of Stieglitz's photographs reappear in Williams' work translated into language" (82) and in a discussion specifically of "The Red Wheelbarrow" later in the book describes the poem in this light:

[17] Stieglitz, Alfred. *The Terminal*. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alfred_Stieglitz_-_The_Terminal_-_2015.218_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art.jpg

> The poem is a perfect representation of the kind of painting or photography the Stieglitz group might have produced: it is a moment, caught at the point of its highest visual significance, in perfectly straightforward, 'realistic,' but highly selective detail; each word has its intrinsic evocative function, focusing the object and its essential structural relationship to its immediate surroundings in concrete terms. The words are facts, the direct linguistic equivalents to the visual object under scrutiny. (168)

It is this poetic practice that leads me to argue that Williams's technique in "The Red Wheelbarrow" is an expression of writewithist ekphrasis. The poem is expressed as a flash of visual insight that reveals how Williams's early engagement with metaphor in the precise and vivid images of Imagism was turning, like Stieglitz's photography, toward works in which the image is no longer a metaphor:

> By concentrating on the significance of single objects, or the objective relationship between two units of material form, Williams shifted his attention from the image as subject to the object as image. Like Stieglitz he began to let the object speak for him by letting it speak for itself through his description of it and through the selection he made of its visual detail. (Dijkstra 167)

"The Red Wheelbarrow" also displays, as Dijkstra notes, a photographic aesthetic in its form and structure. In other words, rather than represent an actual photograph, Williams uses photographic technique as a model for the poem's formal construction and from that perspective can be considered a form of writewithist ekphrasis. Despite the absence of an actual photograph, he has produced in writing the effects a photographer like Stieglitz might have achieved if he had focused his lens on the object of a red wheelbarrow wet with rain beside white chickens. Williams controls

his reader's view of the scene depicted in his poem in the same way that a photographer in the Stieglitz circle might have focused their lens on the wheelbarrow. He reduces the poem's language, forgoing capital letters and eschewing adjectives except for those that are most easily verifiable by an observer—red, rain, white—so that, like a photograph, the poem depicts a moment that had visual significance for the poet. And, in doing so, Williams underscores "the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving rather than as static objects" (Swensen 71). Just as the photographers of the Stieglitz group valued unmanipulated clarity of image, so Williams's poem represents a poetic practice in which "words are facts, the direct linguistic equivalents to the visual object under scrutiny" (Dijkstra 168).

Williams's clearly discernible photographic thinking in "The Red Wheelbarrow" serves as a starting point from which to consider how the aesthetics of photography might offer a model for the more complex formal construction of ekphrasis of a photograph in Snow's "Artist and Model." While the explicitly ekphrastic poems do—unlike "The Red Wheelbarrow"—reference specific photographs, that is not the case with what I have been calling the personal poems in the sequence. In these, it is the implied viewer's "camera vision" that creates a sense that she sees her world through a photographic lens. What the reader is shown is not a photograph rendered in words, but the implied viewer's thought processes coloured by camera vision. As I discuss below, Snow's references to photographs as artifacts and her camera vision partly account for my contention that photography provides poems in the sequence "Artist and Model" with a model for their formal construction. But in a more subtle way, the thought processes of Snow's implied viewer also reflect the aesthetics of the Brassaï photographs when a recurring motif in the images becomes a recurring motif in the sequence.

My analysis of "Artist and Model" for its photographic thinking and use of Brassaï's photograph as a model for the formal construction begins with John Szarkowski's discussion of "what photographs look like, and of why they look that way" (6) in his 1966 book *The Photographer's Eye.* Szarkowski, who curated an exhibition of the same name for the Museum of Modern Art, argues that photography differs radically from painting because the "picture-making process" is based on selection and not synthesis— "[p]aintings were made…but photographs… were taken" (6). Szarkowski points out that early photographers had no tradition to draw upon, so their experimentation with the form involved understanding what the technology could do and observing what other photographers had achieved. His selection of photographs for his exhibition was based therefore on how the various photographers encapsulated five "characteristics and problems that have seemed inherent in the medium" (7). These characteristics or issues are "the thing itself," "the detail," "the frame," "time," and "vantage point." They are interrelated in that they highlight how the photographer's decision making contributes to the sense that the resulting image is a visual phenomenon unique to the photograph. These characteristics or tenets of photography have relevance to ekphrasis because they help to pinpoint what the photograph as photograph offers the poet.

Szarkowski's discussion of "the frame" in particular enables me to make an aesthetic connection between poem and photograph in Snow's "Artist and Model," not least because the poet makes use of ideas around frames and framing as both metaphor and compositional device in her sequence. Swensen notes that "issues of framing, perspective, and resemblance filter throughout" (70) Snow's entire collection, and in my discussion of "Positions of the Body" in chapter one, I noted how the act of *living with* rather than *looking at* an artwork tended to collapse any

frames separating poet from visual art. In "Artist and Model," however, the notion of framing assumes a different meaning when it is viewed as an integral component of the art of the photograph.

Szarkowski argues that framing allows the photographer "to quote out of context" (70) because in selecting scenes for their lens, they choose what to include and what to reject:

> The photograph's edge defines content.
>
> It isolates unexpected juxtapositions. By surrounding two facts, it creates a relationship.
>
> The edge of the photograph dissects familiar forms, and shows their unfamiliar fragment. (70)

In ekphrasis of photographs, the poet is able to exploit such "unexpected juxtapositions" to create poetic and emotional meaning within the frame of the page in much the same way as Szarkowski's photographer "edits the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame" (70). Such "unexpected juxtapositions" appear frequently in Snow's work in "Artist and Model," as she interrogates Brassaï's framing of Matisse and his model.

I argue that Brassaï's photograph of Matisse in his studio provides Snow with a model for how to construct both the overtly ekphrastic poems and the personal ones. This model becomes apparent when the sequence is read as a response to Brassaï's "unexpected juxtaposition" of the pitcher of branches and leaves with the artist's model. Snow's focus on the relationship of the model to the pitcher of branches and leaves within the poems of "Artist and Model" is as much a "quote out of context" (Szarkowski 70) within the sequence as the unexpected juxtaposition evident in Brassaï's photograph. This "quote out of context" can also be seen as a *punctum*

which pricks or wounds Snow's implied viewer. Barthes describes *punctum* as an "accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). In "Artist and Model" we can deduce what became *punctum* for Snow, by considering what metonymic "accidents" of *punctum* in Brassaï's photograph became central to the emotional effect of the poems in "Artist and Model" as a result of their "unexpected juxtapositions."

Snow introduces the pitcher of branches and leaves as *punctum* in the ekphrasis "The Morning Exercise." In this poem the implied viewer ignores the model and focuses on a detail of the photograph:

So the branches

and leaves set in a pitcher the artist

studies, in one of the photographs:

branches—

already almost line—and leaves—

surface— (29)

The pitcher returns in "From the Model" as an incidental detail in a poem in which Matisse is depicted drawing his model:

his surroundings—

the painting on an easel in the foreground; behind him, a pitcher

of branches

and leaves; couch,

chest, trochee, dactyl and dactyl—forgotten… (31)

In “Artist and Model” the final poem of the sequence, it appears again: “a pitcher of branches and leaves / behind him” (34). As I discussed in my reading of the sequence for Snow’s use of themes derived from the Daphne and Apollo myth, the pitcher of branches and leaves is a central motif. It connects the ekphrasis to the personal poems by aligning ideas associated with the branches and leaves in the studio to the trees in “After Daphne” in which the viewer wishes to take refuge. It is also a motif that can be considered in terms of Benjamin’s “spark of contingency” that originated in the implied viewer’s reaction to the photograph. As a result of this “spark of contingency,” a detail which might have been *studium* to others became *punctum* as the implied viewer adds a meaning to the photograph that in turn becomes a *punctum* or emotional centre in the poems. Snow explores this meaning by conflating the pitcher of branches and leaves in the photograph with the Daphne and Apollo myth.

This first *punctum* is further complicated by a *punctum* of perceived resemblances that appears in the poem “Artist and Model,” which was foreshadowed by a reference to wounding in “After Daphne.” In that poem, the viewer says that the houses across the street “have no business wounding me” (28). This potential for wounding, related first to her observation in “The Houses Opposite” that some of the houses look like faces and secondly to the pattern of repetition she sees in the picket fence that reminds her of paper dolls are perceptions that, in Barthesian terms, she has added to the view, but which are “*nonetheless already there*” (Barthes 55). This potential for a resemblance to wound her appears in the poem “Artist and Model,” as I explored earlier, in the multiple resemblances the implied viewer discerns between herself, the model, Matisse, and her father. Like the pitcher of branches and leaves, this *punctum* is as particular to the implied viewer as Barthes’s exemplars in *Camera*

Lucida were to him. And as with Barthes, they are a consequence of her interrogation of the aesthetics of Brassaï's photograph.

Swensen's "To Writewithize" alerts us to the existence of ekphrases that are not traditional verbal representations of visual representations. Swensen contrasts this traditional mode with works which share contexts with visual art, or which appropriate the techniques and characteristics of visual art. As I discussed above, in Snow's work in "Artist and Model" specific characteristics of photography in general and of her source photograph in particular offered Snow a framework upon which to compose the sequence. However it is important to clarify that in writewithist ekphrasis such as "Artist and Model," appropriation of photographic aesthetics may be as much a consequence of the habit of camera vision as it is a deliberate act on the part of the poet. As North argues in *Camera Works,* "[t]he habit of seeing photographically has affected modern experience to such an extent that certain oddities of the camera, especially its tendency to frame particular points of view and to isolate one moment from another, have become second nature to human observers as well" (3). Nonetheless, camera vision and the technology associated with photography have provided Snow with a model for the formal construction of her work. Modes of thinking and explorations associated with photography such as framing and *punctum* provide a model for both the structure and the emotional freight of the poems in Snow's sequence.

Quoting out of context in the sequence "Artist and Model"

Szarkowski notes how the photographer "edits the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame" (70). He attributes the appearance of "unexpected juxtapositions" within a photograph to the photographer's ability "to

quote out of context" as they frame scenes with their lens. Snow achieves the same effect within the six poems of "Artist and Model" by creating "unexpected juxtapositions" within each poem as well as between the poems. These juxtapositions are a consequence of both her camera vision and of her appropriation of the cultural and aesthetic qualities of photography.

Snow's exploitation of the aesthetics of photography begins with the photographic seeing or camera vision of the implied viewer in the personal poems. In "The House Opposite," for instance, the point of view can be likened to camera vision. The implied viewer sits on her bed and observes that when she tilts her head, the view through her window becomes unstable as if her eyes were the framing lens of a camera and a photographer is moving her head: "it shifts a little when I tilt my head— / throws the familiar surroundings into shadow" (27). The implied viewer, like Szarkowski's photographer, is defining content and isolating unexpected juxtapositions (Szarkowski 70). She continues:

> I will sit on my bed, the house
> opposite—struts and light and Picasso's
> eyes, I think, those dark windows—and want to sleep. (27)

In making this statement, a verbal analogy between the appearance of the windows in the house and Picasso-like eyes, Snow's viewer is making a visual abstraction of the scene in the same way that a cubist abstract artist like Picasso might represent the view as a "composition of enmeshed, intersected and dissected surfaces" (Apollinaire 29). The viewer's abstraction of the view from her window by highlighting its "unfamiliar fragment" (Szarkowski 70) as if she were the lens of a camera, foreshadows the ekphrasis in the "Morning Exercise" where Matisse describes his work as "not just a question of / copying this branch, but of creating

something equivalent to it" (29). Although Matisse and Picasso were contemporaries and artistic rivals, I don't believe that this is the connection that Snow is intending her readers to make. Rather, I argue that the idea of likeness and altered perspective that the speaker associates with Picasso in "The Houses Opposite" generates the tropes of metamorphosis in the motifs of the Daphne and Apollo myth and those of resemblance that characterize the rest of the poems in the sequence. In other words, the speaker-poet's habit of "seeing photographically" (North 3) reflected in her tendency to "frame particular points of view and to isolate one moment from another" (North 3) is reflected in the construction of the sequence "Artist and Model." This "camera vision" is as evident in Snow's isolation of unexpected juxtapositions in the Brassaï photograph as it is in her treatment of the view of the house opposite in the personal poems.

While Snow's exploitation of photographic *punctum* and photographic seeing in this sequence reflect her viewer's camera vision, such practice is not her only approach to emulating the photographer's strategies in her poems. Snow also "collaborates with" (to use Swensen's term) Brassaï's depiction of the model by using the model's position in the photograph as a means for negotiating the emotional context of the sequence. In Brassaï's photograph *Matisse and his Model at the Villa D'Alésia*, the model is central but in the middle ground.[18] She is awkwardly posed—standing with her arms encircling her head and her legs slightly crossed. In the left foreground and taking up about a third of the image is an easel with a painting of flowers and foliage in a vase, beside an open box of painting materials. Matisse, also in the middle ground, sits to the model's right beside a white pitcher of branches and leaves. The photograph appears on the one hand to be spontaneous and

[18] Brassaï, *Matisse and his Model at the Villa D'Alésia*. Metropolitan Museum New York, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265163

unrehearsed, but equally Brassaï must have intended for the painting to assume such importance and for it to be balanced by the artist and the white pitcher.

In “Artist and Model,” Snow “collaborates” with this image by constructing a narrative within the sequence that accounts for the model being both central to the photograph and the poems but dominated by the other objects in the studio. The status in the photograph of the painting and the pitcher which both eclipse the model are represented in the poems, as I have shown, through Snow’s engagement with the Daphne and Apollo myth. That is, the model appears for the first time in “From the Model,” the fourth poem of the sequence:

> (standing, ankles crossed,
>
> breasts lifted—
>
> the back is arched, the arms encircling her head; which is slightly
>
> turned and looking
>
> downward) … (31)

Until this point in the sequence, despite its title “Artist and Model,” the model has not been mentioned. However, the pitcher of branches and leaves appeared in the previous poem, “The Morning Exercise”: “So the branches / and leaves set in a pitcher the artist / studies, in one of the photographs” (29). The model is not mentioned again until the sixth and final poem “Artist and Model” where the speaker notes: “It is all here in the photograph / of Matisse and the dark-haired model I resemble” (34). But even here, the model is somehow peripheral to the action of the poem and to Matisse: “sketchbook open on one knee, a pitcher of branches and leaves behind him” (34).

Swensen describes this kind of collaboration between poet and artwork as the means for the poet to grapple with and negotiate the "disturbances" of visual art in a way that breaks down the frames that act like "containers to keep art carefully separate, functioning as a commentary on life, rather than as an integral part of it" (71). In "Artist and Model," the "disturbance" is the uncertain status of the model in Brassaï's photograph. The poet's stance towards the photograph within individual poems and between the poems themselves reflects her negotiation of that disturbance. Thus, the implied viewer's musing in the personal poem "After Daphne" on her desire for refuge and "the dark of these dark / trees" (28) becomes a meditation on what it is "to break into leaf" (30) in the ekphrastic "The Morning Exercise." Similarly, in the ekphrastic poem "From the Model," Matisse's search for the "desire of the line" and his intent to "condense the meaning of" the model's naked body is transformed in the personal poem "Likeness" by the speaker's fear of "tenderness / of her body held open to pleasure" (33). Such forms of collaboration between poet and artwork and personal and ekphrastic poems show how writewithist ekphrasis represents a movement away from the referential level that Swensen describes as habitual realm of ekphrasis. She argues that "instead of using visual art as subject matter, works such as these [Snow's *Artist and Model*, Moriarty's *Nude Memoir,* and Berssenbrugge's *Sphericity*] increasingly use visual art as a model for formal construction, thus underscoring the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving rather than as static objects" (71).

In "Artist and Model," Brassaï's photograph is the ekphrastic stimulus and model for formal construction for Snow's exploration of likeness expressed as ideas related to transformation, whether it be metamorphosis or artistic and poetic practice. The originating photograph provides the poem with the context of the artist's studio,

and the attention Matisse gives to the model. The point at which the photograph becomes a model for the formal construction of individual poems and the sequence as a whole rather than an artefact with which to collaborate or with which to share a context is via Snow's identification of *punctum.* Barthes was clear that a *punctum* is personal to the viewer of a photograph: Snow's implied viewer is "wounded" by the resemblances she discerns between herself and the model, and her father and Matisse. She is further "wounded" by her understanding of Matisse's art practice which conflates the model with the pitcher of branches and leaves. These resemblances are, of course, an addition: By allocating significance to them, the *punctum* become something she adds "to the photograph, and *what is nonetheless already there*" (Barthes 55). This *punctum* becomes a writewithist model for formal construction when Snow activates that characteristic of *punctum* Barthes describes as its metonymic power of expansion (45). In Snow's case, the pitcher of branches and leaves becomes more than a studio prop. It expands via the Daphne and Apollo myth and Matisse's art practice to become a metaphor for the implied viewer's attempts in "Likeness" to grapple with her "fear of tenderness" (33). The composition of Brassaï's photograph provides a further model for the construction of "Artist and Model" because of the way that Brassaï presents the human model as central but strangely subordinated to a large still life of foliage and flowers and a pitcher of branches and leaves. Snow's appropriation of the Daphne and Apollo myth to explore this intersection of model and foliage combined with her sustained meditation on likeness throughout the sequence demonstrates how, in "Artist and Model," the arts are modes of thinking and perceiving.

An analysis of ekphrastic responses to the photograph through the lens of photography theorists and Swensen's writewithist ekphrasis demonstrates how

aspects of the culture and theorizing of photography have influenced both the way we describe the visual world and how we can engage with poems about photographs. Barthes attributes to photographs the capability of detonating a response in a viewer— "an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph" (49); he speaks of *punctum* in terms of a wound that has the metonymic "power of expansion" (45). Benjamin drew parallels between the optical unconscious revealed by a photograph and the instinctual unconscious. Szarkowski points to the frame's ability to isolate unexpected juxtapositions and to quote out of context (70). In *Bellocq's Ophelia* and "Artist and Model" such aesthetics contribute to the way that photographs have provided Trethewey and Snow with the emotional centre of their work and the means for describing the visual world of their subjects.

In the next chapter, I extend my investigation of how the aesthetics and theorization of the photograph have impacted on ekphrasis of photographs by considering prose poem ekphrasis of photographs. I argue that the prose poem form shares aesthetic and cultural preoccupations with the photograph that are revealed in writewithist ekphrasis.

Chapter Three

The Prose Poem, the photograph, and ekphrasis

Introduction

In This Photograph I am Untitled

And seen through. The way a wine glass placed
on a table transparently suggests wine will be
served. I don't mean to say that is all that I am
but it is a fact that even in the dark, angles often
conduct the eye into a lighted interior. There,
someone sees and says to herself, I wasn't
always this way. One sometimes becomes.
(*A Doll for Throwing* 24)

In this poem from Mary Jo Bang's *A Doll for Throwing*, a 2017 collection inspired by the experiences of Bauhaus practitioner and photographer Lucia Moholy, the implied viewer is contemplating her self-portrait. It is a prose poem ekphrasis that incorporates aspects of the camera vision that can be found in Trethewey's work and the interrogation of the aesthetics of the image that characterises Snow's "Artist and Model." A further layer of representational complexity is provided by the prose poem form, which is what I turn to in this chapter.

Like most prose poems, “In this Photograph I am Untitled” depends upon the sentence rather than the line as a unit of composition. And like many prose poems it is presented on the page as a dense, rectangular block of print surrounded by white space. This form draws attention to itself in the same way that a photograph does by presenting its subject within a frame. The white frame of the page around Bang’s poem acts like the camera’s framing of the photograph that her viewer is contemplating. Szarkowski argues that “[t]he photograph’s edge defines content. It isolates unexpected juxtapositions…shows their unfamiliar fragment” (70). Within the frame of the poem and using the metaphor of an empty wineglass as an “unexpected juxtaposition,” Bang draws attention to the way that point of view in a poem, like angles in the dark, often conducts “the eye into a lighted interior” (24).

The wine glass, which “transparently suggests wine will be served” (24), can be read as a metaphor for the way the sentences of a prose poem suggest to the reader that they are about to encounter the narrative logic of prose. The sentences suggest continuity or that a narrative is about to unfold. But in this case, just as the speaker of the poem suggests that she “wasn’t always this way. One sometimes becomes” (24), the reader’s expectations of the linearity of prose are contradicted by Bang’s use of poetic devices such as juxtaposition and imagery. The speaker begins by suggesting that like a wine glass, her photographic portrait is transparent—she is what she appears to be. But this statement is subverted by the next sentence, which is not about wine glasses but about the way that in the dark, angles encourage the eye toward light. The juxtaposition of the two statements invites comparisons between a lighted interior and a photograph of a wine glass, but it seems that the speaker wishes us to understand that she is not what she seems: “I wasn’t always this way” (24). Such subversion of the expectations that prose invites, along with the absence of line

breaks, are among the genre's defining characteristics as I will explore in the section that follows.

I begin this chapter by discussing prose poetry as a genre that is defined by problematics associated with its hybrid nature. I then discuss how some of these problematics reflect an aesthetic and cultural connection with photography, one that is revealed in ekphrasis. I illustrate this argument by reading excerpts from Bang's *A Doll for Throwing* and selections from Kathleen Fraser's work *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling* (2004) as examples of writewithist ekphrasis of photographs in works of prose poetry. Bang and Fraser are poets whose body of work demonstrates a connection with the visual arts that provides a further opportunity for considering the significance to writewithist ekphrasis of Stein's aphorism "I write entirely with my eyes." Specifically, I explore the prose poem ekphrasis of Bang and Fraser for the way that camera vision and photographic practice provide both poets with a model for the formal construction of their work. I argue that in their work, the prose poem takes on the attributes of photography when the two art forms encounter each other in ekphrasis.

Reviewers of Bang's work often comment on the visual nature of her writing. In her review of Bang's *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* (2004), a collection of lyric ekphrasis of mostly avant-garde artworks, poet Donna Stonecipher notes how the visual is the "primary concern of the poems… The eye…is complicit in the artificializing of experience through its representation…The window, the frame, the stage, the screen, the page: all are devices that crop and order experience" (np). These devices are equally apparent in *A Doll for Throwing*, and as I explore in my reading of the poems, the ekphrastic relationship of many of the poems in the

collection to photographs taken by Moholy and other *Bauhäusler* (Bauhaus students and practitioners) is amplified by Bang's use of the prose poem form.

Fraser is a poet who was a long-time advocate for women's experimental writing through the journal *HOW(ever)*. Her work is known for its collaboration with visual art and for her "early attraction to the visual manipulation of the page and the word" (Kinnahan, "Incremental Shaping" 3). Fraser's attention to the sentence in her ekphrastic sequence "Soft pages" and the long poem "You can hear her breathing in the photograph" from *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling* provides me with examples of prose poetry which extend, as Kinnahan noted of Fraser's work, "an ekphrastic set of encounters with works of art into serial meditations upon the framing of meaning and identity through visual processes" ("Incremental Shaping" 2). While Fraser often refers to works of art in her poetry, my focus here is on how her implied viewers represent their worlds through forms of "camera vision" or photographic seeing related to both still photography and to the cinema.

The work of both Bang and Fraser also provides a means for considering prose poetry's historical intersection with modes of thinking and perceiving normally associated with the visual arts and photography in particular. This historical intersection has been explored by Margueritte Murphy in her essay "The British Prose Poem and 'Poetry' in Early Modernism." However, Murphy's essay does not explicitly consider the prose poem's relationship to photography, per se. It is this gap that I address by reading prose poetry selections from the work of Bang and Fraser as ekphrasis that demonstrates aesthetic synergies with the art of photography.

The Prose Poem as Genre

Almost all critical discussion of the prose poem begins by noting that its definition is problematic. This is partly a consequence of the difficulty in defining a genre which appears to be an amalgamation of two distinct and seemingly opposing genres (poetry and prose). In a 2012 interview conducted by poet Barbara Sabol on the occasion of the publication of his prose poem collection *Hotel Utopia*, Robert Miltner describes prose poetry as a "hybrid form located in the interstices between poetry and prose." On the one hand, prose offers the prose poem "linearity, the paragraph, sentence rhythm, character, voice, plot, arc, description, information, problem, climax and especially the readers' impulse to rush at the speed of the sentences." On the other hand, the form calls on the poet's use of "image, non-hierarchical word choice, sound and song, juxtaposition of fragment and phrase, and an intuitional interior logic" (Miltner, "Sabol Interview" np).

Miltner's description of the form as hybrid and located in the "interstices between poetry and prose" echoes that of many other practitioners and critics. While Miltner describes his writing practice as being a "balancing act" between poetry and prose, critic Nikolai Duffy describes Rosmarie Waldrop's prose poetry as representing her interest in "the bluff where prose and poetry meet…where the one falls into the other, prose into poetry and poetry into prose" (Duffy 2). Charles Simic adds the idea of a collision to the analogies from Duffy and Miltner. Simic told an interviewer that his prose poems came from a place "where the impulses for prose and those for poetry collide…What makes them poems is that they are self-contained, and once you read one you have to go back and start reading it again. That's what a poem does" (qtd. in Lehman 12). Peter Johnson suggests, because there is no set rule for composing and therefore recognising a prose poem as there

are for verse forms like a sonnet or villanelle, "the most that we can say about prose poetry is that it exhibits certain characteristics" (np). Johnson, who is both a prose poet and an anthologist of prose poetry, identifies genre-blurring hybridity and unpredictability among these characteristics and elucidates further by quoting from Michael Benedikt's 1976 "working definition" of the prose poem. In his now out of print *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*, Benedikt described the form as "a genre of poetry, self-consciously written in prose, and characterised by the intense use of virtually all the devices of poetry, which includes the intense use of devices of verse," except for the line break (qtd. in Johnson np). In the introduction to his *Great American Prose Poems* (2003*),* fellow anthologist David Lehman suggests that the "best short definition is almost tautological. The prose poem is a poem written in prose rather than verse…Just as free verse did away with meter and rhyme, the prose poem does away with the line as the unit of composition. It uses the means of prose toward the ends of poetry" (13).

The one common feature in such efforts at definition is that the determining feature of the prose poem is the absence of line break and as a result its reliance on the sentence. Gary L. McDowell and F. Daniel Rzicznek also point out in their introduction to the *Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry*, that the sentence, though relevant to verse poetry, simply becomes more central to the prose poem:

> ...the one major difference between a prose poem and a lineated poem is the prose poem's reliance solely on the sentence as its rhetorical rhythm, as its gait. The lineated poem certainly relies on the rhythm of the sentence…but they also rely on the line break as a unit of syncopation and rhythm. (xxxvi)

Others argue that the absence of the line break has a more substantive effect on how a prose poem generates meaning and therefore makes this form different in an

important way from verse poetry. Lehman argues that "[i]n prose the poet gives up the meaning-making powers of the line break. The poet in prose must use the structure of the sentence itself, or the way one sentence modifies the next, to generate the surplus meaning that helps separate poetry in prose from ordinary writing" (22). Sentences play a role in traditional prose by advancing narrative. The prose poet, however, can choose to free their sentences from the expectation of narrative linearity that prose suggests by employing poetic strategies such as the juxtaposition of fragment and phrase that Miltner identifies in his discussion of the prose poem form.

Lehman connects this strategy of "repudiating or resisting the narrative impulse" to the "new sentence" associated with Language writing (21). The term "new sentence" was coined by Language poet Ron Silliman in his 1980 essay "The New Sentence" in which he observed that such "new sentences" were a characteristic of the prose poems associated with Language writing such as those by Robert Grenier, Hannah Weiner, and Bob Perelman. Silliman argued that in a new sentence, "the paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument," "sentence length is a unit of measure" and "syllogistic movement is: (a) limited; (b) controlled" (*The New Sentence* 91). Syllogistic movement refers to the relationship between one sentence and the next, which in a new sentence is often tangential. Bob Perelman connected the new sentence to modern experience by pointing to the way in which we are "inundated by intense continual bursts of narrative" (313) in advertising, for instance. He described this experience as a form of parataxis—which in poetry refers to the placing of two dissimilar ideas beside each other requiring the reader to make their own interpretations of their association. Perelman noted that such juxtaposition of ideas is a characteristic of the new sentence: "Parataxis is crucial: the internal,

autonomous meaning of a new sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences" (313). Parataxis is perhaps given its most extreme treatment in language writing, but as a literary device it is often employed in prose poetry to disrupt expectations of linearity, contributing to the sense that the prose poem is a fragmented form.

In many respects, when Miltner describes prose poems as demonstrating the qualities of poetry in a form that incorporates some of the characteristics of prose and Perelman describes the parataxis of the new sentence as a reflection of modern life, they are providing a contemporary view of the characteristics of the prose poem described by Charles Baudelaire in the mid-nineteenth century. Baudelaire's *Petits Poèmes en Prose* or *Paris Spleen* (1869) is credited with launching the prose poem as a genre in France. In a letter to his editor, Baudelaire wrote of his dream "of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience" (ix-x). While Baudelaire was rebelling against the highly prescriptive French alexandrine line form, which required a set number of syllables (usually twelve) divided by a medial caesura, he also wanted to capture the essence of what he termed "our more abstract modern life" (ix), an ideal that had arisen from his "exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations" (x). He clearly felt that prose imbued with some of the emotional qualities of poetry was the best way to achieve that goal. Elsewhere, he elaborated on what he meant by modern life when he described the artist and newspaper illustrator Constantin Guys as a "painter of modern life" for Guys's ability to capture "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art

whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 13).

In Baudelaire's prose poetry this desire to capture the ephemeral and the contingent in the context of urban experience can be seen in his evocation of nineteenth-century Parisian life in poems like "The Eyes of the Poor." The speaker of that poem describes the experience of being watched as he sits in one of the city's new cafés with a female companion to whom he has declared his affection:

> …The café was dazzling. Even the gas burned with all the ardor of a début, and lighted with all its might the blinding whiteness of the walls, the expanse of mirrors, the gold cornices and moldings, fat-cheeked pages dragged along by hounds on leash, laughing ladies with falcons on their wrists, nymphs and goddesses bearing on their heads piles of fruits…all history and all mythology pandering to gluttony. (52)

The speaker notices a ragged father with two small children who stand outside the café gazing at its splendour and is touched by their evident astonishment and "was even a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, too big for our thirst" (53). His companion, however, spoils his reverie and makes him question his admiration of her by asking him to have the onlookers sent away. The poem in some respects is like a sketch by Constantin Guys of Parisian nightlife in which the ephemeral nature of glittering high society pleasure is contrasted with the desperate circumstances of the lower classes. Baudelaire's speaker is disturbed by the discovery that his frivolous companion does not share his concerns.

While Baudelaire's "dream of the miracle of a poetic prose" is an often-cited reference associated with the prose poem's emergence in the nineteenth century, he also provided an early model for considering the prose poem sequence as a

fragmented and reorderable form. Baudelaire began his dedicatory letter by describing *Paris Spleen* as being like a serpent in which everything is "both head and tail, alternately and reciprocally" (ix) and which may be cut and reordered at will because each piece in the work can "get along alone" (ix). These fragmentary pieces in other words, can be viewed as complete in themselves. "The Eyes of the Poor" can be seen as a cynical stand-alone observation of how two people fail to understand each other or as an integral part of the whole collection. The incident described in the poem adds to the insights into the speaker's psyche that the whole collection affords and the poem's description of the contrasting lives of Parisian citizens in a city undergoing huge urban renewal is an important component of Baudelaire's depiction of "our more abstract modern life" (ix).

The prose poem as fragment and its intersection with the visual arts

When Baudelaire wrote the dedicatory letter to his publisher describing the work in *Paris Spleen* as a collection of potentially reorderable fragments, he was suggesting that this was a desirable characteristic of his collection. Scholars such as Nikki Santilli, Jonathan Monroe, and Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington, among others argue this is evidence of a line of influence from the Romantic critical fragment.[19] According to Santilli, Baudelaire's approach was influenced by the fact that he was working on the poems while engaged in translating Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* and *Suspiria de Profundis.*[20] Santilli

[19] See Monroe chapter 1 for a general overview; for an in-depth analysis of the form's genesis in the Romantic critical fragment see Santilli chapters 3 and 4.

[20] *Confessions of an Opium Eater* was first published in English in 1821 and revised in 1856. *Suspiria de Profundis* was published in instalments in *Blackwood's* magazine beginning in 1845. Santilli describes Baudelaire's translations of *Confessions of an Opium Eater* which Baudelaire began in 1857 as "part translation, part paraphrase and summary, and increasingly, an abridgment" (89).

describes De Quincey's style as one "that progressively and self-consciously strives to achieve the form of contained, brief, independent units" (19) and suggests that Baudelaire's experience with De Quincey's work gave him the opportunity to "examine the nature of extended prose composition (and De Quincey's self conscious style in particular) while creating his own distinctly brief prose texts" (72). Santilli argues that it is the character of both the Romantic critical fragment and the prose poem "to preface a (missing) work" (39) and that in *Opium Eater,* De Quincey announced but did not realize his purported aims of producing a series of "opium-induced dream visions." (71). Baudelaire's description of his own work as fragments then, can be seen as an outcome of close association with the equally fragmented work of another writer.

Understanding Santilli's argument that there is a line of influence stretching from Baudelaire to De Quincey and to the Romantic fragment requires a brief overview of that historical literary form. The Romantic critical fragment was a literary and philosophical response to aspects of the "challenge of the ever-accelerating modernisation of European society" (Bode, qtd. in Atherton and Hetherington 20). In their essay "Like a Porcupine or a Hedgehog? The Prose-Poem as Post-Romantic Fragment," Atherton and Hetherington observe that nineteenth-century Romantic writers, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Friedrich Schlegel, experimented with the idea of composing fragments as forms that represented a projected whole work. They were writing in an era in which philosophers and writers were inspired by the visible fragmentary ruins of a classical past "which became a model for the imperfectability of contemporary human existence" (20). Quoting Kelly Eileen Battles, they argue that this antiquarian interest expanded "the concept of fragmentation to include not only materiality…but

also fragmented narrative forms and the privileging of the historical anecdote to the exclusion of linear grand narratives" (21). They point out that "tropes of fragmentation haunt almost all of the major works of the Romantic period," (23) referring to Coleridge's interrupted and incomplete "Kubla Khan" and Keats's "Hyperion" and "The Fall of Hyperion" as works "whose incompleteness helps to define them and their poetic character" (23). The ruins of a classical past that inspired that model for ekphrasis scholarship, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" for instance, were known to be fragments of a larger whole and in the same way, literary fragments could be perceived as indicating an equally absent whole.

While a detailed literary history of the Romantic critical fragment such as Atherton and Hetherington, Santilli, and Monroe provide is beyond the parameters of this chapter, what is salient to my own project is the notion that the prose poem, as an evolution from the Romantic critical fragment via Baudelaire, gestures towards or implies the existence of an absent whole. Atherton and Hetherington argue further that "the fragmentary prose poem implicitly suggests that many experiences are themselves inherently fragmented and often incoherent" (29) and reference studies in autobiographical memory to support that statement. This observation has particular relevance to my exploration of prose poem ekphrasis of photographs for reasons related to synergies between the theorization of the prose poem form and that of photography.[21]

Specifically, the notion of prose poem as fragment indicates an aesthetic connection with the idea of a photograph as an isolated instant of time that gestures

[21] Atherton and Hetherington also note the prose poem's affinity with the fragmented and incoherent experience of autobiographical memory. For discussions of photographs as tools for understanding and interpreting autobiographical memories, see Kuhn pp. 1-10, 47-69; Smith and Watson pp. 95-96, 175-176.

toward a whole. In his essay "Understanding a Photograph," for example, Berger argues that "[a] photograph, while recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum" (20). In *On Photography*, Sontag remarks that photographs "are a neat slice of time" (17) and that "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (23). And, as I explored in chapter two, Szarkowski identified five "issues" of photography that highlight the photograph's ability to define content, isolate experiences and create unexpected juxtapositions. This characteristic of the photograph to present "a moment taken from a continuum" (Berger 20) provides a link between the theorization of the prose poem and that of the photograph.

But such a link also suggests ways in which prose poetry might invite Swensen's "writewithist" approaches to ekphrasis—specifically her contention that ekphrastic poems might use the artwork they engage with as models for formal construction. In the last chapter, I offered "The Red Wheelbarrow" as an example of a poem which reveals the poet's understanding of the aesthetics of a photograph in its language and its form. I suggested that characteristics of poems such as Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" encapsulate the modes of ekphrasis that Swensen describes as works of poetry that reveal how visual art might offer a poet "a model for formal construction" of a poem. In this chapter, then, I am arguing that Swensen's contention has a particular resonance for ekphrasis of photography because the camera has given us new ways of seeing.

In the next section of the chapter, I investigate how contemporary modes of ekphrasis such as those articulated by Swensen provide a platform from which to discern the shared aesthetic and cultural preoccupations of photography and prose poetry more specifically. I first provide background to this argument by considering

Margueritte Murphy's exploration of the early-twentieth-century British prose poem's relationship with the visual arts. Murphy's examination of Jessie Dismorr's prose poem "snapshots" and "urban fragments" helps to connect scholarship on the prose poem as a means for depicting the fragmentary experiences of modern life with my exploration of prose poem ekphrasis of photographs. Murphy's connection of the prose poem form of the early twentieth century to the aesthetics of other art forms and to "new modes of seeing" introduces my analysis of the prose poem ekphrasis of photographs of Bang and Fraser. I argue that as with Dismorr, the work of both poets demonstrates an operative relationship that is "not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (Swensen 71). The technology of photography is a major influence on the visual poetics of Bang and Fraser, and as such, provides both poets with a model for the formal construction of their prose poetry.

The Prose Poem and the Photograph

There is little scholarship on the ekphrastic relationship between prose poetry and photography, and a surprisingly small body of prose poem ekphrasis of photographs, which may indicate that contemporary poets and critics do not particularly differentiate between representational art and photography with regard to ekphrasis. As Barthes declared in *Camera Lucida*, "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (6). My perspective, however, is that the essential characteristics of a photograph do affect how poets represent photographic images and that the prose poem as a form is particularly suited to such representation.

But if there is little in the way of scholarship on the links between prose poetry and photography per se, scholars have identified a connection between the

prose poem and the art movements of the early twentieth century more generally. In her study of the British prose poem's links to early Modernism, Margueritte Murphy argues that the prose poem was a vehicle for writers to "represent a new 'real' in a manner informed by twentieth-century sensations and sensibilities" (Murphy 30) and without the constraints of verse.

Murphy notes that poems which found a place in the avant-garde little magazines of the early twentieth-century such as *BLAST* were seldom called prose poems; instead, they often aligned themselves aesthetically with non-literary art forms. She cites Julia Nelsen's study of prose poetry and the little magazines which revealed that the description and titles of "the vast majority of prose poems appearing in modernist journals evoke other forms of the language arts, as well as painting and music: Fragments, Impressions, Sketches, Etchings, Prints, Notes, Improvisations" (qtd. in Murphy 31). Murphy points out that this allusion to other art forms was not a new development. Aloysius Bertrand, the writer who had inspired Baudelaire with his *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1842), referenced the painters Rembrandt and Callot with his subtitle *Fantasies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*, and Arthur Rimbaud reportedly referred to his set of prose poems, *Illuminations* (1886), as "coloured plates" (Murphy 31).

For Murphy, the fact that these early prose poets compared their poetry to works of art indicated that they felt their work had parallels with other arts. Murphy argues that "[s]uch self-definition and departure from generic identification, also implies a role in literary experimentation" (31). She notes that the era in which prose poetry was establishing its place in the British literary scene coincided with literary debate about the nature of poetry. Murphy highlights arguments from authors T. E. Hulme (1908) and Laurence Binyon (1912) who drew distinctions between prose

and poetry in the context of *vers libre*. Hulme's arguments, which foreshadowed the emergence of Imagism, compared the "direct language of poetry…direct, because it deals in images" with the "indirect language of prose [which]uses images that have died and become figures of speech" (Hulme, qtd. in Murphy 32). Binyon contrasted a poetic view of the world in which "all is energy, relation, change" to a prose view which he aligned "not only with a static use of language, but also a conventional perspective on the world" (33). While neither critic was referring specifically to prose poetry, Murphy intends for their remarks to represent the way that the early twentieth-century prose poem illustrated how the static and conventional language of prose could be energized by the vividness and dynamism of poetry as a means for representing the modern world.

What is significant for this project's interest in the impact of photography on poetry, and prose poetry in particular, is Murphy's contention that the prose poem rose to the challenge of representing modern life in literature by offering "a vehicle for capturing the sensation of the modern that seemed to fit the accelerated pace and fragmented sensations of the early twentieth-century city" (32). This is a characteristic of the prose poem first articulated by Baudelaire in the mid-nineteenth century when he attributed the genesis of his prose poetry and his desire to represent "our more abstract modern life" (ix) to his "exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations" (x).

While it seems that Baudelaire, in the mid-nineteenth century, experienced his own version of the "fragmented sensations" Murphy refers to, the expression has a particular meaning in the context of early twentieth-century art as well as cinematic and still photography. Artists of that era, such as Picasso, Georges Braque, and Duchamp, experimented with capturing that sensation of fragmentation in their

artwork. This can be seen in Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* for instance or Picasso's and Braque's Cubist paintings whose fragmented style allows objects to be depicted from many angles at once.

In order to illustrate how prose poetry attempted to reproduce the effects of such artwork, Murphy draws attention to the poetry and artwork of the Vorticist Jessie Dismorr (1885–1937). She points to the way in which Dismorr's work was "informed by a Vorticist aesthetic with attention to angles and exaggerated perspectives" (38). Murphy's analysis of Dismorr's work encourages me to read Dismorr's poetry as an example of writewithist prose poem ekphrasis associated with a particular art movement. For this reason, it is useful to provide some background to the Vorticist movement and Dismorr's contribution to it. Vorticism, a modernist avant-garde art movement that included painters, sculptors, and writers, was influenced by cubism, futurism, and expressionism but sought an English rather than European expression of these movements. It combined "cubist fragmentation of reality with hard-edged imagery derived from the machine and the urban environment" (*Tate* np). The movement, which listed among its literary adherents the writer Ezra Pound and painter and writer Wyndham Lewis, was launched in England in 1914 in the journal *BLAST* which had one further issue in 1915. Dismorr, who was better known as an artist, was a signatory to the Vorticist manifesto published in the 1914 edition of *BLAST*. In his essay "London, literature and *BLAST*: the vorticist as crowd master," Rod Rosenquist notes that "[o]ne of the primary goals of *BLAST* seemed to have been to create a specifically English form of the European *avant-garde* of that time" (np). Rosenquist explains the significance of the name Vorticism by referring to Pound's explanation that vorticist practitioners applied the term to the "idea of an artist standing as an anchoring centre to the swirling chaos of

modern thought" (Rosenquist np). Rosenquist elaborates on Pound's explanation by explaining that the movement was directly associated with London and suggests that "just as the artist provides the stable centre of the personal vortex, so the city might be seen as the stabilizing centre of the movement's vortex" (np). According to Rosenquist, a Vorticist view of London presents the city as "monumental, cold, even classical." He discerns such a stance in Dismorr's work in which emotions are represented "in strictly literary lines, planes and surfaces" (Rosenquist np).

Dismorr provided two pieces of graphic art and six "Poems and Notes" for the 1915 edition of *BLAST*, including the sequence "London Notes," a series of seven short statements about London places and institutions such as the British Museum, Park Lane, and Hyde Park. The "Notes" are presented in *BLAST* on a single page that together give the verbal impression of a photo-essay in which the ordinary is rendered unfamiliar by odd camera angles or jarring juxtapositions. Dismorr's verbal presentation of the London streetscape, in other words, is like that of an artist or photographer seeking to present modern life as hectic. She reproduces the experience of being dwarfed by futuristic constructions in the form of scaffolding, for instance, in "Piccadilly:" "Towers of scaffolding draw their criss-cross pattern of bars upon the sky, a monstrous tartan" (*BLAST* 66). Or she represents the world in miniature and at the same time likens it to something else, as in "Fleet Street," in which the speaker notes how "Precious slips of houses, packed like books on a shelf, are littered all over with signs and letters" (*BLAST* 66). "Hyde Park," a "note" in three paragraphs, sets out three contrasting scenes in which "titanic figures" are contrasted with "little London houses," women are depicted sewing and knitting under trees, and men on horseback in the Row are contrasted with women "enamoured of their own accomplished movements." Rosenquist

detects in Dismorr's description of London her preference for "the more cubist construction of architecture and flagstones to that of the uproar of the human flux" (np). Murphy suggests that "it is the visible through which the city is available for interpretation; the artist/prose poet may tilt the perspective to plumb its realities, read its pain and anxieties, and suggest takes on the city beyond the conventional" (40). Both analyses focus on Dismorr's depiction of the city as a cubist, tilted, perspective of angles and planes which is mirrored in the behaviour of its human occupants.

One "Note" in particular, the single sentence piece "In Park Lane," stands out for its unusual perspective and its evocation of women in the context of the buildings:

> In Park Lane
>
> Long necked feminine structures support almost without grimacing the elegant discomfort of restricted elbows. (*BLAST* 66)

Murphy suggests that in this "'note,' architecture and women meld, with buildings as confined as women, women rigid as architecture, and necks below elbows to render a distorting perspective" (39). Rosenquist describes Dismorr's observations as "sculptural" and locates "In Park Lane" "somewhere between formalism and expressionism. But it is also possible to provide a writewithist reading. Such a reading of "London Notes" would focus on the manner in which the alignment of vorticist art practice to the form and content of Dismorr's poetry "underscores the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving rather than as static objects" (Swensen 71). By adopting the prose poem form, Dismorr makes use of what Miltner describes as the form's characteristic "juxtaposition of fragment and phrase" to emphasize a vorticist visual perspective that presents the city and its inhabitants as fragmented and as angular planes and surfaces. When Dismorr writes that "Long necked

feminine structures support almost without grimacing the elegant discomfort of restricted elbows," she is reducing her subjects to the same kind of angles and planes that might be found in a cubist depiction of London architecture. The poems in "London Notes" provide an early twentieth-century illustration of Swensen's contention that art can provide poetry with a model for how it could be written.

Murphy and Rosenquist also use photographic analogies to describe "London Notes." Rosenquist argues that Dismorr "understood what vorticist technique might look like when dressed in print rather than pigment" (np). He contends that Dismorr arranged "her scenes according to visual composition…framing them as snapshots" (np). Murphy also uses the term "snapshots" in her discussion of "London Notes," to point to a relationship between the "Notes" and photography. She describes "London Notes" as "[mimicking] a series of postcards from a day's excursion with the title replicating the role of photo caption…These short prose pieces evoke discrete places from a particular perspective, snapshots from an unusual angle, urban fragments" (38). Murphy's remarks are a reminder of Szarkowski's identification of the importance to photography of vantage point and frame. Szarkowski observed that vantage point enables the photographer "to reveal not only the clarity but the obscurity of things, and that these mysterious and evasive images could also, in their own terms, seem ordered and meaningful" (Szarkowski 126). When he discussed the importance of photographic framing, Szarkowski emphasized how the edge of the photograph "isolates unexpected juxtapositions…dissects familiar forms and shows their unfamiliar fragment" (70). Murphy concludes her essay by arguing that texts like Dismorr's "explore new modes of seeing, incorporate ways of viewing informed by new technologies and means of transportation and new modes of feeling" (44). Though not named directly here, photography and film are among the "new

technologies" of the time, and I take these as among those she groups into this category.[22] The poetic form of "London Notes" is related not only to Vorticist art practice but also to the technology of photography. That is, photographic seeing is as apparent in Dismorr's poetry as is her vorticism.

Murphy does not take the next step to consider Dismorr's poems as ekphrases. Rather, Murphy is concerned with how texts such as Dismorr's participate in a "redefinition of 'poetry' as the medium for the presentation of lived fragments, of direct emotion, and of images whose newness resides in a dynamic take on modernity rendered in contemporary language" (44). But my argument is that it is ekphrasis, as further developed by Swensen's writewithism. Such a redefinition of poetry aligning verbal representation of modernity to "new modes of seeing" suggests that Swensen's new modes of ekphrasis have a history that can be traced to the early twentieth century at least. Dismorr can be viewed as an early practitioner of an ekphrasis that deviates from the "referential level, which is its habitual realm… [by using art] as a model for formal construction" (Swensen 71). And as Murphy argues, Dismorr's poetry is both an example of the prose poem's historical "parallels with the other arts, especially the visual arts" (31) and with "new technologies" that must include photography. Such an association of prose poetry, visual art and photography is the focus of my analysis that follows of the contemporary work of Bang and Fraser.

[22] Murphy references Andreas Huyssen's *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film.*
Huyssen writes about the impact of photography and cinema on literature beginning in the era in which Baudelaire was writing *Paris Spleen*.

New Modes of Seeing in Mary Jo Bang's *A Doll for Throwing*

Mary Jo Bang's collection *A Doll for Throwing* is a work of prose poetry which can usefully be compared to Dismorr's "London Notes" for the manner in which Bang has incorporated the aesthetics of an early twentieth-century art movement with the form of her poetry. Like Dismorr's "London Notes," Bang's prose poetry also displays a writewithist parallel with photography. *A Doll for Throwing* is a twenty-first-century collection of prose poetry, but its subject matter is the Bauhaus movement, the avant-garde school of design that operated in Germany between 1919 and 1933. Bauhaus principles reflect the belief of its founders that arts such as "painting, architecture, theatre, photography, weaving, typography, etc., [should be brought together] into a modern synthesis which disregards conventional distinctions between 'fine' and 'applied' arts" (Bayer np). Bang's poetic response to the principles and aesthetics of the Bauhaus movement generally, and to Bauhaus experimentation with photography more particularly, reveals that not only has the prose poem form provided Bang with a means for sharing contexts with Bauhaus aesthetics but that Bauhaus aesthetics have provided her with models for the formal construction of her poems.

Many of the poems in *A Doll for Throwing* demonstrate a view of people and objects related to the Bauhaus that is constrained by the frame and vantage point of a camera lens. The collection was inspired by the life and work of Bauhaus photographer Lucia Moholy (1894-1989), who was briefly the first wife of Bauhaus master (teacher) and fellow photographer László Moholy-Nagy. When Moholy fled Germany in 1933 as the Nazi government came into power, she left five hundred or more of her glass negatives with Moholy-Nagy, who eventually gave them to Bauhaus director Walter Gropius. Gropius subsequently took the negatives to the

United States and made unattributed use of them to promote his own work. Moholy fought for decades to recover her negatives and to have her photographs of the work of students and masters in the Bauhaus school correctly attributed to herself. Although she died in 1989, Moholy's long struggle for recognition has recently been the subject of attention by scholars, [23] and Bang's book in some respects adds to this scholarship because she draws attention to the work of Moholy and other female *Bauhäusler*.

In her "Afterword" to *A Doll for Throwing*, Bang explains that she become interested in Moholy after seeing an exhibition that "brilliantly enacted the democratizing collapse between craft and high art envisioned by Walter Gropius in 1919 and promoted by the vaunted Masters of the Bauhaus movement" (Bang 64). Bang found a 1926 Lucia Moholy photograph entitled *Walter and Ilse Gropius's Dressing Room* among exhibits as seemingly diverse as "a Dutch woven textile, hung verso, *circa* 1910-1930; Pablo Picasso's *Woman in a Red Hat*, oil-on-canvas, 1934…[and] a Plexiglass vitrine inside of which were three things: a medicine pot, a 'power object,' and a figure of a man carved on a staff (Mali), all unattributed, dated *circa* 20th century" (64). In other words, these works had been displayed together in an exhibition that did not make an aesthetic distinction between fine art and craftwork.

The poems in *A Doll for Throwing* demonstrate their genesis in Bang's gallery experience and her interest in the Bauhaus. Speakers of the poems either articulate Bauhaus ideals or enact them, and the subject matter of the poems references Bauhaus art, architecture, and craft. And in many respects, Bang's prose

[23] See Schuldenfrei, pp. 182-203, for an account of Moholy's photographic practice and her attempts to recover her images; Forbes, pp. 25-42 for a biographical essay placing Moholy in the context of the lack of recognition for her work among male Bauhaus practitioners.

poem ekphrases attempt to grapple with Gropius's assertion on the dustjacket of the book length catalogue published to accompany the 1938 Bauhaus exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art: "The Bauhaus is an answer to the question: how can the artist be trained to take his place in the machine age" (Bayer np). In a 2020 podcast interview for *Poetry for All* Bang explained that in *A Doll for Throwing* she chose to work in the prose poem form for this collection because it represented aspects of the Bauhaus ethos:

> …because of the Bauhaus, because all those objects are very linear and very compact… and free of ornamentation, so I felt that would be perfect, these Bauhaus poems will have their little Bauhaus house to live in… And so for each one of them, it was decided in advance and they're justified box, so it's not just a prose poem with a ragged right edge…but it's these little blocks, just like those buildings are. (Bang 7:51-8:25)

In other words, Bang uses the prose poem form to verbally enact the "democratising collapse between craft and high art envisioned by Walter Gropius" (Bang 64) that she found so inspiring when she viewed the exhibition that introduced her to Moholy's work.

Bang stops short of claiming that the speaker in *A Doll for Throwing* is Moholy. In an appendix, she concludes a short biography of Moholy's life with the statement "[t]hese poems are not about her but were written by someone who knew of her" (66). In a 2017 radio interview with host Don Marsh, she described the poems as "persona poems" (Bang 1:30) and explained the title of the collection was inspired by a doll called a *Wurfpuppe* (a doll for throwing) designed by *Bauhäusler* Alma Siedhoff-Buscher. Bang explained that when thrown, the dolls would always land with grace, and she was taken with the thought that "we are all human dolls as it

were, and we're often thrown" (Bang 1:49). Bang explains further that another meaning for *A Doll for Throwing* is that "a ventriloquist throws a voice into a doll and in some ways, these persona poems are ventriloquized where I have invented a doll…a woman speaker and thrown my voice" (Bang 2:20). Bang's appendices to *A Doll for Throwing* reveal that the persona of the poems is a conflation of several Bauhaus personalities whose engagement with the Bauhaus ethos included theatre, ballet, architecture, and design as well as photography. If the speaker of the poems is viewed as the "doll for throwing," then the poet is the ventriloquist throwing her a Bauhaus voice. It is a voice that is, nevertheless, consistent throughout and belongs to a woman whose life story occasionally coincides with Moholy's and who espouses and also questions aspects of Bauhaus philosophy in her creative life.

The poems in *A Doll for Throwing* also grapple with how to represent the Bauhaus world in Bauhaus terms. Bang's notes identify that a self-portrait by Lucia Moholy inspired "In this Photograph I am Untitled" (the poem that acts as the epigraph to this chapter). In that photograph, Moholy stares intently and slightly upward at the lens. She fills the frame; the background is blurred and her chin rests in her hands, fingers curled under into loose fists. Moholy's husband Moholy-Nagy practised photography as a Bauhaus art form, and many of the poems in *A Doll for Throwing* illustrate the way that photography was perceived by Moholy-Nagy and other Bauhaus practitioners. Moholy-Nagy was interested in how mirrors, lenses and translucent objects create gradations of light values; he photographed such objects and experimented with how they cast shadows or reflected light sources. Thus, when Bang's speaker claims that "even in the dark, angles often conduct the eye into a lighted interior" (24) she is referencing the kind of photographic experimentation that Moholy-Nagy's work reveals.

Despite the importance of photography to Bang's engagement with Moholy's life and the Bauhaus, it is not always apparent that many of the poems are in fact forms of ekphrasis. This approach is similar to that of Bang's earlier ekphrastic collection *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* (2004) in which, although a significant number of the poems take the titles of the artworks they represent, the artwork itself is obscured. In an interview with Jennifer K. Dick, Bang described her approach to ekphrasis in terms that are in sympathy with Swensen's notion of ekphrasis as *living with* rather than *looking at* the artwork. Bang describes her process in *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon*, as one of "taking an existing work of art and rewriting over it…imposing a new narrative on it, one that is partially suggested by the artwork itself and partially by something that comes from within" (Bang, "The World Anew"). She identifies the artworks in an appendix partly to acknowledge the original artist and their art and partly because being able to see the artwork offers readers "another dimension to the poem":

> The poems have a certain independence, but at the same time each poem writes yet another chapter in the story begun by the artwork. It begins with the artwork but then goes somewhere new. I guess you could say the artwork becomes a single thread from which an entire cloth is then woven, but a cloth that has its own inherent lapses and ellipses, and its own psychological content. (Bang, "The World Anew")

In "To Writewithize," Swensen describes the practice of taking an artwork and going somewhere new as one in which the poet "engages *with*, grapples *with*, visual art" (Swensen 71). In contrast to traditional ekphrasis, the poet is not opposing or competing with visual art: instead, they are collaborating with it. As Bang's

ekphrastic practice demonstrates, the arts can be seen "as modes of thinking and perceiving, rather than as static objects" (Swensen 71).

In the section that follows, I read three poems from *A Doll for Throwing* for Bang's writewithist use of Bauhaus themes as both subject matter and for the formal construction of her poems. The poems "A Model of a Machine," "In the Street," and "Self Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror" are either identified in the appendices as ekphrases of Bauhaus photographs or represent a body of photographic work associated with the Bauhaus. My exploration of these poems views Bang's work in association with the tenets of the Bauhaus movement, which encouraged its adherents to consider "how can the artist be trained to take his place in the machine age" (Bayer np). In her interview for *Poetry for All*, Bang pointed to similarities in form between Bauhaus architecture and the prose poem as a rationale for selecting a justified box shape for her work. I will argue that many of the prose poems in *A Doll for Throwing* thematise and enact the Bauhaus ethos, and Bauhaus photographic practice in particular, when they aestheticize the utilitarian and quotidian in a form that combines the characteristics of poetry with the linearity and paragraphs of prose.

"A Model of a Machine," the opening poem from *A Doll for Throwing*, captures the Bauhaus movement's interest in rendering everyday objects beautiful:

> I'll begin by saying that objects can be unintentionally beautiful. Consider the simplicity of three or four self-aligning ball bearings, the economy of a compass. Brilliant, no? We thought so. We had confidence in architecture and design beyond the base commercial. Stage settings, furniture, typography, everything came with a moral mandate. The machine was important, of

> course. At four o'clock in the morning ideas came effortlessly, as if out of the air, the way a teapot or a pan comes cleanly out of the cupboard. In the blank space between the following day and the previous night, you see the beauty of a propeller, for instance, and think, yes, I want that silver metal to mean something more than just flight. (3)

The notes for "A Model of a Machine" direct the reader to a photograph of self-aligning ball bearings and another of an outboard propeller from the catalogue of a 1934 Museum of Modern Art exhibition entitled *Machine Art.* The foreword to the catalogue, written by Museum of Modern Art director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., reveals a Bauhaus-like regard for the design and technical skills of the industrial metalworker:

> The role of the artist in machine art is to choose, from a variety of possible forms each of which may be functionally adequate, that one form which is aesthetically most satisfactory. He does not embellish or elaborate, but refines, simplifies and perfects. (Barr np)

Barr also notes that sometimes a machine-made object is unintentionally beautiful and sometimes its beauty is a result of deliberate aesthetic choices on the part of its manufacturer (np). This observation is echoed by Bang's speaker in the opening sentence of the poem when she declares, "I'll begin by saying that objects can be unintentionally beautiful" (3). But the poem concludes with the speaker's desire for "that silver metal to mean something more than just flight" (3). My reading of this poem focuses on how such a movement between aesthetic imperatives encapsulates Swensen's contention that in some modes of ekphrasis, "poem and artwork are fellow travelers sharing a context" (70). In this poem, and in *A Doll for Throwing*

more generally, such context sharing also contributes to the sense that Bauhaus aesthetics provide Bang with a model for formal construction of her poems.

In “A Model of a Machine,” poem and photographs share a Bauhaus context in which the applied arts are afforded the same aesthetic significance as the fine arts. Bang’s speaker begins with the objects depicted in the catalogue and moves to a summary of the subjects taught at the Bauhaus— “architecture and design…stage settings, furniture, typography… the machine was important of course” (3). A feature of Bauhaus practice was the attention paid to ergonomic design. Chairs, cupboards, and drawers for instance were all designed to fit with the shape of the human body; even the design of utensils was considered against their use and storage— “the way a teapot or pan comes cleanly out of a cupboard” (3). In such a paradigm, industrial and domestic objects might be considered as worthy of ekphrastic representation as objects of fine art.

Bang’s stated approach to identifying the subjects of her ekphrasis is that by providing notes for her readers to identify her source images, she is providing “another dimension to the poem” (Bang “The World Anew”). In “A Model of a Machine,” this other dimension is the Bauhaus context in which propellers or ball bearings are presented as aesthetically beautiful. In Swensen’s terms, poem and photographs are fellow travelers sharing this context when Bang’s speaker grapples with this apparent contradiction:

> We had confidence in
> architecture and design beyond the base commercial.
> Stage settings, furniture, typography, everything came
> with a moral mandate. The machine was important, of
> course. (3)

The speaker's excitement, presented here in short declarative sentences, is in line with the moral mandate of the Bauhaus. But this excitement is juxtaposed with her closing wish for the propeller which is presented in a single long sentence of multiple clauses: "In the blank space between the following day and the previous night, you see the beauty of a propeller, for instance, and think, yes, I want that silver metal to mean something more than just flight" (3). Like the Bauhaus, "A Model of a Machine" grapples with ideas around uniting functionality with fine art. The speaker's final wish could be seen as an acknowledgment of the unintentional beauty of machine-made objects and of the importance of imagination.

The prose poem form adds an extra dimension to the ekphrasis of "A Model of a Machine" because of what Bang describes as its compactness, linearity, and lack of ornamentation (Bang, *Poetry for All* 7:51-8:02). Art and architecture of the Bauhaus movement was marked by the desire to disregard conventional distinctions between functional items and the fine arts and objects designed by its adherents had an inbuilt and recognisable aesthetic quality. The prose poem, which unites the functionality of prose with the aesthetic orientation of poetry under a nomenclature that has "the virtues of simplicity and directness" (Lehman 15), makes a similar claim for its aesthetics. Or, as the speaker in "A Model of a Machine" expresses it in two prose-like yet poetic sentences:

> I'll begin by saying that objects can be unintentionally
> beautiful. Consider the simplicity of three or four self-
> aligning ball bearings, the economy of a compass. (3)

In these lines, Bang uses the "means of prose toward the ends of poetry" (Lehman 13) in sentences that evoke the rhythmic compression and musicality of poetry. This rhythm and musicality is illustrated by the pause instituted by the full stop between

the sentences and the comma within the second sentence and secondly by Bang's attention to sound. The full stop alters the rhythm of the prose, inviting the reader to pause and reflect, while Bang's repetition of sounds ('b" sounds in "begin," "object" and "beautiful" in the first sentence and hard C sound in "Consider," "economy" and "compass") and slight internal rhyme ("aligning" and "bearings") evoke what Miltner describes as the "sound and song" of poetry (np). This musicality and Bang's presentation of utilitarian household objects like teapots and pans as poetic similes for creative ideas ("At four o'clock in the morning ideas came effortlessly, as if out of the way, the way a teapot or a pan comes cleanly out of a cupboard" [3]) contribute to the poeticity of her prose. Such repetition of sounds, attention to punctuation and striking simile is of course applicable to prose, but it is the kind of language and construction given concentrated effect in poetry. Bang's adoption of the prose poem form reflects a Bauhaus aesthetic when she demonstrates how the utilitarian language of prose can become *intentionally* beautiful when it is combined with the aesthetics of poetry.

Many of the poems in *A Doll for Throwing* demonstrate how Bang has taken a writewithist approach to photographs of the Bauhaus by examining the images for what they depict about Bauhaus ideas. In the poem "In the Street," for instance, Bang makes writewithist use of Moholy-Nagy's experimentation with photography by representing his ideas about the creative use of vantage point in a prose poem that engages with the same aesthetic through its form. Art historian Laura Muir describes Moholy-Nagy's influence on Bauhaus photographic practices as one of encouraging artists to think of photography as an artform rather than a means of reproduction:

> [Moholy-Nagy] argued that photography had the power to provoke a fresh rapport with the visual world—a 'new vision'—by rendering the familiar

> unfamiliar through unexpected viewpoints, extreme close-ups, radical cropping, negative printing, and the photogram technique…. (Muir 127).

In Bang's poem "In the Street," Bauhaus photographic techniques such as radical cropping or extreme closeups find their poetic counterparts in disconcerting juxtaposition of image and speaker's perspective.

The poem "In the Street" begins by establishing a vantage point:

> Here we are, on top of the utopian arc. The water is shallow. An oil spill shimmers on the surface like a lens catches light and folds it in front of a mirror. If someone stands next to you, they are there, even when outside the picture. Which makes total obscurity relative to luck and such. Unlike the law, architecture lasts. A façade, like an ideal, can be oppressive unless balanced by a balcony on which you can stand and call down to those in the street: Come over here and look up at us. Aren't we exactly what you wanted to believe in? (30)

As with Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," there is in this case no attributable image associated with this poem. Nevertheless, it represents a mélange of images and photographic practices associated with Bauhaus photographers. Moholy-Nagy and fellow Bauhaus photographer Lyonel Feininger both took photographs of building façades with protruding balconies, for instance, and Gerd Balzer rendered the balconies of the Prellerhaus dormitory building on the Bauhaus campus in

Dessau abstract and strange by tilting his camera at an acute angle.[24] However, this poem is not about the balconies so much as what the balconies represented to Bauhaus photographers like Moholy-Nagy. The balcony afforded an opportunity for photographers to look down as much as provided a reason for people on the ground to look up at whoever was on the balcony. It was also an opportunity to break photographic "rules." Art curator Beaumont Newhall explains Moholy-Nagy's interest in the elevated vantage point as an opportunity to experiment creatively with a "new vision [where] converging verticals play against the unfamiliar birdseye views of common objects to create exciting patterns and forms" (347).

This creative and defamiliarizing new vision is represented in "In the Street" by both the poem's subject matter and, as with "A Model of a Machine," by the prose poem form. Bauhaus photographs often depict people on the balconies at acute angles or hanging precariously as if the people want to be perceived as something out of the ordinary. In terms of subject matter, Bang's poem emulates this practice by beginning with the speaker's downward focus onto a shallow pool of water shimmering with oil which is described as if it were the subject of a photograph: "like a lens catches light and folds it in front of a mirror" (30). This poem is a depiction in words of the kind of photographic practice Moholy-Nagy might have encouraged in his students.

Like Williams's composition in "The Red Wheelbarrow," Bang's writing also emulates photographic practice. Williams begins "The Red Wheelbarrow" by

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[24] Balzer, Gerd. *Prellerhaus Balconies*. Minneapolis Institute of Art, https://collections.artsmia.org/art/31101/prellerhaus-balconies
Moholy-Nagy, László. *Xanti Schawinsky on the balcony of the Bauhaus*. Wikiart, Laszlo-moholy-nagy/xanti-schawinsky-on-a-bauhaus-balcony

carefully and precisely asserting “So much depends / upon” (1-2) to focus his reader’s attention on the image that is to come and then provides a spare and precise description in the manner of a Stieglitz or Sheeler photograph. Bang’s speaker offers visual image upon visual image juxtaposed with a philosophical commentary that suggests a school of photography that valued unusual images created by making the familiar strange— “an oil spill shimmers on the surface like a lens catches light and folds it in front of a mirror” (30). Thus, Bang is using Bauhaus photographic principles as a model for the formal construction of the poem. But this is also linked to the characteristics of the prose poem. In a prose poem, as noted earlier, the utility of the prose and the expectation of linearity and narrative that accompanies it is disrupted, is made unfamiliar by poets who “use the structure of the sentence itself, or the way one sentence modifies the next, to generate the surplus meaning that helps separate poetry in prose from ordinary writing” (Lehman 22). Williams placed each spare and carefully crafted line to reinforce his poem’s debt to photography through sound and image. Bang relies on the jarring juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated ideas to achieve the effect of “the converging verticals and plane profiles” (347) that Newhall attributes to Moholy-Nagy’s interest in the elevated vantage point. Oil spills that shimmer “like a lens catches light” are juxtaposed with the observation that someone who is left out of the picture is still there. “Unlike the law, architecture lasts” the speaker declares—without a clear logical relation to what has just preceded—before suggesting that Bauhaus ideals might have sometimes felt restrictive; “[a] façade, like an ideal, can be oppressive unless balanced by a balcony” (30). In “In the Street,” the façade provided by the prose poem form is balanced by “balconies” of juxtaposed ideas and observations.

Another poem, "Self Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror," demonstrates first how a poet might interrogate the aesthetics of a Bauhaus image in composing a poem about a Bauhaus human personality and secondly what the prose poem form contributes to such a depiction:

> Some days, everything is a machine, by which I mean remove any outer covering, and you will most likely find component parts: cogs and wheels that whirr just like an artificial heart, a girl in a red cap redacting the sky, fish that look like blimps and fish-like blimps, an indifferent lighthouse that sweeps the horizon. I wasn't a child for long and after I wasn't, I was something else. I was this. And that. A blast furnace, a steel maze inside, the low-level engine room of an ocean liner. My eye repeats horizontally what I by this time already know: there is no turning back to be someone I might have been. Now there will only ever be multiples of me. (22)

Bang is aware that the originating artwork for her ekphrasis can, as noted earlier, offer "another dimension to the poem for those who want to read the poem by the light thrown onto it by the artwork" (Bang "The World Anew"). Accordingly, in her notes to the poem she identifies the source photograph as "Self Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror" ca. 1926-27, taken by Ilse Gropius, the wife of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius.[25] My reading of the poem begins with the image but proceeds from

[25] Gropius, Ise. *Self Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror*. Bauhaus Kooperation, https://www.bauhauskooperation.com/knowledge/the-bauhaus/works/photography/self-portrait-in-the-bathroom-mirror-of-the-masters-house-in-dessau/

the perspective that Bang's stated approach to ekphrasis is to "impose a new narrative" by "taking an existing work of art and rewriting over it" (Bang "The World Anew"). Such an approach to ekphrasis recalls Swensen's identification of modes of ekphrasis where the operative relationship between poet and artwork "underscores the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving rather than as static objects" (Swensen 71). For Swensen, such an approach is linked to works where the image offers the poet a model for the formal construction of their poem. My reading of "Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror," therefore, is interested in how Bang's "rewriting" of the image contributes to the sense that the photograph has provided her with a model for formal construction.

In the source photograph, which also features the camera that is taking the image, Ilse Gropius appears eight times as multiple refractions showing alternate left and right sides of her face. It is as if the image were a Bauhaus-like experiment with angles and reflections that also highlights the importance of the camera itself: the photograph is paying homage to the machine that created it. There is an implication too, that like her fellow Bauhaus photographers, Gropius is an artist who is being "trained to take [her] place in the machine age" (Bayer np).

The poem opens with the machine: "Some days, everything is a machine" (22). This statement is the first in a long sentence of multiple clauses which "rewrites" the source photograph by placing it within the context of the Bauhaus movement. By beginning with the idea of a machine in this way, the poem—like the photograph which shows the camera making the image—aestheticizes the machines that were so important to the Bauhaus ethos. However this claim to aestheticization

After her marriage to Walter Gropius, Ilse changed her first name to Ise. Her work is sometimes attributed to Ilse Gropius as in *A Doll for Throwing* and at other time to Ise Gropius.

(that is, depicting them as beautiful and artistically pleasing) is not simply that Bang's poem mentions a machine in its opening statement. She creates images that evoke the abstract art of Bauhaus artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee:

> …cogs and wheels that whirr just
> like an artificial heart, a girl in a red cap redacting the
> sky, fish that look like blimps and fish-like blimps, an
> indifferent lighthouse that sweeps the horizon. (22)

This sentence in itself provides an example of writewithist ekphrasis because it demonstrates how Bang grapples with the implications of an aesthetic movement that wishes to train the artist to take their place in the machine age. In this poem, she acknowledges that intent by attributing to her speaker a Bauhaus inner voice that aestheticizes the machine by comparing it to works of art. She presents that voice in a form—the prose poem—that aestheticizes the utilitarian nature of prose by employing characteristics of poetry such as "image, non-hierarchical word choice, sound and song, juxtaposition of fragment and phrase, and an intuitional interior logic" (Miltner, "Sobel Interview"). In this sentence, then, the speaker demonstrates that she "lives with" the artwork of Kandinsky and Klee—it is images like Klee's floating magical fish, or Kandinsky's circles and wheels that come to mind when she describes the inner workings of her machine.[26] Through her evocation of the art of Kandinsky and Klee, the speaker is indicating that in her world, "art is normal—not

[26] Kandinsky,Wassily. *Composition viii*. Samuel R. Guggenheim Museum, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/1924
Klee, Paul. *Fish Magic*. Philadelphia Museum of Art, https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/51027

special…[or] isolated in a frame or institution, but an inseparable part of the daily—and the poetic weave" (Swensen 70).

Such aestheticizing of the machine is accompanied by a similar aestheticizing of the language of prose with the characteristics of poetry. The characteristics of poetry discernible in the prose of this poem, like those I identified in "A Model of a Machine," incorporate attention to sound and image. In the long opening sentence, for instance, there is the use of repetition of adjacent sounds as consonance or alliteration in the proximity of "wheels" and "whirr," "red cap" and "redact." Later in the poem there is similar repetition of sounds in the phrase "low-level engine room of an ocean liner" (22). This work, like "A Model of a Machine," has many of the elements of poetry in terms of language and image. But these poetic elements are juxtaposed with elements of prose in the form of sentences which carry the implication of narrative. This juxtaposition contributes to the sense of a poem in which prose and poetry are in a state of mutual transformation in the same way that the Bauhaus ethos encouraged fine and applied arts to transform each other. The long, opening sentence with its evocative images of Bauhaus art, for instance, is followed by three much shorter and utilitarian sentences that contain no such imagery before Bang offers a mechanical metaphor for the workings of the speaker's inner life:

> I wasn't as child for long and after I wasn't, I was something else.
> I was this. And that. A blast furnace, a steel maze inside, the low-
> level engine room of an ocean liner. (22)

This is an evocative metaphor, suggesting a speaker who is both fiery and complex. And it also seems to suggest that despite her initial evocation of artworks in the long opening sentence, she thinks of herself in terms of the machine age in short

functional sentences in line with Bauhaus thinking that argued "[t]he Bauhaus is an answer to the question: how can the artist be trained to take his place in the machine age" (Bayer np). The writewithism of the piece is in both its content and form. The prose poem form in which prose and poetry collide is the means by which Bang uses Bauhaus principles as a model for formal construction. In turn, the content of poems like "Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror" reflects Bauhaus principles, in particular the desire to collapse distinctions between craft and fine art and to prepare the artist for working in the machine age.

In "Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror" and *A Doll for Throwing* more generally, Bang's adoption of the prose poem form to represent Bauhaus aesthetics is a significant component of her writewithist ekphrasis. As I argue in my reading of "In the Street," characteristics of the prose poem such as juxtaposition of fragment and phrase allow for an ekphrasis in which form as well as content echo the photographic image. In "Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror," when Bang rewrites over a work of art she is "underscoring the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving" (Swensen 71). In this case, the prose poem form which disrupts the utility of prose with the aesthetics of poetry, enables Bang to demonstrably live with and share contexts with a movement which had as a foundational principal the desire to break down the hierarchy which had divided fine art from the utilitarian design of craft.

Writing with the Eyes

Kathleen Fraser's visual imagining

Kathleen Fraser (1935–2019) is an avant-garde American poet whose work is characterised by her exploration of the poetic line, her interest in the visual arts, and her use of cinematic imagery and vocabulary to portray the fragmented and

disjointed movements of her speaker's mind. My reading of Fraser's work in this chapter focuses on how photographic technologies, and the cinema in particular, have provided her with a model for portraying female experience in poetic ekphrasis that depends on the sentence rather than the line. Fraser describes the poetic line as a site which has "afforded many contemporary women poets the difficult pleasure of reinventing the givens of poetry" (Fraser, "Line" 142). Fraser identifies poems that adhere to the "givens of poetry" as those with line breaks that echo "agreed upon codes of 'right' music, 'serious' subjects, or 'well-crafted' metric constraints" ("Line," 141). She feels that such "agreed upon codes" do not allow her to adequately depict the "hesitancy, speechlessness, continuous disruption of time" (Fraser, "Line" 142) that mark female experience. She adopted sentences grouped in fragments and paragraphs in order to escape the "lyric vise," and to "open up the range of the mind's movement and to forget about line breaks" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 16).

Fraser's work is also distinguished by what critic Linda A. Kinnahan describes as Fraser's "visual poetics" ("Incremental Shaping" 1). Kinnahan remarks on the "rich variety of spatial inventiveness" (1) that characterizes the physical appearance of Fraser's work on the page. She notes that in her poetry, Fraser has both focused on specific artworks and investigated how to represent them with her text. Kinnahan describes this practice as a form of collaboration with "the means though which visual media mark space and compel awareness of their materiality. As such, Fraser innovatively expands the practice of ekphrasis, or the long tradition of poetry that responds to a visual expression" (Kinnahan, "Incremental Shaping" 2). Kinnahan's remarks have a parallel with Swensen's argument in "To Writewithize" that identifies modes of ekphrasis in which poets make use of verbal strategies

equivalent to the visual strategies of an artwork. In this ekphrastic paradigm, a poem might not reference an actual artwork at all. Instead, as in Berssenbrugge's *Sphericity,* the poet's application of the "questions that traditionally animate a work of art; distance, interpretation, perspective, illusion are here applied ambiguously to life and art both, so that the reader is constantly aware of the presence of the visual arts, without being able to delimit them…" (Swensen 71). My discussion of Fraser's work investigates it from this perspective by asking how the aesthetics of visual media such as photography and the cinema are represented in the verbal strategies of Fraser's ekphrastic prose poetry.

In arguing for a photographic element in Fraser's writing, I follow Kinnahan's lead when she argues that in Fraser's 2004 collection *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling*, "[i]nteriority …becomes compellingly linked …to the structures of vision and modes of representation and reproduction dominant in twentieth-century life" ("Gendering" 225). In fact Kinnahan explicitly connects Fraser's work to "different kinds of visual technology" including cinema and photography, noting that such a "range of technologies offers important technical models for Fraser, such as the splicing effect of cinema as a formal choice for a poem's architecture" ("Gendering" 225). In an interview, Fraser explains that "using film imagery or its technical vocabulary was not really a conscious project or decision but came from the parallel gestures and metaphors that link one's life to the films you see, how they enter you" (Fraser, "Fraser and Guest" 371). Fraser later remarks that the avant-garde movies of the nineteen sixties had taught her "the breakdown of movement":

> I began to see how differently one's vision might be constructed—the tempo of it, the speed of image arrival…It made a new kind of sense if you were

> thinking of what was going on in jazz and 'new music'—all those jump cuts delivering meanings outside of the linear narrative which, normally, had provided one's main frame of reference. (Fraser, "Fraser and Guest" 372)

Fraser attributes this discovery with enabling her to find a way to "shed" the "received familiarity authorized by the mainstream models: how things ought to be if you were going to write a 'good' poem" (372). Fraser's desire to move away from the mainstream of poetry expressed in her use of the sentence and paragraph rather than line and stanza and her interest in cinematic techniques as a means for "delivering meanings outside of linear narratives" encourages me to explore Fraser's "visual poetics" as forms of writewithist ekphrasis.

In the sections that follow, I explore the prose poem sequence, "Soft pages" and the long poem, "You can hear her breathing in the photograph" (hereafter "Breathing") from *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling.* In "Soft pages" the ostensible subject of the sequence is a photograph of a foot in motion, while in "Breathing" the subject is a photograph of a sculpture. But while the photograph is central to each poem, in both instances Swensen's writewithist characterisation applies: the "operative relationship is not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (Swensen 71). In my readings of "Soft pages" and "Breathing," therefore, I explore how Fraser is clearly *living with* rather than *looking at* a photograph and by extension film. I expand upon this reading by focusing on how photography and cinema provide her with a model for the formal construction of her poetry. Specifically, I explore how photography and camera vision contribute to Fraser's ekphrasis by providing her with a model for portraying the shifts in time and visual perception that form part of what she described in a 1998 interview as "the gendered

experience" of female daily life and its "habituated availability to interruption" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 9). Both works also provide me with the means to point to fragmentation as an aesthetic link between Fraser's prose poems and photography: the prose poem as fragment, the photograph that represents a moment extracted from a continuum and Fraser's interest in depicting female experience as itself fragmented and interrupted.

In order to understand how Fraser's work in these pieces "lives with" photography in a writewithist sense, it is useful to begin with some background on Fraser's poetics. In interviews about her work, Fraser frequently explains how her poetics developed as a response to her perception that there was a mainstream model for "good" poetry that did not allow for the kind of innovation she wanted to develop in her own work. Fraser describes her desire for innovation in terms of how poets such as Emily Dickinson, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and H.D. use the "frame of the page, the measure of the line… imagining in visual, structural terms core states of female social and psychological experience not yet adequately tracked: hesitancy, silencing, or speechlessness, continuous disruption of time, 'illogical' resistance, simultaneous perceptions and agendas, social marginality" (Fraser, "Line" 142). Fraser expands on this by describing how she wanted to "get as close as possible to the notation of one's own way of seeing things—the movement of a mind as it notices and jumps" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 14).

Fraser's interest in portraying the "movement of a mind" is in turn related to her desire to capture the "layered or constellated time" and the condition of "continuous availability" that she felt marked female experience. She wanted to "trap in the poem the experience of layered, multiple perception—not just the fragmentation and the interruption, but the holding-in-the-mind-of-four-things-at-

once" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 15). Fraser initially used enjambment to portray shifts and layers in perception while experimenting with lyric form. She described this practice, which is evident in her 1993 collection *when new time folds up*, as being analogous to the "jump cuts in a film" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview"21). However, Fraser also describes the lyric as confinement—a "lyric vise" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview"16) from which she wanted to escape. A focus on sentences provided her with an "opportunity to open up the range of the mind's movement and to forget about line breaks. A sentence here, a sentence there—that can give you a way into something, or a way out" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview"16).

Fraser's reference to the sentence as a contrast to the verse line requires some context. Sentences are a component of poetry, but Fraser's use of the word sentence needs to be understood in relationship to the experimental writing of the literary communities in which she participated. In a 1982 essay, "Partial local coherence: Regions with illustrations (Some Notes on 'Language' writing)," Fraser describes her intrigued response to poetry that challenged aesthetic norms and her realization that her own students were submitting work that demonstrated the influence of the "new sentence" associated with Language writing:

> Clearly there was something very timely, necessary, and attractive about what the new writing and theory was proposing. And it was fun to write in sentences, to be liberated from the emotional tones of high lyricism and the fussiness of the line, to deprogram around poetry and to play with language as though it were unholy. (65).

While Fraser did not consider herself to be a total convert to Language writing, she acknowledged that it had "filtered, intentionally and unintentionally, into [her] writing" ("Coherence" 65). Many of the structural effects of Language writing,

particularly parataxis and fragmentation, would certainly seem to lend themselves to the depiction of "the experience of layered, multiple perception—not just the fragmentation and the interruption, but the holding-in-the-mind-of-four-things-at-once" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 15). Fraser's hesitancy to embrace Language writing was in part a result of her perception that for many women writers, Language poetry seemed to be centred around a largely elitist group of mainly "straight, white, male, linguistically oriented" writers ("Coherence" 75), and as such did not offer a means for them to examine their own experiences: "It would seem as urgent and more interesting, really, for many a woman writer to attend first to the unraveling of her own buried history of/in language before it gets classified, theorized, tamed" ("Coherence" 76). Fraser's attention to her own "unraveling" is apparent in her use and manipulation of prose sentences rather than the lines of verse to depict "core states of female social and psychological experience" ("Line" 142).

Fraser describes her desire to escape from the "lyric vise" as an aspect of casting off a learned "ear-memory" (Fraser, "Glück Interview"). In "artists' statements" and interviews[27] Fraser frequently refers to a childhood in which she was inculcated with the sounds and rhythms of English lyric prosody and of the King James Bible. Over time however, she began to feel that this experience was in fact "pushing my 'ear' into unnecessary words and extra beats in order to satisfy the rhythmic requirements of some earlier literature that no longer pertained to my life or my developing poetics" (Fraser, "Glück Interview"). Her solution was to consciously strive to overcome these earlier echoes and to strive to be "more 'colloquial' and allow multiple registers of voice to be present" (Fraser, "Glück

[27] See *Lyric Postmodernisms,* Shepherd, 50-51 for a short discussion of Fraser's interest in Charles Olson's open field poetics; Interviews by Glück, 2002 and Hogue, 1998 for Fraser's articulation of her influences and poetic practice.

Interview"). She explains that her work had evolved from the lyric poem, even if it was still generically linked to it, because of her interest in "highly condensed and lyric sound forms." When she began working primarily with the sentence and paragraph, it gave her "a greater emotional and intellectual range…Even my poems written in lines were mostly intended as series of juxtaposed, sentence-like statements" (Fraser, "Glück Interview). Significantly, and in an echo of Baudelaire's mid nineteenth-century letter to his editor, Fraser began to see her writing evolving as a response to the realities of twentieth-century urban life:

> …the writing…has attempted to embody, visualize and address the multiple assaults being made on a Twentieth century urban person attempting to map that expanding sensibility, with its time constraints & political arguments & moments of grace—the wish to make a place in the structure of the poem for the temporal reality of that interrupted life: Noise, silence, line, pause, fragment, space & other spaces. (Fraser, "Glück Interview")

Baudelaire's solution to the problem of capturing the fragmented and ephemeral nature of modern life was the prose poem. Fraser's solution to the problem was to explore the visual field of the page following Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse." Olson's 1950 essay advocated for a "poetics in which content determines form and poetry becomes more than self-expression" (Danvers 113). Olson argued for the importance of the breath as a source of energy transferred from poet to reader and as a means for expressing the rhythms of thought. Fraser reports that she couldn't quite "connect his idea of one's breath and speech to the measure of my own line" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 11), but that she responded to Olson's "emphasis on the visual field of the page," or his practice of composing the

placement of words and images on the page in forms outside of conventional prosody.

Fraser's poetics take on an additional significance when they collaborate with and "live with" photography. In my introductory discussion, earlier in this chapter, of an aesthetic relationship between prose poetry and photography, I noted that photography has often been theorized by critics such as Berger and Sontag as an isolated instant of time that gestures toward a whole. In his essay "Appearances," Berger also argued that "[a] photograph arrests the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed…Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity" ("Appearances" 62). In his essay "Rhetoric of the Image." Barthes describes this "shock of discontinuity" in terms of the disconcerting way that a photograph always shows something that has existed in the past but in such a way that it appears to also exist in the present:

> The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there.* What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then.* (*Image-Music-Text* 44)

It is the representation of this "new space-time category" combined with Berger's "arrest [of] the flow of time" that I note in Fraser's ekphrasis of photographs. It is also interesting to consider Fraser's work in the context of the aesthetics of photography espoused by Szarkowski, who lists the treatment of time among his five tenets of photography. While his work predates Sontag, who described the

photograph as a “neat slice of time” (Sontag 17), Szarkowski also describes photographers’ fascination with “[i]mmobilizing these thin slices of time” (10) and their discovery that “there was a pleasure and a beauty in this fragmenting of time that had little to with what was happening. It had to do rather with seeing the momentary patterning of lines and shapes that had been previously concealed within the flux of movement” (10). As I will now explain, Fraser makes narrative use of just such “momentary patterning” in “Soft pages.” In this sequence, Fraser’s fragmented, interrupted, and juxtaposed sentences provide a verbal parallel to her speaker’s perception that the camera has the ability “to bunch up time, capture it incrementally or smoothly, into successive unfoldings” (“Soft pages” 18). “Soft pages” begins with the speaker recalling a photograph of a man’s foot in action. She believes that the photograph has delivered to her “the plot of a story” (16). This idea of a still photograph suggesting a narrative is represented in the sequence by Fraser’s adoption of cinematic effects to depict the “minds movement.” By cinematic, I mean that Fraser uses the literary equivalent of jump cuts to move from one perception to the next, often to portray the notion of time passing. Both “Soft pages” and “Breathing” play with the representation of interrupted, layered, or constellated time as a characteristic of female experience, but this effect is particularly evident in “Soft pages.” In both sequence and poem, such cinematic effects contribute to a writewithist ekphrasis.

“Layered or Constellated Time”

“Soft pages” is a sequence of nine sections varying in length from one to three paragraphs and tangentially connected by ideas to do with feet and movement. This connection is characterised by a cinematic portrayal of time passing that is

represented by the interrupted thought processes of Fraser's speaker. The speaker is a woman writer living in an apartment in Rome who has written a piece about a postcard depicting a man's foot in motion. She wants to insert the piece of writing into this sequence but can no longer find it. She describes her neighbours, her preferred writing materials, a day in which it rains, her yoga class, and a walk to the market where she admires the vegetables for sale and sees a man sharpening knives. Visual experiences such as the play of reflected light on a wall, rain on a window or a blue glass bottle shattering on the edge of a bathtub trigger the speaker's thought processes and memories as she attempts to recreate the lost sentence about the foot. "Soft pages" is also characterised by the manner in which the persona voicing these scenes is sometimes an "implied viewer" (Swensen 70) of both the photograph and her neighbourhood in Rome and at other times a speaker who is exploring the conditions under which the poem is being constructed. This meta-literary approach is characterised by references to writing process and to the technology and aesthetics of photography and the cinema. For example, the speaker inserts her thoughts about her writing process into the narrative of the sequence— "I must remember to enter the narrator's life in as many ways as possible" (22). At the same time she also emphasises that her perspective is informed by the aesthetics and technologies of the camera as her narrative follows "the camera's path, its ability to bunch up time, capture it incrementally or smoothly, into successive unfoldings" (18).

Fraser has divided "Soft pages" into sections of various lengths in which time bunches up and then unfolds. Images from one section might be repeated in another but subtly altered with their meaning unravelled. The overriding impression in the sequence is of an unstable and changeable visual world in which the narrative action is being depicted via an avant-garde film of the nineteen-sixties. In order to

demonstrate this movement between sections, my reading of the sequence progresses from section to section as if each section were a component of a storyboard for an imaginary film about a photograph of a foot.

The first section opens with the motion of a foot captured in one long sentence:

> It was that motion of the back foot caught in the photo as a blur, more believable and quickly conveying a person's leaving who had once been on his way, even anticipating this place that continued to re-enter my imagination, as if the black-and-white photo of no one I knew had delivered the plot of a story it wished me to take hold of. (16)

As the sequence progresses the speaker / viewer explores this "plot of a story" and its relationship to ideas of feet and movement in a series of short, highly visual scenes reminiscent of photographs or film clips and incorporates cinematic techniques such as flashbacks, flashforwards and juxtaposed images. These cinematic devices contribute to the writewithism of the sequence in much the same way that Swensen argues in "To Writewithize" for Berssenbrugge's *Sphericity* to be considered ekphrasis. Instead of the elements of works of art such as "color, line, surface, form" (71) that Swensen attributes to *Sphericity*, "Soft pages" displays elements of camera vision, such as jump cuts and juxtaposed and spliced images derived from the cinema. Swensen argues that *Sphericity* demonstrates an "operative relationship that is not so much between writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (71). I argue that such an operative relationship is also discernible in Fraser's work. In my reading of "Soft pages," therefore, I focus on how visual modes of experience derived from

photography and the cinema provide Fraser with a model for the formal construction of the sequence.

That cinema provides Fraser with a structural model for her work is made quite tangible in the tenth section of the sequence, when the speaker enters a theatre:

> …You could also say that something suddenly leapt forward in the dark theatre and that what had been the curb now became a screen with her foot projected onto it just as it was lifting and setting itself back down. The screen was carried inside her, it having already installed itself, forming its contours again and again, but the light falling on her foot, as it appeared to lift of its own volition—as a separate animal even—made it seem as if the projector were also hers… (22).

Fraser depicts her speaker here as a woman who expresses her perceptions via cinematic analogies such as "projector," "projected" and "screen."

Elsewhere in the sequence, cinematic "techniques" such as flashbacks and flashforwards and notions of splicing images provide Fraser with a model for how to depict the shifts in narrative and visual perception that characterize the work. An aesthetic and formal preoccupation with cinematic effects is particularly evident in the narrative movement between the fourth and eleventh sections of "Soft pages." The two sections are connected by the idea of a centaur spliced with a monster. This mythological being is introduced as a mental construct in the fourth section as an example of how the mind "notices and jumps," but reappears in the eleventh as a visual phenomenon explained by the speaker's camera vision. The fourth section, consisting of three paragraphs, begins with a highly visual and colour saturated scene in which the speaker is putting away laundry:

> I lift the red panties with satin stripes, earlier tossed on the green radiator along with various pairs of ankle socks, among them the black cotton streaked with yellow and vermilion, still damp from the morning's rain outside in the *cortile.* Touching them. Turning them into their folds and rolling them into neat little bundles for the drawer. (17)

In the next sentence Fraser continues her description of the scene but subverts the colourful visuals in a cinematic juxtaposition of images and time by referencing a newsreel: "Some greyness begins to fall. I can see its motion sideways from the window, the graininess of newsreels from the Second World War, and I know it's more rain" (17). Fraser's play with "greyness" and "graininess" encourages the reader to follow the implied viewer's mental jump to the grainy flickering of old newsreels from the dull grey of the sky as rain begins to fall sideways across the window. In a move that demonstrates how Fraser's work emulates the capability of film, what had begun as a full-colour scene of quotidian domesticity is suddenly converted to black and white and with a reference to war which recurs throughout the sequence.

The second paragraph interrupts the scene further by introducing the speaker's thoughts about the process of recording this jump in time and context. She observes that a "realistic representation of the foot" (a reference to the photograph of the foot that opens the sequence) could help you "technically, into a different century, just as introducing the words The Peloponnesian Wars or World War I can pull you into a discrete flow of time assigned to a displaced fragment…." (17-18; ellipsis in original). The speaker continues by noting "[e]ven as you walk towards the most simple morning task" (18), the mind keeps returning to certain ideas or experiences over and over again. Her reference to "The Peloponnesian Wars or

World War I" represents "the experience of layered, multiple perception" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 15) and connects it to ideas to do with the camera's ability, as she puts it in this poetry sequence, to "bunch up time" ("Soft pages" 18).

The third paragraph in this section builds on the notion of displaced fragments and time:

> An earlier war could attach itself to the odd assignment of time before now, not yours, called 'Turn-of-the-century,' as could the spliced image of a centaur attach itself to a monster, the new construct borne into overlay as word, or demonstration of the mind's ability to jump or grasp more than one thing at a time, this horse/man turning away from us or leaving us with its (his?) path of motion as inadmissible evidence. But also the blur of discrete categories forced into coupling. (18)

My argument that "Soft pages" is writewithist ekphrasis is based on the manner in which Fraser uses elements derived from photography and the cinema as models for the formal construction of the sequence. The "spliced image" of a centaur and a monster that appears in the third paragraph of this section re-emerges in the eleventh and final section of the sequence when the speaker visits a market and observes a man driving a horse and cart:

> …Man with horse and cart trotting along in traffic. Centaur. My century. About to turn. the whiff of red tomatoes, still attached to the vine with the same acrid odour as my father's **V**ictory garden so carefully tended. War stamp days.

Recall that in the first paragraph of the fourth section, Fraser used the words "greyness" and "graininess" to jump from her present-day room to a Second World War newsreel. In this section, she uses the words "centaur" and "century" in a

similar way by capitalizing on the similarity in the sounds of the two words to achieve a jump cut between the era in which the idea of a mythological centaur might have occupied the citizens of Rome and the present day. It is the speaker's century now: a century which includes the Second World War. The paragraph continues:

> Behind the flower sheds, next to the iron railings separating the market stalls from the children's play area, a monster with a man's head and trunk, a horse's body and legs. His head emits a kind of music, he loves the romantic theme songs of American movies of the Forties and whistles as he sharpens knives against a device powered by/turning above a bicycle wheel he pushes, his hooves pressing the pedals, in place, whistling those old tunes from Mussolini times, but always off-key. Monstrous to a tuned ear. My ear, my sweet. (23)

These are the final four sentences of the entire sequence, and in them, Fraser performs a verbal splicing of content and images that replicates a camera's capabilities to "bunch up time, capture it incrementally or smoothly, into successive unfoldings" (18). Now the man has become a monster—a centaur—with a "man's head and trunk, a horse's body and legs" evoking a visual shot in which foreshortening, or some other visual trickery, has perhaps joined man and horse together. The "newsreels from the Second World War" of section four reappear in this paragraph: the knife grinder loves "the romantic theme songs of American movies of the Forties" and he whistles "those old tunes from Mussolini times." Not only is he out of tune, "[m]onstrous to a tuned ear," but his feet have been replaced by hooves "pressing the pedals;" the word "hooves" slipped in as a substitute for feet in the same way that a camera might overlay one component of an image with

another or jump from one scene to another. The jump cut between centaur and century, and centaur and knife grinder demonstrate how Fraser's work can be considered ekphrasis, not because it references a film or a photograph—though these provide the thematic context, linking the sequence to these forms—but because the poet uses the verbal equivalent of cinematic techniques to represent her speaker's fragmented thought processes. Fraser is revealing an operative relationship that is "not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (Swensen 71).

The prose poem form is an integral part of the writewithism of this sequence. Miltner described the prose poem as a "balancing act" located in the "interstices between poetry and prose" by pointing to the manner in which it incorporates, among other attributes, the "sound and song, juxtaposition of fragment and phrase" of poetry and the "linearity, the paragraph, sentence rhythm" of prose (Miltner, "Sabol Interview" np). Fraser's poetics reflect this "balancing act." In her discussions with interviewers about her desire to find a means for portraying gendered experience, Fraser talks about how her experimentation with the sentence and its composition on the page gave her a means for portraying female experience as interrupted and fragmented. But she also describes the evolution of her writing from the lyric to a more sentence-based literary form in terms of a "push/pull relation to the 'lyric poem'" by which she means her attraction to "the compressed variables of music" and to rearrangements of sound (Fraser, "Glück Interview"). The prose poem form, as Miltner argues, allows for fragmentation, interruption and attention to sound and song.

Fraser's prose poetry also reflects her interest in depicting the "mind's movement as fragmented and interrupted and her acknowledgment that avant-garde

movies of the nineteen sixties had taught her the breakdown of movement…all those jump cuts delivering meanings outside of the linear narrative which, normally, had provided one's main frame of reference" (Fraser, "Fraser and Guest" 372). One way to consider how the prose poem form links to the cinema in Fraser's work is to explore her use of parataxis to represent cinematic flashbacks and flashforwards. Individual sections of "Soft pages" are linked by subject matter but paratactically—the linkage is not chronological or linear—much as cinematic flashbacks and flash forwards can be considered paratactic. Film goers have long been accustomed to the way a narrative is implied by visual clues or voice-overs in flashbacks or flashforwards and accept such disjunction as evidence of time passing. In her book *Flashbacks in Film*, Maureen Turim describes the flashback as "a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference. A juncture is wrought between present and past and two concepts are implied in this juncture: memory and history" (1). Turim goes on to discuss how flashbacks in film, like memories, can be both highly personal to the subject— "subjective, interiorized" or instead constitute a less personal "telling-in-language…To analyze this constant play of difference, the films need be examined as fragments of a cinematic discourse on the mind's relationship to the past and on the subject's relationship to telling his or her past" (2). Swensen is clear that writewithist ekphrasis can be found in works where the operative relationship is one between verbal and visual modes of experience. Specific works of art need not be mentioned, but the techniques associated with artworks will be discernible in the written work. The narrative structure of "Soft pages" reveals how Fraser engages with the visual techniques of flashbacks and flashforwards through the verbal fragmentation and parataxis of her prose poetry. Parataxis is not confined to the prose poem form, but it is a crucial

component of the new sentence of Language poetry, the movement which Fraser acknowledges had "filtered intentionally and unintentionally" into her writing ("Coherence" 65). In his discussion of the new sentence, Perelman notes that the new sentence "encourages attention to the act of writing and to the writer's particular position within larger social frames" (316). In Fraser's work, parataxis is a component of her desire to represent female experience as one of "layered, multiple perception—not just the fragmentation and the interruption, but the holding in mind of four things at once" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 15). Parataxis encourages our attention to that position.

The parataxis and fragmentation evident in "Soft pages" occurs both at the level of the sentence and between paragraphs. This process is particularly evident in the fifth section of the sequence which consists of one long paragraph followed by a single sentence of anonymous speech: "May I demonstrate my lineage?" In the main paragraph, which contains two long sentences with multiple participial phrases and two short sentences, the speaker describes walking with a friend "alongside and then across the Circo Massimo" (18) in Rome:

> Today, walking with you, alongside and then across the Circo Massimo at an angle down from the upper track and over the grassy slope to the site of pre-Christian games of prowess and midnight movies in 1983, looking for the odd bit of archeological evidence, finding an almost buried slab of Roman brick underfoot, wanting the smaller scale and ordinary blue of the wild flower next to it. Not as definite as departure.

The words "walking," "looking," "finding" and "wanting" that signal the beginning of each phrase contribute to an impression of a camera panning across the action. The second sentence, "Not as definite as departure," is paratactic. It does not seem to

be syllogistically related to the previous sentence or to the one that follows it. The effect of this sentence is to make the reader pause and consider what they had understood in the long sentence about walking, looking, finding, and wanting. If something is "[n]ot as definite as departure," what might it be? This ambiguity now colours the reader's understanding of the first sentence and suggests that perhaps the answer lies in the next.

The third sentence of this section begins by confirming the impression that a camera has been following the speaker and, by introducing the notion of a fade-out to indicate a change in scene, adds a cinematic meaning to the sentence "Not as definite as departure":

> Already it was following the camera's path, its ability to bunch up time, capture it incrementally or smoothly, into successive unfoldings, compression fanning out through heat-laminated brick, golden fade-out into transliteration of…pale fan sent from Tokyo, held in place by a thin loop of silver paper, just at its breaking point, until the restraint had been lifted away to release the motion of unfolding. (18; ellipsis in original)

The phrase "Not as definite as departure" now suggests that the speaker wants to fade-out from the scene in the Circo Massimo and fade-in to another. Fraser achieves this fade-out by comparing the camera's ability to "bunch up time" to a paper fan "held in place by a thin loop of silver paper" which seems about to spring open "to release the motion of unfolding." The next two sentences clarify this perception: "Someone wanting that prop in cultural time. // 'May I demonstrate my lineage?'" (18). The fan as a cultural prop has introduced an alternative voice, who is either Japanese or lives in Tokyo, and who is offering to demonstrate her cultural lineage. This perception is confirmed in the following section of the sequence in which we

are given a glimpse into the life of someone whose grandmother had bound feet and who is preparing to post the fan to the speaker.

The walk across the Circo Massimo of the fifth section and the sudden segue in the sixth section into the life of the woman preparing a fan to post to the speaker are part of "the plot of a story" delivered by the black-and-white photo of a foot in motion that Fraser introduced in the first section of the sequence. This segue from walk to fan illustrates how the paratactic sentences and paragraphs associated with language writing which she has noted as an influence have provided Fraser with the means for constructing a sequence comprising a succession of narrative jump cuts derived from the very photographic/cinematic technology she refers to in the sequence. Fraser chose to experiment with the sentence in an effort to escape from a "lyric vise" and to find a way to express the mind movement of gendered experience. The fragmentation, interruption, and juxtaposition evident in the prose poetry of "Soft pages" both reflects such mind movement and also illustrates how prose poetry lends itself to a narrative ruled by what Michael North describes as a "spectatorial consciousness" (150) that has resulted from the speaker's life "having been lived in a field of vision delimited by the camera" (150). In Fraser's case, the narrative of "Soft pages" expressed as loops, jump cuts and revisions of the speaker's daily life in Rome can be best understood as a movie interrupted by flashbacks and flashforwards.

Resistance and Transformation in "You can hear her breathing in the photograph"

Fraser's six-part ekphrastic poem, "You can hear her breathing in the photograph" brings us in a way full circle back to Daphne and Apollo. As in Snow's "Artist and Model," this myth is central to Fraser's poem. As with Snow, a photograph of an

artist's work is again the catalyst for a speaker's meditation on the meaning of the work in the context of the myth. And like Snow, myth and art provide Fraser with a means for examining her poetics. However, where Snow was preoccupied with ideas relating to metamorphosis and likeness and compared her writing practice to the artistic practice of Matisse, Fraser uses myth and art to work through the significance of her personal resistance to the "lyric vise."

The two ekphrastic subjects of Fraser's poem are Gian Lorenzo Bernini's seventeenth-century sculpture of Apollo and Daphne on display in the Borghese Gallery in Rome, and a twentieth-century photograph of that sculpture that appears on a postcard. Both the sculpture and postcard photograph appear in this poem as works in progress: the poem imagines Bernini sculpting Daphne and Apollo and a museum photographer taking the photograph that appears on the postcard. The sculpture depicts Daphne's limbs turning into branches and leaves at the moment that Apollo reaches out to touch her:

> Daphne is rushing into leaves. Her mouth is stretching sideways into the opposite of an expanded purposeful plan. Bernini's chisel lingers inside Apollo's right foot; he's finally coaxed the marble of the left leg into a sprint, showing veins breaking through. (48)

Ideas to do with liminality, transition from one state to another, and metamorphosis underpin Fraser's treatment of the Daphne and Apollo myth. These are worked through from the point of view of a speaker-poet who is also concerned with her own liminal state as a poet who, as briefly mentioned earlier, has shifted away from conventional poetics:

> For instance, these opening lines—led by grammar and punctuation into the promise of coherence. Now I must turn my back on them. Is it the turning away that marks me? (47)

My reading of "Breathing" as writewithist ekphrasis focuses on how Fraser's use of prose poetry works with her distinctive camera vision in a meta-literary exploration of resistance to gendered and literary norms. In "Breathing," Fraser *lives with* and shares contexts with both Bernini's sculpture and the postcard photograph of the sculpture. Specifically, she portrays ideas to do with resistance and transformation triggered by the Daphne and Apollo myth, Bernini's sculpture, and the composition of the postcard photograph. This writewithist relationship is further accentuated by Fraser's use of the prose poem form. Specifically, concerns with liminality, transition and metamorphosis are reflected in the formal construction of the poem through Fraser's use of fragment, sentence, and paragraph.

Because I read Fraser's approach to the Daphne and Apollo myth as an illustration of gendered resistance to received norms, I begin my reading of the poem by considering it against Fraser's personal resistance to conventional poetics. This discussion provides background to my discussion of Fraser's writewithist ekphrasis, which is complicated by the different roles the postcard and sculpture play in the poem. Finally, I expand upon the themes of resistance and transformation that I perceive in the poem by highlighting how Fraser expresses liminality—in her case manifested as the process of transition between two states of being—in both the prose poem form she has chosen and in the way she has constructed a narrative.

In order to explore how poetic form is crucial to the writewithist relationship in this poem, it is useful to return to Fraser's personal resistance to poetic convention. As I briefly discussed in my introduction to Fraser's work, in interviews

and in her own critical writing Fraser frequently refers to her desire to escape the "lyric vise," or confining bonds, of what she describes as the received "correct" poetry of the mostly male cohort of poets she encountered as she developed her own poetics. In her essay "Line. On the Line. Lining up. Lined with. Between the Lines. Bottom Line," she expresses this desire as a form of resistance:

> Resistance is an ongoing condition-of-being for most women poets…the inability to say how it is or not wanting to say, because what *wants* to be said and who wants saying can't be expressed with appropriate tonal or spatial complexity in the confident firm assertions cheered on by witty end-rhymes or taut lines marching with left-hand precision down the page. What wants to be said is both other and of 'the other world.' It wants words and worlds to be registered in their multiple perspectives, not simply *his* or *yours*. (154; ellipsis and italics in original)

Fraser's personal "resistance" to conventional poetics encouraged her to experiment in her work with the prose poem's focus on sentence and its association with the fragment. In this poem, such resistance leads her to portray the speaker's perspective of her world and "the other world" of Daphne and Apollo in a poetic form that eschews "taut lines," and "left-hand precision." Instead, Fraser opts for prose sentences to allow for the "continuous disruption of time, 'illogical' resistance, simultaneous perceptions and agendas, social marginality" ("Line"142) of female experience. Both the narrative and the form of "Breathing" illustrate and encapsulate all these states.

My reading of the ekphrasis in this poem emphasises the way that the poem and the artwork are parallel means of thinking and perceiving. This ekphrastic relationship is evident in the way that Fraser's treatment of resistance in her poetics

is interwoven in “Breathing” with her meditation on the theme of Daphne’s resistance in the Bernini sculpture. Specifically, in the first two sections of the poem, the speaker describes how she resists conformity in her life and her writing before offering an extended ekphrasis, over the next three sections, of Bernini’s sculpture depicting Daphne as a woman transformed in order to resist Apollo and his desire to possess her.

The speaker begins the poem with a discussion of non-conformity, which lingers on questions of liminality—of being in transition between, or on the threshold of one state and another. In the three-paragraph opening section, the speaker muses on what it is to be, or feel different:

> What causes a person—say, in a family—to feel he or she is different from the other members, separate, an extra bit of jigsaw puzzle with unreliable hump, listing to one side of the table after the entire cardboard picture lies perfect and flat? (47)

The perception of difference introduced in this section—feeling that you *are* “different from the other members” or *looking* different, like “an extra bit of jigsaw puzzle with unreliable hump”— is then expanded in the second paragraph into a meditation on what it is to be poised on the brink of conformity:

> Who, finally, complies and merges—at every point—with the agreed upon shape of a human torso or preferred community type? Is arrival focused by admirable intention or by an off-camera genetic predictor, trapped just at the periphery of departure? Perhaps it is more like the snapping back of a stretched rubber band to its inherent ovoid design? (47)

In the third section of the poem, Fraser revisits this metaphor of a stretched rubber band in her description of Daphne’s terror as she attempts to escape Apollo: “her

mouth is stretching sideways into the opposite of an expanded purposeful plan" (48). But in the first section, the stretched rubber band in its liminal state of being about to snap back signals the potential for "disruption, departure…even from something that lodges so functionally within one's grasp" (47; ellipsis in original).

The second section of the poem is where Fraser connects feeling different from her family to her personal preoccupation with resistance to pre-established models for writing:

> For instance, these opening lines—led by grammar and punctuation into the promise of coherence. Now I must turn my back on them. Is it the turning away that marks me? Is everyone else in my "family" looking inward to a centre, or are they also turning their gaze sideways? (47)

In this section, enclosing the word "family" in quotation marks suggests the word is being used here as analogy or metaphor. That the quoted term follows an assertion that she is turning her back on "grammar and punctuation" and the "promise of coherence" suggests this "family" is the literary world. The speaker is interested in "turning [her] gaze sideways," or, as Fraser expressed it in her essay on the line in poetry, "[b]reaking rules, breaking boundaries, crossing over, going where you've been told not to go" ("Line" 156). The speaker turns her back on poetic rules by expressing herself in sentence, paragraph, and fragment rather than the taut lines and left-hand precision of the other members of her poetic "family" —she resists the conformity to "coherence" suggested by her initial use of "grammar and punctuation." Such poetics are like the puzzle piece with an "unreliable hump, listing to one side of the table after the entire cardboard picture lies perfect and flat" (47).

As a meta-literary opening to an ekphrasis, these two sections are important in terms of understanding the poem as a form of writewithism. The imperative to

comply or conform, which might be a result of "an off-camera genetic predictor, trapped just at the periphery of departure" (47), that occupies the speaker in these initial sections foreshadows the narrative of the rest of the poem as she considers the implications of Daphne's refusal to comply with Apollo and how Bernini and the un-named museum photographer depict her. The Daphne and Apollo myth illustrated by the postcard and Bernini's statue provides Fraser with multiple opportunities to consider gendered acts of resistance and transition from one state to another.

When Swensen offers examples of alternative modes of ekphrasis in "To Writewithize" she focuses on works in which the poet *lives with* rather than simply *looks at* works of art. In "Breathing," the act of *living with* is made complex by the many perspectives with which Fraser uses the postcard and sculpture to consider the states of resistance and transition: the speaker-poet whose perspective is coloured by her resistance to conventional poetics, Bernini as sculptor who is depicting Daphne resisting Apollo and transforming into a laurel tree, and the museum photographer who is grappling with how to best capture the sculpture. I argue that Fraser's exploitation of this complexity of perspectives is ekphrastic—the poem illustrates Swensen's concept of a poetic work that uses artworks as models for its formal construction.

The ekphrasis in "Breathing" is complicated by the status of the postcard. In a writewithist sense the postcard photograph is the artefact that the speaker-poet literally *lives with*, but Fraser's ekphrasis is more firmly focused on Bernini's sculpture. The postcard photograph is important, however, for its role as an intermediary between speaker-poet and sculpture and it has an almost oracular role in the poem via the breathing that the speaker hears as she puts the postcard away in a box. It also provides an androcentric perspective of the sculpture because the male

photographer is depicted as focusing on Apollo rather than Daphne. As such, it provides a foil for the ideas to do with gendered resistance, transformation, and liminality that the speaker-poet attributes to both sculpture and the myth.

The postcard is first mentioned in the third section of the poem as a question about the postcard's significance to the speaker: "*Why must the photograph of the two of them come out of its envelope every year and be pinned to the wallpaper?"* (48, italics in original). The postcard reappears in the fourth section which is concerned with Bernini's "slow revelation" of Apollo's chase and Daphne's metamorphosis:

> You can hear her breathing in the photograph as it's unpinned from the wall and put away in a box, exposing the anatomy of imagined capture, even when you're not looking at it. (48; italics in original)

The postcard is the means by which the speaker recalls the sculpture and the myth. In this paragraph, Fraser makes it clear that her focus in the poem is on Daphne and her "imagined capture." Even when the speaker-poet is not looking at the postcard, "[she] can hear her breathing in the photograph." Or, put another way, even when the postcard is out of sight, ideas to do with resistance and transformation occupy the speaker's thoughts.

The speaker-poet's focus on Daphne's resistance continues in the fifth section of the poem, which is concerned with how the museum photographer composed the photograph for the postcard. Fraser presents the photographer as choosing to make Apollo the principal focus of the photograph: He "lights the bodies to catch the dramatic hollows of ribs and male trunk" (48). As he "shifts the armature of high-wattage lighting" (49), he is talking to himself: "*Apollo almost has her*, he thinks. *You can tell by his floating, unclenched hand and the conviction in his eyes*

as deep and particular as oxygen entering cell walls" (49; italics in original). But the speaker-poet's focus is on Daphne: "it is Daphne's eyes, sliding with the immense pull of gravity that stop you…you have been taken by the hand and led to this" (48, ellipsis in original). The idea that we "have been taken by the hand and led" is a significant one in the context of the speaker-poet's writewithist relationship with the postcard and sculpture. The poet has taken us by the hand to show us how resistance is depicted in the sculpture and how it is ignored by the photographer. In "Breathing," Fraser aligns Bernini's sculptural depiction of resistance with her own poetic resistance by leading us from the "unreliable hump," the "snapping back of a stretched rubber band" and "sidewise gaze" of the first two sections to the sculpture where Daphne is "rushing into leaves" and Apollo has only just seen that tough green leaves are "sprouting, and not just from her hands" (49).

When she focuses on the sculpture itself, Fraser presents Daphne's metamorphosis as both a feminist and poetic resistance via the "successive unfoldings" and multiple points of view of these ekphrastic sections by continually bringing Daphne back into focus. The speaker opens the third section of the poem with the observation that "Daphne is rushing into leaves. Her mouth is stretching sideways into the opposite of an expanded, purposeful plan" (48). The shape of her mouth has been foreshadowed by the speaker's analogy in the first section of the poem of a stretched rubber band to the "off-camera genetic predictor" (47) that signals conformity.

By offering a gynocentric perspective of the sculpture, Fraser is offering a re-reading of myth, sculpture, and postcard in order to make Daphne and not Apollo her central focus. This re-reading, which incorporates the speaker-poet's act of *living with* the postcard, is in many respects a writewithist manifestation of the arts as

“modes of thinking and perceiving rather than as static objects” (Swensen 71). Fraser has used Bernini’s sculpture and the postcard which both depict Apollo as thwarted by Daphne’s “illogical resistance” to provide a visual counterpoint for her own “illogical’ resistance” to the norms of poetry (Fraser, “Line” 142) which is implied in the opening sections.

Photography’s contribution to Fraser’s writewithism via her photographic thinking and cinematic analogies is evident in the way that she presents Bernini’s sculpture. According to art historian Genevieve Warwick, the sculpture offers “a multiplicity of perspectives: of Apollo giving chase; of Daphne in flight; of Daphne’s metamorphosis…The walk around the sculpture from Apollo to Daphne may reasonably be construed as a narrative progression of viewing points…[that] unfolds only by means of the visitor’s participatory movement around the piece” (Warwick 375). In “Breathing,” this “multiplicity of perspectives” is also characterised by a cinematic “continuous disruption of time” that Fraser aligns with the portrayal of female experience (Fraser, “Line” 142). In the ekphrastic sections three, four, and five of the poem, the speaker-poet circles the sculpture, but in disrupted time periods: Bernini is depicted at work on the sculpture in the seventeenth century, the museum photographer takes his photograph in the recent past, and in the present the speaker-poet has a copy of the postcard as a reminder of a visit to the sculpture itself that has taken place in the recent past. These time periods are presented as if they are synchronous. Bernini is depicted in the present tense, as having begun to capture Daphne in a liminal state as she begins to turn into a tree— “tree bark is creeping between her thighs and pushing from roots that lift her body higher with the force of minute-by-minute growth” (48). He is also putting the finishing touches to Apollo’s leg— “Bernini’s chisel lingers inside Apollo’s right

foot; he's finally coaxed the marble of the left leg into a sprint, showing veins breaking through" (48). By conflating the past and present in this poem, Fraser creates the impression that the mythological action is taking place and the sculpture is being produced at the moment that it is being viewed. Apollo is chasing and is being sculpted in the chase, just as Daphne is transforming and is being sculpted in that state.

These points of view are presented in the non-linear fashion of a camera vision similar to that of "Soft pages." The overall effect of this chronological and visual non-linearity in "Breathing" is that, as in "Soft pages," sections "bunch up time, capture it incrementally or smoothly, into successive unfoldings" ("Soft pages" 18). The sense of visual and chronological movement in "Breathing"—the sense of slipping from one perspective to another and backwards and forwards in time—is as significant a component of Fraser's poetics in this poem as it is of her ekphrasis. The ekphrastic "disruption of time" and the cinematic jump cuts in perspective and subject matter that occur between the opening and closing sections of "Breathing," a product of Fraser's photographic thinking, are intensified by the interrupted and fragmentary sentences of the juxtaposed paragraphs of her prose poetry. This effect can be seen in the movement between darkness and light in sections four and five. The first paragraph of section four is concerned with historical facts surrounding Bernini's acquisition of the marble for his sculpture—where it was found and who paid for it—but the section opens with the idea of the bodies already in existence and trapped inside the stone: "They are two perfect bodies, entirely hard white marble caught in absolute dark" (48). The first paragraph is in fact composed of sentences within which the syllogistic movement is relatively straightforward. It is a narrative in which each sentence relates logically to the those on either side. In the second

paragraph, however, this syllogistic movement is disrupted by juxtaposition of subject matter and time periods. This effect is apparent in the fourth section of the poem which I presented earlier in a discussion of the significance of the postcard:

> Bernini works in marble without knowing what it may deliver. He's in love with the slow revelation of the chase. Apollo's concentration, Daphne's uneasiness. She's disappearing. He knows that much. *Apollo's claim of certainty should be gaining on her, shouldn't it?* You can hear her breathing in the photograph as it's unpinned from the wall and put away in a box, exposing the anatomy of imagined capture, even when you're not looking at it. (48; italics in the original)

This paragraph begins in Bernini's time before a jump cut to the making of the postcard and into the speaker-poet's present, a move that continues into section five. Bernini is depicted as working the marble to release the bodies "caught in absolute dark" and as not knowing what he is uncovering although he is enjoying the "slow revelation of the chase." The implication here is that the bodies of Daphne and Apollo were always present within the marble, that Bernini is merely uncovering them and that as he does this, Daphne's body is transforming into a tree— "She's disappearing" (48). With the next sentence, "*Apollo's claim of certainty should be gaining on her, shouldn't it?"* (48; italics in the original), Fraser performs a highly cinematic jump cut from Bernini to the postcard and its photographer who in the next section is presented as being focused primarily, like Bernini, on Apollo's attempts to capture Daphne. In section five Fraser presents the photographer's thoughts in italics as he lights the sculpture for his photograph. Both Bernini and the photographer, then, are releasing the sculpture from the dark and both are presented as puzzled by Apollo's inability to prevent Daphne's metamorphosis— "*Apollo's claim of*

certainty" in section four becomes "*Apollo almost has her"* in section five. The last sentence of section four— "You can hear her breathing in the photograph…"— as I argue above, represents the speaker-poet's obsession with resistance and transformation, but it also provides a further illustration of Fraser's writewithist ekphrasis. In Swensen's terms, Fraser "grapples *with*" (71) Bernini's depiction of Daphne and Apollo by presenting the notion of resistance via an "illogical" cinematic juxtaposition of time periods, subjects, and ideas and by exploiting the prose poem's characteristic juxtaposition and fragmentation of linear narrative. In this section, the sculpture and the postcard are presented as works in process, Daphne's metamorphosis is presented as a work in process and these events are spliced together outside of any logical frame of reference.

A further writewithist exploration of Bernini's sculpture is represented in Fraser's depiction of Daphne as being in a liminal state—in transition between her female form and that of a laurel tree. Daphne is depicted as "rushing into leaves" (48), "traveling ahead of herself" (48), "disappearing" (48), and "running towards herself and having no idea where the next life might be" (49). Such descriptions are unsurprising in a poem about Daphne and Apollo but become significant in a poem that is concerned with liminality. My exploration of "Breathing" that follows shows how ideas around liminality, transition and metamorphosis are reflected in both the form and content of the poem, contributing to the sense that the art works (both sculpture and postcard photograph) provide Fraser with the structural means for exploring gendered resistance as well as her subject matter. Swensen describes such ekphrasis as modes in which "the operative relationship is not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience" (71). In Fraser's case, Bernini's statue with its "multiplicity of perspectives" (Warwick

375) and the postcard representing the single focus of the museum photographer prompted a poem with its own multiplicity of chronological and narrative perspectives that focus on "turning away," and turning the "gaze sideways" (47). As I will argue in the section that follows, Fraser's use of the sentence and paragraph are a means for her to explore alternatives to lineated verse and at the same time consider what it is to be caught in transition from one state to another.

My reading of the context sharing that occurs in "Breathing" is influenced by Fraser's published comments about her poetics, but it is also interested in how Fraser's response to Bernini's work reveals the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving. For this reason, my process of unravelling this aspect of Fraser's ekphrasis begins with her use of the sentence to represent the liminal space between poetry and prose. The prose poem form offered Fraser the opportunity to resist "the confident firm assertions cheered on by witty end rhymes or taut lines marching with left-margin precision down the page" ("Line" 154). There are no witty end rhymes in this poem. The poet is determined to turn her back on her "opening lines—led by grammar and punctuation into the promise of coherence" (47) and instead turn her "gaze sideways" (47) toward the possibilities for recording female experience afforded by the sentence and the paragraph.

Fraser not only "turns her "gaze sideways" from her poetic "family," she turns her gaze sideways from Bernini's sculpture and the museum postcard when she focuses on Daphne instead of Apollo. This turning sideways is particularly evident in the form and content of the last section of the poem where the speaker's desire to turn her gaze sideways (or to resist conventional lyric writing) is enacted in a series of five statements:

She did not think—or did she? —running towards herself and having no idea of where the next life might be. Out of sight seemed the place.

She was inside and outside of him and visible, forced too soon by his definiteness.

Her indefiniteness was not tolerable to his practiced will.

She wanted the shape of a lintel.

When Bernini chipped the final piece of stone from the block of marble, he saw what he'd done. But it was too late and he'd already turned away. (49)

Unlike the other sections of the poem, these statements are not presented as a paragraph. They are single sentences that visually present the kind of female experience—the "hesitancy, silencing, or speechlessness, continuous disruption of time, 'illogical' resistance, simultaneous perceptions…" ("Line" 142)—that Fraser identifies in some women poets' experimentation with the line. As individual statements they summarise the narrative of the poem while enacting it in writewithist ekphrasis that demonstrates how Fraser has been *living with* the artworks. Specifically, this final section of the poem represents both Daphne's plight and the end result of the poet-speaker's determination to turn her back on the promise of coherence afforded by grammar and punctuation. But it also enacts that determination: not only is this final section not lineated verse, but it has also slipped away from the coherence afforded by a paragraph. Each statement stands alone and only tangentially coheres to the statements around it. It is as if the speaker-poet is

undergoing her own poetic metamorphosis alongside Daphne whose "indefiniteness was not tolerable to his [Apollo's] practiced will" (49). Fraser's use of prose in this section is important because the very expectations set up by prose—linearity, the paragraph—are transformed into a verbal representation of the kind of hesitancy that Fraser aligns with female experience. The gaps between the sentences are a visual reminder of gendered "hesitancy, silencing, or speechlessness" (Fraser, "Line" 142). The gap between "forced too soon by his definiteness" and "Her indefiniteness," for instance, indicates a silenced response.

The speaker-poet's final reference to Daphne in "Breathing" is the sentence "She wanted the shape of a lintel" (49). It is a confusing statement because the mythical Daphne was turned into a laurel tree. But it is less mysterious if the statement is considered from the perspective of Fraser's writewithism and her use of myth and statue to consider states of resistance and transition. The word "lintel," referring to the span between two vertical supports in a doorway, is linked etymologically to liminal, a word derived in part from the Latin *limen* meaning threshold. Liminal is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "between or belonging to two different places, states." The word "lintel" works to connect Daphne to the speaker's desire to turn away from expectations and toward the ideas expressed in the poem about transition and liminality. Daphne and the speaker are both in states of transition—Daphne into a tree and the speaker into a poet who wishes to turn her back on the "promise of coherence" (47) in the grammar and punctuation of the opening lines of the poem. Both speaker and Daphne are at a threshold between two states of being. The statement is writewithist in the sense that Fraser has used her perception that the statue portrays Daphne in a state of liminality as a model for the formal construction of the poem. That is, Fraser's use of prose poetry is a turning to

a poetic form that can itself be construed as liminal, in that it occupies a transition zone between what Miltner described as the "intuitional interior logic" of poetry and the "paragraph, sentence rhythm… and description of prose" (Miltner, "Sabol Interview" np). But states of liminality expressed as transition and resistance are also a component of Fraser's poetics and it is her working through of the means for expressing "core states of female social and psychological experience" in the guise of an ekphrasis of Bernini's sculpture that makes the poem writewithist. Fraser's personal focus on "reinventing the givens of poetry" in order to express "such female experience, particularly states of "hesitancy, silencing or speechlessness, continuous disruption of time, 'illogical' resistance…" (Fraser, "Line" 142) led her to the sentence and paragraph of prose poetry. In "Breathing," Bernini's sculpture and the museum postcard provide her speaker with a visual analogue to such experiences. Poem and artwork "are fellow travelers sharing a context" (Swensen 70) that is related to the technology and language of photography.

Conclusion

When Swensen distinguished between traditional ekphrasis and new modes of ekphrasis in "To Writewithize," she focused on poets who were taking the term in new directions by *living with* rather than *looking at* artworks. She argued that in such ekphrasis, visual art does not provide subject matter for poetry so much as offer poetry "a model for formal construction" (71). Swensen does not explain why poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries might be able to live with art in the manner she describes, but my thesis argues that the camera has played a significant role in enabling such ekphrastic practices. In chapter one, I turned to Berger's *Ways of Seeing* in order to understand how art has become an "inseparable part of the

daily—and the poetic weave" (Swensen 70). Berger argues that modern reproduction technologies associated with photography have enabled works of art to "surround us in the same way as a language surrounds us" (32). Berger's drawing of an analogy between visual art and language seems particularly relevant to Swensen's identification of new modes of ekphrasis in which works of art are a normal part of the everyday life of the speaker of the poem. In such a paradigm, works of art contribute to an ekphrastic situation that is "not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (Swensen 71). Swensen's writewithism, in other words, reflects the development of the new "language of images" that Berger attributes to modern means of reproduction (33).

In chapters one and two of this thesis, I provide background for my argument in chapter three that prose poetry and photography share aesthetic and theoretical synergies that are particularly apparent in writewithist prose poem ekphrasis of photographs. In chapter one, my reading of Snow's ekphrastic sequence "Positions of the Body" focused on how Snow demonstrates that works of art surround her speaker like a language surrounds her. In Swensen's terms, the poems in the sequence and the artworks the poems reference are "fellow travelers sharing a context" (70). Snow names artworks like Picasso's *Guernica* or Giotto's *Lamentation* and *Crucifixion* and then evokes the visual language of the artwork, not by inviting the reader to look at the painting, but by showing the reader how the speaker is living with it. In my analysis of "Positions of the Body," I noted how Snow described visitors to a gallery shifting in front of the paintings like masts in a marina which she compared to the spears carried by the crowd depicted in Giotto's *Kiss of Judas*. She describes how the body of a mentally ill girl alone in a hospital

ward adopts the positions of grief and despair of the women in Picasso's *Guernica,* or the angels in Giotto's *Lamentation*. Snow's work in this sequence demonstrates how writewithist ekphrasis reflects the way that artworks have "entered the mainstream of life" (Berger 32) through modern means of reproduction.

The camera has also affected ekphrasis by introducing poets to "the habit of seeing photographically" (North 3). North argues that aspects of "camera vision" such as the camera's "tendency to frame particular points of view and to isolate one moment from another, have become second nature for human observers as well" (North 3). In chapter two I investigated how camera vision and aspects of photography theory from the work of Barthes and Benjamin are apparent in writewithist ekphrasis of photographs in "Artist and Model," a further sequence from Snow and in Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia.* I argued that camera vision provides ekphrasis of photographs with a model for formal construction by contributing to the expression of point of view or when poets edit their depiction of the world in the same way that a photographer's lens might edit "the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame" (Szarkowski 70). In Snow's "Artist and Model," for instance, frames and framing are a compositional device that allows the speaker to demonstrate how point of view can shift and be inconsistent. Writewithist ekphrasis of photographs also reflects the kind of emotional response to the photograph that Barthes identified as *punctum*— "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes 27). Such an emotional response contributes to the emotional freight of writewithist ekphrasis when the *punctum* of a photograph becomes the *punctum* of the poem. That is, the poem takes on the emotional meaning of the photograph that inspired it. The poet's initial response to the photograph is transformed into a verbal response that in turn pricks or bruises the

reader. This effect can be seen in Trethewey's poems where she identified the subject's refusal to hold still as *punctum* in some of Bellocq's photographs. (Trethewey, "Haney Interview" 19). In turn, this desire for agency became the *punctum* of the poem. At other times, a poet might search for *punctum* in a photograph in order to identify a means for living with the image by entering into the narrative it suggests. In my analysis of Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia,* I noted how Trethewey identified *punctum* as the means by which she was able to use the detail from a photograph that had a personal poignancy to "enter the realm of the imagination…which is an act of interpretation" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). Trethewey's identification of *punctum* related to the experience of "appearing to be one thing to people on the outside and having an inside that's different" (Trethewey "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028), enabled her to invent a life story for one of the anonymous subjects of Bellocq's photography project.

In chapter two, I investigated writewithist ekphrasis of photographs by reading works of lyric poetry in order to understand how photographs might provide poets with a model for formal construction. I looked at how poem and photograph shared contexts via the poet's camera vision or her identification of *punctum*. In chapter three, I extended my investigation to prose poem ekphrasis of photographs. This investigation was inspired partly by the work of scholars like Murphy who have identified a link between the British prose poem and the art movements of early Modernism and partly because I discerned aesthetic and cultural synergies between photography and prose poetry in the theoretical work of scholars of prose poetry more generally.

My argument in chapter three is that the work of Bang and Fraser illustrates how a particular mode of visual art—photography, and by extension film—and a

particular mode of poetry—prose poetry—share aesthetic preoccupations that are revealed through writewithist ekphrasis. These aesthetic preoccupations include the depiction of ideas associated with modern life as a fragmented experience. Such experiences can be theorized in terms of the ability of both photograph and prose poem to depict the visual world as a "slice of time," and in terms of how photographic frame and the frame of the page isolate unexpected juxtapositions.

My exploration of the ekphrastic prose poetry of Bang and Fraser builds on the idea of the prose poem as fragmentary depiction of fragmented experience by calling on Szarkowski's theorization of photography to point to synergies between the two art forms. Szarkowski theorized photographic engagement with fragmented experience in terms of the concepts of framing and time. He argued that "to quote out of context is the essence of the photographer's craft" (70). He maintains that a "photographer edits the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame," the edge of which, "isolates unexpected juxtapositions…and shows their unfamiliar fragment" (70). Berger described the photograph's ability to "arrest the flow of time" ("Appearances" 62) and Szarkowski wrote about the photograph as a "slice of time" that revealed the "momentary patterning of lines and shapes that had been previously concealed within the flux of movement" (10). My reading of Bang looks at how her prose poetry reveals verbal synergies with photographic ideas to do with framing and juxtaposition and with a particular art ethos. Bang's prose poetry not only is about the Bauhaus ethos of collapsing the distinction between high art and craft but performs it in an ekphrasis which combines the characteristics of poetry with the workaday linearity and paragraphs of prose. In Fraser's ekphrasis, she uses sentences rather than lines in order to depict female experience via camera vision and cinematic effects as "layered, multiple perception" (Fraser, "Hogue

Interview"14). In Swensen's terms, Fraser "grapples *with*" (71) the depiction of gendered experience in "Breathing" and "Soft pages" by presenting sculpture and photographs as visual expressions of resistance and transformation in a fragmented and paratactic form that resists and transforms the linearity implied by prose. The work of both poets demonstrates how the operative relationship in their ekphrasis is "not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives" (Swensen 71).

The prose poem selections from Bang and Fraser that I have analysed in this chapter demonstrate synergies with photography through writewithist ekphrasis. These synergies are both formal and aesthetic, and this mutual interaction can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century and to Baudelaire's desire to capture the essence of "our more abstract modern life" (*Paris Spleen* ix). Baudelaire's solution was to adopt the "miracle of a poetic prose" (ix), a form that appealed to him because of its fragmentary and reorderable nature. In her essay about the British prose poem in early modernism, Murphy highlights a similar preoccupation with representing modern life among British prose poets of the early twentieth century. Importantly, by considering the work of Vorticist poet and artist Jessie Dismorr, Murphy aligns the prose poem form to contemporary art movements by demonstrating how both artforms sought to represent the visual world as fragmented and angular. By taking their lead from the art of photography, Bang and Fraser represent a twenty-first century analogue to prose poetry's early synergies with visual means for representing the modern world. In their ekphrases, the sentence and paragraph of the prose poem form shares contexts with photographs through camera vision and the poets' verbal representation of such characteristics of photographs as framing, unexpected juxtapositions and the representation of time passing. The prose poem

form, in incorporating the aesthetics of poetry with the functionality of prose, enables Bang to encapsulate the Bauhaus ethos of breaking down "the hierarchy which had divided the 'fine' from the 'applied' arts" (Bayer np). Fraser's adoption of the form enabled her to present gendered experience as fragmented, interrupted, and resistant to perceived norms. In both cases, camera vision—photographic and cinematic seeing—is an integral part of the visual world of their implied speakers. Photography has provided both poets with a model for formal construction of a verbal world that relies on fragmentation and juxtaposition. As Sontag observes about photographs in *On Photography*, these prose poems are not "statements about the world so much as pieces of it" (4). Like photographs, the poems are "miniatures of reality" (4).

Chapter four

Fragments of Female Experience: Introduction to the Creative Component

Miniatures of Reality

Miniatures of Reality, the title of my creative component, comes from Susan Sontag's essay "In Plato's Cave" from her canonical work *On Photography*. In this essay Sontag argues that "[i]n teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing" (3). Sontag makes a distinction between photography, an act that "appropriate[s] the thing photographed," and interpretative acts such as producing writing or "handmade visual statements" (4), before arguing that "[p]hotographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (4). Sontag's concept of a photograph as a "miniature of reality" struck me as an apt title for a creative project informed by my critical investigation of the shared aesthetic and cultural preoccupations of prose poetry and photography. It suggested to me that I could think about photographs as miniatures of the reality of my speaker and at the same time produce prose poem ekphrasis that, while it was interpreting the image or the event represented in the photograph, was also a form of miniature—a fragment of reality in its own right.

The images I selected for use in my creative component encompass personal photographs taken from family photo albums, images found on the Internet or in a second-hand shop and images made by critically acclaimed photographers such as Cindy Sherman and Anne Ferran. What these images have in common is that they depict aspects of or fragments from female experience. This common denominator enabled me to create a life for my speaker from the experiences depicted in the photographs. In the discussion that follows, I describe how I used such images to create some of the sequences in *Miniatures of Reality* and relate my ekphrasis to both photography theory and to my use of the prose poem form.

The prose poem and the photograph

Fig 1. Young Girl on Swing

In the summer of 1963, I was photographed sitting on a swing while holding a book and apparently engrossed in its pages (fig.1). The 6”x8” black and white photograph was developed and printed by the photographer who was a friend of my parents. Fifty-five years later, in 2018, the photograph became the intellectual and aesthetic inspiration for the sequence “Miniature Worlds” that opens *Miniatures of Reality*. The other images my ekphrasis responds to in this collection —works by Cindy Sherman and Anne Ferran, late Victorian “Hidden Mother” photographs, an early twentieth-century studio portrait of five women taken by West Coast photographer James Ring, and a further selection of photographs from my childhood and adolescence—are all linked in some way to the speaker and narrative of “Miniature Worlds” in their depiction of women’s lives.

A photograph of a young girl on a swing with a book might seem an unlikely candidate for a creative project responding to research into prose poem ekphrasis of photographs, but the photograph enabled me to internalize many aspects of Roland Barthes’s discussion in *Camera Lucida* about “what a photograph was ‘in itself’” (3).While I used the photograph to understand Barthes’s concepts of *punctum*, *studium* and *that-has-been*, Barthes’s apparent ambivalence towards being the subject of a photograph—“I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing” (11)—inspired me to think about how my speaker might construct a “self” through posing. Over time, too, I began to understand my emotional response to the “Young Girl on Swing” photograph as a reflection of my reading of *Camera Lucida*. I understood that my poetic responses to the photograph were indicative of the way in which ekphrasis of photographs demonstrates aspects of such emotional responses. My “reading” of the photograph in the context of Barthes’s work also alerted me to the way that the camera and photography have shaped the way visual

experiences are described. Michael North has described this "camera vision" as a consequence of the camera's "tendency to frame particular points of view and to isolate one moment from another" (3). The speaker in *Miniatures of Reality* sees her world and recalls it later as isolated incidents through a camera-like lens.

Alongside this focus on Barthes and camera vision, I was also experimenting with the prose poem form as a means for writing ekphrasis in which the speaker, in poet Cole Swensen's terms, *lived with* rather than *looked at* photographs. In her essay "To Writewithize" Swensen points to forms of ekphrasis in which the poet uses an artwork as a model for the formal construction of their poem. I experimented with this mode of ekphrasis by considering how some of the characteristics of a prose poem— "the use of the strategies and tactics of poetry" (Lehman 13) but expressed in prose that is characterised by fragmentation and juxtaposition of sentence and phrase that gestures toward a narrative—provided me with aesthetic links to photography. Among these links is the concept of framing. A prose poem is often a block of prose framed by the white space of the page like a photograph presented in an album, and as John Szarkowski argues in *The Photographer's Eye,* framing allows a photographer "to quote out of context" (70). Szarkowski's argument that such framing "isolates unexpected juxtapositions…dissects familiar forms and shows their unfamiliar fragment" (70) suggested to me that the voice of the speaker in a prose poem that was using photography as a model for its formal construction might exploit ideas around fragmentation and juxtaposition. This idea was given further impetus by poet Kathleen Fraser's comments in interviews in which she spoke about the way the prose sentence enabled her to "open up the range of the mind's movement" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview"16). Fraser's focus on representing the "gendered experience" of female daily life and its "habituated

availability to interruption" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 9) also suggested to me how the female speaker in a prose poem could respond to photographs of women by representing the image verbally in a fragmented, non-linear, and interrupted voice.

There were two, equally weighted drivers for my research. First, I wanted to creatively explore how prose poetry and photography might be understood to share an aesthetic. And I wanted to explore how such shared aesthetics might enable me to use photographs of women or girls to portray female experiences. Secondly, I wanted to experiment with the ekphrastic strategies outlined in "To Writewithize" in order to write ekphrases that demonstrates this connection between prose poem and photograph. I wanted to produce a collection of prose poems about female experience that "shared contexts" with the photographs they were responding to or used the photographs as models for formal construction with the idea that both arts represent "modes of thinking and perceiving" (Swensen 71).

The speaker in the poems in *Miniatures of Reality* is preoccupied with perception— what a photograph depicts or what it helps her to recall— and she expresses these ideas, often as interior monologue, in what Fraser describes as the simultaneous perceptions and the continuous disruption of time of female "social and psychological experience" ("Line" 142). The speaker is at times also aware of being seen or perceived by others and expresses this as if she is being photographed or filmed: "I had imagined that at any moment I could be caught and preserved in a kind of view finder, one foot in scuffed leather sandal poised to touch ground, say, and the other about to rise up…" ("View Finder").

A discussion of a few selected sequences from *Miniatures of Reality* demonstrate, I hope, how I approached aspects of this creative research, as I will explain in more detail below. The sequence "Miniature Worlds" evolved from my

response to the *punctum* and *studium* of the *Young Girl on Swing* photograph and illustrates how I used the *punctum* of a photograph as a means for imaginatively entering the world of its subject. The speaker in "Stills" responds to images from Cindy Sherman's photographic sequence *Untitled Film Stills* by taking Sherman's place in the stills and appropriating their implied narrative as illustrations of her own life experiences. Finally, in Part Two of the collection, I combine ekphrasis of Victorian "Hidden Mother" photographs, photographs of the speaker's grandmother Ida, and images representing the speaker's relationship with her mother to consider the hidden work of motherhood.

***Punctum* and *Studium* in "Miniature Worlds"**

The poems in this sequence originate from my initial responses to the *Young Girl on Swing* photograph. It began in a Barthesian study of the photograph's *studium* and *punctum* before extending into a sequence of five poems prompted by what poet Natasha Trethewey describes as the *punctum's* ability to draw you outside the frame of the photograph and into the "realm of the imagination" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). In *Camera Lucida,* Barthes distinguishes between a photograph's *studium,* that aspect of a photograph of general interest to any viewer, and its *punctum*—that aspect of a photograph that pierces or wounds a viewer. The *studium* of the *Young Girl on Swing* photograph initially provided me with a vivid reminder of the back garden of my childhood home and what I looked like as a child. I see the back lawn, the roses that flower against the wooden trellis that separated lawn from driveway, part of the garage wall and the swing. The edges of the lawn need trimming, and feet have scraped away the grass beneath the swing. For years, too, I have looked at my eleven-year-old self and seen a girl in the last years of being

unconcerned at how she appeared. She is wearing Roman sandals, shorts, and a white, home-sewn blouse hemmed with dark bias binding. Her hair needs washing and shows the scissor marks of her mother's haphazard home hair-cutting. Although she is seated, she has clearly grown too big for the swing because her knees are bent above the seat. But, even for me, these details are all *studium.* There is nothing particularly "wounding" about the setting or the items I have described.

Barthes describes a photograph's *punctum*—that aspect of a photograph unique to a viewer which wounds or pricks them—as often being metonymic and having "a power of expansion" (45). In interviews about her ekphrasis of Bellocq portraits of prostitutes, Trethewey elaborates on Barthes's remarks by describing *punctum* as "those little things within a photograph that often will draw you out of the immediate action of the photograph to contemplate all that is behind it or outside of it" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations" 1028). Once you have entered that zone of contemplation, it is possible to "enter the realm of the imagination which is an act of interpretation" (Trethewey, "Inscriptive Restorations"1028). Trethewey was looking for a means for exploring mixed race experience and her *punctum*, unique to her, included evidence that the subjects were about to speak or move. In the case of my originating photograph, my *punctum* was the uncapped fountain pen the girl was unsuccessfully attempting to conceal beneath the swing seat. When I first noticed the pen as I studied the photograph after many years of seeing the photograph and liking it, or sometimes not liking it, in terms of what I was focusing on—garden, or girl—I was suddenly drawn out of the frame of the photograph and back into my eleven-year-old's world. I recalled that this was the summer I had spent feverishly writing both a novel and a series of playscripts for a collection of dolls and other figurines to perform in a miniature theatre in the next-door neighbour's garage. It seems that the

photographer, who took pictures of my sisters holding dolls or balls on the same day, had called me away from the kitchen table and my writing to have me pose on the swing with a book— perhaps because I was always reading.

My discovery of the pen reminded me that despite the photograph appearing to be a candid shot, I had in fact been posed on a seat that I would not have chosen for myself as a place to read because the movement of a swing has always made me feel nauseated. This realization was doubly significant for my approach to my creative project. The photographer, who was a family friend, had elected to portray me as a type—the child who is always reading—and while I had agreed to pose in this way, the photograph is not what it seems, because I hadn't been reading on the swing at all. This understanding had been irrelevant (there are other photographs of me holding a book from this time) until I set out to use the photograph as the subject of ekphrasis and began to think about Barthes's argument that "in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there.* There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past" (76; italics in original). Barthes's suggestion that a photograph, which depicts something in the past no matter how recent or distant that past is, must have a basis in reality—represents a "*that-has-been*"—made me consider how to use my *punctum* (the pen) as an opening to portray how the speaker's perception of events changed as she grew older and had more insight into experiences than her younger self did.

The sequence "Miniature Worlds" is a series of seven vignettes or short scenes that evolved from the *punctum* of the pen in the photograph of the speaker as a young girl. All the poems in this sequence are preoccupied with what things appear to be and how the speaker understands them, expressed in the context of the miniature theatre and the series of playscripts the speaker has written for her

playmate, “the director.” This sequence is also the one in which I first experimented with portraying in prose poetry the kind of fragmented and non-linear thoughts that the photograph invoked in the speaker’s older persona. I wrote four of the poems, “Act One,” “Act Two,” “Intermission,” and “Act Three,” as developments of the idea of a theatrical performance. The children understand the concept of a theatre and engage with it as a game, while the speaker’s older persona is aware that not everything was as it seemed: “The theatre, the props, Lola, the conversation I had years later with a sister about that game in the garage: everything was out of proportion” (“Act Three”). An additional two poems, “Later, he Disappeared,” and “Translation” supply a narrative about the girl in adolescence remembering the game and how her relationship with the boy developed. The narrative of these additional poems deliberately overlaps with the narrative of the theatre poems because I wanted their sequencing to represent the way the speaker’s thought processes overlay memories and events from different time periods as a result of her thinking inspired by the *punctum* of the original photograph.

The poems in “Miniature Worlds” are all presented, like the staged tableaux in the miniature theatre, as vignettes portraying aspects of the speaker’s life experience. A vignette is both a photographic term and a theatrical one. In photography, a vignetted image is blurred around the edges to highlight the subject, while a theatrical vignette is a short, impressionistic scene. Vignette is also an apt description for the form of the poems in this sequence. The prose poem, as I explored in chapter three, can be fragmented and incoherent and rely on juxtaposition and parataxis at the same time as it might employ poetic devices such as image or lyricism. Importantly for my project, the box-like shape of the prose poem recalled for me the box-like shape of the miniature theatre the children play with in this sequence. The

page that the poem is printed on is like the proscenium arch of the stage—the poems offer a series of vignettes as if each is a play.

I intended that in "Miniature Worlds," the relationship I discerned between vignetted image, dramatic vignette and the prose poem as vignette would highlight the speaker and her playmate in the past of their game with the theatre as a contrast to the older speaker's understanding of the events, with each perspective presented as a vignette. The poem "Act Two" for instance, finishes with the boy's father watching them "through the garage door, eye blinking like a shutter. Something captured." In "Intermission," the "something captured" becomes two vignettes as the speaker recalls the time when the boy's father had made her practise reading scenes from *Hamlet.* It is the older version of the speaker who observes that the father "might have stood very close or perhaps there wasn't much room."

The reporting of events as if they were scenes from a movie is continued in the poem "Later, he disappeared" where speaker and boy are both older. My intention here was to have a poem that resembled a close up—either a photograph or an instant from a movie shot from the speaker's perspective. I intended the details she notices— the lighting, the dark hairs on his wrist and his eyelashes—would represent how closely she is looking at him and to convey the sense that her gaze represents her feelings toward him for the reader of the poem. In other words, I was using the idea of a closeup per Swensen's "writewithist" ekphrasis as a model for the formal construction of my poem.

The poems in "Miniature Worlds" represent the thought processes of the speaker's older persona, who juxtaposes the memories evoked by the *punctum* of a photograph of herself as a young girl with her experiences as an adolescent. In these poems, my attention was on how the characteristic parataxis of the prose poem

enabled me to explore the way the speaker's memories are not linear but occur in highly visual flashes or vignettes which were often prompted by photographs. As such, the poems are not conventional ekphrasis in which a poet makes direct reference to an image of visual art: rather, the emotional content of the poems is focused by flashes of the speaker's camera vision as she recalls past events.

Untitled Film Stills after Cindy Sherman

The poems in "Stills," the sequence that follows "Miniature Worlds" are similarly dependent on parataxis for their evocation of the speaker's thought processes. However, unlike the poems in "Miniature Worlds," all the poems in "Stills" have an identifiable photograph as the subject of their ekphrasis. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* provided the ekphrastic inspiration for the ten poems that make up my sequence "Stills." Two further Sherman works from her *History Portraits* series provided the inspiration for the standalone poems, "Botticelli Notebook" and "Barefoot and Pregnant." Sherman is an American photographer who gained critical recognition in the 1980s for her black and white *Untitled Film Stills* series. In each still, Sherman poses as a stereotypical female character from B-Grade movies of the mid-twentieth century. A film still was a publicity mechanism for a movie that had been especially posed and shot for that purpose rather than being extracted from the film stock: as such, it incorporated visual "messages" that indicate the setting, narrative, and aspects of the character's personality. In his introductory essay to *Untitled Film Stills: Cindy Sherman*, critic Arthur C. Danto provides a helpful analogy when he compares the film still to the "lurid jacket on the paperback novel, which must compete with the other paperback novels on display for the reader's attention, money, and time" (9).

The critical reception of Sherman's stills reveals an interesting tension between the promotional focus of the historical still and the artist's intention in duplicating them with herself as the central figure. Sherman's stills are for non-existent films and often appear to be depicting an instant from a disturbing narrative in which Sherman's character is in a perilous situation. She looks sideways, looks over her shoulder, or she appears to be in distress while gazing obliquely away from the lens. The vulnerability of the character and the narrative implied by the stills have raised questions about their effect on how the viewer sees women: whether the series calls attention to the "ways women have been exploited or whether it reinforces that process of exploitation" (Meagher 19). This ambiguity is heightened because Sherman has declined to espouse any specific feminist intentions. In a 2003 interview with Betsy Berne for *Tate Magazine*, Sherman stated that didn't want to have to explain herself: "The work is what it is and hopefully it's seen as feminist work, or feminist advised work, but I'm not going to go around espousing bullshit about feminist stuff" (Sherman, "Berne Interview"). Regardless of Sherman's assertions, a considerable body of criticism from authors such as Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Judith Williamson reads the stills as symptomatic of Sherman's intent to critique mass media and its presentation of the female body in particular. [28]

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[28] Mulvey, Laura. "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87," *Cindy Sherman* edited by Johanna Burton. MIT Press, 2006, pp 65-82.
Silverman, Kaja. "How to Face the Gaze." *Cindy Sherman* edited by Johanna Burton. MIT Press, 2006, pp 143-170.
Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Suitable for Framing: The Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman." *Cindy Sherman* edited by Johanna Burton. MIT Press, 2006, pp, pp 53-64.
---, "The Coming of Age: Cindy Sherman, Feminism, and Art History." *Abigail Solomon-Godeau: Photography after Photography* edited by Sarah Parsons. Duke UP,2017, pp 189-206.
Williamson, Judith. "A Piece of the Action" Images of 'Woman' in the Photography of Cindy Sherman." *Cindy Sherman* edited by Johanna Burton. MIT Press, 2006, pp 39-52.

My approach to Sherman's work was consciously that of a creative researcher considering how the stills could provide my ekphrasis with, per Swensen, "a model for formal construction." I was interested in how I could relate the *punctum* of my original photograph ("Young Girl on Swing") and the narrative that evolved from my work with it in "Miniature Worlds" to a new series of images, as the focus of poems narrated by an older speaker. I wanted my poems, as writewithist ekphrasis, to echo the constructed and performative nature of Sherman's work while building on the narrative of the "Miniature Worlds" sequence. So I set out to experiment with how my poems could gesture toward the life experiences of the speaker, albeit one in disguise and posed in an artificially constructed setting, to suggest a backstory just as Sherman's stills suggest the narrative of non-existent movies.

When I worked with the *Untitled Film Stills* images, my interest was partly in their relationship to cinema as an extension of the theatre in "Miniature Worlds" and partly in how Sherman was demonstrating a way to fictionalize and make possible an alternative version of my speaker's self. My speaker, in other words, continues to dramatize her own backstory, revisiting and refining memories through the lens of Sherman's protagonists to create a narrative that suggests further "*that-has-beens*." The dramatized backstories of "Miniature Worlds" and "Stills," then, continue to appear in the memories and thoughts of the speaker in the sequences that follow as she merges them with other life experiences.

One of the ways that I attempted to use Sherman's stills as "a model for formal construction" of my poems was by appropriating and adapting methodologies that researcher and teacher Barry J. Mauer devised for his students: these methodologies are based on Sherman's work. Mauer, whose teaching interests

include cinematic and electronic media and cultural studies, has published two critical analyses of his work with Sherman's stills. In the first essay, "Film Still Methodologies: A Pedagogical Assignment," he describes how his students learned to "read" and then produce their own stills by identifying, critically analysing, and reproducing the information contained in the visual codes of Hollywood films. Mauer describes Sherman's *Untitled Film Still*s as being "on the far end of the legibility continuum since many of her images show a character in close-up, reacting to something outside the frame" (94). The students were required to produce their own stills from which a viewer could "infer a sequence or an entire narrative" (94) and to consider "how far can we push fragmentation (breaking a sequence into smaller and smaller segments and eventually to a single image) without losing the sequence?" (94). A second essay, "The Epistemology of Cindy Sherman: A Research Method for Media and Cultural Studies" argues that Sherman's work in her *Untitled Film Stills* was a form of research into how cinema influences people's presentation of the self. Mauer suggested to his students that they view Sherman's images as representations of Sherman's attempts to articulate a "self" based on the "re-enactments of ideological 'lessons' Sherman received from cinema about the dominant culture's preferred values and behaviours" (95). He instructed his students to consider how they could portray the kind of ideological lessons that had resonance in their own lives. Mauer's instructions, in fact, had a particular resonance for me as poet because I had been struggling with what I perceived to be a conflict in my writing between autobiography and fiction. Mauer's remarks about Sherman's "ideological lessons" led me to consider how Sherman portrayed a range of characters in her stills with the help of makeup, wigs, and costumes. I began to think about my relationship as a poet with the speaker in my poems from the same

perspective. When I thought of the speaker as someone acting out another's life in order to learn something about how to live her own, I became less concerned about autobiographical truth and was able to present a coherent narrative with a single speaker for all the poems in *Miniatures of Reality*.

I was also interested in whether Mauer's instructions to his students for constructing a film still could also offer me the means for producing ekphrasis. Mauer's essays incorporate detailed discussion of the theoretical background to the production and analysis of film stills, but his instructions to his students suggested to me that if I worked on my ekphrasis of Sherman's stills in a similar way I could experience what it was to use a photograph as a model for formal construction of a poem and thus gain a better understanding of what Swensen meant when she used that terminology. In my appropriation and adaptation of Mauer's work, I began by scrutinizing the stills I selected to work with for the details that implied a potential cinematic narrative. Sherman's stills tend to offer an actress "type" from the fifties and sixties (a Gina Lollobrigida or Marilyn Monroe for instance), a setting (rumpled bedclothes, a dimly lit stairwell, an interior with evocative furnishings), and the impression that some kind of interaction with an unseen other is taking place. This implied action is what drives the notion that the film still represents a fragmented instance from the absent narrative of a movie. In terms of my creative project, I built on the action I deduced from the stills to imply events that my speaker had experienced and had found confusing or frightening and which had then become "lessons" the speaker remembered about aspects of her life. In my poem "The Complete Guide to," for instance, the speaker-as-librarian's desire to look like a Brigitte Bardot character is tempered by the harassment that follows: "There will always be some who ask for the books from the top shelf so they can watch you

reach for them." In "Yesterday's Panties," the girl who poses in front of the mirror before going out remembers "getting out of the car in your too-short skirt, running barefoot up the road into the grainy half-dark at the far edge of the headlights." In other poems, she imagines herself as a character in some kind of drama. The woman in "Putain," for instance, imagines herself as a character in a foreign language film which depicts some kind of domestic violence. This imaginary life then provides a script for her behaviour later in life. The opening action of "Putain:" "When you can see your reflection in the darkened kitchen window, pause, lift your hand to your face and turn to the room" is echoed later by the speaker in the sequence "That-has-been" in the poems "View Finder" and "Kitchen Sink," where she is depicted as seeing her reflection in a darkened window and feeling like she is playing the part of a dutiful daughter in some domestic drama.

In my work with Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* I also spent time considering how I could use the aesthetics of the stills as models for my poems. To do this, I ignored any potential for implied narrative in the images and instead asked myself how I could verbally represent the aesthetics of the still. One example of this thought process can be seen in my poem "Ballerina" after Sherman's *Untitled Film Still # 36.*[29] Sherman's still shows a woman backlit in front of light curtains so that her body is in silhouette. She is wearing a crinoline petticoat and is raising her arms as if pulling on a blouse.

[29] Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled Film Still #36,*. MOMA, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56899

Ballerina

(After Untitled Film Still #36)

If you close the box carefully, letting the last shard of mirrored light settle slowly around her, you can feel the moment she stops turning. A ballerina made to wait patiently in the dark until her next clockwork pirouette. Everyone is taught to play *Für Elise* on the piano in the hall behind Our Lady, Star of the Sea. You tiptoe down the unlit aisle toward the pretty statues, averting your eyes from the blood dripping down the Jesus, and push through the door. Unlined curtains and bright daylight outside. Wishing for the kind of petticoat that goes with white gloves and a hat with ribbons, you put down your music, point your toes and whirl across the floor through a shimmering cloud of dust motes until the teacher arrives.

In her essay, "Cindy Sherman Untitled," critic Rosalind Krauss notes the aesthetic relationship of this still to "two photographs by Edward Degas, of a ballerina dressed in a low-cut bodice, her skirt a diaphanous crinoline, standing in front of a luminous curtain and reaching with one arm upward, her other arm bent inward at the elbow" (111). The Degas images had been part of the exhibition "Pictures" organized in 1977 by art historian and critic Douglas Crimp. In her analysis of Sherman's image, Krauss quotes Crimp's discussion of the Degas photographs as manipulation of light:

> How can we speak of a white shadow? a dark highlight? a translucent

> shoulder blade? When light and dark, transparency and opacity, are reversed, when negative becomes positive and positive, negative, the referents of our descriptive language are dissolved. (113)

Krauss considers that Sherman's still has "the aura of this impossibly folded Degas dancer" (113) but also that unlike others in the series, "this work is deprived of narrative implication" (111). These comments and Crimp's description of the manipulation of light in the Degas photographs provided me with a means for considering how to represent the aesthetics of Sherman's still in my poem.

I began by thinking about how to portray light in the context of a figure clothed in a garment that made me recall a childhood yearning for a "stiff petticoat" to wear under my Sunday school dress. Such a petticoat was designed to make the skirt of your dress float about your legs like a ballet dress rather than just hang limply from a waistband. Ideally, you would also get to wear the other accoutrements of Sunday school high fashion such as white gloves, a hat with ribbons and dainty shoes. These childhood memories encouraged me to make my speaker in this poem a version of the speaker in the "Miniature Worlds" sequence and to look for a means to represent light and shadow in terms related to childhood. Unlike the other poems in my "Stills" sequence, there is no implied narrative in this poem. It is simply a series of moments from childhood characterised by light and shadow.

My intention with this poem was to verbally represent Sherman's manipulation of light and figure by using the image as a model for my ekphrasis. Unlike some of my other "Stills" poems in which I make it clear that I am referencing the speaker as the subject of an image—for instance "Yesterday's Panties" or "Leopard Skin"— there is no such image in this poem. Instead, I focus

on how I could verbally represent light and shadow in the context of a figure in an aethereal costume.

Swensen's discussion of ekphrasis that "deviates from [art] at the referential level" (71) includes examples in which either no artworks are mentioned (Berssenbrugge) or in which the poet assumes her reader will recognise allusions to unnamed artworks (Moriarty). The subtitle of "Ballerina," (*Untitled Film Still #36*) supplies a reference to Sherman's work that would enable a reader to look at the image if they wished to, but my intention was that the poem should stand, like the image, as a light-filled fragment, and that the originating image would simply add another level rather than being the most important aspect of the poem. My speaker employs "camera vision"—she sees her world vividly in terms of light and shade as she whirls "through the shimmering cloud of dust motes" hanging in the air of the empty hall.

By describing "Ballerina" as a "light-filled fragment," I also intend a reference to the poem's form. "Ballerina" is a block of dense prose framed on the page like a black and white photograph whose subject matter is a fragmentary collection of significant details from the childhood of the speaker. In my discussion of the prose poem as form in chapter three, I pointed to scholarship on its origins in the Romantic critical fragment, its gesture towards an absent whole, and Atherton and Hetherington's contention that "the fragmentary prose poem suggests that many experiences are themselves inherently fragmented and often incoherent" (29). My decision to write prose poem ekphrasis of Sherman's stills reflects my interest in exploring how best to represent the fragmented and often incoherent memories of a speaker whose recollection of aspects of her past is via the lens of camera vision.

Camera Lucida as a model for the structure of *Miniatures of Reality*

The speaker in *Miniatures of Reality* is both a daughter and a mother. The poems in Part Two— the sequences "Hidden Mothers," "Kept Hidden," and "That-has-Been"— consider these roles through the lens of specific photographs, photographic practice, and photography theory in a narrative thread that encompasses the speaker's experience of motherhood and her experiences caring for her mother in fragile old age. An underlying motif in many of these poems is the idea of hidden mothers, whether concealed behind a lace curtain in the bay window of a villa, hidden under a shawl in a "Hidden Mother" photograph or, as in the speaker's case, where the existence of a long-concealed grandmother was revealed through an old photograph.

I first encountered "hidden mother" photographs in Patrick Pound's 2018 exhibition "On Reflection" at the Wellington City Art Gallery. "Hidden mother" photographs were a peculiarity of Victorian studio photography.[30] In an effort to keep small children still for long enough for their portraits to be taken, some nineteenth-century photographers posed the child on their mother or caregiver's knee and either covered her with a cloth of some kind or later scratched her face from the surface of the print. A mat placed over the image then centred the child and hid the adult. Such photographs have assumed notoriety in recent times because they have begun circulating without their concealing frames. The hidden mother now appears behind the child prompting questions about the literal and metaphorical meaning of her erasure.

[30] *Untitled (Hidden Mother)*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. https://collections.mfa.org/objects/653783/untitled-hidden-mother

When I looked for more examples of these photographs on the Internet, I came across some twenty-first century examples by photographer Megan Jacobs.[31] On her website, Jacobs states that she creates "formally similar images in contemporary times as a metaphor for the unrecognised physical and emotional work that mothers do…[t]he interplay between hiding and revealing explores the complexities of motherhood and functions to illustrate the mutability of identity and in some cases an erasure of self" (Jacobs np). Jacobs's project and her remarks about "erasure of self" provided me with a link between my interest in the Victorian photographs and the sequences in *Miniatures of Reality* in which the speaker is a mother herself or is caring for her own mother. The "mutability of identity" Jacobs identifies is intensified by the need not only to mother your children regardless of their age but also to swop roles and play mother to your mother.

Many of the poems in the sequences "Hidden Mothers" and "That-has-been" reflect aspects of the speaker's ambivalence about motherhood and about the role reversal that occurred in her mother's old age. An example of this ambivalence is the poem "Hidden Mothers" which begins with the speaker thinking about a "hidden mother" portrait:

> The shape of knees or the contours of a lap beneath fabric draped to hide her body. Is it the idea that a mother could be hidden and yet visible that makes me return again and again to the photograph? Or is it the expression on the face of a child who means nothing to me? The way she leans back into what must be the reassurance of warmth and softness to stare confidently into a lens. The thought that it is only the child we are meant to see. Long, dead, yet alive here in white lace and kiss curls.

[31] Jacobs, Megan. *Hidden Mothers*. http://www.meganjacobs.com/new-gallery

The speaker uses the hidden mother portrait to consider various aspects of the public life of mothering—the friend who regrets that she has had no children to offer her the excuse to stay at home all day, or the woman looking out at the world from behind a concealing lace curtain whose unsettled baby has prevented her from taking a shower or folding laundry.

There is also another, autobiographical, "hidden mother" in *Miniatures of Reality*. This hidden mother is the speaker's maternal grandmother Ida—a mother who is dead and whose memory was hidden and never spoken about by either the stepmother who replaced her or her daughter, the speaker's mother. The poems "Kept Hidden" and "Trace in an Album" in the sequence "Kept Hidden" explain how Ida was introduced: "My grandmother Ida first appeared in a conversation as surprising as the one in which my mother revealed that all girls bleed" ("Kept Hidden"). The speaker begins to look for evidence of Ida's life in albums or other memorabilia: "Ida holds the baby under her arms so her feet can dance to daddy across the poker work top of a wooden stool…I linger on the foreshortened glimpse of her nose and mouth, the sinews of her neck, her fingers" ("Trace in an Album"). In "Obliteration," a letter about Ida's death from pneumonia in 1932 is juxtaposed against a contemporary description of pneumonia and a twenty-first century photographic essay about the hospital in which she died. The poem "Dark Shapes Shimmering" that opens the sequence "That-has-been" reveals that the speaker's mother has virtually no memories of Ida— "In her mind's eye, the image flickering like dappled light through willows, Ida is a summer afternoon where grass feathered beneath her outstretched palms and dragonflies shimmered over running water." In all these poems, Ida is portrayed in "camera vision:" in a vignette of a mother instructing her daughter about pubertal change ("Kept Hidden"), as a partially

obscured image in an album ("Trace in an Album") or as a figure missing from a landscape ("Dark Shapes Shimmering"). Photography is an integral part of the speaker's means for depicting her grandmother because the photographs of her testify to the *that-has-been* of her existence.

The poem "Dark Shapes Shimmering" also introduces the gradually deteriorating vision of the speaker's mother, who has macular degeneration and whose sight progressively worsens as the sequence progresses. This predicament is the focus of several poems in the sequence "That-has-been" as the speaker is torn between sympathy for her mother's struggles to continue with painting in poems like "Sunny Days," "Peat" and "One Hundred Photographs," and the knowledge that her mother can no longer care for herself expressed in poems like "Night Bell" or "Kitchen Sink."

The sequences about the speaker's mother that evolved from the "hidden mother" photographs all relate in some way to my interest in exploring how prose poetry lends itself to portraying gendered experience and in particular aspects of motherhood through the lens of photography. The prose poem form allowed me to progress a narrative in the fragments and hesitations, repetitions and revisions that represented the way my speaker was using photographs as prompts to tell a life story. The form also enabled me to be lyrical in terms of how the speaker presented her subject matter, but not constrained by any requirements of genre or lineation.

When I came to think about a shape and ordering for the sequences in *Miniatures of Reality*, I struggled to work out how to combine the pointedly autobiographical work in "Hidden Mothers," "Hidden," and "That-has-been" with the more "every-woman" subjects of the other sequences. I found a solution to this dilemma in Barthes's treatment of his own "hidden mother" in *Camera Lucida*

which Barthes wrote when he was mourning the death of his mother, Henriette. The book has two parts, each containing twenty-four numbered short pieces. In Part One, Barthes introduces the terms *punctum* and *studium*, describing in detail how he came to use the terms and illustrating his discussion with photographs. However, despite these efforts, he felt he had not managed to discover "the nature (the *eidos*) of photography" (60) that had been his intention at the outset. He concluded that in order to discover what distinguishes photography from any other image, he would "have to make my recantation, my palinode" (60). In Part Two, therefore, he takes a different approach and begins with his experience of finding a photograph of his mother as a small child posing in a Winter Garden that encapsulated everything that was important to him about her personality and character. Despite the importance of the Winter Garden photograph and Barthes's frequent references to it, it is not reproduced in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes explains that for anyone apart from himself, it would be "nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'… at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound" (73).

Thus, if Barthes's concepts *punctum* and *studium* helped me to "read" the photographs I was using for my creative research and find an emotional centre for my ekphrasis of photographs, his work *Camera Lucida* also suggested a structure for my manuscript. Barthes's hidden mother and her appearance in the second part of *Camera Lucida* suggested to me that I could construct *Miniatures of Reality* in the same way by grouping the poems about hidden mothers, Ida, and the speaker's mother together in the last section of the collection as a contrast to the earlier poems that reflected my experimentation with *punctum*, *studium* and camera vision. In this way, I hoped that the final section would build on the work I had done with the prose

poem form in the first section of *Miniatures of Reality* to create a speaker whose voice reflects what Kathleen Fraser describes as "the average female's habituated availability to interruption … almost as if there were no choice, as though the nurturing role doesn't carry choice as part of its makeup" (Fraser, "Hogue Interview" 9). The final and most pertinent example of synergy between the structure of *Camera Lucida* and *Miniatures of Reality* is in the death of the speaker's mother and the speaker's recognition that her mother continues to exist in the form of photographic images:

> I cannot delete the photographs of my mother in my phone. The images are still alive like her voice on the answering machine. A disturbance like a clock ticking in an empty room. In front of the lens, she is at the same time: the one she thinks she is, the one she wants others to think she is, the one the photographer thinks she is.
>
> ("A Disturbance")

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Miniatures of Reality

Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.

—Susan Sontag

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A Photograph is only a Fragment

A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading…

—Susan Sontag

Prologue

Untitled (ca. 1915)

Plaster balustrade, hint of leadlight mullions, rococo clouds. The eye is drawn behind then settles on five women pinned in place against a velvet chaise, a carved mahogany dining chair, the balustrade. Like moths in a fanciful vitrine, their faces are turned to the light, bodies enclosed in the folds of their skirts. They have been posed by the photographer, or they elected to stand or sit according to the order in which they were called up. Whichever was the case, this is how they must remain. We've seen this set-up before. Old aunts, someone's grandmother, unknown cousins, faded and blotched, just out of their salad days and before the war. Before the photograph slipped off the mantlepiece, into a book and then a box.

Back of the Hand

A child might feel the back of the hand. Something is happening, some commotion behind the photographer. Naughty little boys in white lace collars pinching and whispering. The women are distracted, one frowns, another holds tight to a chair back, no one smiles. Observe the Salvation Army uniform worn by the woman on the right. Tremulous rattle of tambourine, tentative note from a French horn, drum somewhere ready for the Saturday parade. Call them sisters. An enlargement shows the silk flower pinned to the dress of the woman with light curly hair. Say the flower is pink and cream, the dress a murky Eau-de-nil, give her four sons. Make her short tempered, too quick to get the copper stick or the belt. Have her sisters talk about her when she's not there, how clean her house is, how cruel she is to those boys.

Hidden (Watch the Birdie)

The photographer is hidden beneath his black cloth, his studio a little stage-set with a glass roof, his lens an impartial eye more interested in light than shadow. The script is something to be played out on a balcony with a distant view behind potted plants and heavy furniture arranged about a bearskin rug. Props to the side—a heavy Chamber's Journal, assorted gilt-embossed poets and a tin whistle shaped like a bird that warbles and flutters its tail when you squeeze the rubber bulb. How do you make sense of another's life before your own? Mothballs and rust stains in a tin trunk of poorly sewn summer frocks, strings of beads that disintegrate when you pick them up, an embroidered bag containing letters in a schoolboy's hand. Imagine this photograph as a scene from a first act for which you have cut the lace from your mother's rayon petticoat to fashion a dress for the little doll you begged for. The women are watching you. The photographer has seen to that.

I

Miniature Worlds

Photography is a kind of primitive
theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*…
—Roland Barthes

Black and White

Young girl posed on swing; high summer, browned off grass, soaker hose in the vegetable garden, roses against a lattice fence and a damson tree heavy with bloom and blue. A white painted shed—not visible in the photograph but nevertheless, memory attaches lattice and roses to its side wall. She has a fairy tale book open in her lap and a fountain pen in her right hand, half concealed beneath the wooden swing seat. When she has her own children and lives in a house with a driveway made of lime that glows in moonlight, she will threaten to take the boys into the forest and leave them if they won't behave. But here on the swing, she is thinking about princesses, ogres, the fate of youngest sons. Her children will claim too, that when she is away from the house, they lock their youngest brother in a cupboard. She will sometimes wonder why the boy is so quiet, but as he never complains about his treatment in her absence, she will assume that this is as much a joke as her threats to abandon them. The photographer pays no attention to the fountain pen, focusing instead on the area delineated by the girl's face, the angular lines of her body and the book. It will be many years before she notices the pen, remembers ink stains on her fingers, days spent conjuring shadows.

Act One

The director is waiting for my script. He needs lines for an ingenue with waist-length hair who stands on tip toes as if she is walking on knives. We have made a backdrop—a balustrade with a distant view of mountains and clouds, and in one of the wings, a fold out screen painted to look like the windows of a palace. In the meantime, I am captured, posing for a photograph on a swing beside a shed, fountain pen in one hand half concealed and a fairy tale book in my lap. If I stare long enough without blinking, the lawn reveals itself as a jungle full of ant trails beneath the pale flowers of Onehunga weed and glistening brass shavings from my father's lathe. Sometimes I imagine movement under the azaleas—little arms, a foot. The theatre will seem like a wonderful game in fifty years' time after the hedge between the houses has gone, along with the smell of pee, the memory of a bruise on the director's cheek and the sight of his small pink penis, like a finger without a bone. His sideways glance. We had been hiding, shoulder against shoulder, dust from the path gritty inside my sandals, pee leaving a dark stain in the dirt, bees hovering in the hedge among its white flowers. I caught one in my hand and felt its thrumming.

Act Two

The ingenue has red hair and tiny breasts that feel like pearl beads inside her plastic chest, and she wears a little white dress made of lace cut from a petticoat. We argued for days about her name: I had wanted Arriety, but in the end we chose Lola. Lola, with the simpering pout and a hole in her back where she might once have been attached like a maquette to a stand. She has lost her shoes. We discuss how to find more figures the same size as Lola and read alternate lines from a copy of *Hamlet* the director found on his father's bookshelf. When the lines don't go right across the page, it must be poetry. There might have been ten thousand Lolas once, maybe more. Someone will have glued eyelashes on to their soft, caramel-coloured faces, painting blue eyes or brown; each with a little dab of white. He holds Lola upside down and her dress falls over her head. Her little bead breasts have no nipples, and there is nothing between her legs. Much later, we will seek each other out with a new script in which he slowly peels off all my clothes, folding them carefully onto a chair. Proscenium arch, apron, stage left. The bus ride home alone past flashing neon. His father watched us through the garage door, eye blinking like a shutter. Something captured.

Intermission

When the girl thinks about the theatre in the years to come, she will recall pencils as table legs, thimbles for cups. An eye at the door. Tiny things. Wooden chess pieces and the top hat, the iron, the little dog from a game of Monopoly. A blink. The smell of wood shavings, oil, and cigarette smoke. How Lola could not stand by herself, and the boy's father had her practise reading speeches from *Hamlet* while the boy painted scenery for the theatre. How they found a piece of fur in a box, skin gone hard and crackling, but they could lay it on the stage as if it were a rug in front of the leaded glass, the balustrade, and the painted sky. Lola could lie on it, surrounded by tiny flowers—forget-me-nots and daisies. "What, the fair Ophelia!" How she stumbled over the words, the book on the workbench propped up against the vice and how a moth was caught in a spiderweb. Gossamer. Her tongue lingering over the syllables. A sound like steam. It was easier to make tableaux than to move the actors about. The father made her keep one finger underneath the words and run the lines into each other. He might have stood very close or perhaps there wasn't much room. When it began to get dark, she would go home but she could see the light in the garage from her bedroom window and the shadows of the boy and his father. An arm swinging. A hand. Like a movie with the sound turned off. She could not know then how it would all end.

Act Three

We had a windup gramophone and a collection of 78s. The needles came in a gold-coloured tin shaped like a pyramid. He drew black lines around Lola's eyes, twisting her head so that she looked Egyptian, arms and legs at right angles to her neck. Her bead breasts bare. I spirited a wooden camel and a set of elephants away from the bookcase at home. Lola was taller than the elephants, so they were always upstage beside the pyramid. The tone arm of the gramophone was made of brass, and it was heavy in a way that I couldn't describe until I held my first baby and let its head fall across my forearm so I could wash its hair. He borrowed his mother's chiffon head scarves so we could make the light change with a torch; an orange glow across the back of the set suggesting sunset, the crackling of the gramophone as we lowered the needle onto the record might have been rain or wind. Eventually we grew out of this game and the boy's father broke up the theatre and burned it. The theatre, the props, Lola, the conversation I had years later with a sister about that game in the garage: everything was out of proportion.

Later, he disappeared

But first, a scene in his kitchen. A lamp throws shadows onto the ceiling, spills light across a Formica tabletop. Two coffee mugs. The fine dark hairs on his wrist. His eyelashes. We carefully place everything not said into the small wooden box that once contained chess pieces. I stand up to leave. He watches me walk to the door.

Translation

We are among a group seated on a sloping lawn, I'm smiling toward the camera, you're looking at the ground between your knees. Years later I will translate your posture into something like boredom. My hair is long and I'm wearing that necklace made of leather with wooden beads and small copper bells that tinkle faintly whenever I move. This is the year you will tell me that it is the boy in the room downstairs you hope to find at home when you knock on my door. You used to lie on my bed and ask me about people from school. Who was or wasn't? Did the boy downstairs ever mention you? I worried beads between my fingers while we talked until they rattled across my lap like brightly coloured pebbles and onto the floor to bruise my bare feet. When you drifted away, I hung the bells on the back of my door—I couldn't explain why normal seemed so appealing sometimes, or why I no longer wanted to be surprised.

II

Stills

(*after Cindy Sherman*)

The still dis-stills. It does not so much give us a frozen moment of a continuous action (like a freeze frame) as it condenses an entire drama.
—Arthur C. Danto

Ballerina

(Untitled Film Still #36)

If you close the box carefully, letting the last shard of mirrored light settle slowly around her, you can feel the moment she stops turning. A ballerina made to wait patiently in the dark until her next clockwork pirouette. Everyone is taught to play *Für Elise* on the piano in the hall behind Our Lady, Star of the Sea. You tiptoe down the unlit aisle toward the pretty statues, averting your eyes from the blood dripping down the Jesus, and push through the door. Unlined curtains and bright daylight outside. Wishing for the kind of petticoat that goes with white gloves and a hat with ribbons, you put down your music, point your toes and whirl across the floor through a shimmering cloud of dust motes until the teacher arrives.

You imagined everything

(Untitled Film Still #54)

It was before television, so you imagined everything in a miniature theatre made from beer crates with wallpaper glued to the back and sides. Tiny found things—cicada cases, glass buttons, a diamante prised from a brooch—for props. You sewed costumes for a skinny plastic doll from Woolworths who had breasts like little pearl beads and shiny red hair falling all the way down her back. Years later, when you walk home late at night and afraid of the dark, you recall gluing fat teardrop sequins to her cheeks and sewing her into a tiny lace dress so tight that her legs couldn't move. You cross the road under streetlamps while car headlights slow then speed up. Her lips were moulded into a pout, her eyebrows permanently arched in a contemptuous stare. Nothing you understood from that theatre prepared you for the clumsy hands, the unshaven chin, the pleading you mistook for romance—your short skirt rucking up, the feel of the handbrake against your hip, raindrops on the windscreen glinting like sequins.

The Night You Planned

(Untitled Film Still #48)

From your untitled dreams. Stilled. You once worried about waiting. Alone at a bus stop, a railway station late at night. How fast to walk down an unlit street? You knew about keys carried in your fist and your heart beating like heavy footsteps in the shadows. You are waiting on a roadside at twilight, suitcase in the gravel. Girlish skirt, white ankle socks, white shirt. The blue hour—ragged clouds, and the long slow gleam of a river behind scrubby trees. This is the setting for when you planned to run away, birds settling, raucous, into the wilding pines behind you. Your hair shines in headlights and of course there is music. Juke boxy. Car radio. The birds shrill into the evening sky, circle, and return to their perches. You used to sing hymns loudly when you were afraid.

The Decisive Moment

(Untitled Film Still #65)

Say that the black shadow at the top of the steps is just a shadow. There is no man. The steps, the concrete curve of the balustrade, the iron handrail and the opposing wall glow warm in late afternoon sun. Dangerous to run down steps in high heels. Stop and look back so that a photographer who might have been waiting for something to happen, thinking about composition and the play of light in the stairwell, can capture the moment in which the shadow becomes the monster in the wardrobe after your mother closed your bedroom door and left you alone in the dark.

The Complete Guide to

(Untitled Film Still # 13)

Create the glamorous librarian look of the sixties, that time when we all wanted to look like young Bardots, lipstick so pale that only our eyes mattered. From the other side of the mirror in the basement bathroom, you could see what we were trying for—accentuating the positives while hiding our imperfections. There will always be some who ask for the books from the top shelf so they can watch you reach for them. Keeping an eye on the weather, snowing down south and such like. Were we always cold? You rest your cheek against the cool of the mirror in the bathroom while running cold water over your wrists and shout "Leave me Alone" in different tones to the thud and screech of the roller towel mechanism. Pale smears of lipstick lingering on the glass.

Your Stars for April

(Untitled Film Still #53)

You can find yourself in the wrong place unexpectedly, your coat thrown across a bed and no easy way to leave. You can fix a slight smile on your face and remain quite still while a run works its way up your leg from the hole where your foot turned as you started, mouth a little dry, up the steps to the front door. If you were going to start again, it would not be in this white nylon pin-tucked blouse or following an afternoon reading magazines in your underwear with big rollers in your hair which you had to spray into place with Aqua Net before pulling on a girdle and the skirt that is a little too tight. You'd wear a slinky low-cut dress, and you'd go straight up to him the minute you walked into the room. You wouldn't be watching from the couch under the pretty lamp, legs crossed slant, nursing a tumbler of warm Bacardi and coke. Not smoking, not talking, not looking for trouble.

Leopard Skin

(Untitled Film Still #50)

Why are there three ash trays in this picture and is it the same girl wearing leopard skin cuffs and collar who was crying in the picture on the other page? Someone has underlined *credentials* and *theatricality* and left a spider web of Chinese characters in the margin. The question must be one of intelligibility or a memory for back then. It is Sixties décor with wooden idols and a martini glass, jazz on the turntable. Kick a shoe off and sit with one leg folded beneath you and you could be mistaken for what you want to be, except for the rest of your body which remains on high alert. There was such a thing as tear-proof mascara, and you could pull the zip as high as you wanted. You might have been better to stay blonde and to arrive much later. But for now, you are listening to angry voices in the kitchen and the sound of someone sobbing at the end of the hallway.

Yesterday's Panties

(Untitled Film Still # 2)

Traffic stops for blondes. A complexion so natural that you can't believe it's makeup—turning just before the click—fingers to chin like the ads. Framed within frames, the bath towel clutched across your breasts, not slim but not fat either. Out of the picture, the shower curtain hemmed with mould, glimpse of green tiles above bath, and underfoot, a damp bathmat and yesterday's panties. You will remember this—mirror, light, click—razor knicks on your shins, getting out of the car in your too-short skirt, running barefoot up the road into the grainy half-dark at the far edge of the headlights.

A Kind of Wilderness

(Untitled Film Still #37)

The room smells of ashes and not just from that cigarette. Something cold that catches at the back of your throat and makes you think of dank shadows, like all the bitter blues and greens in the painting above the fireplace. Home décor bought from a furnishing store—riverbed, rocks, wind beaten pines, mountains, no visible brush strokes, just a wisp of soot from the open fire where smoke curls over the mantlepiece and up the chimney breast in a southerly. A lamp lights your bare arm and part of your face so that it seems that you have the kind of cheekbones that signal darkness. You lean against the fireplace looking casual, until your heart rate drops, the hurt in that conversation cooling in your mind, like water seeping under rocks.

Putain

(Untitled Film Still #3)

Kitchen Sink Drama. When you can see your reflection in the darkened kitchen window, pause, lift your hand to your face and turn to the room. The screenplay for this sink full of greasy water, saucepan handle and drainer calls for an uplift bra and the kind of apron that will not protect your clothes from cooking. It will screen in French or German with subtitles and dialogue we occasionally understand. There is someone behind you, drumming his fingers on the table and gesticulating with a lighted cigarette. We don't need the subtitles for the part where he pushes the chair back and comes toward you.

III

Playing Memory

…if there is a narrative form intrinsic to still photography, it will search for what happened, as memories or reflections do. Memory itself is not made up of flashbacks, each one forever moving inexorably forwards. Memory is a field where different times coexist.

—John Berger

Figure to Ground

Figure to ground, as small child pictured on tiptoes scooping water from a rain barrel beside out of focus raspberry canes. Grounded, as in footing or solid. As young girl captured knee deep in sea, dark hair and green striped swimming togs that will be too small by the end of summer. Uncertain ground, as in undertow or embarrassment, as younger sisters whisper with friends. Laughter fluttering behind hands. A click and she will become whatever is missing. Shells and sea glass tumbling in foam at the tideline, a white sail reflecting sunlight, islands floating on the horizon.

Afterglow

She spends the summer reading with the sea breathing into her ears, grains of yellow sand in the gutters of her library books. At night, sand falls from the pages of her book to drift onto the sheets. Text blocks glimmer behind her closed eyelids, the white frame of the page turned sunburn pink like her shoulders as if the beach were projecting itself onto the pale skin untouched by sun.

Love Hearts

Squatting in the leafy cave under my father's rhododendrons, making perfume in an empty vanilla essence bottle from flower petals and water, print dress rucked up to reveal matching panties with thin elastic edgings cut too tight and sewn firm on my mother's Singer, I ease a finger inside one leg. This is the day I learn that good girls. Never. Daphne, pink and white as Love Hearts fizzing into powdery sweetness on my tongue. Love You. Love You Not.

My twelfth birthday party. Six girls in black and white, party frocks and Alice bands. Sensible, plain names with stiff petticoats. Hidden at the back, I smoulder beside the rhododendrons' flaming blossoms.

Newspaper

When my eldest son turns five, I walk with him until we can see the school gate. The Trolley bus, the sounds of engines in another street confuse him. I watch him hesitating on the kerb, listening for cars, and I am five again, leaning over the newspaper on the sitting room floor, spelling out words and looking at a photograph: an overturned tricycle, a doll's pram like the one in my bedroom, a school satchel and twenty children lying on their backs, eyes closed, in the middle of the road. My mother took the page for rubbish, burned it later out the back, stirring the flames with a rusted waratah. "And never get into a car if a man says he has lollies." In his school photographs, my son looks anxious. I decide to turn off the television before the news comes on. The same disasters over and over again. My mother setting light to the newspaper, the children lying still as if they were sleeping, embers flying into the evening sky and glowing like stars.

Slide Evening

After dinner, grandma's kitchen smells of coal gas from the gasworks near the airport. Chairs in the dining room are lined in a row and grandpa's Slidemaster warms up on the dining table. We granddaughters sit cross-legged on the floor in our Sunday dresses for the slide show of their world tour. While we wait, we make hand shadows in the glowing tube of dust motes that float between table and screen. A rabbit, a duck. In the kitchen, grandma drops a plate, shatters painted rosebuds and ribbons. Someone gets up to close the door on her tears. The slides click through the projector. Switzerland, Venice, Florence. I finger my mosaic broach from Italy, its specks of colour on my collar. Grandma in a raincoat in a rose garden. The rose garden is brilliant with reds and greens and raindrops glisten on the petals like the shifting colours in a kaleidoscope. Tears are a sign of illness. Grandpa had seen some of the world in 1917: London, Boulogne, La Basse-Ville. He "hopped the bags" in Poperinghe. Mustard Gas. The smoke from his cigarette drifts towards the ceiling and I imagine holes in his lungs like the pianola rolls for the piano in the front room. Foot treadle pumping air and instead of music, his ragged breaths.

Anonymous Now

My mother can't recall the name of the woman in this black and white photograph. Short-sleeved floral frock, soft pale hat with filigree net, elbow-length white gloves and a fox fur stole with dark marble eyes and tiny claws. When we watched television in the sixties, we got used to different tones of grey by assuming shades of blue for sky and green for trees whose colours we knew. Once we understood greyscale, we could allocate tones as on a stave—brick red, pohutukawa flowers, painted tram-seat brown, dark green corrugated iron followed by improvisations in pale blues, lilacs and pink. Long white gloves and a fur stole indicate an occasion. Picture the woman at a mirrored dressing table applying lipstick and powder, dabbing scent on her wrists and throat, placing the hat just so on her hair before setting out, little black claws scrabbling across her shoulders. I once resolved to discover whether my dreams were in colour but each morning, I woke in the greyscale dawn of my curtained bedroom to play the dream back and it was always black and white as if it was on the set in the corner of the sitting room. Sometimes we used to hide in a wardrobe behind a rabbit fur coat smelling of mothballs and stain our lips with the pink icing from the Animal biscuits our mother bought for birthdays. The woman's frock might have been as brightly coloured as the dressing gown our mother sewed for her Honeymoon. Colour it in fuchsia, with tendrils of fern, dab her lips with cochineal pink lipstick, dye her hair auburn. Place her at the wedding on the arm of a man in an ill-fitting double-breasted suit, cannister of

confetti at the ready. Little spots of colour drifting onto rain-soaked gravel outside the church.

Playing Memory

My mother and I stand beneath the clothesline in grandma and grandpa's backyard. Garden shed behind us smelling of tar paper, tennis nets and sandshoes, damp boxes of cigarette cards and old board games. My mother is a young woman, the same age as her granddaughters are now, and I'm wearing a dress she has just finished sewing for me—little pink flowers on white cotton, long bell-shaped sleeves that bunch under my knitted cardigan on the next cold day. Sleeves as awkward as a self-conscious ten-year-old. I had imagined that the pretty dress might make me.

I am playing Memory with old photographs like that card game from the shed: turn the Today card up and remember where it will be— find the Daughter card and turn her over again, confuse her with the Mother card until there are no more cards to play. The spokes of the clothesline cast shadows like a child's pencilled sun rays and the windows on the shed sit high under the eaves as on a house crayoned by a child who might call out in the night for comfort. For a figure to appear at the door, to offer water, adjust the sheets, tell the time.

IV

Thin Skin

…clothing is a physical memory, an imprint, a second skin to the body that once wore it. So these photograms are traces of the body twice over, imprints of imprints.
—Geoffrey Batchen

Blue Lace Photogram

(after Anne Ferran)

Light fills the arms of the blue lace wedding gown, shimmers across its skirts. The long train is suspended in darkness like bioluminescence. Trailing fishtails dancing in light.

I think about the ocean as I turn the page, blue lace whispering through my fingers—a susurrus. How waves sometimes glow blue in the dark. Evanescent. The lace of foam on the sand, the way the sea seems to breath with you, the moment when you release your breath after inhaling. I am drifting into the past while the dress stills its own shadow in a flash of light.

Red Nightgown

(after Anne Ferran)

In the photogram, a burst of light in darkness, the red nightgown glows like burning coals. Flames instead of legs, breasts rounded in an orange glow above carbonized seams, encircled with a line of glittering embers. The nightgown, settling against the skin of the photographic paper seems to billow, incandescent with light like heat rising from the absent body. I went naked to bed in our first months together until winter in our draughty Thorndon flat. Made a joke about the comfort of my childish flannelette, its faded roses and tattered ribbons. The slippery red silk in its thin flat box, your gift meant to restore your hands to my breasts, made me feel possessed, not luminous, the dye that stained my hands the first time I washed it like blood, not flames.

Thin Skin

(after Anne Ferran)

The skin on the back of my hands is like fabric exposed to light for a photogram—tissue thin and wrinkled as if bone was preparing to slough off its covering to reveal sinews. Like the patches and darns on the gauzy filaments of a child's dress caught in light, my hands reveal scars and burns, scabs. Years of mending, needles piercing fabric between fibres to add more thread, exposed like hurts on the way to healing but made ethereal here as blemishes on autumn leaves glowing on branches in late afternoon sun. Poignant as the groove worn into my mother's finger by her own mother's wedding ring and now settling onto my own hand. Ninety-eight years and one initial still visible—an "I" for Ida.

Cyanotype

I lie on the sand, blue towel with bleach patches and the name of my youngest son still visible in black marker along the edge. Hat over face and thoughts scattering like light deflected into the blue waves of a snow globe; flecks of silica, miniature shells, tiny plastic fish and coral, the label from my swimming togs settling in eddies while disembodied conversations ebb and flow. Something about what he said and then a distant car horn. Footsteps, a shower of sand, the thud of a ball being kicked. Waves breaking. It can be hard to get names right. In that strip of old negatives my son is small enough to sit on my knee, hair glowing white, the whorls of his ears rimmed with cyan. Insisting on another, he abandoned his old name like clothes he'd outgrown but it followed him like a shadow he couldn't shake off, wouldn't wash away from this threadbare towel which is so damp that I imagine my body leaving a bloom of salt upon it as I dry. My wet shape a blueprint, fingers curled like fern fronds, hair like moss, my ear a shell, exposed in a cyanotype like Anna Atkins' ethereal algae still glowing as electric as a neighbour's late-night television pulsing through uncurtained windows.

Painting a Red Wheelbarrow

My sister sketches a wooden barrow, mixes colour in a saucer, while outside, wind and rain rip blossom from her peach trees. Her brush, slick with red, hovers over the foreground.

There are toast crumbs on the table, an empty teacup in the sink. Flames light up the wood-burner and the chimney creaks with heat. Behind the house, a green woollen jersey hangs sodden from the handle of a spade thrust into the vegetable garden.

We discussed photography once. How the camera captures everything, makes the ordinary significant. In this morning's garden, for instance, how it records the rain as it batters the feathery tops of carrot seedlings or splashes soil up the delicate stalks of young rhubarb despite their umbrella-like leaves. How it focuses our attention on the carefully darned elbow of a hand-knitted jersey abandoned in the rain.

She leaves a white space for the chickens—they are so hard to paint. Hard to make them look alive as her four bantams scratching behind the hedge in showers of pink confetti.

V

History Portraits

(*after Cindy Sherman*)

…there are no Dolly Partons in art history.

—Abigail Solomon-Godeau

Botticelli Notebook

(Untitled # 225)

On the cover of my Botticelli notebook, Flora has been gardening—her toenails outlined in black, feet bare in dark grass jewelled with flowers as improbable as those tangled in her hair, and how to account for the curves under that embroidered dress unless it is simply the moment where she has stepped forward, the dress blooming and billowing and Botticelli, anticipating photography, has captured her. She is separated on this pretty book from the others in the painting—the sisters in their diaphanous gowns, fingers entwined, bodies swaying. Their tiny round breasts and blank faces gracing address books now or cushion covers.

Her toes make her seem real and that heavy-lidded quattrocento gaze, her half-opened lips, as if she is about to speak. She should wash her feet, I think, pushing her back into the darkness of my desk, imagining her in gardening gloves, hair tied back and greying, dead-heading dahlias and complaining about the neighbour's cats. Her little *Primavera* breasts slack beneath a polyprop vest and those grubby toes in jandals.

Botticelli's Simonetta Vespucci, *la Bella*, dead at twenty-two. All his long-necked blondes might have her face. That light brown hair, those knowing eyes, the long, delicate fingers. She was always going to be reproducible.

Portrait of a Young Woman as an Allegory ca. 1490, improbably expressing a jet of milk from her right breast and using both hands, fingers positioned as if fingering—almost as if the breast were a harp. Eyes raised to—I want to say out of the frame—but it must be heaven. The way a harpist seems to lean, eyes unfocused, into the harp. Listening. There is no baby in this painting. Simonetta's pearls, woven through her hair and embroidered on her scarf, are for purity, although the allegory must be more than that. Wheat sheaves for fertility in the background perhaps. All the books are uncertain about this.

In her *Untitled # 225*, Cindy Sherman has threaded pearls through a shiny yellow wig, tied off the long plait with a pale blue bow, placed dried grasses in a jug on the windowsill to appear like rays from the gold of the hair and settled the lens onto one artificial breast. Her hand has assumed the breast-feeding position, fingers splayed to bring the nipple forward. This Simonetta, her gaze slightly upward and out of the frame, has been awake all night with the shopping channel or watching Italian Holidays on *Living* —hotels like a Medici Palazzo.

I once wondered if I would ever be able to wear a dress again that did not unbutton to the waist, or a bra that did not unclip at the shoulder. Recalling the prickling of let down—pushing the flat of my hand against the nipple. Eventually I realized that it was a matter of separation. One of us had to learn to be separate.

Barefoot and Pregnant

(Untitled # 205)

Margherita, the baker's daughter, *la fornarina*. Raphael painted her with rounded belly visible through a gauzy veil draped loosely beneath her breasts, right hand directing her left breast toward the artist, left hand splayed across her crotch as if she were concealing her nudity. Margherita Luti, or an allegory, depending on your sources. She directs a coy, sidelong look toward the viewer as if she knows we are wondering how long she sat there pretending to be virtuous, or if that gesture with her right hand has something to do with breast feeding. As if we know that Raphael was so enamoured of her that sex got in the way of painting.

Nearly Christmas, and I am pictured barefoot and thirty-five weeks pregnant in the front garden of our first house. I am looking away from the lens and toward my husband who is holding a rake, tines uppermost. It was meant to be a joke, but everybody commented on the enormous Phoenix Palm in the background, and nobody mentioned *American Gothic*. When we first looked at the house, there were two cots in the small bare room at the back of the house. "Twins. So cute," said the real estate agent showing me the cupboards with built in drawers and the chandelier in the sitting room. No bookshelves, but enough bedrooms to accommodate the imaginary family of four children we might have one day. At that stage, in my late-twenties, I believed that it was possible to become pregnant simply by wishing for it while we experimented with positions

from *The Joy of Sex*. I thought I had felt the moment of this conception happen, as if a door opened and something settled inside me to busy itself with living.

Before I was actually showing, I used to look at diagrams in pregnancy books and compare my belly with the pictures, wondering when it would get big enough for me to legitimately wear maternity dresses like Princess Diana. I was obsessed with pregnancy but not motherhood, as if the two states were as disconnected as Margherita's veiled belly and the engorged rubber breasts Cindy Sherman wears in her *Untitled #205*. She has replaced Margherita's gauzy veil with the sun filter curtaining from my mother's conservatory and her silk turban and jewelled pin with a fringed acrylic scarf like the one that used to catch on my fingernails when I folded it away.

There are three photographs of me pregnant. In each, my belly disguised by folds of cloth, I look away from the lens as if my picture had to be taken by stealth. As if I wasn't sure who I was any more and hadn't worked out how to be myself.

Part Two

VI

Hidden Mothers

And here the essential question first appeared: did I r*ecognise* her?

—Roland Barthes

Absent presence, the present absence

How to hide a mother so that we can see that which is not her. How to erase her for the lens that takes too long for her child to become legible. Throw a brocade shawl over her head and shoulders, drape her breasts and knees with a velvet tablecloth. Have her kneel, covered with a rug, behind a chair and position her hands so they just reach through the slatted back. Seat her in plain sight, then scratch out her face. Wrap her with curtains about her head and shoulders, muffle her voice, disguise the soft pillow of her bosom behind the child's head. Subtract her from what she has helped to create.

Hidden

Through the fabric, a glimpse of movement, a dark blur makes sounds like cupboards closing. Something scrapes. Baby in her lap. The shawl over her head smells of dust and lavender as if her fingers have brushed past a garden. A brief undernote of sultanas and buttered paper from a cake tin. Baby's feet in little boots stir against her knees. Voices murmur. A bead of perspiration down her cheek. This morning she pulled the sheet across her face and closed her eyes when heat rose in her and his breathing quickened. Baby's body tenses. She holds him lightly about his waist through the drapes, whispers shush. Thinks of letting out the seams of her skirts again, of the familiar weight in her lap.

Mother, hiding

Old photographs tipped across the floor like drifts of leaves. My fingers sift through faded oranges and browns to turn up the black-and-white snaps of my first year. Buttoned sundress, matching bonnet, one bare foot raised as if dancing, captured in the few seconds before I sat or fell onto the prickly buffalo grass of my grandma's back garden. In the top corner, my mother's disembodied hand.

Hidden Mothers

The shape of knees or the contours of a lap beneath fabric draped to hide her body. Is it the idea that a mother could be hidden and yet visible that makes me return again and again to this photograph? Or is it the expression on the face of a child who means nothing to me? The way she leans back into what must be the reassurance of warmth and softness to stare confidently into a lens. The thought that it is only the child we are meant to see. Long dead, alive here in white lace and kiss curls.

A weekday morning. Two women in bright exercise gear jogging behind strollers, the sound of their voices rising and falling in time to footsteps and a small hand emerging from behind a cover to drop a sippy cup just at the moment that the duck family begins their morning walk toward the culvert from which my neighbour has twice rescued ducklings. There were eight and now there are two. The sippy cup tumbles along the gutter like a pink plastic duckling as a rubbish truck begins its clattering progress along the street and the joggers turn the corner. The hand opening and closing in a gesture toward waving.

A friend regrets she made no opportunity in her life to be at home all day with children and with nothing urgent to do. Daily life in her imagination being all sunny days, coffee mornings and walks to the park. She wants to be able to replay endless sequences of peaceful domesticity in her mind when her life isn't going to plan. I imagine ten-second videos of a toddler eating a strawberry or playing in the bath all spliced together to watch over and over again,

making the baby perpetually available long after he or she has become immune to such innocent delights.

I used to haul my pram up a flight of steps to the road and then walk a route that took me down a wide street of wooden villas with front porches containing cats and tubs of geraniums. There was no one at home or at least no one visible through bay windows shrouded in the kind of sheer curtaining that allows you to look out through a haze of lace while wearing your pyjamas past midday because the baby has been awake all night and now, in the daylight, won't let you fold laundry or even take a shower.

The child in the photograph has evenly spaced curls arranged across her forehead and holds a small black purse in both hands as if it had been offered as a bribe for stillness. She stares back at us as if the mother in this picture was always partly concealed behind a fringed velvet curtain or was an absence she had learned to accommodate against the promise of her return.

VII

Kept Hidden

But more insidious, more penetrating than likeness: the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor.
—Roland Barthes

Kept Hidden

My grandmother Ida first appeared in a conversation as surprising as the one in which my mother revealed that all girls bleed. My mother knitting, needles clicking in and through the yarn, hands busy, eyes on her fingers. My eyes on the tartan pleats of my winter skirt, arms loosely folded across my chest, imagining how to keep secrets.

I was given a book with clear pages in which a girl could be opened or closed. The womb and the heart are muscular organs. A baby was curled upside down, its fingers in its mouth. Soon I would want a diary for marking days each month. My mother was four when Ida died and was replaced by a stepmother who folded bedsheets into hospital corners. At four, you understand absence in a way you did not when you were a baby and your mother played peekaboo with a scarf. Absence becomes the day your father takes you by the hand to explain *Gone and Never Coming Back.*

Long after I have stopped circling days in a diary, I wonder about light—whether the click of a shutter might have captured something still to come. A scar, or a fleeting shadow in Ida's lungs.

Postcard

Ida's photograph turned up printed on a postcard as if, after years of waiting, I had reached the top of the list in a chain letter. As if I had written letters to eight friends and warned of bad luck if they broke the chain. Hundreds of postcards slotting into letter boxes day after day. Ida looks happy at the beach, an apple in her hand, hair blowing in the wind. I imagine her putting on a stamp and watching herself disappear into the mailbox. You could spend your life worrying about bad luck and you will never imagine pneumonia. I refresh the email icon on my laptop while I wait for a document to print. *No new messages*. As the printer whirrs into life, I think about words. Catastrophe or unhappy. The four pages in Ida's looping hand where she tells her sister that she is tired. How, if I add a word to a sentence now, the whole page might change.

Trace in an Album

Ida holds the baby under her arms so her feet can dance to daddy across the poker work top of a wooden stool. Daisies on the unkempt lawn beneath the rug. The camera frames the baby against her loose checked dress. I linger on the foreshortened glimpse of her nose and mouth, the sinews of her neck, her fingers.

On other pages in this album, my grandfather's paintbrush, slick with cadmium yellow, has dropped flowers onto roadside gorse, painted Ida's hatband red. Grey outlines flooded with colour. Daisies flower white on lank dark grass, a cigarette begins to burn the tiny hole in the grey stripes of the rug that we still take on picnics. The baby dances towards the light.

Likeness

Ida is visible if you know how to look for her. In this old album, for instance, she sits in a garden brushing her hair with the hairbrush that used to sit on my mother's dressing table. Her hair is my sister's hair. She is smiling my youngest son's smile. The shape of their faces, their mouths. The likeness is striking. A necklace in a jewellery box appears in a photograph of Ida as a schoolgirl. Her name is on a bookplate dated 1909—an insect has scalloped the right-hand corners of the last three pages as if it had intended to make lace. She was eleven years old.

We had no idea how to read her and it was too late to ask. She was like a grey day in Spring, warm wind from the north but rain on the horizon. She married the boy who wrote from his sixth-form dormitory quoting Shakespeare, bragging about sport with the new boys. In the fifth year of their marriage there has been an upset. She seems unhappy and he is working away from home. In the eighth year, she writes from Patea to a sister in Christchurch about the Napier earthquake, how their parents escaped injury, how she is afraid of being alone at night. January 1932, she has been on holiday, they have a new car, she is tired from gardening. It is the season for preserving and making jam and our mother is four years old.

Obliteration

The hospital in Patea consists of various buildings with a unifying use of bricks in some parts. Some types of pneumococcus pneumonias tend to terminate earlier than others. Ida's mother writes to Ida's sister, Agnes. *She was never alone for a moment.* Shards of glass hang in the window frames now, like net curtains perished into fragility by summer sun. The temperature continues high without intermission. *I cannot praise the nurses enough.* The stairwell sheds paper like peeling skin and in the downstairs corridors, the ceilings reflect pools of water as if the linoleum were still glazed by polish and footfall. *I was called in a big hurry at midnight*—you could see the hospital from the house. A graph of the frequency of termination resembles the bell-shaped curve. *I stood by her until six am. But it is a cruel thing, the suffering was awful*. Corrugated iron creaks where blinds once rattled. *I don't think I would like to live here*. Cockspur, bleached and feathery grasses, wild lilacs grow through cracks in the driveway. *All the same, the weather has been lovely since I came.*

VIII

That-has-been

The Photograph does not necessarily say
what is no longer, but only and for
certain *what has been*.
— Roland Barthes

Dark Shapes Shimmering

For weeks after the cat died, dark shapes slipped away at the edge of my peripheral vision and ears twitched on the stack of books beside my chair. I woke to birdsong, imagining a weight on the duvet at the end of the bed. I felt a leap in the air like breath against my cheek when I opened a window, while at night curtains billowed and sagged as if paws walked along the sill.

Charles Bonnet syndrome is a side effect of macular degeneration in which sufferers experience visual hallucinations of patterns or buildings, animals, and people. The brain replaces missing information from the eyes with images it creates or has stored. In my mother's case, it was the twisting silk leaves and flowers of a Turkish carpet that occupied the blank space in her vision.

She had twice travelled to Turkey and brought back photographs of stucco walls curving into shadows the colour of the apple tea in silver handled glasses offered to her by the carpet sellers in the bazaar. When I open her pantry, I find apple tea granules in a cut-glass jar that had once belonged to her mother, Ida, whose initials arabesque among tendrils around the silver lid.

I once asked her about Ida, hoping for memories of being mothered in childhood recollections of touch or voice. Instead, she spoke of long grass and a picnic by a river. In her mind's eye, the image flickering like dappled light through willows, Ida is a summer

afternoon where grass feathered beneath her outstretched palms and dragonflies shimmered over running water.

Sunny Days

The wind-blasted macrocarpa looms over a red wooden shed blotched with silvered lichen. Dry grass, wheel ruts, sun high overhead in a cloudless sky. My mother at her easel in the foreground, one Kodachrome shot among twelve, her home-made painting hat stained on the brim with a streak of green. I kept her company reading on a rug in long grass, the hours measured later in the sting of water on my sun burned shoulders.

I'm throwing away hardened brushes, half-empty bottles of linseed oil, palette knives. A bag of crumpled paint tubes. Their names remind me of the colours of Kodachrome, the sound of sunny days on my cheap transistor radio. We didn't know back then to be wary of the light. How the sensors in the eyes might fail, their lenses growing dull, all the bright colours of summer bleaching like the negative of my watch that appeared around my wrist.

Alumni Magazine

A miscellany of journals yellowing in the sun. Coffee cup rings, old envelopes. My mother's voice on the phone in another room. I flick through pages waiting, and here in her alumni magazine, she descends a flight of concrete steps with the friends whose names I've come to know through Christmas cards. Dressed as if for town, she pulls on a pair of gloves, holds books against her chest. Sun directly overhead casts spoked shadows through bicycles leaning against blockwork and under her sensible leather shoes. Four men behind them on the landing, deep in conversation. "After a lecture outside the Physics Block." Christmas cards are a measurable periodic phenomenon—overshadowed now with anxiety. What to calculate from the lateness of arrival, absence of reply. How to read at all. The Physics Block stairs are decorated with quatrefoil petals. It might be that my mother is leaving a geology lecture. Leith Valley basalt, Oamaru stone, foundations of Port Chalmers breccia. Strata laid down and revealed over time. She was not allowed to attend physics without a chaperone. The butter dish they kept in their rooms, the home-made dress for dinner, tin trunk in the trunk room. She has never spoken about physics, but I have looked at the delicate tracery of the illustrations in her copy of Cotton's *Geomorphology* in order to understand how the landscape evolved. Even now, her pencil remembers the bones of the land.

Peat

My mother is silent in the passenger seat, sunglasses on against glare as we head along a winding road I've not driven for decades. Nearly summer, but the late afternoon sky is the dull and textured grey of the gesso-primed canvases she used to make for oil paintings. We drive past tangled gardens where oaks and ornamental conifers compete with natives until we leave suburbia for farmland. Ragged macrocarpa frame distant hills with feathered brush strokes in dark blue-green and grey.

She used to come here to paint, camera in the glove box, camp stool and easel by the side of the road. That red farm shed in the distance, dilapidated sheep pens out front, a one-way bridge with concrete parapet. One of her paintings. I'm driving slowly now—as she might have driven fifty years ago if she were searching for a place to stop and look at the view. This stand of black beech with tannin-stained creek and wide grass verge of long, dank grass. Another painting. We talk about peat—she recalls a geology expedition, a lecture. Layers of vegetation. I stop while a pukeko quicksteps its long red legs across the road.

She can't see the bird, and my voice, raised above the sound of the engine, sounds forced to me—I can confess now that I was thinking about a eulogy. What I could say when I needed to, about macular degeneration, painting, and photography. How first she thought that drought had browned off grass, dulled leaves on trees, blamed blurring vision on sunstrike, then turned from representation to abstracts. Back home, I'll cut tape for the clean edge she

needs for interlocking squares of luminous wash. Like windows but layered. Like memories.

One Hundred Photographs

Climatological observers should commence their observation by recording those elements which do not change rapidly. A flag is useful for determining wind direction and strength.

A photograph from my mother's back door captures a wooden fence on which a rain gauge is mounted, the neighbour's red iron roof, the bare branches of a flowering cherry, an empty flagpole, sky. She stands at the same spot each morning for one hundred days and presses the shutter. The camera battery charging on the shelf beside her glass rain measure, a reminder of the excitement of creation.

Rainfall, or more properly precipitation is a primary climatological and hydrological process, the measurement of which is simple in concept but imprecise in practice.

The soft click of the shutter suggests precision. *Slight drizzle can be detected on the face*. Low cloud unfurls across sunbursts of gorse among wilding pines on distant hills. *Haze gives the air an opalescent appearance.* Depression might be expected when you suddenly lose vision—when you can no longer paint. *Dark objects appear as if viewed through a pale blue veil*. A magnifying glass is essential for reading charts or recording rainfall.

Medication skitters across the benchtop and falls. One hundred photographs are not an official record. I had anticipated artwork: pale skies the colour of frost or pearls. Clouds like bedsheets or lace curtains on a line. Warfarin

tablets collect under the stove as the cherry tree gradually breaks into leaf, *rustling in a light breeze*. I'm recalling problems affecting the data. Questions of aesthetics always return to nature—the rhythm of lines and curves repeating for one hundred days. Outlines replaced gradually by impressions, red iron roof slowly fading toward blue.

View Finder

I see myself reflected in the window, hand to face, head turned slightly toward some distraction in the room. A plume of steam, the kettle boiling, I am thinking about something inconsequential—tea leaves or teabags, whether to use a teapot. I am captured in light against the dark outside, standing at the sink where my mother often stands, but taller and darker haired and wearing a dressing gown from the wardrobe in what had once been my childhood bedroom. In daylight there is a view of the neighbour's living room windows through which I sometimes see movement, but it is as if I have missed the first episode of an incomprehensible drama involving a man, a toddler and an older child and have no way of understanding it without subtitles. Years ago, I imagined something had taken place in the house next door that involved me even though I had been careful about how I exposed myself to misunderstanding. Pretending not to hear a remark about desire, I had resolved to keep away from uncurtained windows.

Perhaps the old box of photographs is responsible for how I recall some events. It had been a way of passing time as a child when I was unwell and had read all my books. The photographs assumed a feverish, dimly lit urgency toward a narrative as I lay back against my pillow, eyes half closed, without the energy to get out of bed despite dappled light through the tree outside the window and distant sounds of other children in the house or out in the street. The photographs seemed to be a clue to something I had missed—the way movement or an expression had been captured and framed. I had imagined that at any moment I could be caught and preserved in a kind of view

finder, one foot in scuffed leather sandal poised to touch ground say and the other about to rise up, one arm going forward, hand and fingers delicately curled, the other arm by my side, my face turned toward the lens until something made everything click forward or back so I was caught squinting awkwardly into the sun in too-small togs, or was a baby held by a bearded great-grandfather and then did not exist.

Night Bell

I knew the story of the movie before we went to see it. In my colouring book, Dorothy and Toto had their own page. I peeled slivers of paper off the crayons, scraping them into points to colour sticky rainbows onto pages where there was too much sky. The picture theatre had an upstairs and boys with ice-cream trays on straps around their necks. Rattling Jaffas, the clunk of push-down seats, the feel of cracked red leatherette warm and sticky against the back of my bare legs. It was the first Technicolor movie and my mother had seen it when she was a child. But there was no colour at the start and Judy Garland's ruby slippers and her little dog jittered like the old movies they showed on TV. My ice-cream fell off the cone and into my lap.

If you know where the Majestic was, you can see how the Bluebird Café is now on one side of the big doors and the second-hand shop fills the space where we once watched coloured lights play on the curtains. Inside the shop, I feel as if I have been whirled into the air inside the weatherboard house of my childhood and then set down again as I rummage through remnants of Crown Lynn dinner sets and wedding-present crystal for a bell for my mother's bedside table. Tonight, she will reach out in the dark to set it chiming like a twinkling starburst from Glinda's wand to bring me stumbling to the door of my childhood bedroom, the sweep of passing headlights from the street illuminating our slow shuffle to the bathroom.

Kitchen Sink

Every day, yellow courier vans speed down the drive past my mother's kitchen window, stop, then reverse quickly back as if a child were pushing a toy back and forth, back and forth. Someone has been pressing *Buy Now* behind the vertical blinds of next door's colonial-style front windows. I plunge silver beet into the sink of cold water and wait for little green caterpillars to float to the surface, my hands changing shape and colour under the water as if they have sloughed off five decades of work and sun. My mother pushes knitting needles into her raised garden beds to deter her neighbour's cats. Spikey shadows claw across the tender leaves and spill onto the concrete path. She once had me knit the sleeves of a cardigan, wool the same green as young silver beet and no amount of steaming or unpicking could disguise my uneven stitches. I wanted her to knit for me, but sooner or later we must all learn to look after ourselves.

In a photograph from that year, I am wearing the cardigan and standing with my arms behind my back in an awkward pose that hides the sleeves. It takes time to learn how to get the tension right—how to relax your fingers and let the wool slide through. Tonight, I'll face my reflection in the kitchen window as I wash dishes to the sounds of early evening television shows. I'll rehearse again the speech about residential care, unravelling it over and over in my head like those uneven rows of plain and purl.

A Disturbance

In a photograph, someone has posed in front of a lens and remained there forever. Ida as a young woman at the beach, my mother as a child in a garden. Pasted in an album, slipped into an envelope, in a box. Box-shaped instants. I cannot delete the photographs of my mother in my phone. The images are still alive like her voice on the answering machine. A disturbance like a clock ticking in an empty room. In front of the lens, she is at the same time: the one she thinks she is, the one she wants others to think she is, the one the photographer thinks she is. A subject who becomes an object. A care facility is not a home. She had not imagined living with people who sang in the entranceway or danced with tiny mincing steps. At that time, though, we could take her for a drive to Petone or Days Bay, or she could watch for the Wairarapa train on the rail bridge at the end of the road. The noise of Time is not sad. If we turn away, we might miss it.

My Mother's Garden

We collect a basket of clippings from the garden for mourners to place on the casket in the back of the hearse. Lavender, plants whose names we do not know, little sprigs of feathery green, variegated pinks and yellows. When I scroll back through the gallery in my phone, past her garden glowing bright with colours she could see, she sits in a wheelchair at Days Bay holding an ice cream. Fast forward and all her great-grandchildren are in the bath after the wake washing ice cream from their hands and faces, their mothers all dresses and laps, hands busy with cloths and towels. She would have enjoyed the party—the way we all found our place in the house and that all her roses were out.

That-has-been

A stiff northerly at Lyall Bay. Planes hover out at sea, wings pitching against the wind before plunging toward the ground in a rush of sound. We are eating fish and chips safe in the shelter of the seawall while overhead, passengers white-knuckle their armrests. Remember the brace position. Oxygen masks. Before attending to anyone else. Red rocks, breakers, and grey sand. We used to come here to watch the surfers, my mother with her camera waiting for the right moment to catch her own waves.

I return to my childhood home alone. My mother's chair faces the dark screen of the television in the sitting room. I walk through each room closing curtains against the evening, sit at the kitchen bench opposite the flowers brought back from the funeral home. Sunset. A shaft of yellow light through the skylight illuminates blue petals dropping soft onto the dining table and I do not know whether to add more water to the huge block of oasis in the bucket or let the flowers wilt.

My mother is in a white cardboard box with our names on it. Those of us who may uplift it. When we decide. To scatter or deposit. Like the waves and windblown sand at Lyall Bay.

Notes:

Title: *Miniatures of Reality*:

The title "Miniatures of Reality" and the accompanying epigraph comes from Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2008, (1977), p.4.

In *On Photography,* Susan Sontag observes that "[w]hat is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (4). She expands upon this statement by arguing that "[a] photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing has happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did not exist, which is like what's in the picture" (5).

Part One

A Photograph is only a Fragment.

The epigraph and the accompanying quotation are from Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2008, (1977), p.71.

Prologue

"Untitled (ca. 1915)", "Back of the Hand," "Hidden (Watch the Birdie)": Group portrait of five women taken in Greymouth ca. 1915 by West Coast photographer James Ring. Black and white print mounted in brown cardboard frame. (Author's collection).

"Untitled (ca. 1915)": Some ideas in this poem were inspired by Charles Simic's poem from *Dime-Store Alchemy*: "Untitled (White Balls in Cots), ca. Mid-1950" about Joseph Cornell's box of the same name.

I: Miniature Worlds.

The epigraph to this sequence is from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* translated by Richard Howard, Vintage, 2000, p. 32.

II: Stills (*after Cindy Sherman.*

The epigraph to this sequence is from Arthur C. Danto's essay "Photography and Performance: Cindy Sherman's Stills," published as an introduction to the book: *Untitled Film Stills / Cindy Sherman*. Jonathan Cape, 1990, pp. 5-14. (13).

"Ballerina": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still #36.* 1979. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56899 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"You Imagined Everything": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still #54.* 1980. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/57179 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"The Night You Planned": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still # 48.* 1979. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56994 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"Decisive Moment": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still #65*. 1980. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/57220 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"Complete Guide to": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still # 13.*1978. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56576 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"Your Stars for April": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still # 53.* 1980. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/57174 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"Leopard Skin": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still #27 and #50*. 1979. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/57159 https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56659 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"Yesterday's Panties": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still #2*. 1977. Museum of Modern Art https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56515 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

"A Kind of Wilderness": *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still #37.* 1979. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56921 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

“Putain”: *Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Still #3.* 1977. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56520 Accessed 19 Feb. 2021

III: Playing Memory.

The epigraph to this sequence is from John Berger’s essay “Stories” collected in *Understanding a Photograph: John Berger,* edited and introduced by Geoff Dyer, Penguin Classics, 2013, pp. 99-105 (p. 100).

“Figure to Ground”: Some ideas in this poem are inspired by Mark Strand’s poem “Keeping Things Whole.” https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47541/keeping-things-whole Accessed 15 July 2020.

IV: Thin Skin.

The epigraph to this sequence is from Geoffrey Batchen’s essay “History Remains: The Photograms of Anne Ferran” *Art on Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 3, (January-February 2000), pp. 46-50. (49). www.jstor.org/stable/24557862. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.

The poems “Blue Lace Photogram,” “Red Nightgown” and “Thin Skin” were inspired by Anne Ferran’s photograms of women’s clothing published in *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land*. Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and University of Western Australia, 2014.

Anne Ferran, type C photogram *Untitled (blue lace wedding gown)* 2003.

Anne Ferran, gelatin silver photogram *Untitled (red nightgown*) 1988.

Anne Ferran, gelatin silver photogram *Untitled (christening gown 1982/273)* 2001.

A photogram is an image made by setting objects directly onto a light-sensitive surface and exposing it to light.

“Cyanotype”: Anna Atkins (1799-1871) was a botanist and an early photographer. A cyanotype is a blue and white print made by exposing the subject to sunlight on paper previously treated with the chemicals, potassium ferricyanide and ferric ammonium citrate.

V: History Portraits *(after Cindy Sherman)*.

The epigraph for this sequence is from Abigail Solomon-Godeau's essay "The Coming of Age: Cindy Sherman, Feminism and Art History" collected in Solomon-Godeau, Abigail, *Photography after Photography*. Duke UP, 2017, pp.189-206. (p.194)

"Botticelli Notebook": Cindy Sherman: *Untitled # 225*. 1990. The Broad Museum, https://www.thebroad.org/art/cindy-sherman/untitled-225 Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.

"Barefoot and Pregnant." Cindy Sherman: *Untitled # 205*. 1989. The Broad Museum, https://www.thebroad.org/art/cindy-sherman/untitled-205 Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.

Part Two

VI. Hidden Mothers.

The epigraph to this sequence comes from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard, Vintage, 2000, p.65.

The poems "Absent presence, the present absence," "Hidden," and "Hidden Mothers" all reference Victorian "Hidden Mother" photographs. For examples of such images, see:
https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/05/victorian-mothers-hidden-photos-their-babies/611347/

"Absent presence, the present absence." Some ideas and lines in this poem are taken from Peter H. Steeves's *Beautiful, Bright and Blinding: Phenomenological Aesthetics and the Life of Art*. SUNY Press, 2017, pp. 23-24.

"Hidden Mothers." This poem refers to a "Hidden Mother" photograph, photographer unknown, ca 1860-70.

https://collections.mfa.org/objects/653783/untitled-hidden-mother

Accessed 12 Apr. 2021

VII. Kept Hidden.

The epigraph to this sequence comes from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, p.103.

"Obliteration": Lines in this poem are derived from:

1. A letter, written in March 1932, by my great-grandmother describing my grandmother's death.
2. South Taranaki District Council. *Patea Heritage Inventory*. January 2000, pp 12.
https://museumofsouthtaranaki.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/patea.pdf
Accessed 10 February 2021.
3. Bullowa, J.G.M. *The Management of the Pneumonias.* Oxford University Press, 1937. (Cited in Singer, M. et al. "Historical and Regularity Perspectives on the Treatment Effect of Antibacterial Drugs for Community-Acquired Pneumonia." *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, Vol.47, No. 3, December 2008, pp. S216- S224, doi.org/10.1086/591407.
Accessed 10 February 2021.
4. Images from a photographic essay, "PTA.PT1," of Patea Hospital by Fergus Cunningham.
https://ferguscunningham.com/2012/06/08/pta-pt-1/
Accessed 10 February 2021.

VIII: That-has-been.

The epigraph to this sequence comes from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, p.85.

"Alumni Magazine": The photograph referred to in this poem, "After a Lecture outside the Physics Block" was published in "Hocken Legacy." *University of Otago Magazine*, Issue 44, University of Otago Marketing and Communications Division, April 2017, p. 47.

“One Hundred Photographs”: Information about meteorological observation sourced from the *NIWA Climate Manual* 1994 compiled by A R Harper.

“A Disturbance”: Some phrases in this poem are sourced from Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, pp. 11-15.