A Journey Interrupted:
The Shaping of Liminal Space in Poetic Composition

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted elsewhere in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.
For Robin VerSprill,
who first sent me in search of the in-between
and taught me the beauty of being lost.

You will forever be the voice in my head
telling me how to get home.
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Abstract

The thesis which follows is composed of two parts. The first component is a critical reflection of just over 20,000 words that details the process through which I wrote the poems in the collection it precedes. The research aims to demonstrate, using the liminal space of stone circles as an oblique influence, how poems shape and create liminal space, how an experience of that space is ordered by the structures that enclose it, and how those structures facilitate connection with the poem through phenomenological response. My theories draw support from Henri Lefebvre, Mircea Eliade, Lyn Hejinian, James Joyce, Wendell Berry, among others. I also employ poems by Michael Donaghy, John Burnside, Paul Farley, and Tracy K. Smith to further support my claims. The critical essay also reflects on the nature of creative practice itself through a discussion of the divergences my own poems took in the course of their composition. Due to gaps inherent in language, the creative process is itself an area of liminality that asks for a certain flexibility and adaptability in a writer.

The second, and more important, component is a collection of forty poems that embody and view liminal space from various angles, perspectives, and structures. While the scholarly research explains the process through which the poems were written, it is the poems which provide the final answers and which demonstrate that practice, more than anything else, is the true research a writer undertakes. They demonstrate my negotiation with liminality, poetic structure, and the limits of authorial intention while telling a story of distances, heartaches, missed connections, longing, and, ultimately, hope.
Interruption to a Journey

The hare we had run over
bounced about the road
on the springing curve
of its spine.

Cornfields breathed in the darkness,
We were going through the darkness and
the breathing cornfields from one
important place to another.

We broke the hare’s neck
and made that place, for a moment,
the most important place there was,
where a bowstring was cut
and a bow broken for ever
that had shot itself through so many
darknesses and cornfields.

It was left in that landscape.
It left us in another.

—Norman MacCaig

“Writing poetry is like finding your way home and you didn’t know you were lost”
—Diane Lockwood

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Chapter One
The Story of the Stones: Stone Circles as Representations of Poetic Bordered Space

I grew up with a mother who drove to get lost on purpose. She would pick me up from school, choose a road leading out of town, and drive until neither of us knew where we were. Her turns were made at random, one road chosen over another because there were blue flowers lining it or because there was a house with three chimneys that she wanted to see. I never questioned these adventures when I was young. I would listen to whatever music she put on and watch the farmland of southern New Jersey move past the car window. It wasn’t until I was older that I finally asked her why. Of all the hobbies we could have done together, why choose a drive to nowhere?

The afternoon I asked her this, she pulled over to the side of the road, put on her hazard lights, and told me she’d been waiting for me to ask for years.

‘Why wouldn’t you just tell me?’ I asked her.

‘Because an answer doesn’t mean anything if you haven’t asked the question’, she said.

She then proceeded to tell me how much she’d always enjoyed driving for the sake of it and trying to find her way back home from roads she’d never seen before. She continued to do so with me not only because it was still fun for her to drive but because she wanted me to be comfortable with being lost. She wanted me to know that there would always be a way home. I’m not sure she intended this wisdom to become a metaphor for life. More likely, she wanted her anxiety-prone daughter to realise how small our hometown was so I would be less inclined to panic when the school bus dropped me off in the wrong location. Regardless, her words and those drives have stayed with me as exactly that, a metaphor for learning to be comfortable with divergence, interruption, and change.

As will be seen in later chapters, I needed a certain flexibility and adaptability to accept the shifts that occur in the creative process.

However, the purpose of this introduction is not to provide an autobiographical backbone to the research and writing that follows, but to demonstrate from where my fascination with liminal space and the production of space comes. Five months after our road-side conversation, my mother died suddenly, and so it isn’t just our drives and her advice that have stayed with me, but also her immediate and incomplete absence. Natalie Goldberg says that ‘writers end up writing about [our] obsessions,’ that we ‘create new stories’ over and over again around the ‘things that haunt [us]; things [we] can’t forget’.³ This has certainly proven true for me. My mother’s death, while more diluted than it was when I first started writing, is nevertheless still a kind of obsession for me; I am still concerned with finding ways to stay close to her, to say goodbye the way I wasn’t given the opportunity to the night she died. Throughout my university career, this obsession has shaped itself into a fascination with liminal spaces, transcendent spaces, points of convergence, and dreamscapes.

Two likely sources that first made me think about the connection between liminal spaces and poetic structure were Eric Weiner’s article ‘Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer’ and Paul Lake’s essay ‘The Shape of Poetry’. Read in the same week toward the end of my master’s degree, the two sources started to form a link for

me between liminal space and how its properties might be transferred to and mirrored by poetic structure. Paul Lake, while explaining how poetry orders itself according to natural law and fractal geometry, addresses the theories of Ezra Pound and A.R. Ammons. He acknowledges that both poets ‘mistook the two-dimensional outline of the poem on the page for the shape of the poem itself’, implying that the shape of the poem is much more than how the words appear on the page. In ‘confusing a poem’s two-dimensional outline with the four-dimensional shape it creates when spoken or read’, the poem is reduced to ‘only a two-dimensional cross-section’ instead of the ‘multi-dimensional object’ it is.\(^4\) Lake suggests here that the shape of the poem is more than its appearance on the page, that its structure enables a poem to be more of an experience for the reader, an ‘object’ to be apprehended, an area to be entered into fully when read. This theory, coupled with Weiner’s statement that ‘thin places’ are ‘locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we’re able to catch glimpses of the divine, or the transcendent’, made me wonder whether the two ideas could be combined in poetic structure.\(^5\) Can a poem, through its shape and subject matter, become a ‘thin place’, a physical area of liminality with which a reader interacts and can enter?

With this initial question in mind, my next step was to gain a better understanding of what liminal space feels like, but I was completely unsure where to start. I knew that I needed to experience a ‘thin place’ to get a sense of the space, to try and determine what properties and characteristics deem it ‘thin’, but, as Weiner continues in the same article, ‘you don’t plan a trip to a thin place; you stumble upon one’. Unfortunately, waiting to ‘stumble upon’ a thin place is not conducive to active research and so my search for a physical location began.

Ian Bradley describes ‘thin places’ as areas where one can experience ‘the narrowness of the line that divides this world from the next’, a space where an ‘intertwining of the natural and supernatural, the material and spiritual’ occurs.\(^6\) Similarly, though in the context of poetry, John Kinsella claims that ‘the gaps between the physical and perceived worlds are blurred’ within a poem because ‘it’s a liminal space’ composed of ‘frames, borders, constraints, and […] elasticity’.\(^7\) What I was looking for was a location where both principles met. Though the selection for my field research locations was complicated, as will be seen in the next chapter, I decided ultimately to focus on the Isle of Iona, mentioned by Weiner as one of the areas where the term ‘thin place’ may first have been applied, the Ring of Brodgar / Stones of Stenness on Mainland, Orkney, and the Callanish Stones on the Isle of Lewis.

My choice to focus on stone circles as representations of poetic space grew out of this initial research and from previous experiences at Stonehenge and Avebury. Stone circles are physical markers that demarcate liminal, presumably sacred, space; they have a physical shape but the experience of the space they border is much more than the shape itself, which relates back to Paul Lake’s suggestion that the shape of a poem is more than its structure on the page. In his discussion of monuments in *The

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Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre states that ‘inasmuch as the poet through a poem gives voice to a way of living [...], the experience of monumental space may be said to have the same similarity to entering and sojourning in the poetic world’. Here, Lefebvre not only acknowledges that the ‘poetic world’ is one capable of being ‘enter[ed]’, thereby suggesting that a poem is a physical space, but also equates monumental space with the space provided by a poem. The experience of both a monument, such as a stone circle, and a poem is much more than the structure of either, but it is the act of ‘entering’ the structure that allows for the experience. As a result, Lefebvre’s theory aligns stone circles and their properties with the intentions of my own creative work.

In deciding how I would go about gaining a sense of what physical liminal space feels like, I also realised that I needed an area untouched by prescribed meaning or purpose. For the idea of bordered space to equate well with the space created by poetic structure, it had to be an area that is adaptable to change and interpretation as well as one that allows for the growth of succeeding generations. Because their uses and original purposes have been mostly lost to unrecorded history, which necessarily provides for freedom of interpretation and imagination, and because they have been recycled and reused by various groups through the centuries without losing their unique integrity, stone circles again looked to be the most logical physical representation of the space I was hoping to create and explore. As Ronald Hutton claims in Pagan Britain, stone circles ‘ground space in an entirely new, deliberate and human, sense of construction’ because they ‘endure to become highly visible representations of the past; and can change their meanings to succeeding generations while remaining in the same form’. Poetry, through its structure, its shaping of space, and its openness to interpretation, allows for this same happening. As Wendell Berry claims, ‘part of the nature of a form seems to be that it is communal—that it can be bequeathed and inherited, that it can be taught, not as an instance (a relic), but as a way still usable’. For Berry, poetic form is something which can be ‘inherited’ and reused by coming generations. While still fixed, form is nevertheless able to be appropriated and repurposed for the demands of any given time. W.S. Graham expounds on this idea when he states that ‘to each man [the poem] comes to new life’ because ‘it is brought to life by the reader’. A poem, much like a stone circle, is able to adapt to whichever generation finds it and can be reused and repurposed. As a result, the poem is an ‘object’, to reuse Lake’s description from above, constructed through time to become a thing held in time.

The decision to focus on stone circles in the Scottish islands as opposed to possibly more famous circles elsewhere in the United Kingdom, such as Stonehenge and Avebury, was further solidified after reading Before Scotland: The Story of Scotland Before History by Alistair Moffat, in particular the chapter entitled ‘The Kindred Ground’. Moffat states that ‘the monuments on Orkney were the first manifestations of a new religion, or at least a new version of older beliefs’. He elaborates, claiming that ‘the Ring of Brodgar / [Stones of] Stenness predates the great henges of the South of England’ by ‘at least 500 years’. Consequently, the

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11 Strong Words, p. 120.
'new religious beliefs' which prompted the construction of the Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar, and their accompanying henges ‘originated in Orkney’. Because the stone circles on Orkney predate those found in the South of England, Moffat concludes that the belief system which gave rise to their necessity and construction was founded on Orkney, making the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness two original bordered spaces demarcated as liminal areas presumably used for religious rites.

The more I discovered as I researched, travelled, and wrote, the more stone circles seemed to be the most appropriate match for the spaces I wished to create in my own poems; they informed my creative practice by allowing me to immerse myself in the feeling of a liminal space that is nonetheless bounded by a specific structure. They are bordered spaces of unprescribed definitions that nevertheless remain liminal and open to interpretation through time. However, the creative research and poems that follow are not about stone circles, their history, or their construction. This is a project concerned with the shaping of liminal space through poetic structure which takes an oblique influence from the stone circles I visited. No poem in the collection uses the stones as its subject and very few pieces were written during my time in my chosen fieldwork locations. Rather, these poems were written with a distant view of the stone circles in the background. They take influence from the experience of liminal space provided by the circles and use it to explore various structures and subject matters. In fact, the direction my writing has taken through the past three years has been one of the most exciting and surprising aspects of the research I conducted, which has made me think more closely about the distance between authorial intention and the actual finished work. While I knew, to an extent, that my poems were going to shape and explore liminal spaces, I was unprepared for the manner in which they ultimately manifested that liminality. They are a collection of missed connections, failing relationships, unfulfilled desires and longing, and badly-timed convergences. Several take place in dreamscapes, admittedly not a new topic for me, where the object of desire is just out of reach. It seems that I have taken the experience of physical bordered space and applied it to my poetry not to close liminal gaps, but to blow them farther apart, widening the span of liminality beyond the structures of the poems and the stones. In hindsight and upon review, this occurrence in my poetry could be rather fitting given Lake’s assertion above that poems are meant to be ‘multi-dimensional objects’ that exist beyond their ‘two-dimensional’ structure on the page.

As a result, what follows is not only an exploration of how poems create and shape liminal space to become Lake’s ‘multi-dimensional objects’ into which a reader can enter; it is also an admission to the writing process itself. The creative space can also be considered a liminal area that allows for spontaneity, unpredictability, and the possibility of random creation. By the conclusion of this project, it is my hope to demonstrate how poems shape and create liminal space, how an experience of that space is ordered by the borders that enclose it, and how those borders reinforce a sense of connection through phenomenological response. I also hope to show, through subject matter and the direction in which my poems went, that the creative process is its own area of liminality and how, sometimes, the poems themselves are the conclusion, the process itself the answer to the questions asked.

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13 Moffat, p. 143.
Chapter Two
The Isle of Iona: Bachelard’s Intimate Immensity

From the onset of this project, I knew that a great deal of fieldwork would be required for me to understand what liminal space is and what it feels like. Initially, I had planned to visit several sites around the United Kingdom, including Glastonbury Tor. I also thought that visits to churches and graveyards would help further my knowledge of the liminal given these locations’ proximity to the line between life and death. However, as explained in the previous chapter, I became increasingly aware that the spaces I needed to visit had to be without prescribed meaning or feelings. For example, the space created by the interior of a church can facilitate the same feeling of ‘entering and sojourning in the poetic world’, to use Lefebvre’s phrase from the previous chapter, but the building’s purpose, as well as what one expects to feel once inside, is very much prescribed.14 For the idea of liminal space to translate well into poetry, the physical locations I needed to visit also had to have ‘poetic’ qualities, like the ability to inspire interpretation through a lack of prescribed meaning. They had to be locations that allow visitors the option to inhabit and interpret the space in accordance with their individual imaginations.

I therefore decided to start not with churches and graveyards, locales which I quickly abandoned, but with the Isle of Iona. Eric Weiner acknowledges ‘the windswept isle of Iona’ as a place ‘the ancient pagan Celts, and later, Christians termed a ‘thin place’.15 While I was still not entirely sure what it was I was looking for or what I hoped to find, I reasoned that there was no better place to start than with a location mentioned in the same article that helped to inspire my initial idea.

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The Isle of Iona isn’t too far away from the mainland, but it still took two trains, two ferries, and a taxi to reach it. After almost six hours of travel (even with a miraculous lack of train and ferry delays), arriving on Iona felt as though I had entered a space removed from the modern world. It could have been the sense of distance crossed to reach the island, the drive across the Isle of Mull with its high peaks, waterfalls, and isolated towns, or the lack of mobile service that started as soon as I had left the ferry port in Oban, but for me arriving on Iona felt as though I had traded our modern world for a far more ancient reality. Even at its loudest, which is usually mid-day once the day-trippers from Mull have come to fish and hike, Iona is almost silent. Coming from Edinburgh, with its constant car noise, sirens, and construction works, being in a place of such quiet was an experience that took me a while to get used to and may have added to the other-worldly sense I felt as I began to walk around the island.

The first thing I did once I had settled into my bed and breakfast was climb Dun I, the highest point on the island. The peak is reached from the road a short distance from the abbey and the climb is very steep. However, the view is more than worth the effort. From Dun I, I could see the whole of Iona and across to Mull and the Outer Hebrides. Standing on the summit of Dun I with the sun shining and the whole island spread out below was something truly remarkable. I stayed still until the couple who had climbed up behind me started opening beers and a man I hadn’t noticed before started cursing loudly into his phone (how he got mobile service is a mystery).

14 Henri Lefebvre, p. 224.
15 Eric Weiner, p. 10.
The next day, I learned that when the residents of the island tell you the trails may be ‘a little wet’, ‘a little wet’ means mud pits that look like solid ground until you step into them up to your knee (or both of your knees, if you’re me). A gentleman I talked with at breakfast assured me that someone doesn’t experience Iona properly until she has gotten her feet thoroughly soaked. If so, then I have fully experienced Iona. After breakfast, I walked to St. Columba’s Bay, the shore that is said to have seen the arrival of the Irish monk who made Iona and the abbey he founded ‘powerful, the centre of Christian life’, a place that held ‘primacy over all the west of Scotland’.

Getting there was not as easy as the map had made it seem. I walked across farmland I’m not sure I was supposed to walk through, opened gates that were meant to stay closed, and wandered over a golf course abandoned to the bad weather. I eventually found the loch that acts as a landmark and the path around it that leads down to the bay. Finding the path, however, did not make the trek any easier. It divided into desire paths that disappeared and reappeared at random. By the time I reached the bay, which was expansive and covered in unrefined marble, I was soaked through. But I was also alone on the beach watching the waves as the sun started to burn through the clouds and fog. I started to think about what brought Columba to the island and why it is and has, for some time, been considered a holy space. Even prior to Columba’s landing, there was ‘another, even earlier, shadow of sanctity’ on the island. As Alistair Moffat states, ‘there is an Irish source which calls Iona Innis Druinidh, the island of the Druids’. Elaborating further, Barry Dunford, quoting Lewis Spence’s 1928 work *The Mysteries of Britain*, states that ‘[the Druids’] chief seat in Scotland was the Island of Iona’.

As a result, it seems that Iona was a place of considerable liminality and ‘thinness’ even prior to Columba’s landing. The realisation made me wonder what makes a particular place more open to liminality than another and why certain spaces express these qualities more forcefully than other locations.

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19. Though not quite relevant to my research, there is something to be said about ‘thin places’ being areas of conquest. In *Before Scotland*, Alistair Moffat cites an Irish account of the life of Columba, which states that ‘the saint found a community of Druids on [Iona] when he first arrived’. He ‘of course…expelled them’. This follows the Early Christian tradition of taking over ‘places of pagan sanctity and rename[ing] and adapt[ing] them for the new faith’ (240). This, of course, implies another, more violent, kind of repurposed space. Following Columba’s expulsion of the Druids, ‘Iona was repeatedly pillaged [by Vikings] and, in 806, 68 monks were slaughtered’ (333). Moffat connects the conquest of ‘sacred’ sites to stone circles in *Pagan Britain*. ‘To erect monuments’, he states, ‘can be one way of stamping [a] sense of ownership on the land’s surface, reordering and dominating it’ (39). However, the conquest of ‘sacred’ spaces occurred not only in terms of warfare but also in terms of construction. In *Pagan Britain*, Moffat also emphasizes that ‘the constructions of the Early Neolithic were abandoned, and it is impossible to tell whether the placing of those of the Late Neolithic in proximity to so many signified […] a triumphant assertion of new ideas over the past’ (98). Regardless, ‘a much more extensive and imposing reconciliation of the forms from different millennia was achieved in Orkney’ as the Ring of Brodgar/ Stones of Stenness (99). Consequently, the stone structures on Orkney are again a representation of blending and negotiation.
After leaving the bay and finding an abandoned marble quarry, I decided that I had seen everything I needed to on the north end of the island, but as I started to head back toward town, I found myself miserably lost. The trails, which I had unknowingly lost sight of in my search for the quarry, were nowhere to be seen and I was left with only the desire paths of people who had found themselves in the same situation, looking for a path back to somewhere in the middle of nowhere. While picking my way from path to path, eventually missing and landing in a mud pit into which I sank up to both my knees, I started to think about the island again and why it has been so famously populated by seekers of the sacred. Iona is the only location I visited that blatantly declares itself a ‘thin place’ on signs situated around the abbey. One sign quotes George Macleod, the founder of the modern-day Iona Community, as stating that the island is ‘a thin place where only tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual’. Another, which provides information for tourists, claims that ‘Iona is known as a “thin place”—a fine veil separating Heaven and Earth’. What is it, I wondered as I followed the makeshift paths of the similarly lost back to town, that makes a particular space ‘thin’ and more open to interpretation and connection? How does such a space function to make us, whether as tourists or as readers, more receptive and suggestible?

Gaston Bachelard claims that ‘grandeur progresses in the world in proportion to the deepening of intimacy’, that when a person ‘really experiences the word “immense”’, he sees himself liberated from his cares and thoughts because ‘[h]e is no longer shut up in his weight, the prisoner of his own being’. For Bachelard, the phenomenological response one has to certain landscapes directly corresponds to an experience and a deepening, or opening, of self. It is possible in such a space to become both more aware of self while simultaneously letting go of self. Certain spaces, it would seem, can blur the boundaries of our own conceptions of self. From where I stood on Iona the day I got lost, surrounded by water and limitless sky in a field of mud disguised as solid ground, I would say that Iona qualifies as such a space. However, I would argue that this same blurring is also present in poetry. Again, I turn to Bachelard, who posits that ‘poets […] help [one] to discover within [himself] such joy […] that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space’. Poets, through an ability to suspend a moment and distil language, allow readers to experience a phenomenological response that engenders a larger awareness of self. The poem allows for a blending that extends the reader’s self-awareness. After all, ‘by leaving the space of one’s usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating’. Though we may not necessarily ‘change place’, we nevertheless ‘change our nature’ to respond to the space. For Bachelard then, a ‘thin place’ is a space that allows for a phenomenological experience of self, one that both allows for a deepening and an opening of consciousness.

In her essay ‘The Rejection of Closure’, Lyn Hejinian more firmly links Bachelard’s theories to poetry and the written word. While explaining her ideas on the ‘open text’, Hejinian states that ‘the “open text,” by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader’. For her, ‘it invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader’, and, as a result, ‘speaks for writing that is generative rather

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20 Quotes taken from tourist signs posted around the perimeter of Iona Abbey.
22 Bachelard, p. 216.
23 Bachelard, p. 222.
than directive’. Subsequently, an ‘open text’, one which inspires reader interaction, participation, and interpretation, invites a blending with the written word that produces ideas within the reader that exist beyond the text itself. The reader and his ‘generative’ ideas become an extension of the work and vice versa. However, Hejinian also claims that ‘the open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating’ because ‘it is form that provides an opening’. The true impact of this statement did not hit home for me until I visited Orkney, as will be seen in the next chapter. On Iona, I did not yet understand the power form has on the phenomenological response inspired by a poem.

I was a pilgrim to Iona, albeit in a far different way than Columba and his monks. Yet I was there for a similar reason: to search out the seat of something innately ‘sacred’ and open in the hope of finding answers in service to the art form I practice. While I did not find all the answers I needed on Iona, the trip nevertheless helped me consider how certain locations allow for an extension of awareness and self. Iona does not look like much: a small town, fields, sheep, a hill, and an abbey, but its history as a place of pilgrimage, worship, and sacred space is still palpable and alive. For an island so small and quiet, seemingly enclosed in its own time capsule, Iona is nevertheless a tremendous influence. It was the island that first made me think about how liminal spaces contribute to both a deeper knowledge of self and a relinquishing of self.

24 Lyn Hejinian, ‘The Rejection of Closure’,
Chapter Three
The Establishment of Thresholds: The Shaping of Liminal Space

Lyn Hejinian claims that a text is rendered ‘open’ only due to the form it adopts. While it ‘acknowledges the vastness of the world’, it is nevertheless ‘formally differentiat[ed]’ because ‘it is form that provides an opening’. When I first encountered this statement, not long after I had returned to Edinburgh from Iona, I did not fully understand what Hejinian was attempting to convey or how form could be considered the medium through which liminality and ‘openness’ are created. While I was aware, thanks to my reading and time spent on Iona, that certain spaces engender a phenomenological response, I was still unsure how, exactly, this response occurred and what prompted it to begin with.

Hejinian’s statement did remind me of a theory Henri Lefebvre puts forward in *The Production of Space*. During his discussion of absolute and representational space, Lefebvre claims that absolute space, which is fundamentally sacred, ‘has no place because it embodies all places, and has a strictly symbolic existence’, two qualities which make it ‘similar to the fictitious / real space of language’. However, because absolute space is ‘ritually affixable to any place[…]the characteristic “absolute” requires an identifying mark’. As a result, ‘it[…]generates forms, and forms accommodate it’. Absolute space is therefore space that is made important and prominent through the form it adopts and presents to the world. It encompasses Hejinian’s ‘vastness’ because it ‘embodies all places’, yet it is also ‘formally differentiat[ed]’ because it ‘generates forms’ that allow it to become distinct. As Lefebvre continues, absolute space is ‘circumscribed, demarcated by a perimeter, and characterized by an assigned and meaningful form’.

The mention of a perimeter here is interesting because it suggests that a space like this has a designated beginning as well as an implied ending that separates it from the surrounding space. Lefebvre then connects the creation of form to words when he states that ‘words are in space, yet not in space’ because ‘they speak of space, and enclose it’. Words ‘speak of space’ while simultaneously ‘enclos[ing]’ it, making them both part of that space as well as the form that borders it.

However, it wasn’t until I travelled to Orkney and stood within the confines of the Ring of Brodgar that I was finally able to understand how form and liminal space work together. The day I visited the circle was unexpectedly clear and sunny, and, though the tourist season was just coming to an end, the site was surprisingly busy. On my way toward the hill on which the stones rest, I passed an American tour group on a day trip away from their cruise ship. A woman turned to her friend and said that she ‘loves coming to places like [the Ring of Brodgar] because [she] never knows what [she’s] going to find there’. Though it was an offhand comment, the woman’s words nevertheless made me think about why a place like the stone circle in front of us could inspire an expectation of discovery, of finding something within the stones that does not exist, or does not exert itself as powerfully, outside their structure. What is it about the form of a space that allows our mindset to shift toward being more open, suggestible, and receptive to possibility and encounter?

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26 Lyn Hejinian, ‘The Rejection of Closure’.
27 Henri Lefebvre, pp. 236-237.
28 Lefebvre, p. 240.
29 Lefebvre, p. 251.
30 Comment overheard on Ring of Brodgar visit, 21 September, 2016.
I must admit that my first visit to the stones did not inspire the sense of connection for which I was hoping. While the circle that morning was beautiful and magical as only something so ancient and mysterious can be, the busyness of the site (smart phones snapping pictures, tourists sitting on fragments of broken stones, a tour bus driver loudly eating a bag of Doritos) distracted me from the atmosphere of the stones themselves. However, I had planned my trip to Orkney strategically around the autumnal equinox, which took place the day I visited the stones. In my mind, the stone circle would be even more impactful on a night that is itself liminal. So, I went back that night and gave the circle a second chance. Maybe it was the isolation (it was just me and the rare dogwalker out on that part of the island), maybe it was the silence, or maybe it was simply my mind finally responding to the expectation I had built up inside myself. Maybe it was a combination of all three, or maybe it was none. Perhaps the idea clicked into place and it didn’t matter whether I was alone or surrounded by a group of Dorito-eating tour guides. Regardless, sitting on a small hill overlooking the stones at dusk on the autumnal equinox, the impact of form finally hit home. While I had not yet done much formal research on the phenomenological response form inspires, I knew then that bordered, demarcated space (whether it be stones surrounding a patch of ground or form enclosing the content of a poem) is responsible for a shift in mindset that contributes to our apprehension and interaction with the liminal. In The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, Mircea Eliade explains that ‘the threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds’ while being ‘at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate’. It is here, in this ‘sacred enclosure’, that ‘ontological passage from one mode of being to another’ is made possible. Therefore, a boundary or threshold espouses a change in mindset, a shift from one mode of ‘being’ in the world to another.

What I posit is that poetic structure interacts with readers in very much the same way: it establishes a threshold, formed through structure and content, silence, and time, that allows for Eliade’s ‘passage’ from one mindset to another. In this way, a poem becomes Lake’s ‘multi-dimensional object’ into which a reader can enter to experience the liminal space it encloses. As David Constantine states, ‘poetry…made of words, engenders a condition in which the single personality dissolves and we enter into other lives, other possibilities of being human’. How is it then that liminal space is shaped into the structure and content of a poem and how does form move to ‘accommodate’ that space? Glyn Maxwell, when teaching his poetry students how to begin analysing a poem, tells them that ‘it helps to mist one’s eyes when first contemplating a poem, see what’s being told by shape alone’. Which lines stand out, either because they are longer than the others or shorter, which stanzas establish a pattern of length and which ones then deviate from it? Doing this allows the shape of the poem, its borders and boundaries, a chance to shine, to be divorced from the words they contain. The shape of a poem tells a story all its own. As Maurice Riordan states, ‘the very look of a poem on the page causes it to jump towards one, as the moon does when it emerges from behind thin cloud’. Yet Maxwell warns against using the story shape alone implies. He states that taking

32 Strong Words, p. 227.
34 The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations, ed. by Dennis O’Driscoll (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2006), p. 117.
the meaning away from the structure (and vice versa) is like ‘blundering through arctic night’. To imagine ‘poetry cold and dark like that’ is to remove half of the equation. Form is not enough on its own. A poem needs ‘a heart, a heartbeat, warmth, a place to go’.  

For Maxwell, ‘what’s signalled by the black shapes [on the page] is a human presence’. As a result, the content of the poem is necessary and beholden to the form just as the form is necessary and beholden to content. Content is therefore enclosed by form which is, in turn, enclosed by the white plane of the page. Maxwell asks that a poem ‘act upon [a person] in a way that resembles a human encounter’ so that the reading of it becomes ‘a meeting in life’. Edward Hirsch provides support for Maxwell’s request. He sets forth that ‘poetry has to be embodied’ because ‘form is the poem’s way of carrying itself, of being in the world, of incarnating the spirit’. John Burnside’s poem ‘Halloween’ exemplifies this relationship.

I have peeled bark from the tree
to smell its ghost,
and walked the boundaries of ice and bone
where the parish returns to itself
in a flurry of snow;

I have learned to observe the winters:
the apples that fall for days
in abandoned yards,
the fernwork of ice and water
sealing me up with the dead
in misted rooms

as I come to define my place:
barn owls hunting in pairs along the hedge,
the smell of frost on linen, the smell of leaves
and the whiteness that breeds in the flaked leaf mould, like the first elusive threads of unmade souls.

The village is over there, in a pool of bells,
and beyond that nothing,
or only the other versions of myself,
familiar and strange, and swaddled in their time
as I am, standing out beneath the moon
or stooping to a clutch of twigs and straw
to breathe a little life into the fire.

‘Halloween’ demonstrates on two levels how content is enveloped by form which is in turn enveloped by the plane of the page, and how this enfolding creates a layered boundary for phenomenological response. The poem’s content includes delicate, almost ethereal imagery and phrases that activate the reader’s senses. We

35 Glyn Maxwell, p. 21.
36 Glyn Maxwell, p. 29.
37 Glyn Maxwell, p. 40, 48.
38 The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations, p. 46.
‘smell [the] ghost’ of a tree removed of its bark and can see the ‘fernwork of ice and water’, the thin fractals of frozen condensation on a window. We can catch traces of ‘the smell of frost on linen’. Perhaps the most elegant image of the poem is ‘the whiteness that breeds in the flaked leaf mould, like the first elusive threads of unmade souls’, which contrasts with the image of the speaker, the ‘I’ presence in the poem, ‘stooping to a clutch of twigs and straw to breathe a little life into the fire’. The introduction of heat in the final stanza, the placement of ‘fire’ as the ultimate word of the poem, sets up a tension with the colder images that precede it. The poem vibrates between heat and ice, the human ‘I’ and the lingering presence of ‘souls’. For this reason, the subject matter of the piece is itself liminal as it brings together opposing forces and creates a conversation between them. However, the imagery and sensory phrases lend an almost ungraspable feel to the poem, as though they might melt or disappear from the page. What allows the poem its ethereal subject matter is the form that works to enclose it. Each line ends with a noun that provides a solid boundary for the images. They are given their freedom, but only until the end of the line when words like ‘tree’, ‘bone’, ‘snow’, and ‘hedge’ stop them. Nevertheless, words such as ‘water’, ‘flaked’, ‘threads’, and ‘souls’, while still nouns, are more fluid and giving, which permits the structure of the poem to move in tandem with its content. As a result, the liminal subject matter of ‘Halloween’ is enclosed and made more approachable by the form that surrounds it.

This form, though, also does not stand by itself. While it controls the space of the poem, it too is surrounded by a controlling force: the white space of the page. Maxwell claims that ‘poets work with two materials, one’s black and one’s white’. For the black structure to be successful, ‘intelligent use of the whiteness’ must be present as well. In the case of ‘Halloween’, the white space is taken up by regular stanzas that descend from five to seven lines, but it is the inclusion of short lines at the end of the first three stanzas that give the poem its most definitive shape. ‘In a flurry of snow’, ‘in misted rooms’, and ‘of unmade souls’ are lines that bring the reader up short because they deviate from the line-lengths that precede them. They change the rhythm of the poem and are almost always associated with an abstract image, like the ‘misted rooms’ of the ‘dead’ and the ‘elusive threads’ of ‘unmade souls’, as though

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39 An interesting parallel to highlight here comes from an observation Alistair Moffat notes in *Pagan Britain*. He notes that ‘the construction of a henge’ may have been ‘the final activity upon a [Neolithic] site’ and could have been a preventative, protective measure. ‘The surrounding of the ground’, he states, ‘would have been intended to pen in the spiritual power associated with it or formerly raised upon it, and keep people on the outside safe for ever from it when it was abandoned’ (97). In this view, form is not intended to create connection but to ‘pen in’ and protect one from the powers or presences it contains. Burnside’s poem, with its noun-stopped lines, could be said to do the same thing: the reader is able to view ‘the unmade soul’ with just enough distance between them, the structure of the poem acting as a boundary the ‘soul’ cannot cross. As an aside, Anne Sexton also likened form and structure to a kind of ‘cage’: ‘If you used form it was like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage, and you could let some extraordinary animals out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form’.


41 Glyn Maxwell, p. 11.

42 This idea is not unique to poets. The novelist Fay Weldon also states that ‘a poem almost exists because of the pattern of space around it’.

*The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations*, p.118.
these beings, not wholly formed, do not have enough substance to fill up their allotted lines. They are a presence in the poem, but things that are unseen, unnoticed, only glimpsed in the line-break. Though it does not end a stanza, the ‘ghost’ of the tree is also given a shortened line as is the ‘nothing’ that exists beyond the boundaries of the village. The penultimate stanza sees the speaker attempting to ‘define [his] place’ and the final line of the poem establishes that he has. He is given room to ‘breathe’ and the line literally allows for this: it is longer than the preceding ending lines and the long ’l’ sounds in ‘life’ and ‘fire’ resonate well with the vowel sounds of ‘breathe’ and ‘little’. The line itself takes a breath and determines that the most prominent presence in the poem is not ethereal and ungraspable, but solidly human and alive. It is the combination of content, form, and white space that provides the multi-layered boundary for interpretation and communication with the poem. While the following chapter will delve deeper into the phenomenological response inspired by this boundary, as well as the reason for it, ‘Halloween’ is nevertheless a prime example of liminal subject matter bounded by a form that is at once solid and just as liminal.

My own poem, ‘Longniddry Bents’, is also an example of this layering, though it grounds itself more firmly in the domestic sphere than does Burnside’s piece:

We walk along the beach at sunset, which should be a cliché but isn’t.

There’s something wrong between us again and we’ve come here to be apart.

He walked off as soon as the car was parked, shaping a path of footprints along the wet edge where the waves meet tide-smoothed sand.

I can see him farther off, running his thumb over razor clam shells before hurling them into the surf one by one. The old power station looms across the Firth of Forth, a beached warship set upon by seagulls and seaweed.

From where I stand, it makes me feel small. But the barely risen crescent moon rests between its two great towers and the sea curls up toward the heave of certain gravity.

I think there’s alchemy to a pull like that, an entire planet of water striving to become part of the sky, currents meeting and mixing, outdoing each other to end here at our feet.

Both of us listen to the aftermath of that collide,
the soft sizzle of sea froth against the shoreline.

I tried various stanzaic structures for this poem before deciding that couplets looked and felt ‘right’. Nothing else made the poem feel as complete as the couplet structure did while I was writing. At the time, I wasn’t thinking about creating mimesis of any kind, but as I started to review and rewrite the poem, I realised that the structure was doing more work than I believed. The poem is arranged into couplets that mirror the two figures on the beach; even though they stand physically apart, each one trying to figure out what has gone ‘wrong’ between them again, the structure continues to link the speaker and her partner together. I then found the space of the poem created between the stanzas, in the scale of the landscape in proximity to the speaker, in the distance between the ocean and the sky, and in the distance, both physical and emotional, between the speaker and her partner. Regardless, the structure of the poem works constantly to close the gap. It acts almost like the ocean in the poem, constantly reaching toward closure but never quite getting there. I then started to pay attention to the sounds that had worked their way into the piece. The structure serves to close gaps created in the poem but it is never quite successful due to the near rhymes between ‘sunset’ and ‘isn’t’, ‘sea’ and ‘gravity’, and the slight sight rhyme in ‘beached’ and ‘seaweed’ that unsettle the unity of the couplets. However, the final rhyme between ‘collide’ and ‘shoreline’ pulls the sounds of the poem together. While there is no peace to be had between the figures in the poem, just as the ocean is not intended to reach the sky, the piece itself seems to settle and allows the reader to sit more comfortably with the lack of resolution. What I ended up creating with ‘Longniddry Bents’ was a disjointed subject composed of distances of varying degrees that finds a solid place to exist in the more united nature of the structure.

The creation of liminal poetic space is shaped not only through content and the physical borders of the words against the page, but through the sounds and silences created by the words themselves. W.S. Graham is a poet preoccupied with how silence functions in the space of a poem. In their book The Constructed Space: A Celebration of W.S. Graham, editors Ronnie Duncan and Jonathan Davidson include an essay by Edwin Morgan titled ‘W.S. Graham and “Voice”’. Morgan asserts that, for Graham, ‘a poem, like any other object, has to be constructed in, and then sent out through, space’ because ‘the voice of the words of the poem has to shape, and then penetrate, silence’. For Graham, ‘space and silence are both necessary to the artist’. Morgan’s theory of Graham’s reliance on silence is supported, necessarily, by Graham’s poems, particularly ‘The Beast in the Space’ and ‘The Constructed Space’. To Graham, the ‘beast in the space’ is ‘the great creature that thumps its tail | on silence’, that exists ‘on the other side of the words’. Graham asks his readers to ‘call it over’, to ‘call it across | this curious necessary space’ so that they may hear what the poem has to say. ‘The Beast in the Space’ is a poem about silence and language, how the two work together so that, as ‘The Constructed Space’ states, ‘somehow something may move across | the caught habits of language’ between poet and reader. In Graham’s work, liminality is created through sound and its absence.

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the medium through which the poem communicates and shapes a space for connection and transference of meaning. However, it is also a space that Graham himself does not fully understand. He knows that ‘somehow something’ will transfer from the page to the reader, that the limited vocabulary a poet has to work with, our ‘caught habits of language’, will be transcended and shaped by the silences within which it functions. Sound is Graham’s ‘beast’, a force he tames with silence, but just barely. Another poem of Graham’s, ‘[Kadinsky’s Ribbons]’, may best represent his negotiation with silence. Though the addressee of the poem is unclear, Graham implores them to ‘be aware | of every shape, of every kind of silence | that slides past the making ear’. They are ‘curious | visiting creatures’ that one mustn’t ‘frighten[...off]’ because ‘they are your medium from everywhere’.46 Whereas sound is the ‘beast’ that must be caged by silence, silence is elusive, a fragile ‘creature’ that is easily frightened off and is yet perhaps more powerful because it is the force against which sound is heard.

Glyn Maxwell also equates sound and silence to the presence and containment of a creature. For poets, he claims, ‘the other half of everything’ is ‘silence, the space, the whiteness’ on which they compose their lines.47 He draws attention to ‘the balance of the black creature’, the words themselves, against ‘the white silence’.48 It is the ‘pressure of silence’ pushing on the ‘black creature’ that dictates form.49 Tracy K. Smith’s poem ‘The Largeness We Can’t See’ perhaps best exemplifies the blending of both Graham and Maxwell’s use of silence and space.

When our laughter skids across the floor
Like beads yanked from some girl’s throat,
What waits where the laughter gathers?

And later, when our saw-toothed breaths
Lay us down on a bed of leaves, what feeds
With ceaseless focus on the leaves?

It’s solid, yet permeable, like a mood.
Like God, it has no face. Like lust,
It flickers on without a prick of guilt.

We move in and out of rooms, leaving
Our dust, our voices pooled on sills.
We hurry from door to door in a downpour

Of days. Old trees inch up, their trunks thick
With new rings. All that we see grows
Into the ground. And all we live blind to

Leans its deathless heft to our ears
and sings.50

47 Glyn Maxwell, p. 13.
48 Maxwell, p. 19.
49 Maxwell, p. 40.
Smith’s poem is an inquiry into the nature of sound and silence, the presence of the black words against the white space, our busy lives pressed up to whatever coexists unseen next to us. The map of sound throughout the poem, coupled with the poem’s structure, gives life and body to this otherwise incorporeal presence. This is particularly noticeable in the last three stanzas of the piece. While the first three stanzas set up the background of the poem, providing the question off which the poem feeds (what is the ‘beast’ that waits where sound gathers, that consumes without our knowledge?), it is the fourth stanza where the vowel sounds concentrate and contrast human life against the more constant presence of the unnameable that ‘has no face’. The drawn-out vowel sounds in words like ‘move’, ‘rooms’, ‘pooled’, ‘door’, and ‘downpour’ make the fourth stanza feel longer than its three lines, though there is constant movement within them. We ‘move in and out of rooms’, our voices ‘[pool] on sills’, and we ‘hurry from door to door’; our lives are long, signified by the vowel sounds, but full of movement and motion that makes them go quickly. The enjambment of the third line into the fifth stanza not only creates a ‘downpour’ of words across the stanza break, but also demonstrates that our incessant movement does not allow for breath; the structure of the words does not allow for pause and renders the stanza break almost unnoticeable. We jump across it to the next word, so busy with the continuation of sound, the alliteration between ‘downpour’ and ‘days’, that we miss the gap wherein the ‘deathless heft’ exists.

However, the ‘deathless heft’, the silence of the poem against which the sound of the piece vibrates, is given its own space and necessarily so; the assonance between ‘deathless’ and ‘heft’ carries weight and exemplifies that this is not a silence or a presence easily ignored. Though we may ‘live blind to’ its existence, the structure of the poem demands that the reader notice what is most definitely breathing between the lines. The significant gap in the final line of the poem gives body to this presence, gives shape (and therefore a ‘face’) to the ‘black creature’, and distils the assonance between ‘rings’ in the fifth stanza and ‘sings’ in the final. The line itself is given room to resound and create noise that then works its way back through the body of the poem. The reader not only sees the shape of the ‘creature’ through the structure of the poem but can also hear it clearly through the silence created by the gap in the final line. As a result, ‘The Largeness We Can’t See’ is made liminal through its structure, its content, and the tension made between sound and silence.

There is a third aspect that works in tandem with silence and structure to help render a poem liminal: time. To return to Maxwell’s theories, once a poet can ‘master form’, she can then ‘master time’ because the two are one and the same. Maxwell states that ‘form has a direct effect on the silence beneath it, which is to say on the whiteness before and after it and where the lines end’. The whiteness of the blank page, the negative space that surrounds the structure of the poem, exerts its own energy and force because ‘the whiteness[…] is also time.’ As a result, ‘line and stanza-break’, the elements that shape the structure of a poem, are ‘white punctuation[…] a polite request to time’. Therefore, poems are shaped through the tension created by the words against the blank plane of the page, which is not only silence but time passing. The words push out against the silence, ‘beasts’ straining against confinement, and the silence, the time through which the words exist, pushes back. This awareness of time and silence, as well as how the shape of the words moulds in response to these forces, is what dictates the structure of a poem.

51 Maxwell, pp. 17-18.
52 Maxwell, pp. 54, 58.
Time helps create liminality because ‘the reader’s role in [poetry] is like nothing else, owing to the medium of poetry’s creation and its relationship with time’. Poetry ‘suggests linearity without compelling it’, which means that the time and space of the piece ‘remains [the reader’s] own’. As a result, the ‘voice’ of the poem is more readily available for the reader to ‘inhabit’. As Maxwell claims, ‘we all[…]know that poetry is written in the everyday material of language’, but ‘at a deeper cerebral level[…]it becomes easier to imagine the voice one’s own’. This then transfers over to the rest of the poem because ‘our inner voice dictates the texture, tone and timing of the reading that we both render and receive’, and so ‘the silence around it and throughout it seems to become ours too’.

While the following chapter will go into greater detail about how we, as readers, come to inhabit a poem through phenomenological response, it is important to note here that the structure of the poem, built through a negotiation with time, silence, and content, allows a reader to inhabit a piece more fully; we are able to place ourselves into the body of the work with greater ease.

To end my discussion on the shaping of liminal poetic space, it is necessary to analyse a poem that brings together all aspects mentioned above: structure and content, silence, and time. Paul Farley’s ‘A Tunnel’ shows how these elements come together to create liminality in a poem.

A tunnel, unexpected. The carriage lights we didn’t notice weren’t on prove their point and a summer’s day is cancelled out, its greens and scattered blue, forgotten in an instant that lasts the width of a down, level to level, a blink in London to Brighton in Four Minutes that dampens mobiles—conversations end mid-sentence, before speakers can say ‘…a tunnel’—and the train fills with the sound of itself, the rattle of rolling stock amplified, and in the windows’ flue a tool-shed scent, metal on metal, a points-flash photograph, and inside all of this a thought is clattering in a skull inside the train inside the tunnel inside great folds of time, like a cube of chalk in a puncture-repair tin at a roadside on a summer day like the one we’ll re-enter at any moment, please, at any moment. Voices are waiting at the other end to pick up where we left off. ‘It was a tunnel…’

This poem functions so well as an example of poetic liminality because the structure reinforces the content which is in turn shaped by the silences and passage of

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time throughout the piece. The train in the poem never stops moving; if anything, the moment in the tunnel is only ‘the width of a down’ or the width of the stanza break between the first and second stanzas. The lack of punctuation through the first four and a half stanzas demonstrates this constant movement. The poem and the train are in motion from the beginning and nothing truly stops moving. Nevertheless, time is suspended, created by line and stanza break. The line break between ‘end’ and ‘mid-sentence’, as well as between ‘say’ and ‘…a tunnel’, make for a pause in the stanza; every voice present in the piece is brought up short in these lines. These enjambed lines, as well as the words that begin and end them, know that they occupy places of power within the poem. The breaks are necessary to show, literally, the breaks both in conversations and in the journey. As a result, the content of the piece, the liminal space of a train in a countryside tunnel that cancels out both conversations and connections on the ‘other end’, is well-supported by the structure of the poem.

The penultimate stanza creates even more liminality through its interesting use of time and space both as structural devices and as content. Henri Lefebvre claims that ‘space is the envelope of time’ and the way language folds on itself in this stanza shows how such a statement can be made true in poetry. The space of the stanza is managed through hard enjambment and limited punctuation, which keeps the language focused and contained. The stanza looks very neat and takes up only so much room on the page. However, the tightness of the structure serves to widen the lens of the physical space in the poem: ‘inside all of this a thought is clattering | in a skull inside the train inside the tunnel | inside great folds of time’. While the stanza is itself contained through a focused structure, shaped through an awareness of how time needs to function within that structure, the content of the piece grows larger and larger until the reader is looking from a single thought in a single skull to the ‘great folds of time’ within which we all travel. As a result, the content of the poem is allowed to stretch without breaching the structure that shapes it. The reader is also able to follow the progression from ‘thought’ to ‘great folds of time’ with greater ease because the structure reveals by degrees the widened scope of the poem; we can enter more willingly into the abstract expanse of ‘great folds of time’. ‘Great folds of time’ is also a key phrase in the poem because it takes the reader away from the literal scene of the piece, a train in the countryside, to the more metaphysical concept of passing through the tunnel that spans from our physical lives to the afterlife and the idea that more exists on the other side. This also includes an implied continuation in the afterlife; voices wait ‘on the other end’ of an experience through which we are merely passing. Again, it is the poem’s management of the words on the page as well as the placement of the metaphysical space in the penultimate stanza that makes the reader more comfortable with and accepting of the idea. The following chapter will delve deeper into how bordered poetic space allows for this phenomenological response.

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55 Lefebvre, p. 339.
56 Paul Farley mentioned in our meeting on 28 February, 2019 that ‘A Tunnel’ has also been interpreted as an inversion to Bede’s sparrow. Instead of everything outside the tunnel being foreign and unknown, as is the case with the sparrow and the exterior of the mead hall through which it flies, the space inside the tunnel is where the world stops being safe and familiar.
The previous chapter has discussed the formation of poetic bordered space, how a poet creates a sense of space in her work through structure, content, time, and sound devices. However, this project is also largely focused on how these borders order the experience of space for the reader, and how they inspire a more susceptible and open mindset that allows one to ‘enter’ that space. What is it about a border or a threshold that creates both a physical and an emotional response? We see a closed door and our minds immediately begin to populate the space on the other side. We blend our current reality with whatever waits on the opposite side of the threshold. Similarly, we walk up to a ring of stones and, while the centre is visible, we are nevertheless drawn to believe that something special must be enclosed therein. There is again a shift in mindset, a willing blend of realities, and a susceptibility to the possibility of the space. It is my argument that the borders of a poem create this same response in the reader, that we approach the structure of a poem on the page in the same way that we come to a threshold or similarly enclosed space.

To revisit a quote from Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*, a threshold ‘that separates’ two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being’ because the ‘threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds’ while being ‘at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate’. A threshold, a boundary, necessarily separates two worlds (the world without from the world within), yet it is also the liminal space where those worlds first touch and communicate with one another. It is a space of possibility, connection, and encounter or, in Eliade’s words, a space that ‘makes possible ontological passage from one mode of being to another’.

Eliade continues by stating that ‘the threshold concentrates not only the boundary between outside and inside but also the possibility of passage from one zone to another’. The word ‘concentrates’ is interesting because it emphasizes just how much potential and

57 While there is not space to delve too deeply into the subject, it is important to note an awareness of the fact that poetic form is very much a gendered space, one that has been predominantly male. In *The Making of a Poem*, Mark Strand and Eavan Boland state that while ‘form is a powerful filter’, it is ‘not an inclusive one’. This is because ‘women were often underrepresented in poetry in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries’. This underrepresentation may have been due, in part, to the fact that ‘in the societies that produced the sonnet, the villanelle, the sestina, poetic form was not just an expression of art’, but also ‘a register for power’. Regardless, ‘toward the mid and late twentieth century those voices which form […] had excluded in earlier centuries […] entered the fray and added, changed, subverted, and radicalized poetry’ (14-15). According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, this shift occurred due to ‘the political movements for women’s liberation and gay rights’ that took place in the U.S. and Western Europe during the 1960s and 1970s. Cashing in on the ‘greater social equality, women poets attempted longer, more ambitious forms, and greater numbers of women gained widespread recognition and publishing opportunities’ (546).

58 See footnote 27 in Chapter 3.

59 Eliade, p. 63.

60 Eliade, p. 181.
liminality are contained at a border. It is a gathering and a distillation of possibility that we feel on a physical and emotional level.

Patrick Howard, in his essay ‘How Literature Works: Poetry and the Phenomenology of Reader Response’, expands the idea of a threshold to something that exists in the natural world. ‘In the science of ecology’, he states, ‘the term “ecotone” is used to describe a place where landscapes meet—a field with a forest, the ocean with the land’. These ecotones are places ‘where contact yields change’.⁶¹ Just as the threshold from one room to another inspires and creates a change in the person about to breach the border, so too do physical points of meeting in the natural world. Howard’s theory, which helps to support my own, is that ‘the space between reader and text’ is also a transformative space because ‘it is our being potentially changed by the transaction with the different space of the text’.⁶² Eliade claims that a threshold creates the ‘ontological passage from one mode of being to another’; with his words, Howard aligns Eliade’s theories with the space of words on a page. Howard also takes the theory a step further when he claims that ‘because the literary work is organized and self-contained, it concentrates our attention and regulates what will enter our consciousness’.⁶³ Here again the word ‘concentrates’ represents a gathering not only of our expectation and the idea of possibility inherent in a border but also of our attention and experience. As a result, it is the organisation, the structure, of the words on the page, formed in poetry through stanza and line break, that allows for a change in ‘being’. Indeed, Howard states that ‘what is imposed by the text functions in and with our deepest, pre-reflective experience’, that when he ‘read[s] a poem, the words, the structure, the images, the author’s skill are at work ordering [his] experience’. What results is what Howard terms a ‘felt-sense’, or the notion that something exists within the words willing to meet the reader halfway.⁶⁴ Our mind, our way of being in the world, shifts at the border of a poem to accommodate this ‘felt-sense’; we become more open and receptive to the space of the work.

Henri Lefebvre has another way to describe how one comes to this ‘felt-sense’. In his discussion of representational space, or ‘those spaces that the imagination seeks to change and appropriate’,⁶⁵ Lefebvre states that ‘words and signs facilitate (indeed provoke, call forth and[…]command) metaphorization—the transport[…]of the physical body out of itself’. This metaphysical experience, which is both ‘inextricably magical and rational’, allows for a ‘strange interplay between[…]disembodiment and[…]re-embodiment, between uprooting and reimplantation, between spatialization in an abstract expanse and localization in a determinate expanse’.⁶⁶ For Lefebvre, words allow for ‘transport’, for a sense of being outside of oneself that helps one to ‘spatialize’ an ‘abstract expanse’, such as the world of a poem, and ground or ‘localize’ in a ‘determinate expanse’, such as the field of a poem as physical space on the page. The reader is at once part of the physical world and is also enveloped by the experience found within bordered space.

⁶² Howard, p. 56.
⁶³ Howard, p 57.
⁶⁴ Howard, p. 59.
⁶⁶ Lefebvre, p. 203.
Lefebvre’s interpretation can also link back to Bachelard’s ‘intimate immensity’ in that bordered representational space allows a reader to be both more aware of his own physicality while also relinquishing himself to the larger experience at hand. This transitional area, termed by Lefebvre as the ‘mixed space’, is where Eliade’s ‘passage’ occurs, where Howards ‘felt-sense’ is realised, and where the reader’s mind shifts to accept the space of the poem.

James Joyce sheds yet more light on the mind’s ability and willingness to shift at the edge of a liminal space. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce’s character Stephen Dedalus discusses the idea of artistic apprehension, or understanding, with his friend Lynch. After he points to ‘a basket which a butcher’s boy had slung inverted on his head’, Stephen explains that ‘in order to see that basket[…][Lynch’s] mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket’. This is because ‘the first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended’. When a reader first comes to the poem on the page, his first reaction is to cancel out everything that is not the poem so that the work is the only thing on which he has to focus. Stephen then explains that ‘an esthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time’ and that ‘what is visible is presented in space’. As a result, ‘the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space[…]which it is not’ so that the object is ‘apprehended[…]as ONE thing’.  

Joyce’s statement relates to Paul Lake’s understanding of the poem as a ‘multi-dimensional object’: a poem is more than its appearance on the page because it encompasses not only that structure, but the experience of the space created. The structure of a thing, whether it be Joyce’s basket or the shape of a poem, allows the mind to focus solely on it so that everything it is not, the background that distinguishes its shape from the rest of the world, is cancelled out. This idea also goes back to Maxwell and the shaping of poetic structure on the page: the white plane of paper is the medium and force against which the poem is constructed. Without a background or the white space, the shape of anything would be indistinguishable. What this means is that the mind needs structure to comprehend that on which it chooses to focus; it is structure that allows for the experience.

Michael Donaghy, who quotes this same passage by Joyce, uses the term ‘enclosure’ to ‘describe the way in which a poem is established as All-One-Thing’. For him, ‘enclosure in poetry is [Joyce’s] “bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended”’. As poets, we ‘play with the boundaries of the poem, exploiting an irresistible human instinct’. We not only need boundaries and structure in order to understand what is in front of us, we also ‘long to wrest coherence and integration from the structure of a poem’. Here, Donaghy reasserts the necessity of poetic structure and details how the mind comes to understand that structure. The mind, out of sheer human instinct, must understand what the structure of a poem encompasses. Donaghy even goes so far as to ask us to ‘consider how any printed page of verse[…]can be understood as a diagram of a mental process’. For him, ‘the audience are participants in total immersion, surrendering consciousness and voice to the story [of the poem]’ because ‘the page encourages an illusion and seduces us with its model of the mind’. The page, the poem, the white space and silence that surround the

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69 Donaghy, p. 12.
words, functions as a ‘model of the mind’ because it establishes a border around that which it encompasses just as our minds establish a boundary around that to which we direct our attention. We create ‘enclosures’ for ourselves that we are then compelled to understand. Poetry, through its structure and shape, does half the work for us by providing the boundary; our only task as readers is the willing immersion into that space. The interiority of a poem, the space into which a reader enters, is supported by the basic terminology of poetics: ‘stanza’ literally means ‘room’ or ‘stopping place’. Therefore, the basic structure of a poem, the stanza, is a ‘room’ into which the reader enters, a ‘stopping place’ for him to observe the world within the words.

Mircea Eliade and Lyn Hejinian provide an explanation for how the theories detailed above present themselves in actual poems. When talking about the transcendent nature of a threshold or border, Eliade states that ‘this possibility of transcendence is expressed by various images of an opening’. In his example, this opening is how ‘communication with the gods is made possible’. It is an opening ‘in the upward direction and ensures communication with the world of the gods’. Eliade’s ‘opening’ is an idea that allows for contact with the divine, yet Lyn Hejinian also claims that an ‘opening’ is necessary for communication to be established within a poem. Hejinian states that ‘closure [in a literary work] is a fiction’, that ‘the writer experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world’ which results in ‘a correspondingly open response’. As a result, the writer, in an attempt to satisfy our human instinct to create boundaries, uses form to shape an image, yet those ideas and images nevertheless remain free and ‘open’. This closed-yet-open, bounded-yet-accessible theory is what allows for the interpretation of a poem. The reader is able to focus on and enter into the poem at hand due to his phenomenological response to the structure, yet once inside the work the writer’s images and words are free to mould themselves to the reader’s own interpretation. As Hejinian states, the ‘open text’ is one that ‘speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive’, one that encourages various interpretations rather than only one reading prescribed by the author’s intention. Form provides the border, the liminal edge at which our minds grasp the possibility of the space of the poem. The space is bounded and closed-off from everything it is not. However, the content, coupled with the susceptibility and openness for which the form allows, makes the space of the poem open to reader interpretation. Hejinian states that ‘form does not necessarily achieve closure, nor does raw materiality provide openness’; it is the two combined that work to make a poem an open area for interpretation and connection.

Michael Donaghy’s sonnet ‘The Present’ is a poem that represents the synthesis of these ideas.

For the present there is just one moon, though every level pond gives back another.

But the bright disc shining in the black lagoon, perceived by astrophysicist and lover,

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72 Hejinian, ‘The Rejection of Closure’.
73 Hejinian, ‘The Rejection of Closure’.
is milliseconds old. And even that light’s
seven minutes older than its source.

And the stars we think we see on moonless nights
are long extinguished. And, of course,

this very moment, as you read this line,
is literally gone before you know it.

Forget the here-and-now. We have no time
but this device of wantonness and wit.

Make me this present then: your hand in mine,
and we’ll live out our lives in it.74

Don Paterson calls ‘The Present’ a ‘disguised Italian’ sonnet due to its rhyme
scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEEFE, but while the rhyme does help establish
the poem’s form, it is not the element that inspires the most connection with the piece.75
The shape of the piece, the arrangement of the sonnet into couplets, puts the reader in
a mindset of ‘twos’ on a subconscious level; as we read, we’re already looking for the
significance of ‘two’ in the poem and we find it. There are two moons, one real and
one reflected, two lines per stanza, two lovers at the end of the piece, and two
meanings of the word ‘present’. Here, the word not only means the current moment
but also the gift of sharing another person’s time on Earth. The structure of the poem
reinforces its content and immediately establishes the need in the reader’s mind to
decipher the significance of two. The content of the piece, which follows the mindset
established by the structure, makes the reader hyperaware of his own presence in the
poem and in his own existence in time. In this way, the poem also creates two
versions of the reader: the person orienting himself into the ‘present’ of the poem, and
the person made more aware of the fleeting nature of his own reality. The reader is at
once part of the poem and rooted even more firmly in his own temporal space, which
brings with it the reader’s own experiences and memories. As a result, the poem
incorporates not only the writer’s ‘present’ moment of the reflected moon, but also the
reader’s current position in life. This idea loops back to Bachelard’s ‘intimate
immensity’ in that the poem allows the reader to be taken outside of himself while
also making it possible for him to be even more aware of his own existence.

It could also be said that the poem itself is a ‘present’ in the way that it gives
the reader a place to let time stop so he can, conversely, consider how fast it moves.
The fifth stanza, which could be considered the volta of the sonnet because it both
concentrates the build-up of passing time established by the piece while also turning it
into a stopping place, is where this gift is given. The reader is asked to consider ‘this
very moment’, which draws him not only into the current moment of the poem but
also into the current moment of his own life. The line then draws him up short
because both it and the ‘present’ are ‘literally gone before you know it’. The rapidity
of this passing allows for a moment of contemplation, a moment where the reader can
swirl in the quickness of time. This is both the poem’s curse to the reader and its gift;
he is made more aware of his humanity and the quick reality of his life while being

given a space into which he can sink to contemplate the nature of time. As the poem itself declares, ‘we have no time | but this device of wantonness and wit’
Chapter Five
An Archaeology of Domesticity: Authorial Intention versus Spontaneous Creation

While the preceding chapters of formal research and fieldwork detail the scholarly road this degree has undertaken, it has yet to be shown how the experience of liminal space on the Scottish islands and the theories with which I have so concerned myself come together in the creative work. As such, there is another journey to convey, one that is necessarily and inseparably built in the research I have conducted but that nonetheless diverged from its intended path. What follows is an explanation of how the poems in this collection incorporate the theories and experiences of liminal space I have come to know well, and how they made the research into something completely their own.

When I first decided to write about and research liminality constructed and shaped through the structure of a poem, I was not entirely sure what subject matter my poems would adopt or how their forms would mould to fit those subjects and vice versa. What I did know was that I wanted to write about parallel worlds, our proximity (based on the Celtic theory that Heaven is only three feet above the ground) to whatever can be considered divine, and the apprehension of ‘thin places’ both in the physical world and in the poems. As mentioned in the first chapter, liminality and coexisting realities have always been a fascination of mine. The first poem I wrote for the degree was ‘Blackbird,’ which, at the time, was directly in line with the kind of subject matter I thought I wanted to explore.

In this blue hour, there is a bird daring enough to try and wake the gods, though nothing moves but the air through its lungs and no world is noticed beyond the focus of its song.

Each phrase lifts the quiet of the almost dawn, silence pooling between intervals in an unbearable hush, sweeping down alleyways and avenues, past rats gnawing on old pizza crusts.

If all we heard was this, small songs down silent streets, how loud the break of day would be, how almighty the crack of Sulis’s neck as she hefts her bright face over the skyline.

‘Blackbird’, as the first poem I wrote before I had travelled to any of the stone circles or delved too deeply into the more formal research, was exactly what I thought

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it should be. Because I didn’t understand yet what a physical liminal space felt like, the poem’s subject was what carried it forward as a success in my mind. While the arrangement of the poem into six-line stanzas still creates a sense of interiority and enclosure that allows the poem to be self-contained as it explores the more ethereal subject of Sulis, the Celtic sun goddess, rising above the skyline, it is the inclusion of the goddess herself that most strongly demonstrates my original intentions for the poems. I wanted the poem to close the gap between our modern world where ‘rats gnaw on old pizza crusts’ and the old world that believed in the natural government of gods and goddesses. The liminality is both created and closed by making Sulis the cause of daybreak in a cityscape. However, it was Dr Eoghan Walls who suggested that the poem needed more ‘grit and grime’ in the description of the city to offset the goddess’s presence. In my Annual Review on 28 November, 2016, Walls told me that the city was ‘too hard to see because it seems to be overtaken by the softer edges’ of the poem and that it veered too close to Yeats’ Celtic Twilight. Walls’ critique of ‘Blackbird’ made me think about my intentions for the project as a whole. What was I actually trying to accomplish with the poems and how close to the spiritual and otherworldly did I want the work to come? While I wanted the poems to toe the line between the terrestrial and the divine, Walls’ critique helped me realise that I needed to decide where the balance between the two was going to be struck. I was also reminded of Thoreau’s quote from the Conclusion of Walden: ‘If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them’. My task was to continue exploring the idea of parallel worlds and liminality while grounding them more firmly in everyday experience and sights. As John Burnside states, poetry ‘opens a door in the everyday and allows me to pass into the otherworld’, but for it to accomplish this, the ‘everyday’ must first be present. As such, the second stanza of ‘Blackbird’ was revised to add a greater sense of life to the poem that works to contrast the goddess’s presence:

Each trill dents the quiet
doing almost dawn, silence
pooling between intervals
in an unbearable hush and song
weaving waking through this
city calmed by night

Each phrase lifts the quiet
doing almost dawn, silence
pooling between intervals
in an unbearable hush, sweeping
down alleyways and avenues,
past rats gnawing on old pizza crusts.

The line, though grittier than the rest of the poem, is nevertheless situated well through the sound devices present in the stanza. The muted vowel sounds between

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77 According to an online article by Judith Shaw, ‘Sulis […] has the iconography of a solar deity’ though ‘the name ‘Sulis” has a complex etymology, with various overlapping meanings’. The name ‘may be related to the proto-Celtic word for ‘sun’ but can also be interpreted as ““Provider of Healing Waters”’.
80 Strong Words, p. 212.
‘phrase’, ‘dawn’, ‘pooling’, ‘hush’, and ‘sweeping’, as well as the assonance in ‘alleyways and avenues’, create space for further assonance with ‘past’, ‘rats’, and ‘gnawing’. There is also internal slant rhyme between ‘hush’ and ‘crusts’ that sonically closes the stanza. As a result, the sound and structure of the stanza support the contrast between the terrestrial and the divine. Though ‘Blackbird’ was written while my ideas for the project were taking shape, it came to be an important poem because it helped me think more closely about how to discuss liminal space in poetry. As with Burnside’s poem ‘Halloween’, which borders abstract ideas with the use of concrete nouns as line-endings, my own ideas needed to be more grounded both by structure and by subject matter. While I still consider ‘Blackbird’ to be a success, I also decided that I needed to make the presence of the divine and otherworldly less overt in further poems. ‘Blackbird’ is the only poem to mention a goddess by name.

There are two other early poems that help to demonstrate my growing understanding of liminal space. Written shortly after my trip to Iona, both ‘Iona’ and ‘Confluence’ show my continuing negotiation with space, structure, and subject matter. They also exemplify how my more mystical subject matter began to manifest itself in different and unexpected ways. ‘Iona’, given the location it references, is a poem one would expect to be unhinged from the terrestrial, but it is actually the direct opposite. The poem is prefaced by a quote from Jonathan Edwards’ sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, which claims that no person should consider himself safe just because death is not apparently imminent. Indeed, ‘this is no Evidence that a Man is not on the very Brink of Eternity, and that the next Step won’t be into another world’ 81 Edwards means that no man is safe from the persecution and punishment of Hell, but for the purposes of the poem, the quote takes on a slightly different meaning:

When the villagers tell you not to trust the ground on their water-logged island because what looks like solid earth is more than likely not, listen

or else end up like this: stuck up to the hips in mud so thick the pull of it as you struggle only moves you farther down. Eventually, held tight by the depths of the land in a field three miles from town, you relax and are simply grateful it isn’t raining.

If only it was always this easy to fall through the strata of things, to have what waits there accept the crush of your presence, the pressure of your wandering feet. And you know you’ll get free and when you do, whatever dwells in the dark can keep your other shoe.

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The poem, rather than focus on Edwards’ original meaning, takes the idea of stepping into another world and makes it more literal. The speaker, stuck up to her hips in mud from a misplaced step on marshy ground, contemplates not how easy it is to fall into another world, but how hard. There is liminality present in the soft earth, the speaker’s position both in and outside of the soil, and the implication that her step ‘into another world’ found her not in Eternity but in the home of ‘whatever dwells in the dark’. The structure of the poem supports her slide ‘through the strata of things’; the lack of punctuation at the line endings makes the poem slippery, each line falling into the next.

‘Confluence’, much like ‘Iona’, also presents a different version of liminality and concepts of the divine.

Around the waters of Iceland, fishermen learn to cast where the cold water meets the warm and fish of all kinds seek a surface full of phytoplankton and light, an aurora of bioluminescence luring both men and animals to their places of convergence as predator and prey.

I watch from the pier as a novice spans the dark swathes of ocean to those sequined patches of neon, his boat birthing new spasms of shimmer along the way. The fish who feed there, swallowing flecks of light whole, skim their scales against the break between water and air just as the fisherman steadies his arm to release a line. Though nothing stops moving, the fish and the man seem suspended there, each leaning further into the realm of the other and, when they break through, how those mixed waters bloom.

As in ‘Iona’, the divinity of ‘Confluence’ is implied. The epigraph at the beginning of ‘Iona’ and the bioluminescent algae in ‘Confluence’ suggest a preternatural presence, but the mud and the fishing scene allow the poems to remain tethered to Earth. Unlike ‘Blackbird’, there is nothing overtly divine in either poem. If anything, the two suggest a more natural divinity, a balance of forces between the natural world and human influence on it. Regardless, both ‘Iona’ and ‘Confluence’ exemplify a maturing of subject matter from ethereal and ungrounded to more earthbound and approachable. Aspects of the preternatural and mystical necessarily remain, but they are made easier to apprehend by the presence of earthly surroundings.

What I did not realise, however, was how much a part of the poems those earthly surroundings would become. During the first year of the degree, when I was writing poems like the three detailed above, poems that span the gap between the world we know and the worlds about which we can only speculate, I was still very
much finding my way through the subject matter, learning how to negotiate my formal research and fieldwork around the research as practice, and figuring out what I thought I wanted the poems to be (though I did not realise at the time that the decision was not entirely mine). It was a year of uncertainty and discovery, both in how I wrote the poems and in the way my research moulded itself around their composition. I was sure that at some point, I would be more confident in the direction the poems were taking and that I would be able to see the path ahead a little more clearly. For a while, at the end of my first year, that did happen. I wrote ‘Glitter’ and ‘Emperor Penguins’, ‘Bolognese’ and ‘Hill Snow’, ‘Evensong’ and ‘Depot’. These were poems with forms and subject matters that explored liminality from several angles, that had gotten stronger through redrafting, and that had been well-received in my supervisions.

However, as I was preparing for my Confirmation panel, compiling the poems so there was cohesion between them, I noticed one large paradox: I had written poems like ‘Glitter’ and ‘Emperor Penguins’, ‘Bolognese’ and ‘Hill Snow’. While researching liminality, experiencing its physical representation in the stone circles, and working with poetic form and subject matter to translate it to the page, I had inadvertently written poems that were admittedly liminal but not in the way I had intended. Instead of bridging gaps and creating closures, my poems were (and still are) a collection of missed connections, failing relationships, ill-timed meetings, dreamscapes, and unfulfilled need. As I continued to compile the poems, attempting to create a conversation between them, I noticed an increasing number of domestic spaces in the work. My speakers communicate with the reader from their kitchens and bedrooms. They reminisce about their childhoods and place Skype calls to their deceased loved ones. They look out from train windows and bell towers, church interiors and their inner landscapes. I had begun this degree with the idea of various manifestations of the divine appearing in the poems. What I found instead was that the secular made its way into the poems just as much as the divine and, though I knew I needed to ground the mystic ideas with earthly surroundings, the presence of so many domestic spaces and subjects left me worried and confused; I wanted to find justification for their use in the poems.

Mircea Eliade claims that ‘the completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit’. 82 Indeed, ‘it should always be borne in mind that prehistoric life was constantly informed by religious beliefs—whatever they were’. 83 It is therefore highly likely, though by no means certain, that the occupiers of the stone circles I visited actively incorporated the sacred into their domestic lives. The circles they constructed, while set aside for a special, presumably religious purpose, were nevertheless included in their domestic landscape. For example, the Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stenness were part of the larger settlement of the Ness of Brodgar, which incorporated ceremonial buildings alongside domestic residences. 84 Such information was enabling and helped me justify why my poems blend the secular, domestic world with the spiritual, sacred one. Poems are, after all, both ‘a brilliant vibrating interface between the human and the non-human’, as well as ‘the stuff of ordinary lives’. 85

Despite this justification for the presence of so many domestic spaces in my poems, the direction in which my writing went nevertheless made me think deeper

83 Alistair Moffat, p. 127.
84 Ronald Hutton, pp. 100-02.
into the distance between authorial intention and actual outcome. How possible is it to complete a project directly in line with authorial intention and to what extent does spontaneous creation take hold? My experience of physical liminal space and the research I had done into the formation of space found itself expressed through everyday scenarios, various descriptions of heartache, and, as Tajinder Hayer detailed in my Post-Confirmation Review on 27 September, 2018, as an ‘archaeology of domesticity’.

To help settle my own questions, I decided to go back and find the poems on which the shift in subject matter hinged. ‘Glitter’ was the first poem in which I noticed domesticity and the idea of a liminal domestic space. Written in the form of a letter to the future tenant of the speaker’s current flat, the poem explores the concept of history and parallel worlds within a shared and, due to the nature of tenancies, transitory domestic space.

Dear Future Occupant, apologies for the collection of hairline scratches on the wall beside the front door. Some days, I carried far too much with me and couldn’t fit through.

Also for the ripped wallpaper in the bedroom that refused to tack back up. I would avoid double-sided tape and its claims to lift from any surface cleanly.

You will probably find dried flower petals in the back of your closet and down between the slats of the hardwood. That puddle of blue candle wax on the rim of the bathtub will never come off.

Good luck with the loose toilet seat in the middle of the night and the buzzer outside that screeches like a stuck bat. Both will try, multiple times, to shave the skin from your soul.

And if you are braver than I, climb up to that nailed cabinet high in the kitchen wall. For all we know, it holds a lost Degas, Mr. Tumnus’s stone heart, or leads to the shower stall next door.

When you are done the exploration, having met the White Witch or worse, a naked neighbour, and you land back

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Comment made by Tajinder Hayer in my Post-Confirmation Review on 27 September, 2018 via Skype link.
on the kitchen floor, the soles of your feet will most likely pick up a dust of glitter.

I tried for weeks after Easter to sweep those stubborn flecks into the bin but they took root in the grouted crevices and there was nothing I could do. Apologies, again, for your newly shining tread.

The poem details an intimacy with a domestic space, mirrored by the use of contained stanzas that are all end-stopped, that is being passed on to someone as somewhere unfamiliar and not yet made into a home. The speaker knows this place, what makes it tick, what will and won’t work for the next tenants, and what they can maybe do better than she did while she was there. There is also the implication that others have left their own mark on the same space, who knew more about the space than the speaker currently does. The nailed cabinet was there prior to her and even she doesn’t know what it contains. The poem works to show how we pass on both the intimacy and the mystery of a space as well as the possibility it invites for speculation and slight trepidation (why did they nail the cabinet shut in the first place?). The idea of climbing through the nailed cabinet to find a naked neighbour, while adding a touch of humour to the poem, also adds a more sinister tone to the piece; this speaker, and whoever comes after, is open to that same vulnerability. Even within spaces with which we are familiar, there is the chance for something else, some other presence, to encroach on what we know and into where we feel safe. The ‘dust of glitter’ the speaker leaves behind also suggests that one can never truly erase herself from a particular space; we add layers to shared spaces that we leave for others to dig through and discover. ‘Glitter’ includes the idea of parallel worlds layered on top of each other, only a nailed cabinet away, of living our lives alongside the ‘dust’ others have left behind, and of how we pass on space to those who come after us. However, it is also a poem that introduces a divergence in the theme and subject matter of my work. While the liminal is still present, it manifests itself not through the mention of anything divine but through a space entirely domestic. The following final chapter will negotiate further with divergences away from authorial intention to demonstrate how the creative process is its own liminal area.

87 The mention of Mr. Tumnus and the White Witch pays homage to Narnia, which is also just a wardrobe door, another threshold, away.
Chapter Six
A Journey Interrupted: The Liminal Nature of Poetic Composition

The formal research necessitated by my creative practice has shown me how liminal space is shaped and enclosed by poetic structure, how that structure encourages a phenomenological response in the reader that forges a deeper connection with the work, and how a poem, due to this response, becomes much more than its two-dimensional presence on the page. However, my creative practice taught me something the formal research never could, which is that the creative process is itself a liminal area subject to change, divergence, and surprise. While returning to the root of domesticity in my poems, I noticed that they grew increasingly personal; I realised that my poems were exploring liminal space through the lens of my own experiences and emotions. They began to explore the fragility of human relationships, the distances we can feel even when standing next to someone we love, and how we attempt to close those distances even if only through daydreams. This isn’t to say that my later poems stopped exploring liminality from other angles: ‘Human’, ‘Baptism’, and ‘Babble’ were written around the same times as ‘Hill Snow’, ‘Nightfall’, ‘Origami’, and ‘Packing’. Domestic and interpersonal details do show up more frequently in the later poems, but they do not altogether abandon the shaping of liminality through more distanced subjects. As with ‘Glitter’, ‘Hill Snow’ is the poem in which I first recognized the inclusion of interpersonal aspects in my work.

Last night as we slept, exhausted from our latest bout of make-up sex, your body apologising the way you can’t,

snow fell across the Lammermuirs, thickening the rind of ice already grown hard and deep on even the lowest hills, the way

our bodies, heaped under a duvet too thin for the season, shaped strata of elbows and breath, my back to your front.

Though I was the first this morning to see the fresh fall, sheep on those hills had seen it hours before, their sleep-heavy steps into the depth of new white helped half by dawn, half by moonlight, and while we dozed, unsure of the same old truce made between us, they nosed at the ice, the small scent of grass and early buds beneath. They hold out for spring.

In keeping with my fascination with form, ‘Hill Snow’ uses unrhymed tercets of varying line lengths. I found, while revising the poem, that the stanza structure finds a mirror not only in the strata of ice formed on the hills, but also the physical and emotional state of the couple. They are pressed ‘back to front’, seemingly close
again after a night of making up, but the presence of three lines suggests the ‘same old truce’; there is still something between them that won’t be calmed and perhaps can’t be solved. As with ‘Longniddry Bents’, whose couplets imply an inevitable pairing and perhaps the speaker’s hope that all will be well, the tercets in ‘Hill Snow’ put the reader into a mindset of three: there are two people in the poem, but there is still something off and uneven. I also noticed that the structure of the poem both complements and contradicts the subject. The speaker very much wants to ‘hold out for spring’, for the thaw of everything wrong in the relationship, but the form does not allow this to happen. While the stanzas ‘shape strata’, the third line will always be present in the form, implying that whatever problem exists for the figures in the piece will remain. In this way, the form undercuts the speaker’s hope.

After discovering the presence not only of domestic spheres in the poems but also the melding of both interpersonal and intrapersonal details with the discussion of liminality the poems create, I began to wonder what understanding my writing practice and experience could contribute to the knowledge of how poems are written. What does it mean for a poem to diverge from its intended path and how does one justify the shift?

Once again, I turn to Lyn Hejinian for answers. In ‘The Rejection of Closure’, Hejinian states that ‘words are not equal to the world, that a blur of displacement, a type of parallax, exists in the relation between things (events, ideas, objects) and the words for them—a displacement producing a gap’. As such, in an attempt to translate an experience, an idea, or a concept into words, a poet, through the inevitable shortcomings of words, produces and must negotiate with the gap present in the writing process itself. A gap implies room for possibility, for change, for unexpected experiences to sift into the work. The gap between words and the world could be interpreted as Lefebvre’s ‘mixed space’, where intention and spontaneous creation meet. As with any liminal space, the two mix so that a poem is not wholly what was intended but is not completely spontaneous either. Indeed, Hejinian also claims that ‘in the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion’ and, as poets, ‘we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things’. As with Donaghy’s theory of artistic apprehension, wherein the mind creates enclosures for itself to better understand what it perceives, the poet’s constant task is to use form, syntax, and structure to enclose the liminal space between what one means and what one can say. As the end of my own poem ‘Holding’ states, ‘every time, I almost reach [it], but not quite’. It is this negotiation not only with the space of the poem on the page, but with words and intention versus the actual outcome that renders the creative process itself a liminal space.

Ted Hughes provides further evidence to support Hejinian’s theory. He asserts that ‘the actual substance of [life], the material facts of it, embed themselves in us quite a long way from the world of words’, but it isn’t until we ‘set out to find words for some seemingly quite simple experience that we begin to realise what a huge gap there is between our understanding of what happens around us and inside us, and the words we have at our command to say something about it’. There is again a space between what we mean to say and what we can actually say given the words at our

89 Hejinian, ‘The Rejection of Closure’.
90 ‘Holding’ is on page 68 of this thesis.
91 Strong Words, p. 153.
disposal. Within the gap lies the freedom those words need to come as close to (or, in some cases, as far from) the original intention as possible. This gap produces an ultimate failure of intention despite whatever success the poem as it appears on the page may achieve: what is truly intended cannot translate completely into the work. As Hughes continues, ‘words are tools, learned late and laboriously and easily forgotten, with which we try to give some part of our experience a more or less permanent shape outside ourselves’. Unfortunately, ‘they are unnatural, in a way, and far from being ideal for their job’.  

This is, however, no cause for despair and does not mean that every poem is destined to fail the intention that drives it. Rather, through the form the words adopt, that intention is appropriated, filtered through the experiences and words at our disposal, and turned into something far more useful and lasting. In this way, the creative process is much like the poems it produces: both are driven by intention, appropriated either by the demands of the words or the interpretations of the reader, and are carried forward in this new light, not quite the same as before or as intended but nonetheless for having been realised in a different way. By extension, the creative space is also akin to the stone circles that linger in the background of my work. It, like the stones, has intention behind it, but through the appropriation of experience, the ultimate failure of words to bridge the gap between our minds and our pens, and, in the case of the stones, the use of their original structure to suit the needs and beliefs of succeeding generations, both are turned into something other and perhaps better. In the end, though intention is not abandoned, it ceases to matter as much as the finished, remaining product. This is how, as the stone circles already are, a poem comes to be a thing made through time to become a space held in time. To revisit a quote by Wendell Berry from Chapter One, ‘part of the nature of a form seems to be that it is communal—that it can be bequeathed and inherited, that it can be taught, not as an instance (a relic), but as a way still usable’. The poem, constructed through time on a foundation of the poet’s intention, becomes a physical space on the page through the form it uses that then allows for reader interpretation and appropriation long after the poet (and her intentions) are gone.

It is also Wendell Berry who provides additional hope for the failure of words to exactly match intention. In his essay ‘Poetry and Marriage: The Use of Old Forms’, Berry claims that form gives ‘an opening, a generosity toward possibility’ and states that ‘a certain awesome futurity[…]is the inescapable condition of word-giving’. Poets ‘speak into no future that [we] know[…]but into one that is unknown[…]and that it is unknown requires [a poet] to be generous toward it, and requires [that] generosity to be full and unconditional’. ‘Unconditional’ is an interesting word choice here: it implies that a poet’s approach to the future of any poem in progress, to the words we choose to use, must be, as far as possible, unhindered by preconceived notions of what the poem should be once it is finished. Berry continues by stating that ‘form serves us best when it works as an obstruction to baffle us and deflect our

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92 Strong Words, p. 153.
93 Wendell Berry, Standing by Words, p. 99.
94 Berry, pp. 93-94.
95 It is important to note that Berry’s use of the word ‘form’ applies to more traditional, restrictive verse forms than the more general use of the term I adopt through this essay. His essay is akin to T.S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, though he does admit on page 103 of Standing by Words that his theories must necessarily apply to free verse ‘if [he] is to respect [his] scheme, and if [he] acknowledge[s], as [he] certainly do[es], that much free verse is poetry’. For this reason, I feel this source remains a valid support to my theories.
intended course’ because ‘it may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey’. This is because ‘the world, the truth, is more abounding, more delightful, more demanding than we thought’ and suddenly ‘we are not where we through we were, nowhere that we could have expected to be’, but that too is okay because ‘it is expectation that would have kept us where we were’. Berry’s words align not only the creative process and the beauty of being lost in that process, but also reinforce another aspect of its liminality. Just as the borders of a poem on the page shape a threshold for the reader to cross, inspiring a shift in susceptibility along the way, the start of any poem and the use of any form is, for the poet, another kind of threshold. Berry’s words are a call to accept the possibility of the space, to allow one’s mind and words the freedom to shift according to the demands of the page. As a result, the creative process is itself a threshold that asks for a shift in the mindset of the poet, one that is ‘generous’ toward the future of the poem.

If my own creative practice has taught me nothing else, it has taught me to do just that. To end my discussion of creative liminality, there are two more poems from my own portfolio that I would like to explore. ‘Origami’ is a poem I could not have conceived of when I began the degree. It expresses an absolute yearning for a distance bridged not out of need to reach something other-worldly, but out of human loneliness and the want of someone close.

At night, when the dark is tremendous and the silence in my over-warm bedroom is fractured only by distant car alarms and occasional crickets, I feel this world for the largeness it is, slowly at first, and then all at once, like a pupil adjusting to new light. Every molecule of sea water and each blade of grass between us comes to me this way until the gap is too great and I am restless in my specific point on Earth. It is then that I fold the globe over on its invisible seams, once, twice, a thousand times until everything charted is a paper fan of longitude, the Atlantic no more than a stream I can easily jump across. I fall asleep already reaching for your hand.

The most noticeable aspect of ‘Origami’ is its form, which I slowly started to analyse as I revised the first few drafts of the piece. Shaped into one long stanza with staggered line lengths, the poem adopts the form of something folded and mimics the mental process the speaker goes through to soothe her loneliness at night. The long stanza implies the connection across the distance between the speaker and the owner of the hand she reaches for while the staggered edges mirror the folded ‘map’ she

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96 Berry, pp. 97-98.
creates in her head. In this way, the poem’s literal edges set up the speaker’s mental process while the overall shape of the poem shows her attempt to close a physical distance as she falls asleep. The single stanza, which again means ‘room’ in its literal translation, can also stand for the single physical space the speaker occupies. It can also suggest that the connection she reaches toward has already been made and cannot be broken; without a break in the structure of the words, the emotional, if not physical, distance between the speaker and the person she wants is already closed. The distance here is also something made palpable through isolation and silence. The speaker is alone in her ‘specific point on Earth’ in a room full of silence only alleviated by ‘distant’ car alarms and crickets, suggesting that she is not only alone in her room by also isolated from nearby society. The process she uses to close the gap between herself and the person she loves, someone very much alive given that ‘sea water’ and ‘grass’ separate them, is a comfort and allows her to sleep ‘already reaching’ for the hand on the other side of the Atlantic. The reader knows, however, that this is all delusion: when the speaker wakes, the distance, the silence, and the loneliness will be reinstated. However, this also prompts the knowledge that the speaker will repeat her process again and again, night after night. Her real work, as is the case with creative practice itself, is in the attempt to close the gap even if the result is only ever ‘reaching’.

The final poem up for discussion is ‘Packing’, which employs the voice of a speaker intentionally acting upon a change in course.

The weather is cruel to us today,  
the sky too blue for what must be done.

I’m loading the rest of my boxes,  
filled with the things I’ve decided to keep

from the remains of our everyday (my books,  
my mug, the bracelet you bought for my birthday)

into a van I’m not sure how to drive.  
You watch from the bedroom window, the slow,

careful process of packing us away.  
And there’s a smell that surrounds me, something

like cardboard warmed in the sun,  
the pink scent of tree blooms and bumblebees.

As seems to be the case with several of my poems, ‘Packing’ is arranged in unrhymed couplets, but the staggered line lengths provide a variation to the form that implies the broken relationship in the poem: one line stays behind while the other moves forward, one person gets ready to leave while the other stays and watches from inside. The distance, the rift, is complete and the longer line demonstrates the poem’s, and the speaker’s, eagerness to move on. While there is sadness in the poem, depicted by the speaker’s description of the blue sky as ‘cruel’, there is nevertheless hope at the end of the piece. The cardboard of her boxes is ‘warmed in the sun’, giving off a scent that is familiar and somehow comforting. The ‘pink scent of tree blooms and bumblebees’ implies spring, the creation and growth of new things. The implication
also takes the reader back to the end of ‘Hill Snow’, wherein the sheep ‘hold out for spring’. Here, ‘spring’ has arrived, though not quite in the way the speaker of ‘Hill Snow’ expected. Instead of a healed relationship, there is a move and a new start, a journey started alone but not without comfort and hope. Wendell Berry claims that ‘it may be that [...] form can be fulfilled only by a kind of abandonment to hope and to possibility, to unexpected gifts’, and that statement is certainly proven true in ‘Packing’. The speaker leaves with a literal gift, the bracelet her former partner gave her for her birthday, and is preparing to go on toward others, the ‘spring’ promised by the end of the poem. She takes a piece of the life she had intended with her but is prepared to move on toward the one that was created instead. However, this does not make the change in direction, the shift and appropriation of intention, or the starting of a new journey any less than a ‘gift’.

I began this degree with the intention to explore the shaping of liminal space through poetic structure and to demonstrate how, through that structure and the phenomenological response it inspires, a poem becomes much more than its appearance on the page. While I hope I have managed to fulfil this original intention, I have also discovered something entirely unexpected in the course of my work, which is that the creative process is itself liminal and subject to a great deal of spontaneity. The writing of the poems that follow has taught me, more than any formal research could, how to bend with the will of the words, how to negotiate with their inherent gaps, and how to blend my own intentions with what feels ‘right’ in individual poems. My poems are not what I thought they would become when I began, but they are nonetheless for the divergences they adopt. They are the answer to the question I wasn’t aware I’d asked, the process through which I wrote them the destination of a journey I didn’t know I was on. But, as my mother taught me on all those drives years ago, and as my creative practice and the writing of these poems has shown me, sometimes the most surprising, exciting, and worthwhile avenues of exploration and inquiry are the result of interrupted journeys, not the roads intended but the ones at first unseen that nevertheless lead toward familiar roads home.

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97 Berry, p. 96.
Blackbird

In this blue hour, there is a bird
daring enough to try and wake
the gods, though nothing moves
but the air through its lungs
and no world is noticed
beyond the focus of its song.

Each phrase lifts the quiet
of the almost-dawn, silence
pooling between intervals
in an unbearable hush, sweeping
down alleyways and avenues,
past rats gnawing on old pizza crusts.

If all we heard was this,
small songs down silent streets,
how loud the break of day
would be, how almighty the crack
of Sulis’s neck as she hefts
her bright face over the skyline.
The Bell Ringer

The first sounds I hear each morning are blackbirds and robins, each species working their syrinxes to greet the new day. Their songs mix with the bells, six chimes, that ring from the tower of our village church.

It’s difficult to tell which comes first, the birds or those bells, which of them perceives most keenly the spin of the earth and the sun’s breach over the horizon, and wakes to let the village know.

I try to track the passing for a while, which birds sing as I tidy the house and if the bells sound before the songs or vice versa, but everything turns to white noise eventually and I forget to listen for the gulls’ thin screech at noon, the patient cooing of wood pigeons around three. I roast beef and root vegetables to a backdrop of hunting sparrowhawks, but let the TV play through them while I eat.

It’s not until later, after I’ve locked the doors and settled down to sleep, that I begin to hear these sounds again, the soft purr of a train farther on, the calls of branching owls, and the town church bells counting to twelve.

I think about him then, climbing the stairs to the bell house with only an hour between ascents to move his life on, who cannot get lost in the flow of a day. He pulls the ropes one last time and waits for morning, the first blackbird.
Recognition

I saw you this morning as I walked through hurried foot traffic, my iPod muted to hear the birdsong, a Costa latte burning beyond its paper cup into my palm.

You were a glister on the corner of Dalry Road and Distillery Lane that barely held the light, but you caught my eye nonetheless and I stopped, aware that I’ve made this mistake before with always the same result: rushing to you, grabbing your shoulder, apologising to the person you aren’t. So, I looked again and, of course, you were gone, absorbed by the crowd or never there at all, another shuffle of random genes that are almost and never yours.

I adjusted my coffee and crossed the street.
Evensong

There’s a silence in the November night
that we don’t break as we walk to St. Mary’s,
Sarah and I, she to light a candle
in memory of her grandmother’s soul,
by now prayed free of purgatory,
and me in need of company and fresh air.

We slip between the church’s carved front doors,
careful not to let wood-creak disturb
the practiced hush of a congregation deep
in evening prayers. Sarah moves slowly
toward the flicker of the memorial alcove
but I stay still and take in the atmosphere.

At the end of the aisle a man kneels
by the altar, his eyes cast up to the cross,
lit from behind by a spotlight placed just so.
Beside me, a woman takes notes from Psalms,
the margins of her Bible already full,
inked with revelations and sermon quotes.

When Sarah returns, her candle burning bright,
transporting her prayers elsewhere, we leave
and emerge into the dusking world outside:
a spaniel chases a ball, an old couple bicker
at the bus stop over fares, and a robin high
in a darkened oak serenades the streetlamp glow.
Gethsemane

I sometimes think of him the night before,
after the last of the bread had been broken
and the disciples slumped low in their seats.

He may have eyed the remnants of the meal,
oily crumbs and spilled wine, and stepped outside
to be alone for a while, neither human or divine.

Perhaps he heard the life of the city,
mule carts tumbling from cobble to cobble,
merchants hawking their wares of fish and honey.

I see him bend for a fistful of sand to rub
the grit over his palms, removing leftover oil.
He starts walking, looks back once, and then runs.
Confluence

Around the waters of Iceland, fishermen learn to cast where the cold water meets the warm and fish of all kinds seek a surface full of phytoplankton and light, an aurora of bioluminescence luring both men and animals to their places of convergence as predator and prey.

I watch from the pier as a novice spans the dark swathes of ocean to those sequined patches of neon, his boat birthing new spasms of shimmer along the way. The fish who feed there, swallowing flecks of light whole, skim their scales against the break between water and air just as the fisherman steadies his arm to release a line. Though nothing stops moving, the fish and the man seem suspended there, each leaning further into the realm of the other and, when they break through, how those mixed waters bloom.
Green Thumbs

I’m shopping for kalettes, the new hybrid between kale and Brussels sprouts horticulturists have germinated from the twisted genes of both parent plants for the dieting elite in need of a new trend, but consider searching for something else as I reach their position on the vegetable shelf, tucked snug in plastic right beside the courgette noodles and cauliflower rice, because my father’s voice pipes up from its seat behind my left ear: if God intended it to be that way, it would have been from the start, so I continue down the aisle and fill my cart instead with what God, or whoever, probably intended: red peppers sprayed a brighter hue and Pink Lady apples pulled from chemical trees, but there’s no time to think about any of that, only about finishing the shop and paying for this week’s haul, hardly noticing, as I press my thumb to it, how the green on the ‘Enter’ button has long worn away.
Aubade

I do not need strictures housed in limestone
and granite, contrived teleological doctrines,
or the crawl of old metaphors through any book
to find my gods, to convince me they exist.

This is enough: daybreak on white frost,
the sun pushed poppy red into view,
and the specific pitch of my living breath
spanning the break between birdsongs.
Iona

‘...this is no Evidence that a Man is not on the very Brink of Eternity, and that the next Step won’t be into another World.’—Jonathan Edwards

When the villagers tell you not to trust the ground on their water-logged island because what looks like solid earth is more than likely not, listen

or else end up like this: stuck up to the hips in mud so thick the pull of it as you struggle only moves you farther down. Eventually,

held tight by the depths of the land in a field three miles from town, you relax and are simply grateful it isn’t raining.

If only it was always this easy to fall through the strata of things, to have what waits there accept the crush of your presence, the pressure of your wandering feet. And you know you’ll get free and when you do, whatever dwells in the dark can keep your other shoe.
Emperor Penguins

We sit in silence after a quiet dinner,  
a couple through with fighting for the night.  
The TV lulls us to a kind of calm as it explains  
the habits of Emperor penguins in the Arctic,  
how they share the burden of hunting, deciding  
which one will stay behind to care for the young.  

Another couple, caught candidly mid-laugh,  
sits dusted and perched on our mantle,  
captured forms sharing a joke I used to know.  
Her legs circle his waist from behind, wild hair  
blowing toward his face, but he smiles all the same  
toward a camera that broke ten years ago.  

The photo was taken ten years before that  
when we were both heavier, healthier,  
and sweating from sun and tequila shots.  
This living room smells like stale steak pie,  
but I still taste the sea on my tongue,  
the fresh sting of lime, an aftertaste of flying.  

*Emperor penguins will never fly,*  
*but they survive nonetheless.*  
*Once their egg is born, the female*  
*returns to the sea to hunt, leaving*  
*the male to guard and protect the shell.*  
*He waits for more than two months.*  

In that time with all the cold,  
he yields up his body weight to warm  
the chick and throws his back to the snow.  
What a luxury that would be, to feel yourself thinning  
to the bone for love, yet trusting, all the while,  
your partner to come back and nourish you.
His last passengers mumble their thanks and stumble from the bus onto the pavement. They pick their way through the snow and ice in the direction they know home waits.

Without bothering to dim the main lights, he navigates the familiar streets, turns right at the primary school and continues straight, past the Catholic church, its bell tolling three.

Some nights, when there is fuel enough, he skips the left turn toward the motorway and drives the long way through the rest of town, slowing as he comes to Millar Loan, his old house.

He wants a look at the squatters inside, but there is no one awake or restless in the night, and the building soon passes him by. The road carries him onward past the Tesco, Superdrug, the post office, and cemetery. At its gates, left open for drunks and grief too sharp for daylight, he almost stops, but the gauge hovers on empty, so he turns back toward the wide echo that waits with the overflow bins and air compressors, the parking bay meant just for his bus, that wider emptiness, all metal and space.
Waiting

Every order has been filled
and the customers are drunk,
their sweaty, liquor-slick hands
gripping glasses that glint like amber
or diamonds caught in the wrong light.

The need of my satisfied, I return
to my art of standing by in hired uniform,
my face giving nothing away.
This is my day job: measuring
Absolut and Captain, Patron and Jaeger,
eyeballing the heads on pints of Guinness
and counting down the minutes
until I can board the next bus home.
It's not that I dislike this work:
I know how much Angostura makes

or breaks a Singapore Sling, that the last squeeze
of lime over vodka accents the liquid’s sting.
It's the alchemy these people understand:
blood turned to booze turned to abandon
that neither guides nor restrains but allows

their minds to find everything the world hides
away, and no matter how many whiskeys
I down, the spirits who wait to whisper
such secrets, who deal in all things unseen,
pay no attention to me.
Infancy

I work two jobs to keep us going,  
9 to 5 at ASDA scanning bananas  
and haddock fillets, then 7 ’til 2 A.M  
pulling pints of Guinness and IPAs  
behind the bar at the Ghillie Du.

By the time I get home, you’re asleep  
and I’m exhausted, and there won’t be time  
again tomorrow to teach you how to say  
my name instead of the sitter’s, to feed  
you dinner myself and tuck you in.

The only time I have with you is this:  
visits after 3 A.M when my head, too full  
of gas bills and problems with the Punto’s brakes,  
won’t let me sleep, and I tiptoe to your crib  
to watch you breathe, smooth and unworried.

I hope you feel me next to you, curled  
around the bed’s wooden frame, wondering  
what you dream about without a knowledge  
of bills or brakes, where your spotless mind  
takes you once you are gone for the night.

Perhaps a realm the rest of us have forgotten,  
somewhere lovely and hidden that rings  
like a glass bell struck in some high place,  
that sound flowing downward like water,  
the ripple rolling toward you where you wait.

Or maybe nothing greets you at the gates of sleep,  
no mirrored versions of this world or portals  
to any other, just a blissful dark that comes  
to claim you with no dreams, no nightmares.  
Regardless, you take me there.
Captured

A man is feeding himself to a shark
in the background of my vacation photo.

The shark is suspended by its tail,
all fibreglass, paint, and plaster.

There’s no real danger in its jaws
and the man has made his child laugh.

He hangs in my living room,
an uninvited but harmless guest,

and I like to think that I, like him,
am also part of someone’s décor,

my left arm in Tokyo, the back of my head
in Cape Town, my face a smudge at the edge

of the camera’s true aim, a ghost
in a memory I did not make.
Baptism

My little niece cries at the shock
of cool water rinsing her small head,
but the priest continues praying,
adding a second handful of holy water
for good measure, for the demons who hide.

Afterwards, while I hold the baby
and try to distinguish her smell
over the damp combination of degraded lignin
and stale wood polish, my uncle decides
that he too should be reborn.

An altar boy hauls the false floor
away from the baptismal pool
and helps the priest wade in, fully robed,
to bless the water with hands spread wide,
lifting and rippling the liquid.

My uncle is dipped with care,
like a half-formed candle into a vat of wax,
each layer meant to smooth the blotches
on the ones below until he emerges
whole and new and gleaming.

I don’t want to, but as my uncle is drenched
and the priest chants, I think of my house:
the laundry left in piles, the kitchen I’ll clean	onight while nursing a glass of red wine,
dunking plates into water slowly murking with grime.
Chaos Theory

This universe is ruled by chaos and stars, by one god or many who pass down decrees of fate like children exchanging secrets in whisper-down-the-lane: by the time they reach us, our lives are faulty, translations of providential design transcribed by wayward angels never taught the orthography then read to us backwards in a tangled, ancient tongue.

And we, made of only strings and softened clay, shape road maps and desire paths through the jumble, praying as we go to our separate, similar skies that all our man-made lines will guide us back to some grand original intent, a plan that makes sense, but the disorder is wide and the gods whisper forever.
Babble

It took only seconds for us to misunderstand each other, to forget our mutual vocabulary and stare, dumb, at a mouth whose speech we no longer recognised. Imagine entire conversations halted like that, the vernacular changed to something foreign mid-sentence and the speakers instantly unable to comprehend, all because of pride and a tower, an old god high on His power and afraid of touch who conjured our sudden and lonely ignorance. No wonder that tonight, under these sickly fluorescent lights, I do not understand his strange tongue. I repeat the word ‘gone’ until it goes odd and wrong, a relic from the languages we’ve left for dead, the syllable too oiled to find purchase in my head. Even as I look at your body, still warm and dressed like you were for sleep, I dream of the world we forgot, where everything spoke and we understood it all.
Pearl

There is nowhere convenient to lay down this grief, no inconspicuous spot to leave it and let it finally rest; everyone is tired of my complaints, how I retell the same sad story with only a few words to describe the ache: I know the aggregate used to pave the way and where the wrong roads lead. Instead, I hold it in my hands and shift its subtle heft from palm to palm, the surface worried smooth and warming to my touch. I know it well: the colour mixed like marble, the balance of its dead weight, how it catches but will not hold the light.
Longniddry Bents

We walk along the beach at sunset, which should be a cliché but isn’t.

There’s something wrong between us again and we’ve come here to be apart.

He walked off as soon as the car was parked, shaping a path of footprints along the wet edge where the waves meet tide-smoothed sand. I can see him farther off, running his thumb over razor clam shells before hurling them into the surf one by one. The old power station looms across the Firth of Forth, a beached warship set upon by seagulls and seaweed.

From where I stand, it makes me feel small. But the barely risen crescent moon rests between its two great towers and the sea curls up toward the heave of certain gravity.

I think there’s alchemy to a pull like that, an entire planet of water striving to become part of the sky, currents meeting and mixing, outdoing each other to end here at our feet.

Both of us listen to the aftermath of that collide, the soft sizzle of sea froth against the shoreline.
Siren

They aren’t for me tonight,
those distant, piercing wails
that filter through the treeline
edging my property from the street
just beyond, bound for whatever
situation they’ve been called toward
that has nothing to do with me,
but I’m aware of how close I’ve come
to being the reason for such sounds.

So close that I could hear them in my head,
tornadoes funnelling from the heavens
toward towns that hadn’t been warned,
missiles fired into the night sky before
shelter could be found, a solitary woman
shrieking from the rocks, luring herself to danger.
Scattered

I was asleep when the wind blew in,
upsetting the urn resting on the windowsill.
Thinking it was the cat swatting
a glass off the counter, I ignored the crash.

So I did not see the air dipping
to the floorboards, reanimating your ash
so that it danced to the dark holes
under the sofas, behind the fake potted fern.

But this morning as I lifted you
into a take-away container for safekeeping,
handful after chalky handful until
I was left pinching at the floorboards for the rest

of your earthly dust, I knew
there are parts of you lost to the house for good,
that as I sleep tonight, your hands
and heart will filter through the moonlight,

coming to rest on my eyelashes
and touching any exposed skin. No matter
that I’ll continue to vacuum and clean;
from today, I will always breathe you in.
Glitter

Dear Future Occupant, apologies for the collection of hairline scratches on the wall beside the front door. Some days, I carried far too much with me and couldn’t fit through.

Also for the ripped wallpaper in the bedroom that refused to tack back up. I would avoid double-sided tape and its claims to lift from any surface cleanly.

You will probably find dried flower petals in the back of your closet and down between the slats of the hardwood. That puddle of blue candle wax on the rim of the bathtub will never come off.

Good luck with the loose toilet seat in the middle of the night and the buzzer outside that screeches like a stuck bat. Both will try, multiple times, to shave the skin from your soul.

And if you are braver than I, climb up to that nailed cabinet high in the kitchen wall. For all we know, it holds a lost Degas, Mr. Tumnus’s stone heart, or leads to the shower stall next door.

When you are done the exploration, having met the White Witch or worse, a naked neighbour, and you land back on the kitchen floor, the soles of your feet will most likely pick up a dust of glitter.

I tried for weeks after Easter to sweep those stubborn flecks into the bin, but they took root in the grouted crevices and there was nothing I could do. Apologies, again, for your newly shining tread.
Bolognese

I’m focused on crisping the edges of minced sausage when he comes in and tells me that he could have died on his way home from work: a narrow B road well past dusk and a tractor on the wrong side.

His small Suzuki barely missed it and left an inch of tyre on the tarmac as proof.

_The thing didn’t even slow down_, he says while popping a beer open and stopping the overflow with his mouth. He comes nearer to stir the meat and wave away the steam.

His smell like deep pine woods and sweat, cigarette smoke clinging to his collar.

_I’m okay though_, he continues, settling his hand on the small of my back, leaning in to kiss my temple.

He plays with the stray hairs fallen from my plait then goes to the snug, turns on the TV.

I breathe deep and continue breaking pasta into boiling water, lowering the heat under the blackened meat before adding roasted tomatoes and a splash of good red wine,

wishing, as it all reduces and the silence grows, that he was really home for dinner, that it had been so.
Transit

I don’t know what I mean by this,
only I was told today that you
have moved on and I wasn’t there
to see you off, the distance between us
far too far to be spanned quickly
by anything other than love or thought,
and as I listened for the echo already
emerging from your unoccupied space,
waiting for your voice to ricochet
back, NASA, eager to know more
about that huge black, settled a world-
hungry satellite into orbit that will search
for another habitable somewhere, passing
across so many red dwarves, listening
as only it can, for the muffled pulse of stars.
Skype

It takes a minute for the image to focus, but the signal has a long way to go.

Your face slowly develops across my screen, scrambled pixels calmed into eyes and mouth,

which are exactly as I remember and not. It seems that death and wherever you are have been kind: you have a certain glow. And there is so much I’d like to know.

But the answers can wait. For now, this is enough, your face in front of mine, the distance erased and the two of us sharing something like the same space.
Holding

It’s right about now, sitting on a train bound for Carlisle where the signalling system has once again turned the rails ahead into high-speed blind spots, that I start wishing for a greater gift of foresight, a third eye opened and shifting toward the hours approaching so I could have seen the fault over breakfast this morning and boarded an earlier service.

But this is not the first time I have wanted for this same power: there was the morning after the sleepless dark that brought your death, when I stared at a dry croissant my stomach would not accept in that cramped hotel breakfast nook (I refused to go back upstairs to collect our things) and cursed that I did not see it coming the day before when you walked in the present tense.

Even today, riding toward the inevitable delay, I think how everything would have been different had we both known our forward momentum would end with such a sudden jolt, a parting so sharp I’ve been left in a pattern of constant holding, trying to press close enough for some sense of you lingering here still. Every time, I almost reach you, but not quite.
Origami

At night, when the dark is tremendous and the silence in my over-warm bedroom is fractured only by distant car alarms and occasional crickets, I feel this world for the largeness it is, slowly at first, and then all at once, like a pupil adjusting to new light. Every molecule of sea water and each blade of grass between us comes to me this way until the gap is too great and I am restless in my specific point on Earth. It is then that I fold the globe over on its invisible seams, once, twice, a thousand times until everything charted is a paper fan of longitude, the Atlantic no more than a stream I can easily jump across. I fall asleep already reaching for your hand.
The house across the street from ours burned down when I was twelve.

We would read in the papers that the basement ignited first, faulty wires frayed to flame.

Next went the throw pillows, the fat leftover on the stove, the antique tables.

The blaze worked leisurely through the rooms, a guest who handled every object within reach until everything was alight. But the Gibsons made it out in time. Mom and I watched them the night of the fire, both of us clutching mugs of hot tea. The hustle of the firefighters, the heavy ribbons of water, the nervous pace of the Gibsons’ daughter, no older than I.

She walked her front lawn in bunny slippers, her body silhouetted against all the orange light.

Across the street, I held my mug up to the window and tried to tell which was which, smoke or steam.

Burn
Chimera

I read somewhere that most people, when faced with a dark hallway or blackened room, allow their minds to populate the space to alleviate that sense of the unknown. We fashion ghosts from the shadows, undead wraiths from the corners we can’t see, all manner of things that go bump in the night, to make the dark, if not familiar, less solitary.

We crave company of even the worst kind. Our minds, to help us make sense of the black, oblige.

***

You and I are a windowless room at 2 A.M and I cannot find the light. I hear you move through the black lava night, taking our ending with you. I am alone with an abyss and thoughts.

This is how we end: we never fought. We just unravelled like worn cloth and neither could be bothered to stitch us back up, or (and let’s be honest) we did fight and the creature I summon from the depths of us looks like you in bed with the woman who came before me, the two of you tangled and sharing heat. Her face looks like mine, when I was happy.

Either way, the darkness has an answer, a body I can almost stomach, not familiar, but less solitary.
Hypnic

It’s as I’m falling asleep that my body
loses touch with reality and begins
slipping off the edge of the earth.

Or so it seems. I catch myself most nights,
my brain conscious enough to respond
to the feeling of falling, and I realise

where I am, that there was no misstep
off an uneven curb, no skydive without
a parachute, only my mind playing tricks

again. But there are rare nights
when the jerk does not come in time
and, though I know it isn’t real, the slide

quickens in pace to free-fall momentum
until I break my ankle off the ledge
of that curb, the ground below comes rushing

up or, worse, the direction of gravity moves
the opposite way and I rise above Earth,
pushed up through the atmosphere until

I find space only theorised about, realms
no book could contain and no prayers can reach,
just a void of brilliance, all colour and light.
Timbuktu

In actuality, an ancient city
in northern Mali suffering
from desertification and draught,

but for me, the distant, threatening
nowhere my mother would send
versions of her daughter she didn’t like.

The five-year-old running a trolley wheel
up the back of an ankle to make her leave
the grocery story early and furious with me,

the ten-year-old throwing a tantrum
in the shop fitting rooms after dismissing
every outfit she picked for me with care,

the fourteen-year-old up texting
after midnight who had not studied
for a history exam at eight the next morning.

All of these were sent packing, pointed
in a direction and told to keep walking
until they got to Timbuktu, or else

wrapped with haphazard care in brown paper
and twine then shipped without return
postage if they refused to go willingly.

I think about these other selves sometimes
and wonder if they ever got there,
if somewhere in time, doubles of me wander

the sand dunes and play through the monuments,
phantoms the locals hear laughing at night,
still young, forever causing trouble.
Eavesdrop

He sits in the front room in half light
with a glass of Glenfiddich on the rocks.

Head bowed, elbows resting on his knees,
he whispers down into the amber spirit,
his makeshift rosary, the words already weak
and stale when they meet the empty air
between his lips and the tumbler,
but the liquid accepts his sins nonetheless.

The syllables slip between the ice cubes
and settle on the bottom of the glass,
dirty sediment passing through the whiskey
as easily as his words filter through our thin walls.

I listen to my father falter and swirl his drink.
He sighs, then knocks it back.
Red Leaves

We haven’t spoken in months,
and I’m not sure why. You’re angry,
I’m stubborn but neither is a good excuse.

And, as always, you’re everywhere:
I saw you this morning, boarding a train
bound for the airport, making your usual escape,
then again later in the day, buying coffee
from the kiosk at the corner of the Meadows,
where everything served is vegan and gluten-free.

At night, I hear your footsteps
through the house, wandering our rooms,
triple-checking locks and switches so the dark is safe.

There are days I don’t see you,
when my mind is tired of the ghosts
it conjures for its own sake, but this is no reprieve:

I see you most often in autumn
leaves that underline my walk to work,
vivid as passion and heat, or so much pulled blood.
Hill Snow

Last night as we slept, exhausted
from our latest bout of make-up sex,
your body apologising the way you can’t,

snow fell across the Lammermuirs,
thickening the rind of ice already grown
hard and deep on even the lowest hills, the way

our bodies, heaped under a duvet
too thin for the season, shaped strata
of elbows and breath, my back to your front.

Though I was the first this morning
to see the fresh fall, sheep on those hills
had seen it hours before, their sleep-heavy steps

into the depth of new white
helped half by dawn, half by moonlight,
and while we dozed, unsure of the same old truce

made between us, they nosed
at the ice, the small scent of grass
and early buds beneath. They hold out for spring.
Nightfall

‘And while our souls negotiate there,  
we like sepulchral statues lay’  
--John Donne

As I lie down to sleep, I take stock  
of my body, the gentle twitch of my muscles  
settling in for the night, the white hum of my heart  
pulling blood up from my toes and pushing it  
down through the avenues of my veins, a miniature  
moon the ocean in me obeys. I listen to my breath  
in the dark, the swell of my chest against the duvet.

I take these small measurements to sink deep  
into the well of myself; I always travel far  
in my dreams, past the specific structure of my bones  
and the borders of my skin, to wherever it is  
I can see you again. A place with no name  
and nothing defined, just a great in-between  
that exists in our minds. You find me there

most nights though your body sleeps  
a true ocean away and I haven’t touched you  
in weeks. I wonder if you look for me  
in daylight, the way I search for you.  
If, disappointed, you sink deep into the black  
holes of yourself and prepare to take flight.  
I wonder if you, too, live for the night.
Crash

Talking to you again, late at night while my husband sleeps, is like placing my palm just close enough to open flames, a burn I know I should pull away from but to which I edge slowly closer.

And I know how this will end, the dizzy euphoria I get from danger, the pulse-quickening thrill of moving too fast, not bothering to look twice, the life I’ve built exchanged as collateral.
Escape Plan

The neighbours can hear me through our apartment walls.
I know because I can hear them.
The woman next door calls her mum every night at 9. She complains about bus schedules, her husband’s job.
He, insomniac, reheats old tea and upsets every pot to scramble eggs at 3 A.M.
They both whistle while making coffee, but stay quiet when making love,
and they know something you don’t. Whenever you’re out (mostly to buy cigarettes and Jack) and I’m alone, I call my family, my friends, anyone who can help me plot my way home: how I will leave and when.
Returning

I forgot the details of this place:
the light that flickers between red
and amber at all times, confusing traffic
as to whether it should stay or go;

the single gravestone at the crossroads
by my old house that no longer bears
a name or a date, just layers of graffiti
that slide from red to blue to green to black.

But it’s not these nuances, the small
marks on a landscape I still somehow know
by heart, so much as the way the birch trees
groan when a thunderstorm gathers close.

I forgot the way they bend and blow,
how the red oaks and silver bells bow low
to the pressures of colliding fronts,
subjects in deference to their deity.
Beautiful, Breakable

I still think about him when it snows or when I hear about a multi-car pile-up on Route 42; something in me still cares that he is warm somewhere and safe.

Maybe he has learned to drive a little slower and has become more distant friends with his bottle of Jack. Maybe he knows now that he is beautiful, breakable, and has put down the knife and hidden the pills and stepped back from the balcony and has grown tired of the amperage a heart sends out just before it stops, his body’s constant convincing to let it live. He could be married by now, another kid on the way. I try not to let this thought hurt.

I still think about how beautiful we were and about how we broke; for some reason, I cannot let the body of us lie where it fell. I hold its hand in the cold and try to let go.
Packing

The weather is cruel to us today,
the sky too blue for what must be done.

I’m loading the rest of my boxes,
filled with the things I’ve decided to keep

from the remains of our every day (my books,
my mug, the bracelet you bought for my birthday)

into a van I’m not sure how to drive.
You watch from the bedroom window, the slow,
careful process of packing us away.
And there’s a smell that surrounds me, something

like cardboard warmed in the sun,
the pink scent of tree blooms and bumblebees.
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