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Please Alight Here

Please Alight Here

A collection of poems that explore aspects of life in modern Britain, through the medium of the Northern Rail system.

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts by research in Creative Writing.**

The University of Huddersfield

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Please Alight Here

'Please Alight Here' is a collection of poems which intend to represent the life of modern British people through the medium of the rail network. The main themes include sex, isolation and parenthood, with social and political issues as background themes. Distinctive elements of the collection are intertextuality, character sequences and line isolation. The setting of the poems is the Northern train network influenced by my own Yorkshire identity and the representation of specific Yorkshire locations. Poetic influences on the collection include Simon Armitage, Andrew McMillan and Charlotte Wetton. Critical influence includes Fiona Sampson, Peter Sansom and David Lodge.

Please Alight Here

Trains pass over tracks.
They're our temporary friends;
strange yet familiar.

Please Alight Here

The Beginning

Poised - the compact her husband bought.
Pouts - Rouge Foncé.
He's sitting opposite - she rests her foot on his.

He spreads his legs.
His mind wanders at work,
when he's fucking his wife.

She brushes his leg as she leaves;
he ogles her from the window,
her number slipped in his pocket.

Please Alight Here

Please Alight Here

*The next station will be Fatherhood:
All change.*

Here already?
He checks his watch:

8.55.
He remains seated.

Please Alight Here

Yellow Line

She walks along the yellow line,
back and forth,

back and forth.

Every so often, she stops -
looks out

into the endless black.

Brakes hiss, headlamps in her eyes;
she steps into the light.

Please Alight Here

But [she] said no, oh no.

Crowded, bodies tight.
Pressed against the window,
breath burning the back of her neck,
crotch hard against her buttocks.

I dreamt about you every night this week.

Was that his hand stroking her thigh?
She pulls her skirt over her knees.
The window is cold, steamy; she clenches her fist.
His face in the window, his eyes lock with hers.

Simmer down and pucker up.

Station appears, exit light comes on.
He reaches for the button, brushes her breast.
Lurching out the doors, she runs towards stairs,
hunches over the railing and vomits.

Please Alight Here

Her teethmarks look like train tracks

Lying on his stomach on the bedroom carpet,
a blank page staring back at him.

He's trying to write a poem; the romantic kind.
A stick man, stabbing his heart.

An hour ago they were naked on this same carpet.
He rolls onto his back, tracing bite marks on his shoulder.

Checks his phone for a text; puts it back down.
Picks up his pen again, writes their names -

another stick man, pointing a gun to his head.
He screws up the paper screwed up, slams it in the bin.

His phone vibrates;
it's a text from O2.

He chucks the phone under the bed.
He grabs the pen.

Stick man, blowing his brains out.

Please Alight Here

Their second meeting in the station car park

Headlights off, spit swapping, hands roaming.
Skin tight under Levi jeans.

Zips undone, arms tangled, they melt simultaneously;
fuck there's some on the seat!

Last batch of passengers hurry past, ignoring
rocking car, steamed windows, moving silhouettes.

Lover-boy wipes away steam, checks carpark is empty,
opens the door,

will you ca-
the door shuts, he darts into the dark.

Please Alight Here

The Middle

Purple sheets at the Premier Inn;
two novice actors, sudden stage fright.

They undress quickly, her hair catches on a button.
They fuck once like dogs -

skittish titillated quick
thrust push thrust.

They stare at the ceiling - sweaty, breathing hard.
They share a cigarette out of the window,

she asks his name,
stubbing out the cigarette, he pulls blue suit trousers on.

I think we should rule out commitment for now.

Please Alight Here

~~Bully~~ Conductor

17.59. Conductor patrols the platform,
a young couple dash with pram and bags.
Conductor closes the door in their faces,
They bang on the door as he smiles.
Conductor marches down the aisle;
every pass checked, every ticket marked,
signature identical every time.
Old woman has forgotten her railcard,
therefore her ticket is invalid.
You've basically committed fraud.
Old woman cries, he counts the change.
wheyyyyyy!
Chavs a few rows down catch his eye;
one kicks the toilet door.
Water spills out, with the smell of stale piss.
A mother with her toddler move seats, nervous;
he strides down the carriage, straight past them.

Please Alight Here

Immigrants are the problem in this country

a pot-bellied, stocky, mid-fifty year old
fuelled by the seven cans of Carling
strewn across the table,
repeats at every station stop,
to his similar looking friend
falling asleep against the window.

*No wonder the NHS is about to collapse,
when those fucking Eastern Europeans are draining it.*

Opening a fresh can, he slurps froth
spitting some onto the table,
A blonde, twenty-something struts
past in heels and black skinny jeans.
Have you seen the fucking arse on that?
she turns and gives him the finger;

Odpieprz się!

* Odpieprz się is 'Fuck off' in Polish.

Please Alight Here

Don't look for the faults like me.

En route to a meeting at Phoenix Futures.
He watches her from across the carriage,
bouncing his thighs up and down on the seat.
He wishes she could smell her;
shoot her scent straight into his veins,
let it detonate in his blood.
The best high he'll ever have.
She has her laptop today.

He watches her furrowed brow
when the conductor asks for tickets;
why does she do that?
He likes the way she places her mustard yellow mittens
and brown tartan scarf in a neat pile.
How she tucks her hair behind her ears,
how she only puts one headphone in.
How she makes notes in her little book
with the hedgehog on the cover.
He stops bouncing his leg, looks out the window.

If she looked at him, he wonders what she'd see.
In his reflection, his hair looks neat today; *trendy*.
His Geisha tattoo; *pretty cool*.
The way he only has one headphone,
because the other has broken off; *cute*.
Maybe he should sit with her next week.
The train stops, he looks back to her,
as she steps off, kisses the tanned young man
in the fitted suit, waiting on the platform.

*Phoenix Futures is a drug rehabilitation centre.

Please Alight Here

8.01

The train is due at quarter past.
Lying in the lukewarm bath,
she looks to her stomach, pallid and flat.

She looks at it as if it might burst.
There is no sign, no obvious trace.
Rakes her nails across it,

red marks fade; she pulls the plug,
water is sucked away.
She stands, opens the blinds, light floods in.

Shapes form on newly tender breasts,
made by the shadows of the branches
of the tree outside.

Stroking the shapes with her finger,
she moves to her stomach -
scrapes a skull with her nails.

Please Alight Here

Lisa's 50th

Leeds Train Station Wetherspoons, 22:58.

Middle aged men in Paul Smith polos
and going-out shoes, see out the last pint of their gallon

as the wives struggle back from the toilets
in five inch heels.

Shrill laughter, pissed sniggering
after bottles of Blossom Hill Rosé.

They marvel at the litre of pink gin offer,
throw banter at the barman

with the *muscles and cheeky smile*.
Leader of the group -

a Yorkshire rose on one arm
kid's names on the other,

drenched in Lacoste Red -
rounds up the rabble;

we're gonna miss the fucking train!

You get stuck behind them on the escalator;
you all miss the fucking train.

Please Alight Here

A siren is sounding, but nobody is listening

*He doesn't know he's born,
his grandfather tells him, again.
He hasn't been down the pit, he wasn't in the war.
He's never been shipped off to Durham
to avoid the Doodlebugs and Heinkels.
His eyes roll, mouth stifles a sigh.*

Tickets from Huddersfield!

A dark-skinned conductor approaches.
His grandfather hands over a ticket,
with a side-eyed glance.
*You're right Granddad,
Muslims are dodgy;
he's going to bomb this train any second.*

Please Alight Here

It's not your birthday, but i baked for you anyway.

She scrambles for the 16.33, looking forward
to the thirty seven minutes of cheek to cheek
with that man who always smells like sardines.

She'll look for a new job soon, she'll go to Bali.

She reaches the tattered blue door,
smells the scent of milk and flour.
He's in the kitchen,

dusting a Victoria Sponge with icing sugar -
damn, I wanted it to be ready for when you get in.

She smiles,
What are we having for tea?

He waves a takeaway leaflet.
She eyes the cake -
they eat the whole thing.

Please Alight Here

Please Keep *Left*

Passengers come and go through holding pens,
like cattle awaiting slaughter.

They bustle, bumping shoulders
rushing for exits, seats and connections.

They crowd the opening doors;
agitated, stomping hooves, clashing horns.

Some ignore the sign printed on the steps -
deviate from the crowd; veer to the *Right*.

No advantage;
everyone ends up in the same place.

Please Alight Here

Cat's Cradle

An almost-empty carriage sways, rickety
over tracks towards Manchester.
You're sharing a seat with your friend,
legs tangled together like string.

She's twisting a piece of hair around her finger,
yours hangs limp by your breasts.
Her spare hand rests on a bare thigh
underneath a mandarin sundress.

Your eyes trace the lacework of her bra strap;
off-white from too many washes.
Train sluggish; stops.
You point to yellow flowers by the track,

Oh they're Mimosas! she beams,
My boyfriend picked some for me last week.

You hop onto the platform, linking arms with her.
Would you like me to pick some for you?
she quips with a smirk.
You stick two fingers up.

she laughs, lets go of your arm.
You watch her, skipping ahead
dress blowing in the wind.

Please Alight Here

Constellations

The specks of dirt on the window remind her of the stars.
She starts to count them,

wondering where the dirt came from,
which route, which track.

With her fingers, she traces the night sky blueprint -
Cassiopeia, Delphinus, Orion...

the train jerks, her hand slips:

only her scarred reflection in the dirty window.

Please Alight Here

Insert Brain Here

A bored-out-of-her-mind girl waiting
for the once-an-hour train to Sheffield
scans around.

Crumbling Castleford Station;
red paint-peeling off shack.
Strangers stealing body heat.

A lone platform, broken ticket machine;
three blue plastic seats
floating like an island in the the concrete.

The Station pub brimming with regulars,
whose ashes will eventually scatter
across the eighties floral carpet.

She scans around again;
this time sees written, loudly
in neon pink -

Insert Brain Here.

She draws a neat line around her skull, imagines
removing the top and scooping her brain out.
The boy next to her, with bloodshot eyes, has already offered his.

Please Alight Here

No one ever asked [her] why

Permed hair woman with the polka dot scarf.
Stinks of Lavender. Cat hairs clinging to her coat.

Office women discussing their favourite topic; gossip.
Karen hasn't made it today - Gracie was vomiting all night.

Nasal voice guy in the Karrimor coat talking
at the North Face jacket woman with the glazed eyes.

Lanky man, with a tangerine watch and matching case.
YouTube again, laughing way too loudly.

Hipster hairdresser with silver hair, waistcoat, Doc Martens,
commandeers the last fold down chair, spreads his legs.

Nose ring girl next to him rolls her eyes,
then turns to you, scowling:

what are you looking at, weirdo?

Please Alight Here

I wish I was your favourite [boy]

The train is now half an hour late.
It could be a day late,
 a week late.

Time is broken, the platform has melted into the snow.
He comes into focus, his mouth revealing a smile.
You're stuck on those eyes, the sharp blue of them.

The crisp shirt, taupe and white pinstripe.
Coifed, almost too-perfect hair; you prefer it tousled
like it was when days were spent laying in his bed.

9 million people in this place; you meet again like this.
He'd been working in Central, staying with friends.
He's back with his ex now.

Keep in touch he says,
it was great seeing you,
you say.

He leaps on the train,
in the expensive Nikes
you helped him pick.

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15:17

A humid mid-afternoon carriage,
an agitated buzz bounces from wall to wall.
A blur of black and yellow crashes
into the window, over and over.
She watches it, fixated on its frantic flailing,
as cries intensify,
from the Baby Zen Yo-yo pushchair his mum bought.

*Ladies and gentlemen,
we are now approaching Woodlesford.*

The buzzing stops, the body drops;
she stares at it for seconds,
screams piercing her ears.
The screaming continues,
all of the twenty six minutes home.

Please Alight Here

It's not ideal for the kids, but they seem to be coping

Saturday morning, bags packed with green,
sun-bleached beach towels, swimming costumes,
a bottle of shampoo to share.
A ceremonious pound, for the vending machine
sitting patiently in their pockets.

He has them every other weekend;
swimming one week, bowling next.
They sit in the platform shelter: the train is delayed.
Eat packed lunch early - jam sandwiches,
chopped up strawberries, salt and vinegar crisps.

He asks how school is, met with shrugged shoulders.
He asks how Mum is, *alright* they say.
He's run out of questions;
the train still isn't here.
Silence settles on them, like dust.

We are sorry to announce that the 10:39 Northern service to Sheffield has been cancelled, sorry for any inconvenience this may cause.

Please Alight Here

He died six years ago

A couple hurry onto the carriage.
We nearly missed it, you idiot.

The wife shoves shopping bags
on her husband. They shake off drips,

as a dry old woman,
gazes from across the carriage.

The wife rolls her eyes at the old woman - *men!*

The old woman smiles,
looks to the empty seat beside her.

Please Alight Here

blowjob 28, Online now

17:16 Goole service standstill,
phone screens lit, restless legs.
Grindr is open,

a new message: 21 feet away.
Anonymous.
I'd love to drink your piss and cum now.

He peeks around the carriage, eyes meet
with his - none telling.
Maybe badly bleached hair guy or

tanned guy with tight suit trousers.
His dick is bursting through jeans,
shaky fingers type:

ok.

Please Alight Here

Postnatal Depression.

The clock hand ticks slower each time
as she waits for his train to get in.

She's still in pyjamas, hair unbrushed.
Baby tantrums for tenth time today.

He opens the door, *hell-*
take the baby, take the bottle.

Runs a bath,
drowns the demons of the day.

Tiredness seeps from every orifice
like blood, after an E goes wrong.

Dunks under water.

BANG

BANG

BANG

on the bathroom door.

Hurry up love, we've run out of nappies.

Please Alight Here

Body heat

he feels hers next to him.
Mousy brown hair, fringe flustered

from the wind.
Aubergine lips, eyeliner flick.

Penis twitch.
Conductor snaps, *ticket*.

He fumbles for it;
looks up, she's grinning.

Please Alight Here

39 Weeks

Empty seats, used tickets,
lingering perfume, sweet wrappers.
Vibrations anticipating departure.

Daffodils stagger along the sidetrack
like Red Light District girls,
waiting to be picked.

Perhaps she should get off here,
pull a flower head from its stem,
use it to replace the plug -

green, pink, waxy -
that has fallen
from her ripened cervix.

Please Alight Here

The End

Knees weak from everything but arousal.
Lips pale, cracked. She sits beside him.

Through the window, a tractor catches his eye.
She says she hasn't been sleeping properly.

Must be a boring job, just driving that thing around.
Conversation flickers out fast, like a tea light - vanilla.

The next station is, Dewsbury.

She reaches for his hand -
he stands up.

I need a piss.

Please Alight Here

Please Alight Here

A collection of poems that explore aspects of life in modern Britain, though the medium of the Northern Rail system.

Introduction

'Please Alight Here' is a pamphlet collection of 28 poems exploring the insecurities, desires and experiences of people on the Northern train network. The collection focuses on themes including sexual yearning, alienation and parenthood, while social and political issues such as race, class and gender recur throughout. A structural lynchpin of the collection is my use of train journeys and wider aspects of the rail network; often the train or rail system acts as the content and context of the poems. I used the rail world as the setting of the collection because of the emotions people experience when in the confined environment of the train (anger, lust, isolation) and train journeys are often an integral part of a person's daily life. Distinctive aspects of the collection include the quotation and appropriation of song lyrics and structure, specifically line isolation, sequences and spacing. This commentary will discuss technique, my influences, the shaping and development of my poems and my intentions for the collection. I conclude by discussing my next steps as a writer. In *Writing Poems* (1994), Peter Sansom notes that, 'when we write vividly and accurately, we create another world for ourselves and our readers' (Sansom, 1994: p. 38). My intention for 'Please Alight Here' was to create a world within the train, building characters and situations which readers could identify with, that would leave a lasting impression.

Please Alight Here

Intention, Theme and Content

In *Poetry Writing* (2009), Fiona Sampson notes how Rainer Maria Rilke's collection 'Elegies' (1923) is 'a series of attempts at nothing less than transcendence' (Sampson: 2009: p .7). Sampson suggests that poetry is 'to make something exist *out there*, beyond the self.' (Sampson, 2009, P. 8) which constitutes Sampson's definition of transcendence. In reference to my own work, I understand transcendence as creating a poem which goes beyond its content; a poem which blurs the line between reality and the world I've created, a poem which provokes an emotional response from the reader. Further to this, I believe both Sampson's and my own view of transcendence echoes Sansom's belief about creating a world through vivid writing; a world existing *out there*. I wanted to maintain a sense of transcendence throughout this collection, intending for each individual poem to achieve this through the movement and content of the poem; the creation of the train environment and the characters within was important for this to work. As Sansom states quite simply: '*We show not tell!*' (Sansom, 1994: p. 39). For the poems to remain rooted within the rail context, I had to create concrete, believable scenes and characters, avoiding abstraction. Too much abstraction and editorialising (something I will discuss later in the essay) in my poems would result in my goal of transcendence falling short, as the concrete language and imagery is the power behind the poems.

In this collection I intended to improve my technique in two areas in particular. Firstly, by using more vivid, sensory writing to represent my subject matter concretely, by

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'showing' rather than 'telling', and secondly I sought to develop my formal control.. The poems are designed to allow the reader to, metaphorically board the train and lose themselves within the world I had created, thus achieving the aforementioned notion of transcendence. In *About Poems and How Poems Are Not About* (2017), Anne Stevenson begins with a discussion around the voice of the poet, referring to Frances Berry's work *Poetry and the Physical Voice* (1962). Stevenson defines 'Poet's Voice' to '[metaphorically refer] to an individual's speech idiom or characteristic mode of expression' (Stevenson, 2017: p. 24). For my intentions to be successful and for the potential of pamphlet publication to be a realistic goal, I had to refine my 'poet's voice' - my unique tone and expression. I felt this would unite the poems and maintain a sense of coherence, the intention being that not only does each poem achieve transcendence but that all the poems ultimately achieve unity.

Initially, I worked on developing an overarching theme to allow the collection specific focus, gathering the content for the foundations of the collection. This gave me the content and initial drafts of the poems; in the editing process I could then develop my poet's voice by paying attention to tone, expression and structure. When discussing the work of W.B Yeats, Stevenson discerns how 'we see the dimensions, oral and rhythmic, of the poet's voice taking precedence over his ideas.' (Stevenson, 2017: p. 27). I understand this as meaning that poet's style is more recognisable and distinctive than the actual content of the poem. An integral aim for the collection was for my ideas and

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themes to be identifiable and executed creatively, but for my poet's voice to be the predominant, sustained presence.

As the collection is set in Yorkshire, an element of voice came from the Yorkshire accent and dialect; I use colloquial and idiomatic language, such as profanities, throughout to reflect the stereotypical Yorkshire speech. The poems which don't have dialogue were intended to be a contrast to those that do; I wanted them to have a softer tone, but still present strong images. An example of this would be 'Don't look for the faults like me', which is a poem about a drug addict going through rehabilitation, who becomes besotted with a girl who gets on the same train as him. I wanted the tone of this poem to be quite melancholic; oddly hopeful but sad at the same time. I wanted the eloquent, softer tone of this poem to juxtapose with the perhaps expected demeanour of the protagonist; he is perceptive, hopeful and intelligent despite his life being blighted by drug abuse. This is not to suggest that the Yorkshire accent or profanities equate to unintelligence, it is more to allow this character individualism. Below is an excerpt from the poem.

He watches her furrowed brow
when the conductor asks for tickets

- why does she do that?

He likes the way she places her mustard yellow mittens
and brown tartan scarf in a neat pile.

How she tucks her hair behind her ears,
how she only puts one headphone in.

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How she makes notes in her little book
with the hedgehog on the cover.
He stops bouncing his leg, looks out the window.

Certain poems contain characters that are representative types and thus might be regarded as stereotypes, for example, a drug addict who is fighting to become sober or an older racist individual. Other poems focus more on the individual, aiming to transcend stereotypes by exploring the individual outside of their Northern identity. The characters in the collection were informed by people I witnessed during my research process, so the 'stereotypical' nature refers to the characters being representative of certain, recognisable types of people. Though the protagonist in 'Don't look for faults like me' is headed to a rehab meeting in Barnsley, I wanted to give the impression that he could be from anywhere. This was intended to link back to the theory of transcendence by presenting a character which is representative of drug abuse and is located in Barnsley, but the character has no definitive feature which suggests his association with Barnsley itself. The character becomes universal, relatable and identifiable, thus going beyond the poem.

In *Marxism and Modernism: A Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (1982) Eugene Lunn discusses Lukács' theory on Realism and Naturalism, noting that

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'Lukács defined realism as a literary mode in which the lives of individual characters were portrayed as part of a narrative which situated them within the entire historical dynamics of their society' (Lunn, 1982: p. 78).

Lunn further notes that,

'the naturalistic author's voice is relativized to the various psychologies of his characters. Static situations with fetishised objects are described, alternating with isolated, fleeting, subjective impressions – an abstract objectivity alternating with a false subjectivity.' (Lunn, 1982: p. 82.).

To summarise, Lukács seems to suggest that Realist writers focus on the wider historical and social connotations of an individual, while Naturalist writers focus on the individual themselves, i.e. the details of their appearance, focusing more in the moment. It could be said that Naturalism can be purely descriptive, while Realism can be more analytical and facilitates typological abstraction, creating recognisable and believable characters who are also representative of a general 'type'. My own writing is more realistic, which also links back to Sampson's theory of transcendence; my poems present several individual characters, with definitive features and specific surroundings, but comment on wider social issues and constructs. Thus, the poems seek to achieve transcendence by using the individual as an instrument to present a trajectory into modern British anxieties and everyday life. Below is an excerpt from 'Immigrants are the problem in this

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country'. While the opening of the poem describes and presents an image of the protagonist, the dialogue transcends the poem by commenting on current social/political fears and attitudes regarding immigration, in the midst of 'Brexit'. Thus, the description serves to present a 'type' of person who has this attitude, rather than focusing on that particular individual.

a pot-bellied, stocky, mid-fifty year old
fuelled by the seven cans of Carling
strewn across the table,
repeats at every station stop,
to his similar looking friend
falling asleep against the window.

*No wonder the NHS is about to collapse,
when those fucking Eastern Europeans are draining it.*

The theme for my collection needed to be clear and specific, so I created a spider diagram which had 'Conflict' at the centre. I wanted to explore conflict in people's lives, so I mapped out the people, situations and conflict in my life, before exploring wider links to society. One of the main themes evident on the diagram was relationships, both romantic and domestic. The overarching theme of conflict gave me more focus but there was still room to really define what would unite my collection. I decided to use

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train journeys and the railway system as a basis to explore the themes and characters within the collection. Rail journeys and the rail system is used throughout the collection for the content and context, which takes shape in the form of setting, characters and language. The train imagery is a structural device to link the poems together and maintain the world within the train. The themes were influenced by my experiences, along with imaginative empathy for other people's experience. This further allowed me to develop the perspective on my poems; I wrote from experience but also placed myself in the positions of others, both individuals and groups of people.

Once the train context was established as a lynchpin for the collection, I considered having a potential underlying theme of 'Brexit Britain' which came from a sense that a train journey is a literal and metaphorical trajectory into contemporary Britain. 'Brexit Britain' was a reference to the current state of British economy and society, particularly fears around employment, immigration and public services which have divided the country. This was something I was working towards initially, writing poems such as *The Witch is Dead!* which was originally called *Cemetery*, then *The Burning of Margaret Thatcher*. The poem was inspired by the bonfires and parties across the country, that were thrown to celebrate the death of Margaret Thatcher on the 8th April, 2013. Though I was specifically focusing on Knottingley, West Yorkshire, in the heart of the former coalfield. There is a train service from Leeds to Knottingley which runs every hour, usually departing from platform 17A, the last platform in Leeds station. I thought this was symbolic as it could be seen to reflect the outsider's view that Knottingley is a 'dead end'

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town; with no real economic infrastructure after the decline of the mining industry. The poem was intended to depict a grim and provocative celebration but ultimately no more than a futile gesture seeing as Knottingley still faces the social, cultural and economic problems that many 'post-industrial' Northern towns face. The initial problem with this poem was that it was too simplistic; below is the original draft of this poem, along with the final draft.

Cemetery

There are no headstones here,
but it is the town of the dead.
The last stop on the line;
purgatory.

No more digging deep down;
the people crumble like coal.
Thick dust covers council houses,
and working men's pubs.

Old Maggie gone,
they drink to that.
Strike matches, burn the pictures.
A brief spark of life.

But this isn't court,
there is no justice here.

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A shell remains;
she takes her crown to the grave.

The witch is dead!

08.04.2013 - 19:56

Ding Dong the Witch is dead!
Chanting, circling the bonfire;
they bring forth the effigy like a sacrificial lamb.
One-by-one they fuel the flames,
children delightfully squeal
as flames lick the offerings.
Parents smile on, drink pints, eat toffee.

10.04.2017 - 14:03

A ten minute stop for no apparent reason
steers his eyes to uncanny smiley face graffiti;
this is the place of the celebratory bonfire.
There's a sign near the gate -
Primary School in development.
Three boys, defacing the sign
turn, show their arses at him.

When developing the poem my focus on the decline of mining communities and stereotypes related to social housing were too cliched. Also, the way I referred to Margaret Thatcher appeared too endearing, conflicting with the concept of the poem. I

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discovered that a primary school was built on one of the sites where a bonfire was held; I thought that this could be a good foundation for the poem because of the juxtaposition of the innocent children and hope for the future with the arguably barbaric,(celebrating the death of a person) mock-execution style events which took place beforehand. Rather than focusing on the perception of Knottingley being 'rough' and working class, I focused on the bonfire itself and how time moves on, hence the primary school element. I wanted to connote how despite the celebrations surrounding Thatcher's death, there is still no justice for the people she (and her government) wronged. The spectator on the train takes the reader to this moment through his memory, therefore the poem became focused on the person's experience of the bonfire and what this said about society, rather than specifically Britain's response to the death of Margaret Thatcher. Ultimately I decided to cut the poem from the collection as, though the idea was effective, I couldn't successfully resolve the content into a poem as there were several strands which could each be their own poem, thus making it difficult to compress them into a single, effective poem.

As the collection developed a different group of themes began to emerge, including sexual tension and longing and also regret and isolation. The personal attempt to find intimacy, meaning and connection within the alienating environment of the train and society as a whole became a major theme, with politic and social issues becoming more of a backdrop. This theme emerged during the writing process, linking well with the nature of the train itself; strangers within close proximity and the physical motion of the

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train provoke the inclination for people to turn their thoughts to sex, loneliness and often, anger. The routine of commuting seemingly prompts passengers to seek gratification, a break from their regular life.

Simon Armitage's *The Unaccompanied* (2017) was influential during my writing process. *The Unaccompanied* documents themes such as recession and social division, against a Yorkshire backdrop. A review on *The Guardian* states how 'Armitage describes a world in social and economic meltdown' (The Guardian, 2017). Though I wanted to explore social and political issues within my collection in a similar style to Armitage, I wanted to focus on the individual within the rail setting, depicting their desires, insecurities, routines and complex lives.

A recurring theme in the feedback I have received from tutors has been to be specific rather than vague, concrete rather than abstract, which is something I wanted to focus on during the editing process. In the poem *Poundland*, Armitage writes 'Then emerged souls: the duty manager with a face like Doncaster' (Armitage, 2017, P. 10). The specific reference to Doncaster immediately draws the reader into an outsider's stereotype of Doncaster - working class, provincial - and similarly the title of the poem evokes a similar vision of the clientele and associations with Poundland. The poem serves as a description of Poundland and the people who visit before concluding with an almost ceremonial view of handing over pound coins 'laden with whatnot, lightened of golden quids' (Armitage, 2017, P. 11). This poem perfectly encapsulates the idea of

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transcendence; Armitage presents Doncaster in a recognisable way, but achieves transcendence by presenting the handing over of coins as a poignant transaction; suggesting people see Poundland as a community or a ceremonial offering. In my own work I wanted to present different train based or rail related situations, which are then transformed through powerful language and a strong ending. An example of this would be 'Lisa's 50th' where I sought to create a concrete scene and recognisable characters, while the profanities enhance the intended powerful ending of the poem. As the collection developed, my natural writing style seemed to be descriptive, meaning the collection leans towards presenting scenarios through descriptions and dynamic language. That being said, many of the characters and situations are representative of certain 'types', so while my poems are concrete, they are also symbolic, transcending their specific settings to be more generally communicable. Below is an excerpt from the poem, which shows the characters and the powerful ending.

They marvel at the litre of pink gin offer,
throw banter at the barman

with the *muscles and cheeky smile*.

Leader of the group -

a Yorkshire rose on one arm

kid's names on the other,

drenched in Lacoste Red -

rounds up the rabble;

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we're gonna miss the fucking train!

You get stuck behind them on the escalator;
you all miss the fucking train.

'The Ice Age' from *The Unaccompanied* was especially influential; in this poem, Armitage achieves transcendence by using techniques which I deploy in my own work. Armitage sets the scene 'Tuesday the tenth, Wakefield Westgate Station, seven in the morning' (Armitage, 2017: p. 35) and then shows the scene 'every lungful of air/ transmuted to silver/commuters standing about like skittles' (Armitage, 2017: p. 35). The opening of the poem roots the poem in time and place, providing an image of the station. Then the reference to passengers being like skittles suggest that they are essentially waiting to be bowled over and are passive. This prompted me to establish the right balance between showing and telling in my own work. The specific references and descriptions are intended to setup the environment and characters, while the showing is intended to be the language and execution of the situation. Below is an excerpt from the poem 'Cat's Cradle' which firstly exemplifies the setup on the train and then shows the protagonist's desire for her friend through their closeness and her scanning over her friend's body.

An almost-empty carriage sways, rickety
over tracks towards Manchester.
You're sharing a seat with your friend,
legs tangled together like string.

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She's twisting a piece of hair around her finger,
yours hangs limp by your breasts.
Her spare hand rests on a bare thigh
underneath a mandarin sundress.

I started shaping the poems into a narrative arc, aiming to portray the repetitive and relentless nature of life; a sense of travelling but going nowhere which is the nature of a local commuter train. I aimed to depict both positive and negative moments, along with people coming and going and to create a sense of repetition in characters' lives; there are people we see continuously then there are people who are fleeting figures. 'Please Alight Here' attempts to present a more focused group of people on life's journey, experiencing their own highs and lows, while ultimately reflecting the sense of travelling, but not always going somewhere.

Originally there were around 35 poems in the collection. I cut poems which I thought failed to cohere or which did not achieve the tone and mood I was seeking. The poems were predominantly formed from vignettes of experiences and observations. The form alternates between free verse, couplets and structured stanza sets - tercets, quatrains, quintets and longer stanzas. The following section of the essay will discuss the techniques used in forming the poems and the process of shaping the collection.

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Technique, Development and Style

In *The Art Of Fiction* (2012) David Lodge introduces the chapter on intertextuality by noting how 'some theorists believe that intertextuality is the very condition of literature, that all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts, whether their authors know it or not' (Lodge, 2012: p. 98). This is a perspective I agree with and I have an awareness that my writing is always inspired by other texts. In *Story* (1998), Robert McKee states how writers 'watch life's passing show, collect bits and pieces to fill file cabinets with random material' (McKee, 1998: p. 386). An integral part of my research came from frequently noting down situations or ideas that I witnessed on train journeys. I also began to note certain song lyrics or quotes from rail signs that could be used for a poem. The use of other texts, rail related references and music within my poems became an element I tried to include organically and only if it stood to enhance the poem itself.

In the poem 'But [she] said no, oh no', I chose to incorporate the lyric 'I've dreamt about you nearly every night this week' from the Arctic Monkey's song 'Do I Wanna Know' (Turner, 2013, Track 1). The song is about someone who wants to know if their interest in someone is unrequited or not. My poem describes a situation in which a man is making unwanted advances towards a woman who gets the same train as him. In this context I felt that using this line suited my purposes, well as I wanted to convey how the man has no regard about whether his advances are welcomed by the woman or not, he simply dominates the situation and regardless of any discomfort he causes the woman. I decided that this line, along with 'simmer down and pucker up' served to enhance the

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poem by representing the domineering nature of the man, adding to the discomfort of the targeted woman. The poem was originally written in couplets to represent the two **characters'** physical closeness. However, I chose to isolate the lines which contained the lyrics to the song, so I changed the poem into tercets to maintain a clear structure whilst accommodating those isolated lines. Below is an example from the poem.

Crowded, bodies tight.
Pressed against the window,
breath burning the back of her neck,
crotch hard against her buttocks.

I dreamt about you every night this week.

Was that his hand brushing her thigh?
She pulls her skirt over her knees.
The window is cold, steamy; her fist clenched.
His face in the window, lips wet.

This was to enhance their presence in the poem and also to represent the man himself; the isolated line is intended to be his voice, whilst the tercets are her experience of him sexually harassing her. The title of the poem is also a lyric from the Arctic Monkey's song 'A Certain Romance' (Turner, 2005, Track 13). The original title was 'Unrequited', but I felt the lyric was powerful and clearly depicted the girl's discomfort. In the poem 'Don't look for the faults like me', I also appropriated a lyric for the title of the poem, which is from

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'The Best Today' (Henson, 2013, Track 5) by Keaton Henson. The song itself depicts a man on a train journey who is fascinated by a girl on the same train, but who he forgets when she's out of sight. The song was a source of inspiration for my collection and I wanted to present how the protagonist sees himself and his life as a 'fault', while looking at her life as idyllic.

My original intention was to use the intertextual deployment of song lyrics to a much greater extent. However I found that intertextuality was becoming more of an end in itself and there were instances where the inclusion of lyrics didn't fit the overall poem. An example of this was the development of the mini-sequence of poems 'The Beginning', 'The Middle' and 'The End'. I originally used two Soft Cell songs 'Tainted Love' (Cobb, 1965, Track 3) and 'Say Hello, Wave Goodbye' (Ball & Almond, 1982, Track 5), (The Beginning and The End) along with 'Passionfruit' (Graham, Rouges, 2017, Track 3) by Drake (The Middle). Initially I decided that if I was going to use two Soft Cell songs, then I should maintain the Soft Cell theme seeing as the poems are intended to be a trio. However, it became clear in drafts that the lyrics only worked in 'The Beginning', and it seemed logical to cut the intertextuality altogether rather than just including it in one third of the sequence. Upon further editing of the sequence, specifically 'The Middle', I decided to keep the line 'I think we should rule out commitment for now' from Drake's song 'Passionfruit' as it fit well with the male character's attitude towards the affair and introduced the beginning of the distancing between the two, which we later see in 'The End'.

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The title of the poem 'I wish I was your favourite [boy]' is a lyric from a Kate Nash song 'Nicest thing' (Nash, 2007, Track 11), originally from the perspective of a female speaker. As the poem depicts a former homosexual relationship, I amended the gender pronoun to signify this. The song is from the perspective of a girl who wishes she could be with a man who she has unrequited feelings for; the reference in the poem is intended to symbolise the one-sidedness of the relationship and the protagonist's yearning for his former lover. The poem concludes with the desired man leaving on the train, while the protagonist remains alone on the platform, symbolising him feeling alienated from the relationship.

In *How Poets Work* (1996), Tony Curtis discusses the work of Helen Dunmore who and notes how Dunmore believes 'poems talk to one and other. There's an exchange of ideas and an intricate web of language' (Curtis, 1996: p. 84). I realised that for my poems to work as a collection, they had to have unity and cohesion. Working towards Dunmore's belief that the poems should clearly fit together, I wanted to create clear structural connections throughout the collection. Bearing in mind Stevenson's idea about the poet's voice, I knew that I had to limit the variation of style and formal range in order for the pamphlet sequence to come across as a unity and for my voice and style to be sustained. The structure changed throughout the editing process, often to accommodate line isolations, descriptions and life isolation. The majority of the poems are quite short, but there are several longer poems; ultimately, there became a subtle

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balance of short, medium and long poems which varied between free verse, couplets and then specific stanza sets.

The vignettes that inform many of the poems are intended to present a transient, evocative account of a person's life in often an everyday setting. As example of this are the poems 'The Beginning', 'The Middle' and 'The End', a sequence of poems which document three stages of an affair between two people who meet as they travel to work. The sequence was intended to portray the same two characters at three different points in their relationship, whilst also acting as a structural tool to represent the beginning, middle and end of the collection as a whole. Within this mini sequence, several of the main themes of the sequence are explored, including lust, isolation and regret. Bearing in mind Sampson's theory of transcendence, the recurring characters are intended to mirror the real-life nature of trains; as a passenger, you see the same people on the same recurring journey. But, these characters go beyond their regular routines by engaging in an affair. '8:01' and '15:17' are intended to represent the same girl at the beginning of her pregnancy and then again once she has had the baby. Below are examples from both poems.

15:17

A humid mid-afternoon carriage,

Please Alight Here

an agitated buzz bounces from wall to wall.
A blur of black and yellow crashes
into the window, over and over.
She watches it, fixated on its frantic flailing,
as cries intensify,
from the Baby Zen Yo-yo pushchair his mum bought.

Ladies and gentlemen,
we are now approaching Woodlesford.

The buzzing stops, the body drops;
she stares at it for seconds,
screams piercing her ears.
Screaming continues off the carriage,
all of the twenty six minutes home.

8:01

The train is due at quarter past.
Lying in the lukewarm bath,
she looks to her stomach, pallid and flat.

She looks at it as if it might burst.
There is no sign, no obvious trace.
Rakes her nails across it,

red marks fade; she pulls the plug,
water is sucked away.
She stands, opens the blinds, light floods in.

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The two specific times as titles establish a link but also the moving on of actual time is intended to symbolise the progression of the pregnancy her transition into motherhood. '8:01' is written using tercets across five stanzas, whilst '15:17' has no specific structure; this is intended to symbolise her mindsets pre and post-baby. The clear structural order in the first poem depicts how she feels certain in her choice to continue the pregnancy, whilst the lack of clear form in '15:17' is intended to display her struggles with her new role. Below is the full version of '15:17' poem and the first three tercets from '8:01' to exemplify this. The line isolation in the middle of '15:17' is intended to keep the reader 'in the scene' on board the train and to also break the protagonist's focus on the wasp.

Another structural method I experimented with throughout the collection is the isolation of lines and gaps within lines to create effects. I like Charlotte Wetton's pamphlet *Refuse to Turn into a Hatstand* (2017) which won the Michael Marks Pamphlet Award in 2017, chosen for 'its assured craft, its emotional and imaginative conviction across a really wide range of forms and tones' (caldervalley-poetry.com, 2017). I found that it has attributes with my own work; Wetton uses similar techniques including intertextuality and point of view, but more specifically line isolation to highlight the tone and message. Like many of my own poems Wetton uses couplets and stanzas combined with line isolation to emphasise significant section of the poem, also adding a striking visual element. In Wetton's poem *Magnolia Crescent*, an example of line isolation is shown below:

Please Alight Here

Upstairs, the son and daughter's rooms,
pyjamas folded, slippers empty.

I do not belong here.

Four bowls and four spoons
on the glass table.

(Wetton, 2017, P.18).

The isolation of the line 'I do not belong here' highlights its separation from the couplets and symbolises her the speaker not belonging to the house which the couplets describe. In the poem *Constellations*, line isolation is used to represent the physical jerking of the train, as shown below:

With her fingers, she traces the night sky blueprint -
Cassiopeia, Delphinus, Orion...

train jerks, hands slips.

her reflection in the dirty window.

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The isolated line not only represents the train itself but also temporarily disrupts the couplet structure, which is intended to depict the breaking of the daydream and the girl being brought back to reality.

In the poem *Insert Brain Here*, the line isolation was intended to emulate the graffiti on the shelter, as shown below in an excerpt from the poem, which is why it was separate to rest of the poem.

she scans around again;
this time sees written, loudly
in neon pink -

Insert Brain Here.

In order to root the collection within rail context, some of the titles of poems are direct references to the signs and announcements often encountered on trains/in stations. A poem which influenced my decision to incorporate this element is *Station* by Li-Young Lee, from his collection *Behind My Eyes* (2008). Lee writes 'Your attention please/Train Number 9/The Northern Zephyr', (Lee, 2008) continuing with this pattern throughout the poem, though with different trains and destinations. I thought Lee captured the environment of the train station well through the train announcements, which also helped structure the poem. Using this method within the poems allowed me to frame the poems by allowing readers to feel 'in the scene' and also to show the underlying

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meaning of the poem. Below is the poem 'Please Alight Here'. 'Please Alight Here' is a train announcement and I liked the idea of this as a poem; the idea being that 'Here' could be anywhere, both physical and metaphorical.

Please Alight Here

The next station will be Fatherhood:

All change.

Here already?

8:55.

He remains seated.

Originally, the poem was much longer, described other passengers on the train and concluded with the girl deciding whether to stay on the train or not. That version of the poem felt too contrived and prosaic, so I developed the meaning of 'Here' to indicate the status of becoming a father, which is a more powerful image and fit well into the recurring themes of parenthood and isolation. The fact that the protagonist remains seated at the end was intended to represent his apprehension at prospect of fatherhood. The combination of the actual train announcement, him being physically on the train and the reference to fatherhood and pregnancy work together to maintain the world onboard the train whilst addressing a huge pivotal moment in this person's life.

For my short poetry collection from the *Liberating Poetic Chaos* module in third year, I wrote all my poems in the first person as the collection was intended to be an

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autobiographical sequence. This is because the theme of that collection was an abusive relationship I had experienced, so first person felt the most natural to use as it was my point of view. However, looking back at those poems now, it is clear to see how the autobiographical nature and the compulsion to 'tell' the story can overpower artistic judgement, often resulting in the presentation of emotions and situations rather than the evocation of them and the exploration of relevant themes. With this in mind, I decided to use only second and third person pronouns for this collection in an attempt to distance myself from the characters and situations, but to also decrease my inclination to tell rather than show. This helped my writing process as I was able to maintain a necessary distance from some of the themes and content, which ultimately allowed me to focus and think outside of myself being in that particular situation, thus allowing myself to build upon stronger language and imagery to construct the scene. This decision was also important for poems including 'I wish I was your favourite [boy]', 'Cat's Cradle' and 'Their second meeting in the station car park' as these poems depict scenes between homosexual couples. I wanted to create a world with a variety of people and situations, and felt that writing in first person would make me more inclined to write as myself. In these poems I alternated between second and third person, exemplified in 'I wish I was your favourite [boy]' 'He's back with his ex now/*Keep in touch* he says, *it was great seeing you.*', to alleviate any confusion as to who the speaker was and who they were referring to, seeing as the gendered pronouns were the same.

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In *The Poetry Review*, Emily Berry writes how 'it seems obvious that colour might be less significant to poets, but poetry is full of colour if you look for it' (Berry, 2017). 'Please Alight Here' is intended to capture the moments in life which are less colourful and also those times which can be very bright. I used Berry's quote in a very literal way, by including colour in most poems. The intention behind this was for the colour to evoke content/context specific moods, to create vivid scenes and to also create juxtapositions. What I mean by this is juxtaposing two colours together to create a contrast, thus capturing the readers' attention. This is exemplified in the poem 'Yellow line' where the 'yellow line' contrasts with the 'endless black', the endless black being metaphorical for depression and the striking yellow line a clear, again metaphorical, indication of her balancing between succumbing to depression or not. In 'Cat's Cradle', I describe the specific colour of one of the girl's dresses, 'Her spare hand rests on a bare thigh/ underneath a mandarin sundress', while in 'Don't look for the faults like me', I describe the girl from the protagonist's point of view 'He likes the way she places her mustard yellow mittens and brown tartan scarf in a neat pile'. In both of these examples, colour serves to signify the longing of the people seeing these colours; the detail of the colours symbolises how closely they watch and are invested in this person. Throughout the collection, inclusion of colour serves to symbolise, to identify and to unite. An element similar to the use of colour, which naturally developed through the editing process and language selection, was the use of slant rhymes. Below are examples of this in the poems '8:01' and '39 Weeks', respectively. None of the poems within the collection have a structured rhyme scheme as this method is not a preference of mine but where opportunity permits I try to emphasise slant rhymes (words that don't

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technically rhyme but sound like they do). This adds a natural sense of rhythm to the poems but also enhances the content and imagery through the striking sounds.

Train is due at quarter past.
Laying in the lukewarm bath,
her stomach is pallid and flat.

the side of the track, like Red Light District
girls, waiting to be picked.

Please Alight Here

Conclusion

Overall, I am pleased with 'Please Alight Here' and feel that I have developed as a writer in the process of composition, editing and polishing. I have achieved what I intended to do by transcending the subject matter into effective poems and by creating my own poet's voice. Most importantly, I believe I have developed technically and improved as a poet. Collectively, the poems fit together through the sustained language style, form and thematic content. Many of the poems arise from vignettes of an observation, capturing a vivid moment in the life of the characters within the rail world. Other poems started as vignettes but transitioned to longer, narrative-driven poems. The collection presents a literary world, complex characters and vivid scenes. I've learnt a substantial amount during the course; my lexical prowess has improved as I believe I use more powerful language and can more carefully select apt words/phrases. I would say that I have established a better show/tell balance, achieving this through metaphors, similes and effective descriptions. Thus, my poems largely remained concrete and I edited a lot of abstraction during the development process.

Though I feel I have improved greatly since undergraduate level, I still have areas for development. I need to work towards a more established, confident balance between the concrete and abstract as I still have the tendency to draw conclusions for the reader and characterisation. Furthermore, I discarded several poems although I was able to evoke the vignette of experience that inspired them, I was not able to transform the content into a poem with a fully developed and explored theme. This meant that,

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referring back to Sampson's view of 'transcendence', these poems did not reach the intended level of transcendence as I didn't successfully resolve them or create an impactful poem. Focusing on the intention of each poem is something that I have learned as being essential to the construction of a poem; knowing what you want the poem to say and why you are writing the poem will ultimately make it a better piece of writing.

Completing this collection and essay, having recent successful online/print submissions and regularly volunteering at Stand Magazine has definitely reaffirmed my love for poetry, both as a reader and a writer. Moving forward, my intention is to continue to submit to literary magazines and enter poetry competitions to build my portfolio, establishing myself as a credible writer. Academically speaking it is my intention to complete a PhD in Creative Writing, again focusing on poetry. The PhD would be a development of where I am currently sitting as a poet; I would be looking to refine my poet's voice and unique style by producing a much more accomplished body of work, specifically a full length collection focusing on the areas of development I have noted.

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