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Wise Woman/Mad Woman

A Poetry Sequence

by

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Submitted in the Faculty of Music, Humanities and Media at the University of Huddersfield in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Research.

September 2020.

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/Mad Woman

I am letting go of fear, and sinking into bliss.

And if I want to throw nuts at you, I will.

If I want to wear nothing but a long, grey beard, I will,

I have shed fear as womb lining and flushed it away.

Neither saint nor virgin, but witch.

And if I want to ram red meat down your throat, I will.

And if I want to roll back my eyes and scream, I will,

with noose as a necklace, folk-dancing in flames.

Call me mad, call me fool, call me witch:

Holy Hell, eating juicy sweet sausage on Good Friday.

Alchemess

She follows me in a long white coat,
a net in one hand, a crook in the other.

When I am drowning, she dredges me up,
sucking saltwater from my lungs.

When my body is weak, she plucks out my soul,
and shoots fireworks into the cosmos.

When my soul is sick, she heals me,
sorcery shrinking mercury, feverish to cool.

When I'm lost, she's with me, in her long white coat,
sliding down my throat, a net in one hand, a crook in the other.

Wound

I cut my finger, and without thinking,
I stick it in my mouth.

The iron blood coats my tongue-
what compelled me to taste it?

An ancestral mutation,
deep-rooted in my brain?

I remember the first time I bled,
a teaspoon turned tub full- Bathory.

I grieved as I pulled the plug
and watched it glug- glug down the drain

but as I suck on this wincing wound,
what was lost, I have reclaimed.

NaGig

Blood drips onto crimson sheets.

I crouch like Sheela Na Gig —

'Emaciated Crone, Dead Mother— Watch over my rebirth!'

I throb within, kicking and fighting,

pain swelling to a roaring ache.

I crawl through sticky vernix, tearing

flesh, spitting blood from my mouth

and breech, soft body shedding my tough old skin,

my face a mirror, Sheela's glint-eyed grin.

Ostara Feast

I'm Rosemary, the bitter taste on your lips,
stuck in her leg, caught between your teeth.

I enter your blood through a needle,
your eyes dilating with every chunk

of flesh that melts on your tongue
bleeds down your chin.

I'm Rosemary- remember, her sharp pitiful
bleats, her knowing, bulging eyes.

Remember her throat- slit. Coat mottled with blood,
skinned for your pleasure- hairless and young.

Work your jaw, she is tough as old goat.

She was tender, but now, we catch in your throat.

The Apple hides a Pentagram

I used to be a believer.

At school, we would sing *Hosanna!*

A hundred pairs of lungs bellowing in unison.

I met Eve in The Children's Bible.

She made me crave apples.

I crunch them with relish, leaving teeth-marks in their flesh.

I take the sweet ones straight from the bowl,

and bake the sour in pies.

I will sample every variety, speaking in forked tongues

lapping up knowledge as fermented juice.

When I die, will I be tossed into the furnace

as a sinner, a harlot, a whore?

Can I be saved if I bellow Hosanna!

Though sovereignty runs through my core?

Lovers: Initiation

We were in France the day you asked me to be your wife.

The day before, the forest had boomed. The foliage rippled with gunshots.

A hind zipped through the bushes, spooked by the noise.

But that day, the canopy was quiet. I said

it was a good place for murder. Then you knelt down
and showed me the silver o- hole, and I slipped into it.

It tightened around me, a perfect fit,
starting as an itch, pulling at my skin.

The de-gloving began.

Flayed bare, you took me in your arms,
a single Shakespearean beast, our feet four cloven
hooves, hide covered us like a second skin.

And now we roam, with towering antlers and earthly womb.

As both the rutting stag and spritely hind, running
towards life.

Köttum tveim

When thoughts hung heavy on my shoulders,
not as the clichés of angel and devil,
but as two grey cats, sniping and snarling,
leaving long red gashes along my collar and neck,
I tamed them: indulging them as they sniffed my scent,
lacing a harness with flakes of fish.

And when they grew large and restless, I stooped
as they scrambled for space on my shoulders.
I slipped bridles over their heads, fangs grinding,
mouths bloody with anticipation.
I belt a war cry, they bolt
their alignment perfect, I drive them on.

Witch?

She comes down from Heaven,
and watches the pilgrims assemble,
grimacing as they lay down their tributes:
bottles, pentacles, talismans

She was the spinster on the back pew,
hunched over her bible, ignoring the stares
and whispers of the townsfolk.

She could hear their buckled boots jingle
outside her window while she knelt in evening prayer,
still muttering as they tore her away.

She cried 'Lord, have mercy!'
when they stripped her, and prayed for a miracle
to conceal the birth mark on her buttocks.

And when they strapped her to a chair,
knees to her chin, and pricked her -
she begged for blood.

She mumbled '*thou Lord art a buckler for me,
my glory, and the lifter up of mine head*' as they dragged
her back and forth, legs bowing, ankles twisting.

And when her head finally drooped, she saw the Him,

a torture-induced vision, begged His forgiveness,
and accepted the fate of a witch.

Imp

I topslice my skull, and lift the cranium,
set it down and remove the brain.

I place her on my lap,
my little imp, slimy and stinking.

I stroke her, wiping mucus off her back,
incanting as she suckles between my fingers.

My blood courses through her grooves like rivers,
she swells and plumps, growing strong.

And when she is full, she dances,
wagging her behind, and leaps back into her hollow bed.

I close the lid and feel her buzzing- little imp brain:
nourished and ready to play.

Labyrinth

The night is silent,
towering city walls close in.
This labyrinth is my home, and I walk it
with pricked ears, each corner a gamble.

Will a minotaur step out
from behind this billowing air vent
and gore me bloody?

And will the figure walking towards me
pull back his hood and show me his
unblinking eye?

I hide in the shadows as it comes,
and looks up- a woman with bright yellow eyes,
who hurriedly crosses the road.

And we slither and wind through this town,
hiding serpentine curls, eyes cast down,
Cursed, to inspire hatred
and make them hard as stone.

After the Devil Took My Feet*An Aftermath of The Red Shoes*

My bones are torch lilies,
bursting into bloom,
burning as I fall on the hospital floor.

I am the little girl from the stories,
watching my feet
dance south, into the night.

I drag myself with my hands,
the doctors arm a branch which I use to
pull myself up, biceps straining.

Fawn-like, I stumble
fall, and pull myself up again.
Gripping the nurse's twig arms
I hold fast and
Plié,

Demi plié.

Arabesque.

The hospital is a forest,
resin floor roughage
Where moss, leaves and twigs
gather on bloodied stumps.

As leaves and skin fuse, I

pirouette,

Jeté,

Assemblé,

Feet cracking, bones scraping together,

friction starting a forest fire

but I dance on, blood-shod and blistered

as the bright- white, sanitary UV beam

mimics the light of Polaris.

Hanged Woman

I am a map, and, brows furrowed,
you plot. Pencil
nib boring from point to point.

The graphite lines create a little diamond
which looks the same upside-down

You think it means something.
A deep-rooted feminine
energy written into my landscape.

So, you trample all over, craving connection.
Erratic. Zone to zone with rod outstretched.

Then you feel the blood-rush to the head,
and, arms raised, you praise The Goddess,
as crimson spreads across the page.

Death: A Ritual

I lay the bones out one by one, scrape off the dead
flesh, and click each joint back into place,

Femur

Patella

Tibia

Fibula

I sing to them, and blooms of sinew and muscle sprout,
organs bud and pulse and pump.

Fat hardens and hairs slice through soft skin.

Song kindles within her.

Her guttural growl harmonises with my soprano shriek.

In contrary motion, we fuse,

and claim the title of *Woman*.

When I was Lilith

When I was Lilith, I bit the apple deep. Sweet spit bubbled
down my chin, fermenting in my mouth, turning sugar
into alcohol, skin catching between my teeth.

I stayed out all night, snaking through writhing bodies,
strobe lights turning my skin to scales. I was greedy,
scooping and slurping, licking the juice from the back of my hands.

When I was Lilith, I bit the apple deep, crunching
to the core. If anyone told me to stop, I cracked
an open-mouthed grin, and popped another one in.

And when a hog cornered me, half-blind and stumbling,
grunting hot breath, nuzzling me with his wet nose-
I glazed his hide with cider, and forced an apple down his throat.

The Devil Is in My Bed

I am bound to this anchorage, not with ropes
and chains, but with my mind- stalwart,
resolved to this bed for the rest of my days.

I am Julian of Norwich, praying to my gods,
pen poised for their response. Her Lord said to her
'If I could suffer more, I would suffer more.'

And I suffer. Both in dead silence,
and when light screams through my window,
I hide under blankets, cover my ears.

Sometimes, I see visions. Not a slick cat,
but a creeping rat, slinking into a dark hole.
'If I could suffer more, I would suffer more.'

and remain, in the corner of this room,
craving connection, anchored
to this bed, that will one day be my grave.

Malkin Tower

I feel like Malkin Tower-
dismantled,
moss covering my foundations.

Once, I would draw down the moon,
inviting my neighbours on a full-bright Sunday
for sabbat celebrations- wine and cake.

But my magic has gone, as quickly as
the tower's thatch; blasted by lightning
when the noose snapped Demdike's neck.

My body is strained like the oaken frame.
My bones prised apart by grasping hands
that dared to reclaim its parts.

Some friends try to reach me,
dowsing pagans, desperate to connect,
circling Pendle forest.

There is nothing to see here,
as there is nothing to see there,
so they pack up their sticks and go home.

But though witch within me is dead,
and I am stripped bare- my foundations
fertilise the land; fertilise my seed.

Stars

We always point to the stars. It's instinctive for us to wonder
at those selenite spheres drifting across the sky.

The Plough, Polaris. A crooked V-shape
makes the horns of a ram, extending across the sky.

We always stop at Gemini. At dusk on the first night of spring,
it is almost directly overhead.

We lie, outstretched in a comfortable sprawl
and discuss how one of us will have to bury the other.

They say that twins are flames, I think this is what they mean-
Not two distant flares, exploding into nothing,
but a steadfast pair of fiery parts,
fused by a million-degree star.

In Dedication (To the Black Goddess)

Am I the Virgin, the waxing moon,
searching the sky, the sweet willow,
weeping young tears?

Or the Mother with a full-moon belly,
swelling firm as oak,
a fertile, emerald green?

Or the Crone, Imparting my waning wisdom
on the hazel nuts that grow
from my elderly limbs?

No, I am the Witch, defined by power, not age
The New Moon, Blackthorn,
leaning into shadow.

It is a grave assertion, must I always be
on display. The moonlight blinds me,
so, I steal myself away.

.

Sun

The sun burns in my chest, a sphere more perfect
than any found in nature.

Fever spreads through my limbs, my fingers
tingle and shake- hot panic numbs my brain.

Beads of sweat run down my face, and dankness
gathers in ditches under my armpits.

Will the sun collapse, leaving a black hole
beneath my ribcage?

How I long to rip it out and hurl it back into the sky,
where it will grow, expanding at a furious rate.

From dwarf to giant- greedy, guzzling
Mercury, Venus, then Earth.

The Cauldron

My womb is a cauldron
and when the moon is in perfect position,
we'll brew.

What if it takes a year? What if it takes a *day*?
What if it never happens at all.

'Relax', the books all say,
'stress will lead to delay.'

We'll try lighting incense- lavender,
but smoke makes you cough.

So, we'll extinguish it, and run a strip
of rose oil between my breasts.

Breathe it in, breathe out.
Three drops make a man a poet,
the cauldron the subject of his songs.

And you'll sing, loudly,
as the moon begins to wane.

'Relax', you'll pray,
'the next full moon is only a month away.'

Wise Woman/

I am flaying my skin, knife shaft exposing
emerald scales, deep- V at the neck.

My brother's the wolf, my sister is Hel.

My pupil is an intimidating slit,
tongue forked and flitting, hissing
'come hither... if you dare.'

This is the Witch; tail-eater- steadfast,
back arched kitty-style. A geyser erupting
at Ragnarök, an image carved in stone.

Feminism, Witchcraft & Tarot in

Wise Woman/Mad Woman

Rosemary Grace Corcoran

A thesis submitted in the Faculty of Music, Humanities and Media at the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts By Research.

September 2020.

Introduction

In this essay, I will discuss how my research into witchcraft, feminism, and the tarot informed my poetry sequence, *Wise Woman/Mad Woman*. I will discuss form, technique, and structure, using contemporary poetry that alludes to witchcraft and related themes to show how my work both fits into and is distinctive in context. I will then reflect on the success of my collection overall.

Wise Woman/Mad Woman explores, in part, women reclaiming the name ‘Witch’, and how this coincides with the rise of feminism. I am a witch and a feminist, and many people of my generation have claimed both labels. I believe that calling yourself ‘Witch’ reclaims female narratives that were once used to belittle women. I have chosen to explore these narratives in my collection, taking inspiration from mythology, folklore, and fairy tales from around the world.

Wise Woman/Mad Woman also draws on historical and modern ideas of witchcraft, from the 17th Century witch trials to the recent revival of folk magic in the form of herbalism, moon magic, and divination. My discussion will draw on *The Black Goddess and The Sixth Sense* by Peter Redgrove (1989), *The Wise Wound* by Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove (1978), *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves (1948), *Reinventing Eve* by Kim Chernin (1994), *The Witch* by Ronald Hutton (2017) and *Women Who Run With The Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes (2003), as well as canonical first-wave feminist authors such as Simone De Beauvoir and Germaine Greer.¹

¹ Some of my sources are non-academic. For example, Kim Huggen’s (2010) *Tarot 101*. I used these books because they have informed and shaped my collection immeasurably and influenced who I am as a witchcraft practitioner, however, they have not informed my critical commentary.

I endeavoured to explore themes that have affected me personally as a woman, feminist, and witch. This means that, although my collection speaks to other witches, it is also deeply personal and often confessional in tone. This is most evident in poems such as 'The Stars', with the line 'one of us will have to bury the other' which is a confession of deep fear, so is ultimately personal but it also speaks to a fear that many people possess, so it would still be relatable to many readers.

Tarot

My collection follows the twenty-two card Major Arcana of the tarot. I made this choice for several reasons. I am a tarot reader myself, so I have a deep understanding and appreciation of the cards. The cards in the Major Arcana have distinctive meanings and imagery, designed to represent every facet of a person's life in a phenomenon called 'The Fool's Journey'. This makes sense within the context of *Wise Woman/Mad Woman* because the goal of my sequence is to show a vast range of emotions and situations pertinent to womanhood. However, the most practical reason for following this formula is that twenty-two cards transformed into twenty-two poems makes a sequence of a suitable size for my MA collection.

Because my collection follows the tarot, the sequence can be read as the speaker's journey. Although this was not the primary goal of my collection, the speaker's journey through the sequence reflects the tumultuous nature of life. I have explored perceived madness in my first poem, 'Mad Woman', guilt in 'The Apple Hides a Pentagram', strength, vulnerability, despair, happiness, and everything in between in what I hope will be a varied yet streamlined collection.

In preparing for this collection, I expanded my tarot knowledge by completing a self-taught course through Kim Huggens' influential book *Tarot 101*. I completed activities and journaling exercises related to each card, exploring each symbol intimately. This helped me to pinpoint specific symbols to focus on when writing my poems and explore them in a more creative and nuanced way. For example, in the traditional Waite-Smith tarot deck, 'The Devil' card shows two people chained up with the eponymous Devil standing between them. I used Huggens' journaling exercises, particularly the question 'what form can chain take?' (Huggens, 2010, p.165) to brainstorm ideas for this poem. I have experience of agoraphobia, which fits the 'chain' theme well, so I wanted to explore this in relation to 'The Devil' card. It seemed appropriate to link this to Julian of Norwich, the 14th Century anchoress.

As an anchoress, Julian lived a solitary life in a small cell and would see feverish religious visions which were recorded and compiled in the book *Revelations of Divine Love* (n.d.) The first line of my poem is 'I am bound to this anchorage/ not with ropes and chains,/ but with my mind- stalwart.' The 'chain' is the agoraphobia keeping the speaker in the room. Similarly, Julian was not bound to her anchorage with ropes and chains, but with her deep religious conviction. I also enjoyed the irony of using Julian of Norwich, who stayed in her anchorage to have intense communication with God and the Blessed Virgin, to portray 'The Devil' card.

I also referred to *Tarot 101* when writing my poem 'The Cauldron', in which I used the section on the 'Judgement' card. The traditional 'Judgement' tarot card depicts a coffin, a person rising from the grave, and an angel figure. However, in some decks, such as the 'Universal Goddess Tarot' (Platano & Caratti, 2006) deck, these traditionally Christian images are replaced by a lady with a cauldron. Huggens links the cauldron that is depicted in the card to

'The "Cauldron of Rebirth" ... another form of womb in which embryos are nurtured until they are liberated from it.' (Huggens, 2010, p.181) I used this description literally and wrote a poem about the links between trying to become pregnant and brewing a magical potion. I begin my poem: 'My womb is a cauldron / and when the moon is in perfect position, we'll brew.' and end it with: "Relax', you'll pray, / 'the next full moon is only a month away.'" From the time of the month, to the optimising of conditions, to other people's unhelpful but well-meaning advice- conception and spellcraft are connected. The womb also has a darker side. Women's hysteria has been said to be a direct result of their wombs.

In her essential book *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer explains that:

At first it was called the mother, and was thought to be the wandering womb that rose into the throat of a girl and choked her. The most sceptical anatomists, while deploring the arts which quacks and witches used to allay hysterics, believed that the womb was 'charged with blood and stale seed from whence arise foul and ill-conditioned damp' (Greer, 1970, p.710)

I wanted to take the idea that a woman's ill health or ill mood comes from the fact that her womb isn't in use, and turn it into a poem that explores both the pressure put on women to reproduce, and the supposed empowerment of the womb/ cauldron image. Within witchcraft, the womb is often cited as the epicentre of the sacred feminine. However, as Greer says, 'most women do not actually feel any of the activity of their ovaries or womb until they go wrong, as they nearly always do.' (p.689)

Witchcraft and Feminism

In her seminal work *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*. Kristen J Sollee (2017) writes:

While engaging in the movement for gender equality, more and more millennial feminists are engaging in ritual, trying out tarot, studying herbalism, and following the primordial cycles of the waxing and waning moon. Witchcraft practices that might once have spelled death for women are now life-affirming. (p.14)

The link between witchcraft and feminism is something that I particularly wanted to explore in my collection, to show that being a woman and a witch is not inherently negative. In my poem, 'Wound', the speaker sucks blood from a finger wound, then asks 'The iron blood coats my tongue-/what compelled me to taste it?/ An ancestral mutation,/ deep-rooted in my brain?'

This reflects the damned woman archetype. Within Christianity, this means Eve, whose subversive actions damned all other women who came hence. This led women to be at once mocked and feared, and this dichotomy of perception is, I believe, why it is so important to discuss the notion of the witch and what it means in today's artistic landscape. As Sollee says:

What's occurring now, with the fourth wave of feminism² crashing, is that many female artists are using occult images, ritual gestures, and witch iconography to not

² Fourth Wave feminism began around 2012 and focuses on ending body-shaming, harassment, rape culture and to bring about the empowerment of women through the lens of intersectionality. It utilises the internet, particularly social media, for many of its campaigns and activism.

only connect to the divine, but to continue to make space for themselves in a field which is still dominated by men. (p.67)

This is the chief goal of my collection. In my vengeance poem 'Ostara Feast', I use the herb rosemary, the herb of remembrance (and also my name), to chastise the Emperor figure, repeatedly questioning him in a forceful way that flies in the face of stereotypical reserved femininity. I end the poem with 'Work your jaw, she is tough as old goat./ She was tender, but now, we catch in your throat.'

This image of femininity progressing from tenderness to tough old goat is reminiscent of a stereotypical fairy tale witch- old, ugly- altogether 'bad,' yet always conquerable. However, within this poem I attempted to subvert that notion with 'we catch in your throat.' As well as being an image of fellatio, it is reminiscent of a catch in your throat when you are trying not to cry, as if the speaker has reduced the emperor to tears. This shows a woman standing in her power, as 'to reclaim the word Witch is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful' (p.83)

I have also tried to include the notion of wildness into my collection, particularly in relation to female sexuality. In the book *Wild Power*, Pope and Wurlitzer write:

Embodied Wild Power is the liberated expression of who you are. It's the culmination of wisdom that you begin to live by, the peace that you make with who you are, and the freedom to express your creativity in the world. (Pope & Wurlitzer, 2017, p.20)

I have tried to embody this by being fearless while writing, giving my creativity free reign without shying away from the gruesome or challenging. An example of this is in 'NaGig' where I explicitly reference Sheela Ne Gig, a 'grotesque' church carving where an old lady is crouched over, holding her enlarged labia apart. It seems paradoxical that these carvings were on churches, as Sheela Na Gig flies in the face of pious Christianity. It seems a decidedly pagan image, and many churches have removed their Sheela Na Gig carvings. Sheela Na Gigs seem to be symbols of protection and fertility, so I wanted to incorporate this powerful and subversive image in the context of rebirth. I wanted the attention to be on the woman herself, which is reflected in the last line 'and breech, soft body shedding my tough old skin, / my face a mirror, Sheela's glint-eyed grin.'

Pope and Wurlitzer also discuss the link between menstruation and the Holy Grail, saying that:

Humanities search for the Grail is ... a yearning to shift from an experience of being an onlooker of life to a deep sense of belonging and intimacy within this whole living, breathing, presence called Life, and a recognition that all is holy. (p.169)

This was the inspiration for my poem 'Wound', centred around 'The High Priestess' card. Female menstruation is sometimes seen as dirty, largely due to biblical injunctions which have led to avoidance and ignorance of the subject. The poem's final lines are 'but as I suck on this wincing wound, / what I lost, I have reclaimed.' Showing the cyclical life-giving aspect of drinking one's own blood, as 'drinking from the Grail is the experience of exquisite, intimate and loving union.' (p.170)

Another seminal work in the study of the cultural and literary contexts of female sexuality is *The Wise Wound* (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1978) which also likens the feminine womb and vagina to the 'goblet' full of blood.' (p.113) Shuttle and Redgrove also point out that:

The Maoris worship the Moon as a menstruating Goddess, incidentally, under the title 'Round-head'. The cervix of the womb has a round head, like the Cornish Witch's Cross- the Crows an Wragh. (p.102)

Femininity is linked to the moon in many modern and ancient cultures. In my poem, 'In Dedication (To the Black Goddess)', I address the notion of the moon as the Triple Goddess, an idea initially popularised in the literary world in the 20th century by Robert Graves in his book *The White Goddess* (Graves, 1948) and developed upon in Peter Redgrove's *The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense*. (Redgrove, 1989) The notion of the Triple Goddess has been a source of contention in modern witchcraft circles, chiefly because Graves's concept of the goddess seems formulaic and limits women to three roles, all defined in terms of the utility to, or attitudes of, men. Graves' very limited view of womanhood is:

As Goddess of the Sky she was the Moon, in her three phases of New Moon, Full Moon and Waning Moon... As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag. (Graves, 1948, p.377-8)

This is contentious because not every woman goes through life in such a clear cycle. The maiden is a symbol of purity and virginity, only having sexual relations when she moves into the motherhood phase, before becoming the wise but undesirable hag. This shows a woman's life arc to be defined by their sexual attractiveness, and utility to men. This view is limited, with no room for the infertile, sexually active young and old, victims of abuse, trans women, trans men, the childfree by choice, and so on. As Simone de Beauvoir asks in her canonical work, *The Second Sex*,

Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented. It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from a clairvoyant's vocabulary. (1949, p.20)

This is precisely what Graves is doing where he writes that 'The Triple Muse is woman in her divine character: the poet's enchantress, the only theme of his songs.' (p.379) implying that the purpose of the divine woman is to be an object of desire for men, using grandiose language to add intrigue and mystery. In her book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose criticises Graves' idea of the woman as muse:

Let's look at what Graves has to say, not about the content of his image of femininity but about women's concrete, lived relationship to it. Despite the idealization- or rather as its direct effect- this concept of the female principle leaves no place for women. None for the women poet (Rose, 1991, p.153-4)

The White Goddess ideology perpetuates the mythological stereotypes of woman as enchantress or crone- muse or battle-axe. He 'places the most impossible demand on the woman – that she should be this Muse, that she can be it only for a few years, but that she does so at risk of her own self-inflicted death.' (p.154) On the surface, this seems an outdated mode of thought in the 21st century. However, this view of women still permeates through society. It is most prevalent in celebrity culture where youthful women are put on pedestals, bullied if they rebel, and mocked when they begin to show natural signs of ageing. Because of this, I find it interesting that the Triple Goddess is such a widespread symbol of female empowerment in modern Pagan circles. I aimed to challenge this by acknowledging the Triple Goddess as she is seen in modern witchcraft- symbolised by the waxing, full, and waning moon, and play with the concept of the new moon as Black Goddess. So, for my poem 'In Dedication (To the Black Goddess)', I described the three stages of the Triple Goddess, adding the final two stanzas:

No, I am the Witch, defined by power, not age

The New Moon, Blackthorn,

leaning into shadow.

It is a grave assertion, must I always be

on display. The moonlight blinds me,

so, I steal myself away.

I used the trees Willow, Oak, and Hazel, to represent Maiden, Mother, and Crone, as Graves says that they are 'expressive of the sequence: enchantment, royalty, wisdom.' (Graves,

1948, p.378) I then chose blackthorn to represent the New Moon. I felt it was fitting as the darker side of the Triple Moon Goddess, and it also appears in the Celtic tree ogham. In *The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense*, Peter Redgrove claims that:

It is among the outcasts and outsiders that the Black Goddess has lingered throughout recorded history. To the respectable and the self-regarding she is disastrous Lilith, she-demon of the night and the storm. (Redgrove, 1989, p.117)

In my poem 'When I was Lilith', I embody the character of Lilith. Not as a she-demon, but as a woman revelling in her sovereignty. My first line 'When I was Lilith, I bit the apple deep' is a spin on the Eden myth. I show the speaker eating that forbidden fruit, and enjoying every second of it, 'turning sugar / into alcohol'. Lilith doesn't care if drunkenness in a woman is seen as unacceptable or unfeminine. This flies in the face of all the insulting nicknames that Lilith has been given through the years: 'Dame Donkey Legs, Vixen Bogy, Blood Sucker, Woman of Harlotry, Alien Woman, Impure Female, End of All Flesh' (Koltuv, 1986, p.xi) because she does not conform, because she is 'other.' The poem also has a slightly mournful tone, as it is set in the past tense. The speaker is no longer this fearless person, and is wanting to reclaim that youthful freedom, making it ironic that this poem represents the card 'Temperance'. This poem exemplifies the feeling that I and many women experience as we enter womanhood from the freedom of our teenage years.

The apple as a symbol of female 'sin' is also prevalent in my poem 'The Apple Hides a Pentagram' where I confess that 'I used to be a believer' (in Christianity). 'I met Eve in The Children's Bible. / She made me crave apples.' Here, I show a very young version of myself

succumbing to temptation and being unapologetic about it. Eating the apples is a deliberate transgression. Does this make me weak, unable to resist temptation, or a woman in charge of her mind? In Kim Chernin's *Reinventing Eve, Modern Woman in Search of Herself*, she writes of the apple in various mythologies:

In Avalon, "Apple-land," the Celtic queen of the dead was kept busy handing out apples to Irish kings, who ate them and became immortal. Idun, goddess of apple-land in Norse mythology, fed the gods her magic apples to keep them from dying. Gaea, the earth goddess of the Greeks, brought a tree bearing golden apples to the wedding of Hera and Zeus. The tree was planted in the garden of the Hesperides and guarded by Ladon, the watchful dragon... Growing from their sacred tree, stored with the power of the Mother Goddess, they offered resurrection and immortality to those who ate them. (Chernin, 1994, p.Xxvi)

This shows an apple, not as a dangerous fruit, but a life-giving symbol of divine femininity. I wanted to challenge the idea that eating the apple, i.e. gaining knowledge is an action that deserves punishment. I show the speaker being fully in control of their sovereignty. The poem's final stanza is:

When I die, will I be tossed into the furnace
 as a sinner, a harlot, a whore?
 Can I be saved if I bellow Hosanna!
 Though sovereignty runs through my core?

The notion that one should go to hell for eternity for disobeying the orders of a male God is an anti-feminist one. The tone of this poem, particularly its final stanza, is sarcastic, and attempts to:

reimagine Eve, eater of the apple, as she might behave in a mythic tradition that associates tree with goddess and symbolically invites daughter to partake of the mother's flesh. Eve, who has been told that she was created from a disposable part of the male body, touches the divine fruit and discovers the Mother Goddess. (p.Xxvii)

Even if the speaker knew she would be damned, she would continue to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge and immortality. She is in touch with her Goddess-self and becomes her own mother figure. She has no notion of relinquishing her sovereignty once it has been claimed.

For my poem 'Death: A Ritual', I turned to *Women Who Run with the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes and the North Mexican story of La Loba, the wolf woman who collects bones:

La Loba sings over the bones she has gathered. To sing means to use the soul-voice. It means to say on the breath the truth of one's power and one's need, to breathe soul over the thing that is ailing or in need of restoration. This is done by descending into the deepest mood of great love and feeling, till one's desire for relationship with the wildish Self overflows, then to speak one's soul from that frame of mind. That is singing over the bones. (Estes, 2003, p.24)

I describe this in my poem as follows:

I sing to them, and blooms of sinew and muscle sprout,
organs bud and pulse and pump.
Fat hardens and hairs slice through soft skin.

Song kindles within her.

Her guttural growl harmonises with my soprano shriek.
In contrary motion, we fuse,
and claim the title of *Woman*

This intense self-love and self-soothing culminate in the self becoming wild and at one with the primal; a retaking of control. Estes says that 'we all begin as a bundle of bones lost somewhere in a desert, a dismantled skeleton that lies under the sand. It is our work to recover the parts.' (p.24)

This shows death and rebirth as something that we do over and over again during our lifetimes, constantly refining the self. Rasa Lucia Luzyte also talks about the idea of the wild woman in her article *A Few Thoughts on the Breath, the Soul, the Divine Female, and the Virgin Mary in Engagement with Luce Irigaray and Clarissa Pinkola Estés*. She says:

The bones signify the forgotten female instincts and powers. The singer is an old all-knowing woman who lives in each woman, who is the root of all the instincts of humanity but also specifically female instincts too. She not only knows where and how to look for the bones but she also knows, “remembers,” how to assemble the skeleton correctly by choosing the right nature of singing. (Luzyte, 2011, p.27)

I chose to explore this idea under the title ‘Death: A Ritual’ because the way that La Loba cleans the bones and lays them out is reminiscent of a magical ritual. Also, the way in which woman continues to reinvent herself sits comfortably with the death card as it symbolises not only the death of the old but the birth of the new.

I also took inspiration from *Women Who Run with The Wolves* for my poem ‘After the Devil Took My Feet’, symbolising the ‘Strength’ card. I looked specifically at the section on Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy-tale *The Red Shoes*.

The symbol of shoes can be understood as a psychological metaphor; they protect and defend what we stand on- our feet. In archetypal symbolism, feet represent mobility and freedom... Without shoes, a woman is unable to negotiate inner or outer environs that require acuity, sense, caution and toughness. (Estés, 2003, p.221)

This poem stemmed from my own personal chaos and issues with physical pain that often strip me of mobility and freedom. I wanted to showcase the struggle but also the determination that it takes to continue even if you are in a lot of pain, as it is difficult not to feel like you are pandering to the stereotype of the weak and feeble woman.

'Girl' is often used as a slur to belittle people who are deemed to be lesser than. In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer explains that if a little girl follows societal convention 'she may be reviled as a cissy, a sook, a teacher's pet, a namby-pamby.' (Greer, 1970, p.1161-2) by others, even other girls in her class. She explains that little girls are often caught between wanting to rebel and the pressure to conform. 'The heaviness of maternal pressure in little girls to be neat and sneaking is very often met with the same degree of resistance.' (p.1140) I linked this theme to ballet, as I wanted to take something that seems 'girly' but in fact requires a great deal of physical strength, turning it into an immense story of defying all odds. My final lines read 'I dance on, blood-shod and blistered/ as the bright- white, sanitary UV beam/ mimics the light of Polaris.' The protagonist of this tale has shifted from a broken little girl to a warrior, fighting on through immense pain. Polaris is the North Star, a symbol of forward motion, navigation, and hope.

In his book, *The Witch*, Ronald Hutton describes ancient notions of witches:

They were always treated with public, and usually with spontaneous, anger and horror, and often associated with a general hatred of humanity and society with an alliance made by the witch with malignant superhuman powers lose in the cosmos: in the European case, famously, by a pact with the Christian Devil. (Hutton, 2017, p.4)

The title of the poem 'After the Devil Took my Feet' is ambiguous- did the 'Devil' take the feet by force or were they given to him as payment in a ritual? I deliberately left this up to interpretation.

Although I have included the Devil briefly in this collection, it is rare (though by no means unheard of) that modern witches subscribe to the Christian God/ Devil dichotomy. The modern witch tends to be more syncretistic, merging various traditions and working with various deities to achieve their goals, or working within specific pre-Christian traditions. This makes prescriptive definitions of what it means to be a witch problematic. In *Wise Woman/ Mad Woman*, I decided to reflect on my own witchcraft practice, while trying to cast my net far enough to portray a well-rounded view of the witch. I also wanted to take Hutton's idea that 'The witch figure now occupies a spectrum from functioning as the ultimate tragic victim to functioning as the embodiment of evil.' (Hutton, 2017, p.279) and fill in some of the gaps, challenging the notion that the witch is an inherently negative phenomenon.

In *The Book of English Magic*, Philip Carr-Gomm and Richard Heygate discuss English magic ranging from Druidic magic to Christian magic, to modern witchcraft. The part of this that caught my attention was the section on Scrying and ley lines, and in particular, a quote from Alfred Watkins of 'The Straight Track Club', a group that investigates ley lines. Watkins says, 'Mother Earth is good enough for you to walk or ride on, and we will pave a way through the streams, soft places, and ponds; our chief job is to point the way.' (Carr-Gomm & Heygate, 2009, p.21) I thought that the idea of probing and trampling all over something that is also regarded as sacred, something referred to as 'Mother', was strange.

In *The Ley Hunter's Companion*, Paul Deveraux and Ian Thompson say 'Move it slowly, following a whim, let the eye be caught, be prepared to be surprised,' (Deveraux & Thompson, 1979, p.26) which sounds very sensual and is where I garnered inspiration for my poem 'Hanged Woman', wherein the woman is a personified map that the man is searching

for ley lines. He is more focussed on his own needs than that of the woman that is being violated, not even noticing when 'you feel the blood-rush to the head,/ and with arms to the sky, you praise The Goddess,/ as crimson spreads across the page.'

This also alludes to humanity's destructive influence on the world, and the destructive influence of many pagans who, despite worshipping the earth in a possibly superficial way, live their daily lives in an unsustainable way that damages the very world they claim to worship.

Contemporary Poetry

I will now explore contemporary poetry relating to my collection and discuss how it has inspired and informed my sequence, while making the argument that my collection remains distinctive.

Several other poets have published work drawing on witchcraft. Rebecca Tamas' critically acclaimed collection *Witch* is the first contemporary collection I will discuss. Tamas frequently explores female narratives, the first example is in her poem '\penis hex\' (Tamas, 2019, p.13) where she references Judith, from the deuterocanonical *Book of Judith* (n.d.). Judith is a recently reclaimed feminist icon, as she used her sexuality as a source of power which enabled her to decapitate the abusive Holofernes. Tamas intersperses Judith's story with the fertile imagery of 'grilled pears/ against cream' (p.14) reinforcing Judith as a woman in charge of her sexuality. Similarly, I blended religion and sex in my collection. In my first poem, '/Mad Woman', I included a sexual reference in the line 'if I want to roll back my eyes

and scream, I will. 'Which juxtaposes the old narratives of Holy Fools being mad but revered, and shows a female Holy Fool taking control, like Judith.

In *The Ode Less Travelled*, Stephen Fry states that:

The perfectly end-stopped verse, unbroken by cesura up until that point, perfectly reflects a sense of assurance, just as the broken, spasmodic breaks (...) reflect the opposite: a crazed and unstable state of mind. (Fry, 2014, p.27)

I toyed with this idea in *'/Mad Woman'*, where every line is perfectly end-stopped. This shows that the speaker knows her mind and is perfectly comfortable with being the woman that she is. This comes as a stark contrast to the words which on the surface seem 'mad.' For example: 'And if I want to throw nuts at you, I will./ If I want to wear nothing but a long, grey beard, I will.' This poem was the perfect choice for the first poem in my collection, as it encapsulates the *Wise Woman/Mad Woman* polarity, setting the tone for the rest of the collection.

In *Witch*, Tamas has a series of poems titled 'Witch and...' 'devil', 'suffragettes', 'scold', 'government', 'wood', etc, which highlights the importance of claiming the title 'Witch.'

Inspired by Tamas, I changed the title of 'Justice' to 'Witch?' to highlight its significance in the same way. I have also added '(a spell)' ': a ritual' and '(initiation)' to my titles to indicate how I would like my poems to be read.

Another theme that *Witch* and *Wise Woman/Mad Woman* have in common is Lilith. In the poem 'Spell for Lilith', Tamas writes:

I heard you like reproductive justice

I heard you like staying up all night with your lips

Pressed against the cracks (...)

Dripping internal blood all over used cars and buildings of state (p.98)

This reflects the reclamation of Lilith as a feminist icon and is reminiscent of my previously discussed poem 'When I was Lilith.' When the Lilith character responds to unwanted advances, she 'glazed his hide with cider, forced an apple down his throat.' Both versions of Lilith show a woman who protests when facing injustice, which is why Lilith is such a feminist icon.

I have gained a lot of inspiration from Rebecca Tamas' collection, and we have similar themes of feminism and witchcraft. However, I think that my collection is distinctive due to the use of Tarot as a structural device and its sustained immersion in aspects of witchcraft and the imagery of the Major Arcana.

The next collection I will look at is a controversial but relevant example of contemporary witch poetry, *The Witch Doesn't Burn in This One*, by Amanda Lovelace. This collection is split into four parts- 'the fire', 'the burning', 'the firestorm', 'the ashes'. Lovelace has no titles for her poems and is known for experimenting with form, a common theme for modern poets, particularly with the rise of online poetry sharing, to lend visual interest to the work.

I have incorporated this into my collection sparingly, as I feel that sometimes too much unusual structure can detract from the poem itself. One poem where I feel I was successful at this would be 'Death: A Ritual' where I describe the protagonist clicking bones together:

Femur

Patella

Tibia

Fibula

This marks each movement as a separate stage in a ritual, where an intense focus on each is key. The shape of the text looks somewhat like an outstretched arm or leg, making the poem almost a calligram. I felt that the way I achieved this was subtle, but still effective.

Another key theme that links my collection and Lovelace's is feminism, and Lovelace focusses on the witch trials extensively to explore this, as shown in the following quote:

the man with the witch-killing look in his eyes drinks deeply from the chipped lilac teacup, his trembling hands making it clink against the saucer as he places them back together. My stomach churns in circles as the dark liquid dribbles down his chin lines... when I turn the cup right-side up, I spot the clusters of soggy brown & black leaves that litter the bottom in various shapes... "the leaves say you're going to . . . pay." (Lovelace, 2018, p.34)

I enjoy the irony that the witch-killer is using a folk divination method to determine the 'witch's' guilt. This happened in the 17th Century witch trials, as wise women would be called to use divination methods to determine if the accused were witches.

Another poet that discusses the witch trials is Breda Wall Ryan in her collection *Raven Mothers*. In her poem 'Salem Pilgrimage' where she talks of the desecration of witch trial sites:

In the bars, early revellers order spirit cocktails
 or chug Sam Adams Ale...
 hyped-up schoolchildren
 disguised as one-night witches
 divvy their candy swag...
 the words of the voiceless
 are cut off by a granite wall...
 I shut my ears against a riot
 of Halloween celebration,
 seek quiet where the dead
 stir among black locust trees (Ryan, 2018, p.48)

I was inspired by both Lovelace and Ryan to challenge the notion that many modern pagans believe- that the people killed in the witch trials were practicing witches. Some of them *may* have been, perhaps many were healers and cunning folk, but most were just easy targets. I explored this idea in my poem 'Witch?', where I describe the trial of a God-fearing

woman who was tortured and eventually confessed to being a witch. I decided to begin this poem with her witnessing people leaving witchcraft memorabilia as a sign of respect. 'She comes down from Heaven, /and watches the pilgrims assemble, /grimacing as they lay down their tributes:/ bottles, pentacles, talismans' to show that God-fearing people who were falsely accused wouldn't appreciate being remembered as witches. I show how the confession was extracted from her and how she remained faithful to her God throughout. I repeated the words 'prayed' 'begged' 'have mercy' emphasising the desperation which led to her false confession.

Nikita Gill's collection, *Great Goddesses*, emphasises female mythological narratives. One poem in particular that includes similar themes to mine is 'Athena to Medusa', the final stanza being 'And I will turn you into a Goddess/ In your own right, a deity of monsters,/ A myth that will scare men for all the years/ And their seasons' (Gill, 2019, p.189) Medusa has become another feminist icon, from fearsome monster to another wronged woman punished for crimes committed against her.

I explore Greek mythology in my poem 'Labyrinth', where I use a labyrinth as a metaphor for a lone woman's journey home. The final stanza reads 'And we slither and wind through this town,/ hiding serpentine curls, eyes cast down,/ Cursed, to inspire hatred/ and make them hard as stone.' The play on words of 'make them hard as stone' again alludes to a woman being blamed for men's actions and is an exploration of victim-blaming.

Finally, I will discuss *Arcana the Tarot Poetry Anthology* edited by Marjorie Jensen which contains poets' interpretations from different tarot decks, including trump cards, and Lilith,

from Crowley's 'Lust' card. Some of the titles are simply the card names, some are variations of them, and some are titles related to the poem rather than the card. I found this interesting and decided to slightly amend some of my titles to make them more compatible with the poem's content, and not stick to the card titles as rigidly as I'd first planned. This is when I decided to change the title 'The Magician' to 'Alchemess', 'The Empress' to 'NaGig', and 'The Emperor' to 'Ostara Feast'.

In *Arcana*, the final two stanzas of Evan J Peterson's 'Lilith' are 'Thrice- Gorgeous/Blood moon,/ Grieves & eats/ Every miscarried/ Mooncalf, every stillborn,/ The death of any egg.' (Peterson, 2015, p.41) This gruesome imagery is also something that I include within my collection. I do not like to shy away from violence and gore if it will benefit the poem. In the following stanza of my poem, 'Wound', I explicitly reference menstrual blood in a way that may be off-putting to some:

I remember the first time I bled,
a teaspoon turned tub full- Bathory.

I grieved as I pulled the plug
and watched it glug- glug down the drain

but as I suck on this wincing wound,
what I lost, I have reclaimed.

I believe that when discussing feminism, blood and violence are imperative topics. Violence against women and reproductive rights issues need to be addressed and I have tried to fearlessly explore these difficult subjects.

Technical Aspects and Reflections

In *The Modern Poetic sequence*, Gall and Rosenthal write:

The modern sequence, then, is a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its structure is finally lyrical. (Gall & Rosenthal, 1986, p.9)

My intention for *Wise Woman/Mad Woman* was to write twenty-two 'stand-alone' poems with their own discrete meanings that would nevertheless combine to form a single coherent sequence exploring an overarching theme-much like the tarot itself. A key way that I achieved this was through my themes, which remain consistent throughout. I changed the order of my poems many times and changed the cards that they represent. For example, my poem 'After the Devil Took My Feet', was originally intended for 'The Devil' card. However, as the poem developed, I realised that it was more about overcoming the obstacle than the obstacle itself, so I changed it to represent the 'Strength' card.

In his exhaustive book *The Poem*, Don Patterson writes that 'brevity of speech is the poem's most basic formal strategy; originality of speech, its most basic literary virtue.' (Patterson,

2018, p.11) I have a habit of over-writing, and using adjectives rather than using a concise word in the first place. This something that I remedied at length in my editing process, changing phrases such as:

Remember Me, Rosemary,
the sweet taste of me on your lips
The feel of me, massaged into decaying
flesh, or when I catch between your teeth.

to:

I'm Rosemary, the bitter taste on your lips,
stuck in her leg, caught between your teeth.

The latter is nine words shorter and conveys the same images. Patterson also says that 'most apprentice poems are bad because they are about four or five things, not one or two.' (p.24) This was an issue for me when I began the collection. I tried to put too many themes into my work, and it became muddy. An example of this is my poem 'NaGig' which was initially a nuclear reaction, real birth imagery, self-birth, Sheela Na Gig, and those were just the main themes. I also included the image of the speaker discarding her old body like a used jumper. This meant that the poem was very difficult to follow and imagine precisely, so I stripped it back to two themes- re-birth and Sheela Na Gig. This made for a streamlined poem that readers could follow, unencumbered by too many layers of metaphor.

Patterson also advises to 'write the poem you're writing, not the one you *want* to write.' (p.78) This was very difficult to do, as I often had a clear idea in my mind of what I wanted each piece to be. However, once I learned to let go and allow the poem to develop its own organic rhythm and themes, it allowed me to trim sections of the poem that no longer fit. This is clear in my poem 'Wound', where I initially wrote the poem as a literal Holy Grail story. A female Fisher Queen who got the grail herself. However, that theme was too distant as it was set in a fantasy world and was not relatable to the reader. Instead, I chose the very real-world image of accidentally cutting yourself and then sticking your finger in your mouth to stem the blood. This poem turned out completely differently to how I first imagined it, but is far more relatable and I think it is one of the strongest poems in my collection. However, as hard as I tried to make my poems clear and concise, there is always room for interpretation. Patterson is 'making an argument for 'attempting clear articulation' as default, because the things poets are trying to say will *never* be entirely clear.' (p.26)

As well as focussing on the words themselves, I also paid attention to silence. Patterson says that:

silence is the poet's ground. Silence delineates the formal borders of the poem, and the formal arrangements of silences puts language under pressure. Silence (...) underwrites the status of the poem as a *significant mark*. (p.19)

I tried to account for silence while ruthlessly editing my poems. In 'Wound' I took stock of each word and assessed its function within the poem, taking care not to:

spoil it with extraneous chatter, inadvertent repetition, irrelevant information, superfluous qualifiers, nervous and unnecessary glosses, or, worse, with ugly accidental noise. (p20)

The following lines are my initial first two stanzas:

Slicing an onion, I cut my finger,
It oozes, and without thinking,
I stick it in my mouth.

Is it some deep-rooted Lilith- energy
that compelled me to taste this satisfying,
iron rich blood?

Which became:

I cut my finger, and without thinking,
I stick it in my mouth.

The iron blood coats my tongue-
what compelled me to taste it?

The latter lines are free from chatter like 'satisfying, iron rich blood' becoming simply 'iron blood' which avoids throwing too many images at the reader, yet says what it wants to say.

I also used silence as a marker in 'After the Devil Took My Feet', when describing the ballet moves, I laid it out as:

Plié,

Demi plié.

Arabesque.

This is a pivotal moment in my poem. I wanted every movement to stand out so that the reader can focus intently on each word/ movement, as the subject would have been as she was performing them. The silence between the words also indicates the struggle that the subject would have endured. She was in a lot of pain and would have had to pause between each movement herself before going on to the next one, the silence forces the reader to mimic this.

Magic Realism

While I was writing, I realised that magic realism was a style that I adopted. I noticed a natural inclination towards transformation within my work and decided to make this an essential part of my sequence. Of course, transformation is a key aspect of magic realism, which takes consensus reality and transforms it by adding magical or fantastical elements.

The most striking example of this from *Wise Woman/ Mad Woman* would be in 'Imp', where the speaker removes their own brain and feeds it and cares for it like it is a pet or a familiar

spirit. 'I top slice my skull, and lift the cranium,/ set it down and remove the brain.(...)/I stroke her.'

I enjoy using magic realism as it allows me to flow seamlessly from real-world, relatable situations, into the mythical and strange worlds that I love to write about. This transformative technique allows the reader to vividly imagine the poem's narrative while moving further from reality, to the heart of the poem's message. I found inspiration in Angela Carter's (1979) *The Company of Wolves*, which I listened to in video format. The following section, in particular:

so a wolf he instantly became and tore off the eldest boys left foot before he was chopped by the hatchet they use for chopping logs, but when the wolf lay bleeding and gasping its last, the pelt peeled off again and he was just as he had been, years ago, when he ran away from his marriage bed. (Padded Cell Studio, 2018)

The idea of the skin peeling off to reveal something about the subject is an idea that I found fascinating and wanted to explore. I used this vivid image in my final poem, 'Wise Woman/' which begins 'I am flaying my skin, knife shaft exposing / emerald scales, deep- V at the neck.' This is a striking image, which quickly transforms the real-life but gruesome image of flaying one's self, into the fantastical image of emerald scales, and the revelation of the true self.

This imagery is also reminiscent of the Scottish mythological selkies, seals who peel off their skin and become beautiful maidens for one night. My human- snake transformation follows a similar pattern, yet it is more gruesome and painful in nature. Instead of being revealed as

simply a beautiful maiden, the speaker ends up as 'the Witch; tail-eater- steadfast, / back arched kitty-style. A geyser erupting / at Ragnarök, an image carved in stone.'

Unlike the selkies, a snake can't reattach its skin once it is shed, showing a finality to this transformation. The Eden myth has branded snakes as evil, and this poem documents the painful realisation, but ultimate acceptance, that the speaker will be seen as a marginalised and 'unholy' being. I felt this to be fitting for my final poem as the whole collection is centred on accepting and being proud of being a witch.

Conclusion

Overall, I feel I have succeeded in executing my intentions of writing a poetry sequence that weaves together themes of feminism and witchcraft effectively, showing what it means to be a female witch in the 21st century. I am particularly pleased with my use of magic realism to merge mundane and magical worlds within my work. However, I feel that I would like to develop my skills even further in rooting my poetry in the concrete. Throughout this process, I have learned to be unafraid of cutting poems that do not work within the context of the sequence, and to be ruthless while editing each poem individually. I am in the process of putting the sequence together as a pamphlet which I will submit to The Poetry Business Pamphlet Competition. I have plans to continue this collection and write poems for each of the Minor Arcana cards, and team up with an artist to publish the resulting collection alongside a tarot deck.

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