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Kayleigh Alexandra Campbell

U1256150

Matryoshka

Poems on the complexity of women

is submitted in partial fulfilment of its requirements

for a Ph.D. in Creative Writing

awarded by the University of Huddersfield.

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Abstract

As an original, contemporary poetry collection *Matryoshka* effectively represents women and their complexity. The accompanying exegesis provides context to the origins of the collection and examines my creative process, discussing the distinctiveness of the collection throughout. The project in its entirety offers an individual, creative and critical input into discussions around diversity, agency and choice. I began the project by asking three questions: To what extent can I represent the complex woman figure? What does this complexity mean? Why have I chosen to present women this way? Firstly, I can only offer a representation and interpretation of women and their complexity. Secondly, the notion of complexity refers to the vast spectrum of individual attitudes, intentions and behaviours women can exhibit. This representation of complexity challenges the limitations placed on individuality, agency and accountability as a result of both patriarchy and popular culture, feminist ideals. Finally, the presentation of women in *Matryoshka* was largely driven by personal experience, observation and perspective.

The below list states the publications which versions of the following poems have featured in prior to submission:

1. 'Fontanelle' featured in Issue 12 of *Butcher's Dog* magazine November 2019.
2. 'Beached' featured on *Anthropocene* in December 2020.
3. 'Dear Vera Shimunia' featured on *Fragmented Voices* in April 2021.
4. 'Death of the Cherry Blossom' featured in *Stand Issue 230, Volume 19 Number 2* June- July 2021.

Matryoshka

A mother gathered her seven daughters
around the fireplace. She poured a glass
of violet coloured champagne for each one.
She watched as they sipped.
She smiled, as they shrank into little,
wooden dolls; she lined them up
on the mantelpiece.

Every one of her visitors raved
how beautiful the dolls were,
how similar to her daughters.
*They remind me of them when
they are away, travelling the world.*
More visitors came from afar
to see the dolls.

The mother began to hate
that people loved them so.
Even the Mayor came knocking!
Now, there was no answer.
The Mayor peeked through
a window. Inside the house

everything was as it should be.
A plate of biscuits on the table,
white roses, the fire burning.
The Mayor held an ear to the glass,
the house was spider quiet.

But one thing
had changed.
Above the fire
stood a single doll.

Wide, bright eyes,
wide, bright smile,
an emerald dress.

The seven
little dolls,

nowhere in sight.

Loch

You look out across the darkness of it
and see no monster there,

only a lone woman swimming into the deep of it.
Something pulls behind her, but you can't see

what it is. You are cold and damp
and swimming towards her.

You stop, breathless.
She stops and turns, she is featureless, but familiar.

Below the surface is a cord, floating between you.

Darling

after Anna Akhmatova

All that you are hangs by a thread —
tonight, tomorrow and always.

Whoever you are,
do not die young, but live dangerously.

Black is good for all occasions,
and the world is an endless funeral.

Ariana Grande said god is a woman

Her sister asks her to bring a dog collar
and some ginger bitters.

Her sister stands facing the wall
and fixes them both a Moscow Mule.

Her sister starts to confess —
things she's heard before.

She lets her sister finish her drink,
tells her to find god or a therapist.

A Poem for Lyudmila Petrusheskaya

i.

There Once Lived a Woman Who Killed:
a baby a fly an abuser a mouse
a child a mother a sister a spouse
a dog a daisy a stranger a grouse
a friend a colleague a song & a louse.

ii.

There once lived a woman
who killed
herself
then buried her body.

iii.

There once lived a woman
who strangled her lover
with some tights
she wore for work the following day.

iv.

There once lived a woman who killed
accidentally.
One morning she needed some air
so she flung open her bedroom window
without even noticing the cat
perched on the ledge there.

v.

There once lived a woman who lost sleep
thinking of her daughter's fate,
as she grew through each season.

If the daughter turned out to be a killer —
a plant, a cat, a lover — the mother was sure
there'd be good reason.

Exit wound

She sets the table.
Two plates, two knives, two forks,
the good paisley tablecloth, tulips
in the best crystal vase.

The oven pings as the front door opens.
She hurries into the room, smiles.
Eyes flash across at the table

A plate shatters against the wall.
She watches as the shards scatter into chaos.
There is no sound anymore,

just raging arms, a moving mouth.
She stares at the debris;
the shards begin to move.

They move into formation.
They have become a woman's face,
pale and distorted.

The silence is broken by shouting.
She cannot hear the words
she can no longer see the face.

The tulips have bowed,
she picks them from the vase.
She pulls the tablecloth from the table,

cutlery clatters, the other plate cracks;
she drapes the table cloth over her shoulders.
She ducks from a fist.

She hurries out of the front door,
tulips in her hand,
paisley cape blowing in the breeze.

Bottled Goods

After Sophie Van Llewyn

There is a kind girl
who offers what she can,
smiles and says nice things.
The girl apologises
for the faults of others.
When the sun goes down
she retreats to a room
filled with books and fairy lights.
On the shelf above her bed
is a row of miniature glass bottles
filled with glitter, dried flowers
and the shrunken bodies of those
who underestimated her,
soundlessly clawing on the glass.

Three Sisters

She can't sleep again,
even after a bedtime infusion
of camomile, valerian root and rose.
She scrolls through Apple news:

Alternative, quiet but beautiful hikes.

A meteor seen over Japan.

*A mother who aided the killing
of her six children is being released
from prison after half her term.*

Johnson, Starmer, Sturgeon.

Her eyes grow heavy from the bright
screen; a star amidst the dark.
They close on three Russian sisters.

An alternative Chekov plays
behind her eyes.
Three sisters have carved their story
on apartment walls.
They scrape mucosa from their tongues
to erase the taste of the lump of skin
who is now slumped in the armchair.
They gather around ceremoniously
and puncture the sleeping, cold heart.
They listen to it deflate.
She whispers how she would do the same.
They stay still, watching life leave
the body that made them,
the body that ruined them.

Cemetery

There are those who cannot fathom
how a young woman could find walking
with the dead peaceful.

There are those who cannot fathom
why a young woman would walk
through a cemetery alone at night,
by choice.

There are those who cannot fathom
how she could not fear the danger
in the graveyard shadows.
Why she walks further into the dark
as a lone, almost shooting star.

Flight

When her children are cutting shapes
from felt, making happy Easter cards
and her other-half sits at a desk
by a picture of her and the children smiling,
her breasts are pressed against
the full-length mirror
fogged with her lover's breath.
Later, she packs a holdall
with thrown together outfits.
She trips on a small bunny by the door.
She scribbles words full of ink
but no meaning on a post-it note,
then leaves.

Lucienne

remained at the cliff edge
her feet dangling above

the Irish sea

longing for the tide
to return her lost love

A gift

The first time the cat left her a mouse,
stiff and intact apart from two small,
bloodied holes on the doorstep
she felt a wave of elation.

She'd heard about this —
they leave you gifts.
Science suggests this is the act
of a natural mother, a teacher.
Her theory is love.

Last Wednesday, a tiny thing
in the foetal position on the doorstep.
Yesterday, another one
amongst the snowdrops.
She shovelled it onto the dustpan
and studied it for a minute,
then flopped it into the sack of leaves.

Each time a new one appears
she ponders how cruel nature can be
yet how lovely it is to receive a gift.
As her stomach grows she uses an app
which tells you how big the foetus is,
week eleven is the size of a fig.
She imagines week twelve as a tiny mouse,
in the foetal position.

Departure

For Alexandra Dvornikova

She receives an envelope from Saint Petersburg.
Her mother is alarmed by this news —
surely it will be laced with poison!

Don't open it— her mother hovers at her side.
She uses her index finger to slice open
the envelope with the precision of a knife.

She gently removes the contents.
A postcard, with an image of a small, porcelain
hand; resting on the hand are three
death's-head hawkmoths.

See! says her mother —
A bad omen; poison, foreign!
She looks up and notices she is now standing
beneath deep green spruce trees.

Her mother is drowned out
by the sounds of the forest.
She looks down again.
The hawkmoths depart from her hand
and she watches their flight for as long
as she can see.

She climbs a half-tree and sits.
She takes out her notepad and some ink.
There is no malice here, only two young
women with wild imaginations.

Martha

In the evenings Martha wanders around
her village as a mischievous cat
If a window is open — in she goes.
She jumps into cots with sleeping babies
tickles their faces with her whiskers.
She kneads her damp, muddy paws
into fresh white bedding.
She releases mice in pantries.
Tonight she sneaks into a bathroom,
Behind the frosted glass she can see
blurry strong thighs, a fuzz of brown hair.
She purrs with excitement.
She taps her right paw three times.
She sheds her fur and is female-form.
Naked, she steps into the shower.
Beneath two closed eyes she kisses the soapy lips
the eyes pop open —
in a flash she's feline again, out the window
and off into the starry night.

Saint Tatiana(s)

i.

Saint Tatiana was good to the bone,
which was exposed when they cut
off parts of her broken body.
Virtue ran through her blood,
she prayed for those who tore
her skin with hot iron.
They took her hair, then finally her head.
In her absence lays a wreath of tulips.

Saint Tatiana was a star waltzing
through Moscow.
People gasped at her shimmer,
grasped at her flicker.
An artist for the people of Russia.
No money, only stardust
and her Anna Karenina dress.
The cranes flew into the night
as she closed her eyes,
exited stage left.

Saint Tatiana was a natural leader.
Sources say she was the most
beautiful of the royal sisters,
and her mother's favourite.
Romances with soldiers
though she was married to Russia.
She embroidered a red cross
on her heart. She read the bible
every evening until one night
a bullet entered the back of her head,
leaving a hole like a small,
misplaced halo.

Sweet, little Saint Tatiana.
Only four years into her life
shadowed by destruction.
The woman who brought her
into the world, was the woman
who took her from it.

ii.

The sonographer laughed,
I think we can see what it is!
She stared at the screen.
She too saw it; she stared at it
until her eyes could see only
darkness.

She would not give birth
to her Saint Tatiana.
She would not be able to atone,
to live again through a daughter.

Insects

We spend our afternoons in the garden
passing the lethargic, post-nursery hours.
You wilt in the mid-July heatwave
and throw yourself on the ground, demanding milk.
It is gone in several gulps.
You lay still, your eyes slowly blinking.

Suddenly you crouch like a cat, face low
to the garden flags looking for insects.
At first with awe.
Ladybirds! Clover Mites! A beetle!
Then you spot an exhausted, nondescript fly
as it clings to a plastic toy in the paddling pool.

You watch it for a moment,
before dunking it below the surface.

The Girls in the Garden of the Dead

I will write to Natalia Deprina
and ask her to photograph me
as one of her girls in the garden of the dead.
I will let my body sink into the mud
and the undergrowth. Let gypsy moths
be ornaments on my bone china skin.
Listen to it crack in the woodland chill,
at the slightest touch of anethum.
I can be a girl in a white dress
laid in this burial garden, welcomed
into the forest, slowly into the ground
adorned with juniper leaves.
I will rise from my burial bed and roam
through ferns surrounded
by a cloud of skipper butterflies
I will stop, trace the curve of the crescent moon
with my finger, cradling a fresh silent heart
in my palm.
I will bury the heart in the soft mud,
place a wreath of wild roses on top.
I will walk into the shallow of the lake
to bathe beneath moonlight.
I will join the girls in the garden of the dead
in their white dresses, with their crimson-stained
hands, earth-lined fingernails.
Anemones rooted to our tongues
pearl-bordered fritillaries sewn into our hair
wings still fluttering. Moss-painted toenails.
Here we rest, here we frolic
here we haunt, here we are born
in the burial garden, in the garden of death.

Death of the cherry blossom

It is our house and it is not our house.
White patio doors; neat emerald grass.
I'm trying to save something;
I can't see what it is.
You are in the living room, behind glass.
Our daughter is beside you
but her face is blurred.
Suddenly there is nothing to save anymore.
It's your fault; my fist finds your face.
You tell me I'm insane.

Our daughter is somewhere else now.
A moment passes and I find myself
in a forest clearing, surrounded
by dandelions and nettles.
Amongst horse chestnut trees
is a single cherry blossom.
It is the same tree that bloomed
in my parent's front garden every year
before my mother ordered the death of it.
I walk towards it. With each step
the blossom withers into lonely petals,
bark falling like tears.

The sky is too blinding now,
like driving in low winter sun.
I can no longer see, or feel around me.
I can hear the white noise of a heartbeat,
soft breathing.
My legs give way like the breaking of twigs.
I open my eyes.
You are next to me, snoring, my face is wet.
I walk to our daughter's room,
opening the door like a plaster peeling
from a wound.

She is stirring.
Moonlight slithers in through the blind.
A quick look: the garden is our garden.
Swing set, old deck chairs, a row of conifers.
In the middle of emerald grass,
a scattering of blossom like ashes.

Drugs are not her thing

She knows a girl who took a pill then started hissing at the mirror and screaming *I'm a vampire*/
Drugs are not her thing/she's sure they make you happy/make you fucking love the stranger in the
toilets/but other times its/anxious/confused /paranoid/panicked/she knows she'd be submerged/
in the depth of psychosis/and not become a hissing halloween vampire/ but Elizabeth Bathory/
smothering girls/with honey/and garnishing them with ants.

A tragedy

A mother lost a daughter,
she vanished one balmy evening.

The mother blames a monster.
Faceless, untraceable.

But wherever she walks
people follow her with mirrors.

Locket

People say her heart is made of gold.
A pendant to a chain, whispering
look at me; I'm so sweet, so loving.
The heart may be made of gold
and it may never rust or corrode
but if you open it up you will not find
a tiny picture of her beloved, only,
nothing at all.

Two women at sea

i.

Eventide has fallen, the North Sea has settled.
Two women sit in the cabin of a small fishing boat.
They are drinking scotch from tea cups,
dipping bread in vegetable broth.
Lucia breaks the silence and begins to talk
of all her unborn children again.
I had names for them all.
Lucia tops up her cup, looks to the crescent moon.
Celeste sips her scotch, *I am with child*
she says as she drags her spoon through the broth.
Lucia lights a cigarette — *You'll be a good mother, won't you.*
I think so, says Celeste.
Lucia blows out smoke — *We'll see, won't we.*

ii.

A month has passed, Lucia and Celeste
are still surrounded by sea, the salted air.

Celeste is weak with sickness and longing
to be grounded by the stillness of land.
She finds comfort in the gentle kicks.

Lucia smokes less than she did a month ago
and sings quietly to herself in the mornings.

iii.

Time has been lost somewhere at sea
when the boat finally docks.
Lucia is alone — no, she has a small bundle
nestled against to her chest.
There is no body nor burial but there is a wake.
People dressed in black gather around
as Lucia recalls the peculiar and tragic events.

The child was a surprise —
Celeste simply emerged from the cabin one morning
she never made a sound.
I was busy gathering fish.
Lucia sipped scotch from a cup, paused.

She was sad — she hid this from me too, poor darling
That evening I was tending to the child whilst she got some air.
I never saw her again.
I found a note tucked into the child's blanket,
it said: I know you'll be a good mother.

Dear Vera Shimunia

embroider me a star
scattered night sky

with my body sewn
into it as a constellation

so I can hang myself
and the universe

on the kitchen wall

or embroider me a field
of sunflowers

sew every centre
as a black hole

so I can face the sunshine
and then disappear

into dreaming

and I'm feeling high as a cloud
way above all the noise of the world.

6.

My watch pings telling me *Breathe*.
I'm inhaling and exhaling just fine
through the lungs of Florence.
One day I knew the dog days would be over.
Life exploded like a party popper
streams of rainbow tissue paper.

7.

The world is burning.
Boney M are singing
Ra Ra Rasputin
Lover of the Russian Queen on Radio One
and I'm craving a mint Aero.
They say it'll be a girl
if you want sugar, spice and all things nice.

8.

Their words can't bring me down.
Like Lana I've been raised from the dead.

I have good customer service skills.
I'm very organised.

I think I'd make a good necromancer.
I'd bring the all the best girls back.

9.

The world in a Camera Obscura.
Full of strangers and lonely people.
A tiny shadow walking through the chaos.
I knew they had the morning sky on their mind.
I knew then, they were my darling;
finally someone of my kind.

10.

Every morning I have a Japanese breakfast.
I don't regret my cruel thoughts.
I'm always searching for goodness.
The bad people seem to always win,
the selfish people seem to shout the loudest.
But I'm always searching, I'll keep on
searching for goodness like finding the toy
in cereal box.

11.

Lykke Li is right
I fall fast so steep low
everything is made of sandpaper
I can't feel at home in this world
I never have
Lykke Li is right
I'm no longer woman
just a single ray of light

Sisterhood

Emily, with her half-moon curves
and honeydew breasts, skin with a caramel glow.
On Instagram her white briefs ride up
between the crack of her cheeks.

She is a painting.
Her body is bewitching.
She is a free woman.
She is doing her thing
[flame emoji]

see below for comments

her body is controversial/her body is feeding the machine/her body is an object/she tries to be a
feminist/ but covers her body in linguine/she is not our sister/she is a curse/baby woman, sexy on
her own terms/dull, dull, dull/pass the violin

* * *

leave/ her/ alone/ ffs

Cherries

Once upon a time she was asked,
are you just going to lay there like a corpse?
Necrophilia wasn't her kink—
she was just trying to lose it
before her eighteenth.

The problem was, she didn't fancy
the person on top of her.
So she went rigor mortis
and transported herself
to the National Library in Saint Petersburg,
disappearing into the pages of Petrusheskaya.

A tale of a woman who cut out two eyes
and offered them like cherries.

Ode to Paris

The morning of the flight
she had googled *painless ways to die*.
She bookmarked an article
about the inhalation of helium.
She packed a navy polka-dot dress,
cherry lipstick and propranolol.
Off she went to the city of love
with the lover she despised.

The taxi stopped outside the hotel;
in that instant, she knew.
There would be no Paris Syndrome.
Rather, she fell in love immediately,
with the Arc de Triomphe roundabout,
Darjeeling in the Café de Flore,
the île de la Cité florists.

After three days -
which included a proposal,
an argument over a Metro stop
and sleeping with the light on -
she said *Au Revoir* to Paris.

Returning home and opening the door
she looked at the ring on her finger;
in moment she that knew.
There would be no wedding,
for she no longer existed.

The article is gathering dust.
She is currently living in Saint Germain.
Paris is a cliché as much as it is beauty.
To her it was a defibrillator.

Death by misadventure

She takes her baths hot; her face
looks like it is painted with Russian Red.

She is not sure if she wants to boil
or if she just trying to reduce something in the heat.

Looking in the mirror at her flushed skin
she thinks of Natasha Collins, at the highest point

in her life, numbed in a farewell bathe.
After her death her children's *TV presenter sweetheart*

was found hanging in MacMillan House.
Grief can drown without any water.

She presses the plug and watches the water disappear.
There is something untrustworthy about a body of it.

Tomorrow

After Natalya Gorbanevskaya

If I had my way, then tomorrow
you'd not even find a trace of me,

a flicker of what I was
or of what I might become.

But for now I am here —
incandescent.

Fontanelle

Delicate, round.
Not a perfect circle
like they teach you in school.
Lumpy in places, fuzzy fur on top.
A fragile peach,
two days before the use-by date.
In the palm of her hand:
easy to squash, fleshy.
Juice spilling through her fingers.

Adrift

For Alexandra Dvornikova

When I open my eyes I am looking up
at the bright, grey sky.

I can feel something heavy on my chest,
feel the weight down to my shins —

I do not look down at it.
I turn my head to the right.

I can see panels of wood.
I turn my head to the left.

I can see panels of wood.
I focus on the grain.

I feel then that I am moving, gently.
I can smell a faint note of sulphur.

I raise my arm, hold my right hand
in front my face — it is not a hand,

but a paw. It is not my arm but a limb
covered in pecan-brown fur.

I look down now at the small body
resting on mine. Honey-blonde hair,

a sunflower clasped in small hands.
My eyes hover on the small chest —

I look back up at the bright, grey sky.
I let me eyes close again and we drift

Ghosts

Everybody is prone to googling
their symptoms then diagnosing
themselves with Fibromyalgia
or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
or Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder.

They need to label things,
to understand why they can't sleep
on any random Tuesday.
Perhaps it is as simple as ghosts
haunting their restless, tender hours.

Tivoli

She had a breakdown so she went to Copenhagen
where she had a second breakdown.

She had dinner at Nyhavn with people dressed as vikings
she returned to the hotel on a train with no driver.

The next day she had melancholia for lunch;
she saw a polar bear pacing up and down.

That evening she saw murmurations of bikes
and a Louis Vuitton solar system.

In the Gardens, she ate at an American diner
overhearing conversations about someone's infidelity.

For dessert she studied her convex body and the concave
bodies of strangers in fairground mirrors that are truer to life

than those that hang in bathrooms or stand
at the end of beds, suggesting everything is in order.

Lost

Madeleines are one of the reasons she wants to live.
They are better than sex, like most things;
they give her tongue a warm bath.

But every time she puts one to her lips
she remembers lost girls, the ones
who cannot taste the comfort of petite sponges.

If only the memory of lost girls could be poured
into rows of shell-shaped depressions and rise
in the oven, then given fresh to those in need of the missing.

Two women in a lighthouse

You chop the head from a trout.

I regurgitate last night's dream.

You stand in a puddle of blood.

I lick salt from the rocks.

You invite your ghosts for supper.

I scream into the easterly wind.

You make a necklace from trout bones.

I sleep wrapped in seaweed.

You climb inside an oyster.

The sun sets again.

The light shines across the sea.

Piscine

As children our bodies in bloom
would emerge
like brittle water-nymphs
peeking out over the edge
of the pool
at the bare-chested
sunbathing women.

How fascinated we were
by strangers' breasts.
How excited we became
for the future.
Beneath the water
we pulled at each other's
bikini strings, giggling.

Oksana

i.

There once was a woman who walked away.
She walked until she found the forest;
she walked until night surrounded her.
Beneath the moon her mouth began to howl.
She pulled away her clothes before cutting out
her womb, cradling it until the morning.

ii.

Scattered clothes were returned to her body,
which were found by police in the forest.
They could not find her uterus.
The police looked for the prints of a monster.
There were only size three, petite footprints.
They concluded that grief had taken place.
They say you can still hear the howling.

Stargazing

In the salmon pink painted waiting room
she reads a pamphlet about diabetes.

In the box room through door
the nurse collects her blood in a vacutainer
and asks *is this decision supported?*

Yes & no,
like everything in this fucking world.

In a another room beyond that
she is asked *do you want to look?*
At the miniature milky way on the screen.

Years from now she might carry a star
but now she's no divine mother, only a telescope.

Beached

I cover my body in St Ives apricot scrub
not because I want to be blemish free
but so I can be a shell in the sand,
iridescent beneath the sun.

I want to be walked over
not because I believe I am nothing
but so I can exist anonymously,
to be different kind of atoms.

I want the option of being treasured
or discarded; to drift with the tide.
To be still but change with time.
To keep the company with the sea.

Babushka & the Cat

For Melodie Stacey

There was once a small cornflower blue cottage
next to the lake, with boxes of lavender beneath
the windows; rows of sage, fennel and rosemary
on one side of the white-pebble path, globe thistles,
honeysuckle and buddleia on the other.

It was found in faultless condition one day
by a curious girl who'd been wandering in the woods.
The girl walked to the front door and without pausing
pulled down on the handle and pushed.
The door creaked open.

The girl entered the cosy living room
and saw an elderly woman slumped forwards
in the armchair with a brown and white cat
perched on her shoulders, slumped forwards
nestled into the her headscarf.

The girl moved close to them and touched
the woman's cheek. It was cold; her face was peaceful.
She prodded the cat; it was stiff, but peaceful.
The girl began to look around the cottage.

In the kitchen stood a cabinet with little glass vials.
Inside the vials were locks of hair.
In the drawers at the bottom of the cabinet
were necklaces, berets and purses.
The girl went up the stairs to the single attic room.
A bed by the window, books in piles, spider ferns
and trailing ivy. A medium-sized cage in the corner.
The girl went back down and saw a door
under the stairs, the door was locked.
She went back into the living room, over
to the woman and found a key around her neck.
The girl removed the key and placed it
around her own neck. She took the box of matches
from above the fireplace and left.

Outside the girl stood in front of the window.
She looked in again at the two bodies,
peaceful, companions still with death.
She struck a match, dropping it into the box
of lavender.

She watched as the cottage became ablaze;
a viking burial for the Babushka and her cat.
Their secrets ground to ash.
The girl wandered back into the woods
and did not speak of the cottage,

of what was inside it.
She wrote about it some years later.

A short French film

[Early Summer in Caudéran.

A girl in a lavender skater dress enters the bakery below her apartment, leaving with a cannelé and fresh orange juice.

She walks to Parc Bordelais and sits down under an oak tree, inhaling the scent of rosemary and fennel drifting from the nearby herb garden.

She begins to read *A Beast in Paradise* by Cécile Coulon. After a few pages she is interrupted.]

A handsome stranger, not a local:

That book looks interesting,
care to tell me what it's about?

Girl:

Oui c'est et non merci.

Slaughter

After Anna Akhmatova

Women have always been slaughtered.
They are not led to believe that they too
can wield the knife.

She learnt that she could hack away
the bits of memory she did not want.
She learnt she could cut people off like limbs.

She learnt the art of hanging oneself
in the abattoir, hollowed
before turning without looking back,
walking away newly formed.

Bound

After Marina Tsvetaeva

*Whimsical sisters,
where are we bound?*

Where do the bad girls go?
The bad girls who aren't really bad.
They were just in the wrong place
at the wrong time or under duress
it was just a mistake, it's the wrong data
in the spreadsheet.
Deconstruct their skeleton
examine the bones
drill into the maxilla
drill into the metacarpals
they are not made of evil —

Take a breath, slow down.
All girls are hell-bound.

Miss Murder, Miss Cadaver.
Monarchs and maidens.
Lost girls, joyful girls, wicked girls.
Save themselves for marriage girls
save themselves from marriage girls.

We will all walk through
an orchard of apple trees,
in the moonlight, knowing we are bound
for the eternal darkness
to be stars lightyears beneath the ground.

***Matryoshka*: A Contextual Introduction**

Matryoshka is a collection of poems that presents an array of scenarios and characters intended to explore the complex spectrum of the behaviours, personalities and agency of women. Distinctive elements of *Matryoshka* include the amplification of women's experiences and characters through the omission of direct male reference or imagery, a foundation of autobiographical writing developed into fictionalised worlds and characters and a diversity of cultural, historical and geographical influences. Men are implicitly present in the collection but never manifest. The intention of this was to focus solely on the women in the collection — character, behaviour and experience. Jacques Derrida's theory of Hauntology, discussed in his work *Specters of Marx* (1993), informed this artistic decision. Men function as a 'spectre' in *Matryoshka*, representing the patriarchal construct, haunting and intrinsic in the past, present and future of women. I discuss my creative process which is informed by relevant creative writing theory and poetic influences including Anne Sexton and Melissa Lee-Houghton. I will refer to several essays on poetics from Rishi Dastidar's *The Craft* (2019), including work by Gregory Leadbetter and Julia Webb. Some of the cultural, historical and geographical influences include poetry, art and short stories by Anna Akhmatova, Alexandra Dvornikova and Lyudmila Petrushevskaya respectively. This influence shaped some of the darker, complex characters and contributed to the economy, imagery and distinct voice. For example, 'Departure' is an ekphrastic poem depicting the artwork of Dvornikova, which examines a negative mother figure and the concept of fearing the other, whilst 'A Poem for Lyudmila Petrushevskaya' is a darkly comic presentation of the relationship between women and violence, death and murder. The poems range widely across themes and content, from sex, relationships, motherhood and childhood, to celebrity, violence, abuse and murder. *Matryoshka* examines, for example, women who kill, their reasons for it and the agency that comes with that. From the Russian Khachaturyan sisters who murdered their abusive father in 'Three Sisters', to 'Saint Tatiana(s)' which references Assia Wevill, most commonly known as Ted Hughes' 'mistress'

during his marriage to Sylvia Plath, who killed her and Hughes' daughter Shura. 'Matryoshka', a magical realist, folktale-inspired poem explores the complex nature of motherhood — overbearing love, control, narcissism — and relationships between women. There is lightheartedness in 'Martha' displaying a woman who morphs into a cat to cause mischief. There is a sense of calm in 'Beached', whilst 'Tivoli' addresses depression, recovery and the chaos of life. Ultimately, *Matryoshka* is a patchwork of identity, which combined is intended to display the complexity of women. It is important to define what is meant by complex women in the context of this project. In 'What does it mean to be a woman? It's complicated' (2020) Susan Stryker concludes the piece with 'it's we the living who say collectively what "woman" means, hopefully in ways that center the voices and experiences of all those who live as women, across all our other differences' (Stryker, 2020). Stryker's statement helps to contextualise my understanding of complex women in *Matryoshka*. The collection is full of characters who represent the complexity of the lives of women, who experience the world and operate (in a number of ways and contexts) differently.

Matryoshka can be considered a feministic collection of poems in the sense that it is representative of women's individuality and agency. Margaret Atwood's essay 'Am I a bad feminist?' (2018) was influential to *Matryoshka*, specifically when Atwood states 'that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails...they're not of incapable of agency or of making moral decisions' (Atwood, 2018). *Matryoshka* offers an experimental, creative and critical representation of women as human beings — the good, the bad and the incomprehensible. *Matryoshka* is not designed to highlight women's flaws, undermine feminist solidarity and goals or diminish the damage of misogyny, rather the poems are designed to represent the complexity of women. The collection and exegesis combined are intended to operate as a creative addition to key contemporary feminist debates about agency, choice and diversity of experience in relation to this. Some of the key texts I will refer to are *Bad Feminist* (2014) by Roxane Gay, Lola Olufemi's

Feminism Interrupted (2020) and *Feminism* (2018) by Deborah Cameron. Thus, the collection adopts a broadly feminist approach to its subject matter, but the poems actively seek to avoid representations that limit women to the roles of the victims of patriarchy or as empowered role models courageously challenging patriarchal structures — ‘strong women’. Both these presentations of women are unquestionably valid, but in turn can combine in the echo-chamber of popular and social media to create a narrative that apparently uncritically supports and celebrates women, but in doing so reduces women to less than their full humanity. This exegesis offers both a contextual discussion of the theory which informs the collection and a critical commentary on the creative process.

Chapter one contextualises patriarchy for the purpose of this exegesis and discusses my artistic choice to amplify the experiences of women by including men as absent though quietly present. I will also refer to popular and scholarly contemporary feminist discussions and theory in regard to the experience and individualism of women, and how these informed *Matryoshka*. Chapter two explores my understanding of autobiographical writing and confessional verse and how this informed and influenced the development of the collection. In relation to this I will discuss T.S. Eliot’s perceptive of impersonality, specifically Eliot’s essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) which informed my approach to autobiographical elements in the collection. The chapter also examines confessional poets who influenced the collection. Chapter three discusses my use of characterisation and voice, examining my creative process and relevant creative writing theory. Chapter four is dedicated to explaining and providing examples of the cultural, geographical and historical influences within *Matryoshka*. This includes reference to specific writers, artists, symbolism and landscapes. Chapter five summarises why the collection is distinctive and how it relates to contemporary poetry that addresses similar themes, alongside its relationship with contemporary feminism.

In my research proposal, my research questions were as follows:

1. Is it possible to represent characters in a way that reflects their full complexity?
2. To what extent will presenting characters in certain ways challenge some existing attitudes to women (for example, patriarchal attitudes towards women and feminist attitudes that arguably idealise women and promote 'orthodoxies').
3. What issues will arise from the artistic representations & re-creations of real people I will make, given that this process inevitably involves not only research, but imagination & intentionality and thus some degree of fictionalisation?

The following exegesis explores certain characters presented in the collection and provides the creative decisions behind these characters. In response to the first question, to represent the full spectrum of complex woman in terms of behaviour, attitude and experience is impossible due to the vast diversity of people and individual realities. Despite this, *Matryoshka* displays a rich variety of characters and experience which is representative of this complexity and suggestive of the wider spectrum of the complex woman figure. The existing attitudes to women refer to patriarchal perceptions of women and feminist attitudes, particularly in popular culture, which idealise women based on their victimisation as a result of the patriarchal construct. As an example of how *Matryoshka* challenges these attitudes, some of the poems challenge patriarchal presentations of women as inherently vulnerable, sexual objects and bound to their maternal nature. Some of the poems challenge the notion, that can be presented in certain feminist groups and discussion, that women are inherently 'good' in relation to inherently 'bad' men. In response to the last question, this project has been an intensive creative process in which I have had to balance autobiographical influence and confession with characterisation and imagination. One area in particular was the inclusion of real-life influences for certain characters and how to include this influence whilst being

mindful of the individual who inspired the character. The combination of all of these factors attributed to the unique intervention of this project as a whole. The poems offer important representations of the complexity of women, offering a creative and critical addition to key contemporary discussion around the diversity, agency and experience of women. Though there are dark undertones in the collection and immoral and unlikeable characters, *Matryoshka* is intended to be a positive addition to the presentation of women as varied individuals with a range of experiences and choices.

The Amplification of Women in *Matryoshka*

The following chapter will explain my decision to deploy the concept of the absent male in *Matryoshka*. The absent male refers to the intentional absence of men — I purposefully eliminated references to, and identifications of, men from the poems: pronouns, narrators, protagonists and characters. I will discuss the absent male in relation to patriarchy in terms of how this informed my decision and what I understand patriarchy to be in the context of this project. *Matryoshka* challenges limiting and arguably dehumanising views of women by presenting women as complex human beings, as fully human agents capable of making choices—good and evil—that are not simply by-products of patriarchal pressures and gendering. In regard to this, I will refer to *Bad Feminist* (2014) by Roxane Gay, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (2020) by Lola Olufemi and *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics* (2014; 2015) by bell hooks. Additionally, I will discuss several contemporary poetry collections which have dominant male presence and how *Matryoshka* differs, presenting examples from the collection which support this.

In her essay 'On writing as a Feminist and against Sexism' (2021) Kim Moore notes how the personal can be invaded by the political and the social (Moore, 2021: p 66). This accurately reflects the origins of *Matryoshka* and the context of patriarchy and feminism. I was inspired to write *Matryoshka* because of my own experience and perception of being a woman in contemporary society. The following discussion of patriarchy and feminism is not intended to be in-depth; much of the theoretical material also retrospectively informed *Matryoshka*. The word limit for this accompanying creative writing exegesis is only 20,000 words which means I did not have the capacity to engage in a thorough discussion of feminism or patriarchy study on a broader and deeper scale. *Matryoshka* is the creative, dominant component of my Ph.D and the exegesis acts as critical discussion of the scholarly, popular and theoretical work which informed the artistic process of the collection. Though *Matryoshka* adopts a broadly feminist approach, it is not solely concerned

with focusing on elements that feminism works to dismantle.. *Matryoshka* is feminist from a particular angle, in the sense that it focuses on women and a representation of their complex characters and range of behaviours. It is important to note that my focus on ‘women’ is not designed to exclude, for example, transgender or non-binary, this decision was influenced by my own identification as a woman and thus focusing on this, rather than attempting to write about groups or experiences that I cannot align with in the same way.

In *Specters of Marx* (1993) Jacques Derrida presents his theory of ‘Hauntology’, which is the concept of the persistence of elements, typically social or cultural in the past, present and future. Derrida notes how ‘the apparition of the specter does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one: enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost’ (Derrida, 1993: p. xix). Derrida suggests that the ‘spectre’ (the element) enters, exits and reappears. This theoretical approach informed my deployment of the absent male in *Matryoshka*; though men do not manifest within the collection and thus have no domineering presence, they exist paradoxically as an absent, haunting presence. As Derrida notes, ‘to haunt does not mean to be present’ (Derrida, 1993: p. 202). *Matryoshka* is informed by the notion that men are explicitly in the lives of women, as is the patriarchal construct — the collection is suggestive that both are spectres entering, exiting and reappearing. As the collection is intended to examine and present the concept of women and their complexity I made the decision to omit direct references and identifications of men from the collection in the initial stages of the creative process to ensure the focus would remain on the women, meaning the characters and protagonists and their experiences, behaviours and attitudes. Despite this, it would be implausible and unrealistic to present the experience of women without any reference to the male as they are, in positive and negative contexts, intrinsic to the lives of women. Accordingly, despite their overt absence from the poems, men lurk unseen and without mention in the poem’s backgrounds—they are implicitly present, haunting and contributing to the

experience of some of the women presented, reflecting the reality of women's experience of patriarchy even in the attempt to be liberated from it. An example of this is 'Cemetery' (p. 14) which focuses on a woman choosing to live fearlessly alongside the threat of sexual violence,

There are those who cannot fathom
how she could not fear the danger
in the graveyard shadows.
Why she walks further into the dark
as a lone, almost shooting star.

Though the absent male, and thus patriarchy, haunt the collection, the absent male also operates in metaphorically reducing the dominance of men in the narrative of women's lives. By including men as a present yet absent figures in the collection, the narrative of the lives and experiences of women are amplified. The absent male is intended to act as a metaphor for the patriarchal construct. In *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy and the Fear of Female Power* (2019), feminist and author Sady Doyle (Doyle, 2019: p. xvi, xvii) asserts how,

Patriarchy is not sexism. It *creates* sexism and it necessitates *sexism*, but it's deeper than that...the promise of patriarchy is that every man will exercise absolute power and control over at least one woman.

Doyle notes that the word patriarchy 'gets flung around a lot' (Doyle, 2019: p. xvi); in some ways, patriarchy as a term becomes 'nothingness' because the patriarchal construct can't be defined in a simple summary. In 'Patriarchy in East Asia' (2013) Kaku Sechiyama notes how they 'use the term to indicate gender-based allocation of power and roles in a given society' (Sechiyama, 2013: p. 1) and how they 'compare how patriarchy functions' (Sechiyama, 2013: p. 1) in each society that they examine within the text. The way I interpret patriarchy and how it informs *Matryoshka*, is that the

patriarchal construct is what allows for political, social, economic and domestic male dominance over women (and other genders or identifications, including men themselves) in a number of different societies and cultures. In feminist discussion, though different feminist groups approach patriarchy differently, a common factor is the equation of patriarchy to sexism and misogyny. Sechiyama (2013: p. 7) also notes,

The use of patriarchy as a key term in the women's liberation movement and the effort to construct feminist theory has led to confusion because various usages of the term had already been developed in sociology and other social sciences when feminists added their own. A common feeling is that only those who understand feminism understand the meaning feminists give the term.

In *Feminism, Interrupted* (2020) Lola Olufemi discusses the concept of 'The Sexist State', the main mouthpiece of which is the government; we can infer the state as being an integral element of the patriarchal construct. Olufemi (Olufemi, 2020: p. 23) notes that:

Radical feminists have long critiqued the role of the state in propping up and maintaining sexist oppression, exposing how it helps to extend control over our lives and bodies.

Olufemi notes that liberal feminists assert that the sexist oppression of the state is lessening, whilst critical feminism asserts that it hasn't, it has merely been remodelled (Olufemi, 2020: p. 23). Whichever way feminists view the control of the state and thus the patriarchal construct, it is evident how much it dominates the narrative of women's lives — and all lives. I agree with Sechiyama that the use of the term, or rather the definition of the term patriarchy is complicated and often confused as to what the absolute definition is. My approach to the patriarchy with *Matryoshka* is quite simple, in the sense that it is a construct in women's lives, that enables a multitude of negative, oppressive and demeaning experiences for women. However, my approach is that the

construct of patriarchy also creates the notion that because of the negativity and oppression associated with the patriarchy, that women are inherent victims because of this and that all of their experiences, attitudes and behaviours are dominated or informed by patriarchy. As Derrida theorises, constructs are by nature near-impossible to remove from society, which applies to the patriarchal construct. Whilst practically speaking, the removal of patriarchal influence in society proves exceedingly difficult, *Matryoshka* seeks to reduce the dominating nature of it and thus, the women in the collection can be examined somewhat separately to men, as opposed to women being discussed or presented in relation to men, or rather, the patriarchy. *Matryoshka* is broadly ‘feminist’ as it acknowledges the patriarchal structure through the absent male and presents women as fully human. The collection does not focus on allocated gender roles as dictated by patriarchy and does not focus on sexism and misogyny — though this does not mean it is not addressed at points. In ‘When Feminism becomes a genre: Alias Grace and ‘feminist’ television’ (2019) Jana Cattien notes how ‘popular culture is, like any socio-cultural domain, ‘a site where the meanings of ‘feminism(s) is produced and contested’ and how ‘undoubtedly, today, ‘feminism’ is a ubiquitous signifier’ (Cattien, 2019). Cattien’s reference to popular culture and how it impacts the definition and understanding of feminism informs the inspiration behind *Matryoshka* and contextualises what I mean by popular culture and popular feminism. Ultimately in popular culture, the definition and understanding of what feminism is, is widely contested and complicates discussions, creates debate and arguably creates pressure for women in popular culture to conform to a variation of attitudes, acts and definitions of what feminism is or should be. *Matryoshka* is representative of the varied woman and the aim is to complicate stereotypes of and ideals for women, as created by popular culture, including inherent victims and ‘strong’ women.

Matryoshka was initially inspired and influenced by a narrative that I have witnessed increasingly on popular and social media —Twitter especially— that fundamentally, men are bad and women are

good; men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. A recent example was the case of TV presenter Caroline Flack. In December 2019, Flack was arrested for assaulting her partner Lewis Burton with a lamp; it is alleged that Flack assaulted Burton whilst he slept due to suspicions that he was having an affair with another woman. A dialogue quickly developed on Twitter, with many female commenters in-particular assuming that Flack must've been acting in self-defence, with other users responding to the problematic nature of this assumption; a recurring expression was how abuse knows no gender. The notion that a women could assault a man on her own terms was unfathomable for many. In February 2020, Flack committed suicide due, in part, to pressures from the trial and intensive media coverage. Though the case was complex, it was evident that there was a belief that Flack was solely a victim and could not be held properly accountable for the assault itself. On February 19th 2020 a headline in the Daily Mail read 'Caroline Flack's assault case based on tiny wound on boyfriend' was clearly an attempt to trivialise the extent of any assault. I am not suggesting that Flack wasn't victimised herself—the media coverage was intense, demeaning and unfair. But the case highlighted how a woman assaulting a man is perceived differently to cases in which men assault women and how women are often stripped of any accountability. Naturally, given the prevalence of male violence against women it is understandable why these types of cases receive these responses, but nonetheless highlights a problematic aspect of popular culture.

Sady Doyle notes how 'men define humanity, and women, insofar as they are not men, are not human' (Doyle, 2019: p. xiii). With this statement Doyle introduces the concept of the 'sub-human' female created by the patriarchal construct; throughout the text Doyle suggests somewhat provocatively that women are only portrayed as 'monstrous' by men because men see them as a threat to male dominance and the construct of the patriarchy. Doyle theorises how 'men fear women, even as they work to make women fear men, because, on the most basic level, male dominance is an illusion' (Doyle, 2019: p. xviii). I agree with this perspective of Doyle's, in the sense that male

dominance is an illusion, a construct. What can be considered problematic for women's identity, agency and accountability is the insinuation that women are either only portrayed as 'monstrous' by men or that they act 'monstrously' as a result of the patriarchal construct and are not capable of generating their own independent 'monstrousness' in the same way men are.

Doyle notes how 'there's a monster threaded throughout every part of this book...for many of us she's the first monster we ever knew' (Doyle, 2019: p. 217). The 'monstrous' females that Doyle examines include Esther Cox (real-life subject of *The Great Amherst Mystery*) and Regan from the original 1973 version of *The Exorcist*. Doyle's perspective echoes that of Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine (1993)* in which Creed (1993, p. 1) discusses male fear of the female body, specifically the reproductive system and how men see women as 'castrators', a concept Doyle also touches on. Creed and Doyle make valid points which I agree with, particularly about male fear of and uneasiness around women in a reproductive context. Doyle's point that a mother bears the blame for her son's immoral and violent actions, in reference to American serial killer Ed Gein and his mother Augusta, is accurate; this often reflected in true-crime documentaries but also in fiction such as the film *We Need To talk About Kevin (2003)*. Doyle notes how a psychologist concluded that the crimes of Gein were a 'result of a desire to re-create the existence of his own mother' (Doyle, 2019: p. 187) thus referencing another 'monstrous' female — his mother 'a woman who raises that monster *is* that monster' (Doyle, 2019: p. 191). However, whilst I acknowledge that the book is designed to be controversial and provocative, Doyle's perspective does ultimately generate the notion that men are inherently evil whilst women are fundamentally innocent, and are exclusively treated unfairly by and have their identity manipulated by men.

Doyle's exploration of monstrous women and the concept of patriarchy, implies that women are never truly monstrous nor accountable for immoral acts; all monstrous perceptions of women and

all monstrous actions by women are a direct result of the patriarchal construct. As exemplified by the response to Flack's actions, women are often publicly automatically stripped of accountability and men are held responsible. If men were overtly present in the collection, there would be the possibility that some of the darker, violent and transgressive characters and their agency would be clouded by the male presence.. Thus, if men were not included as absent yet present 'ghosts' then their presence would influence the presentation of the complex women and their plethora of experiences, attitudes and behaviours. Joanne Hollows states in *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (2000) how 'critics such as Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin writing on sexual violence and pornography continually reaffirm men's inherent evil and women's natural virtue (Hollows, 2000: p. 16). An integral aim of *Matryoshka*, whilst amplifying the experience and voices of women, was to not present the same notion that Hollows' suggests of Brownmiller, Dworkin and Griffin's work. In essence, *Matryoshka* actively seeks to present women as complex and challenge the perception (particularly in popular culture) that women are inherently virtuous and exclusively victims of the patriarchal construct in which they exist. This statement does not seek to diminish the dominance and damaging nature of patriarchy, only that women are more than simply victims of it, not that they are not victimised in various capacities.

Matryoshka is ultimately a feminist text because it presents women as human beings. As previously mentioned, Margaret Atwood's acknowledgment of women's full humanity — the good, the bad and all in between — inspired me to display a representation of this complexity through poetry. Atwood introduces 'Am I a Bad Feminist'(2018) an intentionally provocative piece, by musing 'that now, it seems, I am conducting a War on Women, like the misogynistic, rape-enabling Bad Feminist that I am.' (Atwood, 2018) and then asks 'What would a Good Feminist look like, in the eyes of my accusers?' (Atwood, 2018). Atwood wrote this essay in response to the criticism she has received for speaking out in support of Stephen Galloway, a professor at British Columbia

University. Galloway was accused of sexual misconduct by students and was fired from the university, prior to any trial or conviction. Atwood (along with other staff members) had signed a petition regarding the unfair treatment of Galloway; although he was later found to be innocent in court, he was not reinstated. A common theme of the criticism was the notion that she was supporting an abuser and therefore enabling violence against women. Many of the critics voiced their opinion on social media: 'In today's dystopian news: One of the most important feminist voices of our time shifts on less powerful women to uphold the power of her powerful male friend' (Kassam, 2018). In relation to Atwood and her essay, a large of element of the inspiration for *Matryoshka* is rooted in my own experience regarding this.

My poem 'Nightmare' was included the anthology *You Are Not Your Rape* (2018) published by Rhythm & Bones Press. The anthology operates like the '#MeToo' movement, which was originally founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke but gained mainstream traction in 2017 when celebrities, initially actress Alyssa Milano, brought wide-scale attention to it in the wake of the exposure of film producer Harvey Weinstein as a serial abuser. The anthology is designed to give a platform to those impacted by and the survivors of sexual assault and domestic abuse. The editors, Kristen Garth and Tianna Hanson reached out to Margaret Atwood on Twitter, who in response asked them to send her a copy. The editors and contributors, myself included, were excited by this prospect, that Atwood might read our work. The same day, several contributors expressed their discomfort and concern of being associated with Atwood, given her stance in the case of Steven Galloway. It was felt that, like the critics on social media, Atwood was supporting an abuser which thus, did not align with the purpose of the anthology. Speaking anecdotally, I approached the situation pragmatically and didn't view the situation as simplistic as Atwood supporting violence against women. Women are vastly different to each other, which includes their opinions, approaches and responses. I am not

examining or commenting on the case itself, but the response Atwood received and how this impacted by own perspectives, which subsequently informed *Matryoshka*.

In *Feminism* (2018) Deborah Cameron (2018: p. 3) cites Dorothy Sayer's view that,

a woman is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual.

Sayers view echoes that of Atwood, that women are human, as are men, and they are also individuals. Cameron goes on to say this belief is what made Sayers reluctant to embrace the feminist movement, with Sayers stating, 'what is repugnant to every human being, is to be reckoned always as a member of class and not as an individual person' (Cameron, 2018: p. 3). Though a significant number of men frequently demonstrate transgressive and criminal sexist behaviour such as domestic violence, rape and murder and women frequently share experiences of victimisation — sexual assault, misogyny, death by domestic violence — this doesn't mean that all men behave or think transgressively and not all women are exclusively direct victims. Cameron acknowledges that patriarchy literally means rule of the father, though feminists use it as a term to signify male dominance. Cameron clarifies that this is not a claim about the intentions or behaviour of individual men, but more so a claim surrounding social structures. (Cameron, 2018: p. 14 - p. 15). Cameron further notes that 'individual men may choose to forego certain rights and privileges, but that doesn't make men's collective structural dominance disappear' (Cameron, 2018: p. 15). It is understandable why feminist discussion refers to patriarchy as a term for collective structural male dominance and why feminism generally focuses on the negative experiences women face collectively as a result of this. Even though Cameron makes a point of recognising how discussion

about patriarchy doesn't make claims about the individual, the simplistic narrative implied in popular culture and social media seems to be that ultimately, men are bad and women are good.

Roxane Gay refers to an 'essential feminism' in *Bad Feminist (2014)*, which she describes as 'the notion that there are right and wrong ways to be a feminist... there are consequences for doing [it] wrong' (Gay, 2014: p. 304). Many feminists refer to the concept of the 'good woman' as defined by the patriarchy — 'good women are modest, chaste, pious, submissive' (Gay, 2014: p. 304) — but there is also a sense of the *good woman* as defined by feminism. Gay (Gay, 2014: p. xi) notes that,

[she] never wanted to be placed on the Feminist Pedestal. People who are placed on pedestals are expected to pose, perfectly. They get knocked off when they fuck it up.

Though Atwood intentionally sparks controversy, Gay's perspective does echo the experience of Atwood and prompts thought about the fairness of the responses and this issue within popular culture and feminism.. There is the concept of the 'bad woman' as defined by patriarchy and though there is an apparent narrative suggestive that women are inherently good, there is a sense of the 'bad woman' or rather, the bad feminist, as defined by certain feminist perspectives. Gay notes how 'the most significant problem with essential feminism is how it doesn't allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality' (Gay, 2014: p. 305). *Matryoshka* is designed to highlight the complicated experience of women and in some ways designed to creatively challenge the limitations in representation, especially in popular culture and media, of the deeper complexity of women and their experiences. For example, some of the darker characters within *Matryoshka* seek to complicate the stereotype of women as victims and challenge the way darker female characters are perceived, in the sense that women who act violently, immorally or cruelly can do so on their own terms. This type of presentation in *Matryoshka* could be interpreted as 'bad feminism' in the way Gay discusses, in the sense that it offers negative representations of women which could be

seen as feeding into the patriarchal agenda of presenting, as Sady Doyle hypothesises, women as monstrous. This is not the intention of these representations found in the collection, they are only a representation of reality and the wider spectrum of the experience of women.

As an example, 'Essential' feminism can be problematic for the individuality of women and notably, this type of feminism can exclude those who do not fit within a narrowly-defined experience; the experience and perspective of white, usually middle-class, heteronormative women. In *Can we all be Feminists?* (2018) June Eric-Udorie notes how she was initially not aware of the 'myriad of ways in which mainstream feminism has historically excluded marginalised women' (Eric-Udorie, 2018: p. viii), herself as an example being a British woman of Nigerian descent. Eric-Udorie goes on to explain how she read articles by Flavia Dzodan and Jude Wanga for example, realising quickly that their version of feminism was almost exclusively focused 'on the experiences of women who were white, wealthy or middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied' (Eric-Udorie, 2018: p. x). Similarly, Olufemi addresses this issue in *Feminism, Interrupted* (2020) 'I saw how black women were locked out of womanhood as defined by white supremacy... anyone outside of those boundaries simply did not exist in the eyes of mainstream feminism' (Olufemi, 2020: p. 2). bell hooks notes in *Feminism is for Everybody* (2014) how the type of feminism which is generated in the mass media is one that pushes for gender equality, often by women who are white and privileged (hooks, 2014: P. 2). hooks discusses how early feminist visions of sisterhood as being united on the basis of being victimised by male dominion were challenged by increasing discussions around race and class (hooks, 2014: p. 3). A perspective which is key in further contextualising *Matryoshka*, is hooks' (hooks, 2014: p. xii-xiii) view that:

all of us, female and male, have been socialised from birth on to accept sexist thought and action. As a consequence, females can be just as sexist as men. While that does not excuse or justify male domination, it does mean that it would be naive and wrong minded for

feminist thinkers to see the movement as simplistically being for women against men.

Speaking from an anecdotal perspective, I feel there is a pressure, especially on social media, that women are meant to feel united by the fact they are victims of patriarchy, when in reality, women are not united and are not exclusively victims. Moreover, women can exhibit behaviours such as sexism, racism and homophobia which victimises others. This insistence on solidarity — and concomitant ostracisation — is not exclusive to women and feminism, this is typical of all the echo chambers of Twitter, for example. *Matryoshka* is informed by hooks' above perspective and expanding on that, how this kind of naive, narrow-minded way of thinking can generate the notion that women are inherently good and men are fundamentally bad, which then informs all of their actions, thoughts and attitudes in some way..

Much like patriarchy limits women to specific roles, certain feminist ideologies also place limitations on women by not acknowledging women in their entire complexity — behaviour, race, class, experience. As a white, heterosexual woman I cannot attempt to explain the experience of or sympathise with those such as Eric-Udorie and Olufemi, and as such, I do not address this directly in *Matryoshka*. It is not my intention to enter an in-depth discussion surrounding the racial inequality within feminism. The purpose of this discussion is to highlight my engagement with the dialogue surrounding the challenges to the homogeneity of some feminist ideas and ideologies. Thus, the collection is informed by these types of discussions but does it not attempt to examine the intricacies of feminism, or the patriarchal construct. This exegesis is designed to contextualise why I chose to present women in this way. *Matryoshka* acts as a creative and critical intervention in these key debates, such as those from Olufemi and Gay, surrounding women's agency, diversity and individualism. In a similar tone to the discussions of Gay, Olufemi et al, *Matryoshka* examines the varied experiences of women, transcending the patriarchal stereotypes of women but also

challenging the arguable limitations placed on women by popular culture and essential feminism, for example.

Matryoshka is rooted in feminism. On the most basic level I am a feminist because I support the dismantling of political, social and domestic systems which disadvantage, discriminate and demean women. However, *Matryoshka* does not focus on the damaging reality of the patriarchy nor does it focus on the solidarity of women, 'strong' women or women as inherent victims. Instead the poems explore women as complex, varied and individual characters, with a magnitude of experiences, behaviours and perspectives. My intention is not to be a 'bad' or 'good' feminist nor is it to diminish the brutal violence and systemic 'othering' and demeaning women face through the patriarchal construct. The intention is to present a pragmatic, considered and specific approach to women's identity and agency. Women are more than simply victims of systemic male dominance. In *Matryoshka* there are characters which exhibit their own cruelty, their own agency and their own independence. There are dominant women and vulnerable women, likeable women and unlikeable women. *Matryoshka* is an exploration of women as human beings; their darkness, their tenderness and their complexity.

In other contemporary works which explore identity, relationships, abuse and motherhood, such as *All My Mad Mothers* (2017) by Jacqueline Saphra, *Life of the Party* (2019) by Olivia Gatwood and *Unorthodox* (2020) by Jemima Hughes, it is notable that the 'male' is a constant and often dominant presence. Men are prevalent in poetry written by women because they are integral to their lives. In the collections I have mentioned above, men are dominant, negative presences. For example, the *#MeToo: women's poetry anthology* (2018), edited by Deborah Alma is an apt example of women actively writing about their experiences of male violence, abuse and misogyny. In *All My Mad Mothers* (2017), Saphra examines romantic and familial relationships, as well as a multifaceted

mother figure. Though not actively writing about negative male behaviour, this topic flows throughout the collection ‘climbed into the mini my father had bought as penance for his bad behaviour’ (Saphra, 2017: p. 11).

In the *#MeToo* anthology, Saphra does actively write about negative male behaviour and presence. She opens her poem ‘Spunk’ with a vivid and intimidating image of a man ‘his cock hangs at half mast; it’s primed to score: rising, monstrous’ (Saphra, 2018: p. 124). In the same anthology, Victoria Bennet opens her poem ‘Cat’ with ‘when he beats the kitten to death, I pretend not to see’ (Bennet, 2018: p. 84) which depicts a violent man and vulnerable woman. Both these poems are strong reflections of the overall tone of the anthology and vividly depict the violence and ‘monstrousness’ of male abusers. In this context, the dominant, violent and unforgiving presence of men achieves what it is meant to; powerfully highlighting the prevalence of sexual violence against women and allowing the women who experience it a much-needed voice, which is why the ‘#MeToo’ movement originated. Though sexual and emotional violence against women is referenced in *Matryoshka*, my intention for the collection is entirely different. As previously mentioned, the male ‘ghost’ operates in several ways. As one example, when addressing topics such as male violence towards women, the focus is on the women themselves and the impacted lives of those around them as opposed to the violent, transgressive men. The poem ‘Lost’ (p. 42) exemplifies this as the narrator is reminded of ‘lost girls, the ones who cannot taste the comfort of sponge’ and how she wishes,

the memory of lost girls could be poured
into rows of shell-shaped depressions and rise
in the oven, then given fresh to those in need
of the missing.

There is no direct mention or presence of these men who are predominantly the cause of ‘lost’ but they haunt the poem and the reality of male violence against women is perfectly clear and saddening, even in their absence. It was important that I addressed these women and the awful circumstances without directly addressing men, because to address the perpetrator would be to give them focus they don’t need or warrant. To contextualise, *The Yorkshire Ripper Files: A Very British Crime Story* is a documentary directed by Liza Williams which was first broadcast on the BBC in 2019 and adopts a similar approach to what I have employed in *Matryoshka*. Naturally, the documentary examines the case of Peter Sutcliffe, also known as The Yorkshire Ripper. However, this particular approach to the cases focuses much more on the lives and stories of the victims, as opposed to focusing heavily on Sutcliffe himself. This approach does not diminish Sutcliffe’s crimes, but does shift the focus from him to those impacted. This is how, in part, I intended the absence of men in the collection to operate. Not to diminish their actions in the context of control and sexual violence, but to focus on the women who experience it.

The absence of men also allows for sharper focus on the presentations of immoral and dangerous women, who are domineering figures and command the poem. A good example from *Matryoshka* is ‘Babushka & the Cat’ (p. 48) a folktale-inspired poem influenced by a painting of the same name by British artist Melodie Stacey. The poem takes the image created by Stacey, an elderly woman resting with a cat perched on her shoulders, and develops this into a narrative. The poem begins by depicting a quintessential folktale-style cottage, which is found by a young woman. Without any hesitation, the woman enters the cottage and finds the deceased bodies of the babushka and her cat, but no sign of foul play. The woman looks around the cottage, finding small vials containing locks of hair, a collection of necklaces, purses and such, before finding a ‘medium-sized cage’ and a ‘locked door under the stairs’. The poem implies that the peaceful babushka, who lived in a lovely, cosy cottage with her faithful cat was actually perversely wicked and that many women met an

unsavoury end inside the cottage. The absence of men in this poem — there are no references or insinuations at all — effectively highlights the implied cruelty of the babushka. Essentially, she is bad because she wants to be not because she is influenced or coerced by a male counterpart. In addition, the absent, haunting male which is present in the collection similarly acts to emphasise the wickedness of the babushka. Although there are no men in this poem, their implied existence in the collection as a whole seeks to suggest that women can act immorally alongside men, as opposed to simply being under their control or coerced by men. *Matryoshka* is ‘haunted’ by the patriarchy, or more specifically the men who operate within its structure. But, the omission of direct presence effectively amplifies the lives and voices of women. The absent male is a distinct feature of the collection, particularly in comparison to other similar, contemporary works. Whilst there is an integral feminist context to *Matryoshka*, the previous discussion works simply to contextualise the origins of the collection and contribute somewhat to the wider discussion of women’s agency and diversity. My approach with *Matryoshka* is pragmatic, informed and rooted in my own experience. Thus, the collection is a distinct, feministic collection of contemporary poetry.

The Confessional influence in *Matryoshka*

The following chapter examines the confessional influence within *Matryoshka*. I begin with a discussion on the characteristics of confessional poetry, alongside two specific poets associated with the mode, predominantly focusing on Anne Sexton, but also referencing Sylvia Plath. Following this, I will reference modern confessional poets Melissa Lee-Houghton, Bryony Littlefair and Zoë Brigley whose work was influential in the development of the confessional element in *Matryoshka*. Throughout the chapter, I present and examine extracts from my own work which best exemplify of my use of autobiographical and the typical confessional mode but also some of the poems which employ T.S. Eliot's theory of 'Impersonality'.

In 'Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic' (1978) Steven Hoffman notes how a 'unifying feature of the confessional mode is the explicitly autobiographical connection, identified though the use of first person and focus on emotional crisis and philosophical intensity' (Hoffman, 1978: p. 689). Hoffman refers to the 'autobiographical connection', my interpretation of the difference between autobiographical writing and confessional writing is that autobiographical is poetry which contains personal influence, whereas directly confessional poetry reveals elements and experiences of one's life which would not normally be in the public sphere in a frank and open manner. In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) Chris Baldick defines Confessional Poetry as,

An autobiographical mode of verse that reveals the poet's personal problems with unusual frankness. The term is sometimes used more loosely to refer to any personal or autobiographical poetry, but its distinctive sense depends on the candid examination of what were at the time of writing virtually unmentionable kinds of private distress.

In the context of *Matryoshka*, many of the poems are autobiographical in terms of the influence from my own experiences. Though the poem is autobiographical in some ways and there are private experiences from my own life which I have included in the collection, the majority of these poems do not align with the traditional confessional characteristics, such as the revelatory aspect through myself as the poetic personae or the lyrical ‘I’ element. During the creative process, I felt it was essential to include these experiences of my own thus revealing them to the reader, but in a distanced way as the reader would perhaps naturally be unable to distance the ‘I’ from myself as the speaker, unless she was presented as a very specific character. In ‘Revisiting Sylvia Plath’s and Anne Sexton’s confessional poetry: Analyzing stylistic differences and evolution of poetic voice(s) through computational text analysis’ (2021), Shin Haeng Lee, Jin-Young Tak, Eun Joo Kwak, Seonghoon Kim and Tae Yun Lim note how,

The traditional approach to the literary genre of ‘Confessional Poetry’ focuses on external sources including the biography, historical backgrounds, and private feelings and emotions of the poets. First coined by Rosenthal (1970), the term, ‘confessional’ in this context is defined as a poetic genre that puts the speaker’s naked voice at the center of the poetic works, so the speaker’s psychological vulnerability can be introduced to the representative realm and be healed. Regarding the general features of confessional poetry, readers generally think of a poet’s intense self-exploration and frank revelation of an individual experience or trauma.

Both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are considered as original and notable confessional poets, part of the original confessional movement operating in the 1950s and 1960s, which also included Robert Lowell, John Berryman and W.D Snodgrass. In ‘Diminished but Never Dismissed: The

Confessional Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Bruce Beaver' (2015) Tegan Jane Schetrumpf (2015: p. 117) notes how it is,

true that the biographical nature of confessional poetry and its engagement with ta-boo topics such as mental illness, sexuality, mortality, and the subconscious means the poet's life can overshadow the work.

This statement is accurate regarding Plath and Sexton's work as they are have and continue to be overtly examined since their suicides. Though their work is celebrated, the complex and troubled nature of their lives is continuously discussed and arguably does overshadow their work as much as it informs it. Schetrumpf states how 'Confessional poetry is emotionally arming when the reader is daunted by psychological exploration or cannot identify with the poem' (Schetrumpf, 2015: p 119) Schetrumpf also notes how, 'we are immersed in the trauma of the poet's personal experience and confront the often-concealed ills that affect humankind', both these statements further contextualises my approach to confessional poetry in *Matryoshka*. The confessional element, specifically the revelation of deeply personal experience such as trauma, was important to include in the collection as I felt certain personal experiences of mine were representative of the complex experience of women on wider scale, but I did not want to essentially exclude the reader in some way, by presenting myself so 'nakedly' through the use of 'I'. Schetrumpf makes note of the 'chilling assurance that "i" means "I" in confessional poems. We are afraid of this naked "i," although this nakedness is always the poet's construction' (Schetrumpf, 2015: p. 119). Essentially, the revelation of the experiences were integral to the creative development of the collection but myself as the poetic personae was not, for the reasons aforementioned.

In *Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics* (2004) Jo Gill (Gill, 2004: p. 425) notes how:

Anne Sexton has been described as the 'High Priestess' and the 'Mother' of confessional poetry, and as 'the most persistent and daring of the confessionalists'.

Sexton gained this status due to the highly personal nature of her poetry, which includes details of her bipolar disorder, depression and sexual relationships. Despite how Sexton's work was known to be intensely revelatory, Gill notes Sexton's use of confessional poetry as crafted and more controlled as opposed to simply honest and impulsive, explaining that Sexton's use of confession, 'is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior, lived experience, but rather a 'technique for producing truth' (Gill, 2004: p 432 - 433). To reiterate, the confessional origin of the poems in *Matryoshka* operate to convey a wider message about women's experience and display relatable experiences or experiences that challenge expectation, rather than simply exposing details I wouldn't normally share. Though the poems do reveal or are based on intimates detail from my life, the 'confession' itself does not dominate; rather it is a technique to address the experience. For example, 'Stargazing' addresses abortion, but myself as the 'confessor' of this intimate experience does not dominate, it is the experience itself which is the focus. To aid this I chose to use third-person rather than the direct first-person address which as discussed is characteristic of confessional poetry. Lee, Tak et al note how 'the traditional way of understanding confessional poetry is indeed to prioritize the autobiographical voice *I* behind a mask of poetic personae' (Lee, Pak et al, 2021: p. 951). The reason for this was to balance the confession with the intention of the poem, which means to say that whilst this is my deeply personal experience it is a shared one and acts as one representative of an event women can experience. With this in mind, the poem is confessional but I didn't want the poetic personae to dominate, in order to allow the reader in to that experience more. If I were to use first-person perspective, the reader would gravitate towards my autobiographical voice behind the 'I' and in my opinion, the poem would be read differently, simply because the

reader would visualise me as opposed to any particular women (or person) who may experience this event in their lives.

On a separate but connected note, Sexton is a figure who represents the complexity at the centre of *Matryoshka*. In ‘When The Sexually Abusive Artist is A Woman’ (2018) Annie Lloyd writes:

It’s her art — the confessional, depressive, feminine poetry — that also allowed American culture to keep Anne Sexton in the pantheon of poetic greatness despite the realities that unfolded during her life.

The realities that Lloyd is referring to is not only the extreme mental health issues that Sexton experienced, along with her childhood trauma and complex relationships in her adult life but also the abuse Sexton inflicted on her own daughter which was discussed in her therapy sessions, as Lloyd (2018) notes

Publicising the contents of Sexton’s therapy sessions was both unethical and illuminating... it also, crucially, revealed the abuse she committed against her daughter, Linda Gray Sexton.

Sexton embodies the complex woman: in a life full of intensity and struggles, she was victimised but was also an abuser. In many ways, she openly displayed her complexity through her confessional verse, but the revelations that came from Sexton’s therapy sessions show the depth of her experiences. Not all these experiences entered the public domain. In terms of Sexton, there was an element of ‘selective confessing’, in the sense that she confessed that which she found relatively easy to. This refers to the notion of confessional symbolising a shifting truth or a version of the truth. In his essay ‘Mother of Lies? Poetry, Fiction and Truth’ (2019) Gregory Leadbetter (Leadbetter, 2019: p. 181) notes that:

poems are often praised as honest, and with the best of intentions - but honesty and sincerity alone are not enough to make a poem...to put this another way, the poet in effect seeks sympathy and applause for their honesty or sincerity - for themselves - rather than the poem, or even what is ostensibly their subject.

Again, this is why I chose to adapt the original intended confessional element of *Matryoshka* so that the focus of the poems was on the experience or symbolism presented in the confession as opposed to the honesty of myself, the poet or rather, the poetic personae. Naturally as I am the author there is certain autobiographical lens through which the reader experiences the poems, in the sense that the reader may associate me with some of the characters, voices and scenarios. In light of this, it was important that overall I increased the distance between myself and the speakers in the poems, so that I reduced the scope for the reader to place me as the poetic personae in each poem. This was to reduce the focus on myself as the author, thus amplifying the characters and experiences. Where I did intend myself to be the poetic personae is therefore more controlled and purposeful. I wanted the reader to know this 'I' was me specifically, whereas in other poems it is a generalised 'she' or 'I'.

In 'Tradition and the Individual' Talent (1919) T. S. Eliot argues for impersonality, detachment and objectivity in poetry and notes how you cannot value the poet alone (Eliot, 1919). Eliot discusses the concept of 'depersonalisation', that poetry should be a combination of the personal and the influences around the poet; Eliot (Eliot, 1919) notes that his meaning is:

the poet has, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.

I interpret Eliot's argument as distancing the self from the poem allows for objectivity. Though *Matryoshka* is largely informed by the autobiographical, this was only a part of the artistic process. The collection was informed by influence from other writers, the experience of people in my own life, research and theory. Eliot's concept of depersonalisation and how poetry is not the direct expression of personality, rather it is an outlet for escape from personality (Eliot, 1919) is applicable to *Matryoshka*. This approach is important for the presentation of the complex woman; much like excluding men entirely from the collection would not be accurate, focusing predominantly on my own experience would also be inaccurate in regards to the presentation of women I aimed to show. Again, I acknowledge that I cannot literally present the whole breadth of a woman's character as in reality this is too varied. However, transcending my own experience and presenting that of others — both real and fictionalised — displays a representation of the woman as a complex, varied individual. This creates a sense of detachment and objectivity, as Eliot theorises.

Melissa Lee-Houghton is an example of a modern confessional poet whose work was influential to *Matryoshka*. In her collection *Sunshine* (2016) Lee-Houghton presents her experiences of abuse, addiction and mental health issues. The collection consists of longer lyric poems and unlike *Matryoshka*, what seems to be direct, autobiographically-derived confessional 'I held my baby close to me all the time he fucked me from behind' (Lee-Houghton, 2016: p. 76). As a reader, you feel immersed in Lee-Houghton's distinct chaos of intense emotion and experience; often, it feels as though one is reading her diary and there is not a sense of 'impersonality' in her work. Similarly, Zoë Brigley is another modern confessional poet whose work influenced my own writing. In her pamphlet *Into Eros* (2021) she explores women's experience with trauma and healing, specifically examining her diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder, the victimisation she has experienced and her involvement in toxic relationships 'he hates me and I hate him' (Brigley, 2021: p. 11). Brigley presents a sense of complexity and vulnerability and similar to *Matryoshka*, presents a

complex woman ‘I’ll wear nothing but my bronze hair and prettiest ribbons’ (Brigley, 2021: p. 26). Much like Lee-Houghton, Brigley employs direct first-person perspective in the majority of the poems and reduces the distance between the persona in the poems and herself as the poet. Brigley very much presents her own complexity and as with Lee-Houghton, we do not get a sense of depersonalisation or detachment. In her pamphlet *Giraffe* (2017) Bryony Littlefair examines the lives of women and in-particular presents the experience of her sister’s illness ‘I’m sorry that my sister will not let you take her blood for the operation that will save her life’ (Littlefair, 2017: p. 12). Littlefair presents aspects of her experience with a relative’s illness but she also openly displays elements from her own private sphere ‘I’d wake at ten, a dribble of piss/on my inner thigh’ (Littlefair, 2017: p. 24). In a similar way to Lee-Houghton and Brigley, Littlefair shares intimate and sensitive experiences with the reader, depicting a sense of vulnerability but also resolve. All three poets display aspects from their private sphere and present themselves somewhat in their varied and complex lives, in terms of their experiences and emotions, using the lyrical I. *Matryoshka* does not present a predominant confessional or obviously autobiographical persona like Lee-Houghton, Brigley and Littlefair, rather, the purpose of the confessional influence in *Matryoshka* is to display aspects of my experience as a woman but not to display myself as the dominant voice. Though the confessional mode is not the main aspect of *Matryoshka* all of these poets were inspirational to the content and the presentation of complex women.

In terms of increasing the distance between the persona and myself as the author, many of the confessionally-based poems in *Matryoshka* are written in the third-person perspective. An example of this is the aforementioned poem ‘Stargazing’ (p. 46) which focuses on a woman in the process of having an abortion:

in the box room through door
the nurse collects her blood in a vacutainer

and asks *is this decision supported?*

The confessional element of this poem is that the experience depicted is my own, a private and emotive event in my life now shared in the public sphere. Despite this, the use of the third-person perspective in place of the direct first-person perspective increases the distance between myself and the persona in the poem. Thus, the third-person 'personae' is a way of achieving objectivity and impersonality. The 'she' in the poem becomes a more universal character that allows for readers to project onto. Similarly, the poem 'Cherries' (p. 34) depicts my own experience of losing my virginity, including actual dialogue from the event:

Once upon a time she was asked
are you just going to lay there like a corpse?
Necrophilia wasn't her kink -
she was just trying to lose it
before her eighteenth.

The content is confessional but the third person perspective distances me as the author from the 'she' in the poem, again creating a character that readers are open to transpose onto and allowing the focus to be rooted more in the experience itself, rather than me individually. The confessional influence operates in portraying an uncomfortable but also darkly humorous experience. 'Fontanelle' (p. 38) depicts a woman who is aware of the fragility of her newborn baby and thus, both her responsibility and power. Again, I employ the transient 'she' character, 'in the palm of her hand', although this is a confessionally-based poem, displaying my own thoughts and anxieties. However, instead of using first-person, I purposely used third-person perspective so that the women in the poem would be universal and relatable. The focus is not so much on the woman and her individuality, but on the thoughts she is experiencing and the connotations surrounding this.

In *Male Poets and the Agon of the Mother: Contexts in Confessional and Post-confessional Poetry* (2019) Hannah Baker Saltmarsh discusses Tom Gunn's resentment of the traditional confessional mode, which he sees as self-dramatising and how he approached sensitive, personal experience in a different way, by using third-person perspective. On writing of his mother's suicide in the third-person, Baker Saltmarsh (Baker Saltmarsh, 2019: p. 177) cites Gunn as noting,

it came easy, because it was no longer about myself. I don't like dramatising myself.

I don't want to be Sylvia Plath. The last person I want to be! I was trying in this poem to objectify the situation.

Baker Saltmarsh notes that Gunn wrote about his 'juniors' referring to self-expressive poets such as Lowell, Sexton and Plath, and that Gunn appears to identify more with the poets who came before the confessionals, the older generation of impersonal poets like T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound (Baker Saltmarsh, 2019: p. 177). Similarly, *Matryoshka* identifies with the impersonal mode, though unlike Gunn, this is not an open critique of the self-expressive confessional mode, rather the impersonal mode was more apt for the purposes of *Matryoshka* and something I became more interested in writing over the course of the Ph.D. I feel that the impersonal mode allows more artistic freedom, allowing me to write beyond my own experiences whilst still embedding my own experiences in the poems.

Though my deployment of confessional verse in *Matryoshka* is more distanced than direct, there are instances of the characteristic direct first-person perspective and revelatory content associated with confessional verse. An example of this is the second stanza in the sequence poem 'Writing Playlist' (p. 30):

I have been grabbed by the pussy.

At three years old my daughter isn't quite ready
but give it a couple of years and we can drive along
listening to Nicki spit; I hope she thinks of her as art.

The reference to being 'grabbed by the pussy' alludes to a personal experience; the terminology alludes to Donald Trump's infamous statement of 'grab 'em by the pussy' (Makela, 2016) in reference to women (the full transcript of Trump's comments about women is available to read on *The New York Times* website). The use of the traditional direct first-person address reinforces the intensity of the poem and my persona as the poet is particularly evident, unlike other poems in the collection. My alternation between the directly confessional and the more distanced confessional mode is an element of the distinctiveness of *Matryoshka*. The directly confessional mode is limited in the collection, so when I do deploy this, it adds variety to register, mood and tone whilst also clearly presenting this persona as me, the author. The poems which are confessional-based but focus on the 'she' character are poems which are designed to transcend my own experience and perspective in order to comment on the experience of women (and people) on a wider scale.

This representation of women in *Matryoshka* is a main aspect of the distinctiveness. The confessional mode in *Matryoshka* is successful in presenting experiences from the personal sphere that other readers may feel able to transpose their own experience onto. Though it has strong confessional influence, the effectiveness of *Matryoshka* is made up of a number of factors combined with the confessional element. The combination of the confessional mode and characterisation along with influence from poetry, art, history and culture contributes to the patchwork of women's experiences that I referenced in the introduction. During the artistic process I aimed to be nuanced with the confessional content of the poems. Eliot refers to an expression of significant emotion which is 'emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the

poet' (Eliot, 1919). The confessional content combined with the 'she' character is intended to root the reader in the poem and to the character, as opposed to me as the author, distancing myself from the experience and emotions in the poem, whilst informing the content and being 'omnipresent'. The confessional voice and artistic influence create a distinct tone throughout the collection. The confessional influence is integral but understated and nuanced.

Character & Voice in *Matryoshka*

In relation to the previous section, the following chapter will explain my use of specific characters and protagonists in *Matryoshka* and a more generalised woman figure referred to as 'she'. As previously discussed, some of the specific and general characters are informed by personal experience but some of my characters and speakers are fictional. Specifically, this chapter examines my fictionalised writing and how this contributes to the distinctiveness, but also the effectiveness of *Matryoshka*. The use of different characters and voices operates to represent the spectrum of the 'woman' character whilst embedding my distinct Poet's voice. I will refer to relevant creative writing and poetic theory which informed my use of characterisation. I will present several examples of my work from *Matryoshka* which are relevant to this discussion.

In *The Art of Fiction* (2011) David Lodge (2011: p. 128) discusses the concept of telling in different voices, thus highlighting to me Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony,

at the simplest level there is the alternation of the narrator's voice with the voices of the characters, rendered in their own specific accents and idioms of class, region, occupation, gender etc.

Employing a polyphonic approach to *Matryoshka*, allowed me to provide the collection with a wider range of character and experience than simply personal experience — this was essential given that *Matryoshka* is not strictly about my own experience, but the experience of women. Thus, the polyphonic approach allowed me to root many of the poems in the autobiographical but to transcend the personal by presenting, for example, deviant characters, narcissistic characters, victimised characters and characters representative of the uncanny. In *Story* (2014) Robert McKee states how 'a character is a work of art, a metaphor for human nature' (McKee, 2014, p. 374). The characters in *Matryoshka* are metaphors and representations of the experience and attitudes of

women on a wider scale alongside my own perspectives. Fiona Sampson notes in *Poetry Writing* (2009) how one might ‘think of writing as a contrivance - like a mask, or puppetry - by which the writer shapes his or her ideas and experience into something that can address someone else: the reader.’ (Sampson, 2009: p. 30). Ultimately, *Matryoshka* is designed to address the reader, to present my perspectives and ideas to them. The fictional characters particularly allowed me to achieve this to a greater degree than myself as the confessional or dominant character because I was able to shape the characters and settings.

‘Two women at sea’ is an example of how I employ specific, fictionalised characters in *Matryoshka* as representative types able to speak to and highlight a common experience. The poem depicts two women, Lucia and Celeste, out at sea. Lucia is unable to have children and Celeste is pregnant. The final section of the poem describes Lucia returning home without Celeste, but with the baby ‘That evening I was tending to the child whilst she got some air/I never saw her again’. The insinuation is that Lucia participated in the disappearance/death of Celeste, as Celeste,

was longing
to be grounded by the stillness of land
she finds comfort in the gentle kicks.

suggesting she was looking forward to returning home and to becoming a mother. Lucia, unable to have children, now has a child. The poem represents a fragile relationship between two women along with the complexity of childbearing and pregnancy jealousy. Psychologist Patricia Harteneck notes that ‘feeling jealous of another woman’s pregnancy is common and normal when you are experiencing infertility’ (Harteneck, 2015). Motherhood is intrinsically associated with women’s identity but experiences with and attitudes to motherhood vary greatly. *Matryoshka* addresses this topic in several ways, such as abortion, infertility and motherhood itself. It also presents the

complications this can cause for the mental health of an individual and the toxicity in behaviour, as depicted in 'Two women at sea'. I have employed the concept of 'at sea' in two ways: firstly the women are literally on a boat in sea but secondly, they are both in a sense 'out at sea' referring to the common phrase meaning lost or in a confused state. Both characters are in some ways lost or in a period of emotional change and distress.

As Harteneck asserts, the notion of pregnancy jealousy is not uncommon and in many ways to be expected or certainly anticipated. However, it is still important to acknowledge the actions and agency of women who behave in negative or damaging ways because of this. The absent male in *Matryoshka* aides in highlighting this topic as the absence of the male, along with the setting of the poem, isolates the focus on the women and amplifies the topics explored in the poem. This was important to present in the collection as this is a common experience of and behaviour of women. Importantly, it is suggestive of how women can be victimised by other women. 'Two women in a lighthouse', an excerpt from which is shown below, is similar in style to 'Two women at sea' but does not focus on Lucia and Celeste, instead it focuses on two ambiguous characters, one of whom is directly addressing the other:

you chop the head off a trout
I regurgitate last night's dream
You stand in a puddle of blood
I lick salt from the rocks.

This lighthouse setting is intended to represent isolation, highlighting the disturbing images depicted in the poem. The women depicted are presented as troubled, behaving in unsettling ways. There is a sense of ambiguity in terms of why the women are in the lighthouse and the poem poses many questions: what was the dream about, where is the blood from? The poem is intentionally

obscure, but vivid. In *Poetry In Theory* (2004) Jon Cooke notes Russian poet and theorist Velimir Khlebnikov's view how 'poems may be understandable or they may not, but they must be good, they must be real' (Cook, Khlebnikov, 2004: p. 95). The meaning of the poem and the background of the women is open to interpretation. The ambiguity of the characters allowed me to be daring and creative with the imagery; the women and the environment feel real and haunting.

In their essay 'Comedy of Terrors' (2018) Kathleen Rooney and Logan Berry note how Asae Berg's poems 'collapse categories, including formal generic ones, by blurring the line between poetry and prose. They also blur tonal categories by mixing horror with humour' (Berry, Rooney: 2018). Berry and Rooney also quote Thomas Mann in reference to modern art, how 'it sees life as tragicomedy with the result that the grotesque is its genuine style' (Berry, Rooney: 2018). Much Like Berg's poetry, throughout *Matryoshka* there is an intentional mix of horror and humour, as well as blurred lines between poetry and prose. Mann's view of life as 'tragicomedy' is a fitting way to describe the collection; it's tragic, dark, comedic and surreal. This tone for the collection was apt for the intention behind it. This blurred line between humour and tragedy, violence and calm creates a sense of uneasiness and engagement with the reader. In relation to women's agency, this dark yet humorous tone is effective in highlighting the broader capabilities and realities of women in a peculiar and uncompromising way; it maintains the attention of the reader and the focus on my perspective of the complex woman. 'Drugs are not her thing' (p. 25) exemplifies the dark humour integral to *Matryoshka*. The initial image depicts a girl high on drugs, hissing and screaming at herself in the mirror, declaring she is a vampire, which is both humorous and disturbing. The poem presents how the protagonist of the poem does not want to take drugs because unlike the girl who thinks she is a vampire, the protagonist fears the result may be more sinister. I reference Elizabeth Bathory, the Hungarian countess who is alleged to have tortured and killed young girls during the

late 16th and early 17th centuries. Bathory is representative of a transgressive, violent woman and the poem is suggestive of the protagonist's awareness of her own capability to be cruel,

she'd be submerged in the depth
of psychosis and not become a hissing halloween
vampire but Elizabeth Bathory smothering girls
with honey and garnishing them with ants.

'A short French film' (p. 50) is an example of a lighthearted, humorous poem and an example of experimentation with form. Written in the style of a film script, the opening of the poem depicts a French girl stopping at a bakery for a pastry and orange juice before heading to a peaceful, picturesque park to relax and read. She is interrupted by 'a handsome stranger, not a local' who is implicitly a male tourist. The stranger comments that the book looks interesting and asks if the girl would like to elaborate on what it is about, as a way of striking up a conversation. The poem concludes with the girl responding with 'Oui c'est et non merci' which translates to 'yes it is and no thanks'. This character is intended to represent a regular, self-assured woman, who in this reality is happy sitting in a park reading, enjoying the warmth and confidently shuts down the stranger's attempt at a conversation, in a polite but witty manner. The poem alludes to the frequent unsolicited attention women receive from men but also doesn't intentionally demonise the male stranger, he is just a very passive, fleeting interruption. The shortness of the poem is designed to reflect the impact the interaction has on the woman, which is minimal. These elements of the poem are not intended to minimise the issue with unwanted attention that women so often receive nor downplay the common intention behind it. However, the poem is light-hearted and is suggestive that some interactions such as this one are without bad intentions and that women respond to these situations in different ways.

A significant element of inspiration behind *Matryoshka* is the experiences with women in my own life, who are very much representative of the complex and negative character. American novelist Anne Lamott wrote on Twitter ‘you own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should've behaved better’ (@ANNELAMOTT, 2012). In an ideal world, I could write openly about all of the women who inspired the collection, however, writing about the women in my family would not be without consequence. In one sense, as Lamott asserts, they are my stories to tell, my perceptions to share. But I would assert there’s a balance to be struck and consequences to consider when writing about living people, whom you know. The poem ‘Ariana Grande said god is a woman’ (p. 9) is based on one of my sisters:

Her sister stands facing the wall
and fixes them both a Moscow Mule
her sister starts to confess —
things she’s heard before.

The poem presents two sisters, one of whom we could infer as being dominant whilst the other sister is more submissive. Ultimately, the poem concludes with the previously passive sister essentially implying she has little patience for this dynamic and listening to her sister’s (inferred self-inflicted) issues. This poem is in reference to the complex relationship between sisters and the element of, at times, the ‘falseness’ of sisterhood. In her essay ‘Of Guardians and Destroyers: On Using Your Family In Your Poetry’ (2019) Julia Webb echoes Eliot’s technique of ‘impersonality’ of which she notes ‘using titles such as sister or brother allows the reader more easily into the poem than Neil or Heather might, and it allows the reader to transpose their own sister or brother onto the poem if they wish’ (Webb, 2019: p. 171). My relationship with and perception of my sister was an important area for me to address in *Matryoshka*, but if I exposed us as real people too much then

firstly it would have personal implications and secondly, as Webb suggests, it would potentially stop the reader from being able to transpose their own sister (or whoever that character might represent to them) onto the poem and understanding the intention or the message of the poem. As discussed in the previous section, that is why *Matryoshka* has autobiographical foundations and content, but I have employed the technique of depersonalisation in order to allow distance for myself as the author and to allow the reader greater access, to be able to relate to or transpose onto the poems.

Matryoshka also draws upon real-life women outside of my own sphere. For example, 'Sisterhood' (p. 33) is a poem inspired by model and actress Emily Ratajkowski. Rebecca Gill believes that women such as Ratajkowski, and media socialite Kim Kardashian, are not in support of feminism, even though they openly declare they are. Ratajkowski writes and speaks openly about her perspective on feminism, asserting in 'Emily Ratajkowski Explores What It Means to Be Hyper Feminine' (2019) that women should be given the 'opportunity to be whatever they want and as multifaceted as they can be' (Ratajkowski, 2019). Rather, Gill asserts they are in opposition to it by feeding into the objectification of the female body. The section beginning with 'her body is controversial' was inspired by Gill's article 'Kim Kardashian and Emily Ratajkowski are no feminists' (2016) in which she declared (Gill, 2016),

we will never get away from objectification when the world's most powerful women continue to sell their bodies. They are not our sisters; they're our rivals.

Gill's stance on the behaviour of women such as Kardashian and Ratajkowski is seemingly because she sees their feminism as disingenuous. Gill's view is that they exploit themselves to profit personally. Their actions may be interpreted as contributing to stereotypes of female sexuality and attractiveness that lead to the exploitation of women. It is understandable why Gill feels the way she does in regards to Kardashian and Ratajkowski, to her and many others, their behaviour feeds into

male sexual objectification of women. A theme I have explored in *Matryoshka* is the complex relationships between women and the apparent contradictions of the notion of ‘sisterhood’. In a similar way to how male dominance is an illusion, it could be argued that the concept of universal sisterhood is also an illusion seeing as the reality is that women are fundamentally not united. In her article ‘The Collapse of the Sisterhood’ (2020) Hannah Betts acknowledges how “‘feminist me’ delights in the sisterly supportiveness of other women... realist me acknowledges that women can be complete b*tches.’ (Betts, 2020). In the context of *Matryoshka*, this is not necessarily concerned with feminism generally speaking, more so that this is an accurate representation of the relationships between women and is integral to the experience of women.

‘A Tragedy’ (p. 26) is inspired by Kate McCann and the widely documented disappearance of her daughter Madeleine:

a mother lost a daughter

she vanished one balmy evening

the mother blames a monster.

Faceless, untraceable.

But wherever she walks

people follow her with mirrors.

The poem is designed to examine the concept of victimisation and accountability, but also the merging of the two. As an example, the character based on McCann can be seen to be a victim but also raises the questions around moral complexity. Using McCann and this case as a template allowed me to present a paradoxical woman; this is a short poem that asks many questions. This

poem was in-part inspired by Carol Ann Duffy's poem *The Devil's Wife* (1999) wherein Duffy adopts the persona of Myra Hindley, one half of the infamous 'Moors Murderers' alongside Ian Brady. Duffy's poem was influential to the overarching concept of *Matryoshka*, in relation to showing women as complex, specifically focusing on deviant characters. In the earlier stages of the project I had planned to write a poem about British serial killer Rose West, who in collaboration with her husband Fred, killed and tortured young women, including their daughter, Heather. The purpose of the poem was to examine the deviant mother figure and to subvert the concept of the maternal instinct. The poem was, much like Duffy's, designed to focus on Rose West's accountability and complexity. Upon reflection I felt this wasn't distinctive enough from *The Devil's Wife* so did not include this in the collection. 'Tragedy' allowed me to approach the subject of the accountability of a mother from a different and more distinctive angle. This is an example of how characterisation and drawing upon real-life influences aided me in presenting complex characters within the limitations of patriarchy and some feminist ideologies. The aforementioned poem 'Lost' is connected to 'Tragedy', as the theme of the French Madeleine is a reference to Kate McCann's 'lost' daughter Madeleine.

'Lucienne' (p. 16) was inspired by Lucienne Gilbert, who lost her husband Claudius Echallier, a French pilot, in a plane crash in Mull of Galloway during WW2. I experimented with the form to help visualise the scene, so the line breaks after 'cliff edge' to symbolise the literal cliff and then the 'feet dangling' over the edge and above the sea. This poem is simple but full of melancholy; I wanted to create the sense that Lucienne is attached to the cliff edge because she is attached to grief, which is eternal on the page. In the wider context of the collection, I wanted this poem to capture the sense of a woman who loved her husband and the inference that he loved her, his death being simply a tragedy. Referring back to perspectives of Sady Doyle which I find problematic, Doyle asserts that 'marriage is just the process by which men make wives out of women... a wife is just a

woman who's been brought under male control' (Doyle, 2019, p. 109). Referring once again to Deborah Cameron when she notes how feminist theorists use language this way to comment on social structures and not individual behaviour of men, I understand and agree. However, the way Doyle refers to men and women does create a sense that the statements Doyle makes do in fact apply to all men and to all women. Whilst marriage has arguably been an instrumental tool within the patriarchal construct, this does not mean to say that all marriages are a tool for men to control women. I feel this perspective, though it's purpose is to highlight male dominance and the problematic nature of marriage, reduces a woman's agency and doesn't represent the wider picture of individual relationships in society. Author Libby Page tweeted in April 2022 in response to Victoria Richards' article 'No woman should be changing her name after marriage in 2022' (Richards, 2022). Page (@libbypagewrites, 2022) asserted that,

no woman should have to feel they have to change their surname, but I also think feminism is about choice. For me, using my husband's name in my personal life is an empowering thing because he is someone I chose and using the name was my choice too.

Page also noted how she 'worried changing it would make [her] a bad feminist (@libbypagewrites, 2022). This is an example of how the understanding of feminism is contested in popular culture and how feminist ideologies in the mainstream and social media can feel intimidating and oppressive to the women they are aimed at.

In his essay 'Write What You Know And Then Write Something Even Better: on creating characters and personas in poems' (2019) Dean Atta notes 'no matter how much imagination or metaphor you employ...people will still assume your poems are about you. And they always are. (Atta, 2019: p. 128). Though there is an alternation of confessional, or autobiographically inspired, content with fictionalised characters and worlds, the poems in *Matryoshka* are all rooted in my own experience,

perceptions and research. All of the characters, whether my own confessional voice or an imagined voice, display a selection of the many different facets of the ‘woman’. These representations are simply that — representations of women as human beings. The characters and voices, my poetic technique and style contribute to *Matryoshka* being an idiosyncratic and contemporary feministic collection of poems. In ‘On writing and the changing voice’ (2021) Andrew McMillan reflects on his first published pamphlet receiving negative feedback, how it ‘was too personal and too self-indulgent’ (McMillan, 2021: p. 31-32). I began this project with the intention of the confessional mode and first-person perspective lyric poetry being the predominant style of the collection and now, the combination of autobiography and characterisation is the majority. . The artistic process of *Matryoshka* is, as Eliot theorises, foundational to its distinctiveness and effectiveness. The collection transcends the personal whilst being firmly rooted in it.

Cultural, Historical and Geographical Themes and Influences in *Matryoshka*

The following chapter will discuss the cultural, historical and geographical influences on *Matryoshka* and importance of the collection addressing contemporary issues which transcend international borders. One specific area I will discuss is how poetry, short stories, music and art by female writers and artists influenced the characters and the style of the poems. As examples, I will discuss the poetry of Anna Akhmatova, the short stories of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya and the artwork of Alexandra Dvornikova. In 'Getting Out of Wonderland: Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton' (2009), Jessica McCort theorises that in Anne Sexton's work, the children's book becomes a confessional portal, a lens for examining women's individual and common experiences.' (McCort, 2009, p. 293). In a similar sense, I have employed the inspiration of writers and artists, alongside magical realism and folkloric elements to act as my own 'confessional portal'. This was one element which allowed me to think and write beyond my own experience and cultural sphere. Alongside influences such as Akhmatova and Petrushevskaya, poems in the collection were influenced by different geographical locations including Scotland, Paris and Copenhagen. Other artists which influenced the collection includes British artist Melodie Stacy, Swedish singer Lykke Li and Romanian writer Sophie Van Llewyn. This tapestry of influences transcends borders and creates a globally-connected representation of characters and experiences.

Alice Enterman notes in 'The Matryoshka Doll in Russian Culture' (2009) how the Matryoshka is a small wooden doll, almost perfectly cylindrical, painted to resemble a peasant woman in a traditional sarafan dress holding a rooster. She opens to reveal a smaller doll, which opens in turn to reveal yet another doll, and so on. In total, there are seven dolls in addition to the mother doll.

The earliest symbolism of matryoshka dolls is fertility and motherhood ‘mothers play a big role in the traditional Russian family...it’s the mother who serves as the foundation of the home’ (nestingdolls.co). I developed the poem with the intention of both presenting the traditional symbolism of the dolls but also repurposing the symbolism in the context of *Matryoshka*. In the poem the mother is the dominant figure; unlike an actual set of matryoshka dolls that would remain together, her daughters are about to leave home. The poem begins with the mother gathering her daughters together and pouring,

each daughter a glass of
violet coloured champagne
She watched as they sipped; she smiled
as they shrank into little, wooden dolls.
She lined them up on the mantelpiece.

The poem is intended to present a complex mother figure who exhibits conflicting behaviours and emotions. The mother character embodies the concept of the dominant woman and domestic matriarchy. In one sense, the mother can be seen to love her daughters so much that she turns them into the wooden dolls so she can keep them close to her. It can also be interpreted that she wants to hold onto her control over them and her place as the dominant figure, as well as as an implied of a sense of jealousy, particularly concerning their independence, youth and beauty,

every one of her visitors raved.
how beautiful the dolls were...
The mother began to hate
that people loved them so.

The poem concludes with the mother figure having turned herself into a doll and the daughters are now nestled inside of her, like matryoshka dolls. This symbolises the mother successfully keeping her daughters with her, literally buried within her, and maintaining her role as active matriarch and the focus of attention. The mother figure was, throughout the poem, focused solely on her own emotions and by the end of the poem literally eclipses her daughters because of her own wants and needs.

Though 'Matryoshka' employs elements of magical realism and is folkloric in style, it is rooted in the autobiographical and sometimes directly confessional. It stems from my own awareness of my daughter's emerging independence and the acknowledgment that part of me sees her as a new version of myself and in some way my possession. So the mother in the poem can be interpreted as myself, though I increase the distance between the persona in the poem and myself as author, through the characterisation and magical realism. In 'Magical realism is the language of the emergent Post-Truth world' (2021) Stephen and Jordan Hart note how 'magical realism is typically defined as the portrayal of magical or supernatural events in a dead-pan style as if they were real' (Hart & Hart, 2021). Harts' definition of magical realism applies to how I have deployed it in the collection; magical events are presented alongside non-magical happenings as if they are both the same reality. This is designed to allow the characters in the poems and messages behind the magical-realism inspired poems to feel real to the reader, to allow for the suspension of disbelief. The concept of suspension of disbelief is defined on [oxfordreference.com](https://www.oxfordreference.com) as,

The concept that to become emotionally involved in a narrative, audiences must react as if the characters are real and the events are happening now, even though they know it is 'only a story'.

'The willing suspension of disbelief for the moment' was how the British poet Coleridge phrased it in 1817.

Thus, the reader can appreciate what the poem is intended to comment on, in regard to the behaviour, attitudes and experiences of women in real-life. My use of magical realism is also intended to add to the distinctiveness and effectiveness of the poems by creating uncanny imagery and tones, which are often disturbing in nature, such as in 'Matryoshka'. The magical realism element which flows throughout the collection was largely inspired by Petrushevskaya's short stories but also Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Sophie Van Llewyn's *Bottled Goods* (2018) as other examples. 'Matryoshka' alludes to my own experiences and those of people in my life, presenting a difficult and complex character who exhibits controlling and damaging behaviours. It is an uncanny, tense poem. Structurally, the eight stanzas decrease in regards to number of lines as the poem progresses, representing the mother and her daughters as the dolls. In addition to visually representing the dolls, this is a bespoke use of form and heightens the sense of tension but also anticipation. The ending creates a haunting tone, as the house is now 'spider-quiet' with the mother now a doll on the mantelpiece and 'The seven/little dolls/nowhere in sight'.

Assia Wevill is most commonly known because of her relationship with Ted Hughes, particularly as the two engaged in an affair whilst he was married to Sylvia Plath. Wevill was an interesting character whose life was complex, however, she is most frequently discussed in relation to Hughes and Plath and her murder/suicide involving her daughter Shura. Wevill was influential in creating the complex mother figure in 'Matryoshka'. In *A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill - Ted Hughes' Doomed Love* (2008) Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev describe the murder/suicide by noting how 'she lay down beside her daughter, so as not to wake her. Their heads were lying close to the gas cooker' (Koren & Negev, 2008: p. xviii). Koren and Negev discuss the haunting entry Wevill wrote in her diary prior to her suicide 'execute yourself and your little self efficiently' (Koren & Negev, 2008: p. 200) which itself is symbolic of the Matryoshka dolls, alluding to how she saw her daughter as a smaller version of herself. Much like the mother figure in

the poem 'Matryoshka', it is clear to infer this sense of overbearing love and responsibility, yet, also a selfishness and sense of misguided possession. Koren and Negev seem to focus on Wevill's evident love for her daughter, referencing how it was noted during the post-mortem that Shura bore the, 'evidence of proper care and attention' (Koren & Negev, 2008: p. 203). There is a sense that Koren and Negev present Wevill's action was a result of a distorted sense of over-responsibility. Throughout the book, Koren and Negev suggest Wevill's thoughts and actions were provoked by Hughes, noting how Wevill's, 'mind was filled with gas fumes and every friction with Ted could've ignited them' (Koren & Negev, 2008: p. 205). This can be seen as the accountability ultimately being placed on Hughes, as opposed to Wevill.

In *Reclaiming Assia Wevill* (2019) Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick asserts that the situation which unfolded was, 'structural and gendered... not a personal fault of Assia' (Goodspeed-Chadwick, 2019: p. 137). More directly than Koren and Negev, Goodspeed-Chadwick suggests a lack of accountability on Wevill's part. As *Matryoshka* presents the concept of the complex woman the collection is at times suggestive of the opposite of those perspectives, that women such as Wevill can be held accountable for their actions, whilst taking into account contributing factors, such as mental health and the impact of toxic relationships. Though Wevill was influential to 'Matryoshka' there is a direct allusion to her and her daughter in 'Saint Tatiana(s)' (p. 20). This poem is split into two sections: the first section focuses on real-life 'Tatianas' and the second section is confessional-based verse. The first three stanzas in the first section of the poem references Saint Tatiana of Rome (which sets up the 'saintly' theme and reference), Russian actress Tatiana Samoilova and Russian Princess Tatiana Constantinovna respectively. The intent of these stanzas is to depict a group of women, connected by name, who were in varying contexts considered 'good' women and experienced various forms of suffering. The fourth stanza alludes to Alexandra Tatiana Elise or 'Shura' as she was nicknamed, the daughter of Wevill and Hughes. The stanza reads as follows,

Sweet, Saint Tatiana.

Only four years into her life

which she lived in the shadow of destruction.

The shadow of the body that brought her

into the world, the shadow

of the woman who took her out.

The 'saintly Tatianas' in the poem are intended to highlight Wevill as being the opposite of 'saintly' in one sense, challenging our approach to women in these situations. The fact that the final 'Saint Tatiana' is a completely innocent child also acts to reinforce the misguided behaviour of her mother. My reference to the case of Wevill and her daughter in 'Saint Tatiana(s)' allowed me to express and explore the concept of the complex, transgressive mother figure who, in the case of Wevill, ultimately victimised Shura by choosing to take her life along with her own. Wevill and Shura are only mentioned briefly in this poem but the concept of the complicated mother figure Wevill embodies is addressed at various points in the collection. The second part of this poem is rooted in the confessional, referring to the moment I knew I was expecting a boy in my second pregnancy. The poem concludes with:

She would not give birth

to her Saint Tatiana

She would not be able to atone

to live again through a daughter.

This is intended to further represent that sense of possession a mother can feel over her daughter and how a mother can see her daughter as a mini version of herself, which can be damaging. This concept is also explored in the poem 'Loch' (p. 8) which depicts a dreamlike scene where the

protagonist is being pulled into the middle of a loch by a woman with a ‘a cord, floating between’ them. ‘Matryoshka’, ‘Saint Tatiana(s)’ and ‘Loch’ are all intended to explore the toxic, damaging behaviour that can occur in motherhood. As suggested by the title, ‘Loch’ is set in Scotland, an example of the geographical influences in the collection. ‘Loch’ is in part inspired by my own heritage but also by the melancholic and powerful Scottish landscape, which added an elemental tone to the poem. The Scottish landscape is a contrast to the other cultural and geographical influences, highlights the notion of transcending geographical boundaries, globally-connected experiences of women and characters who share attributes. In her article ‘Transcending cultural boundaries’ (2016) Julia Paul notes that ‘great literature connects culture and nationality. So can education’ (Paul, 2016) upon visiting colleagues in India with a team of lecturers from Queens University in Belfast. Paul’s view echoes the intention of *Matryoshka*, how a collection of poems can connect cultures, national identities and landscapes.

Lyudmila Petrusheskaya’s collection of short stories *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to kill Her Neighbour’s Baby* (2011) was greatly influential in regard to characterisation and tone. Petrusheskaya’s method of characterisation and style of voice influenced ‘Matryoshka’ as well as several other poems. *Matryoshka* is a distinct mix of comedy, darkness and melancholy, in parts akin to the style of Petrusheskaya but in my own voice, content and style. Petrusheskaya presents an array of disturbing tales and characters in a distinctly sharp tone; a theme in *Matryoshka* is the sense of the uncanny, an element which Petrusheskaya’s stories achieve very efficiently. In the short story ‘The God Poseidon’ the narrator explains how they bumped into their friend Nina by the sea and saw her grand new apartment with very ornate decor and lots of beds, telling the tale of how she came to be there after moving from Moscow. Nina had exchanged apartments with the owner of the grand apartment but the owner had not yet moved out. A fisherman, who Nina explains is the son of Poseidon, brings many different things to the apartment, which he collects from the sea. The story

concludes with the fact that the narrator learns upon their return to Moscow that ‘Nina hadn’t moved anywhere, in fact, but had drowned with her teenage son in a well-known ferry accident’ (Petrusheskaya, 2011: p. 86). This story is haunting and melancholic; Petrusheskaya’s use of characterisation, particularly Nina, and setting make the story very effective, as does the conciseness of it.

‘A Poem for Lyudmila Petrusheskaya’ (p. 10) is intended to represent the wider relationship with women, death and murder; a reminder that death and violence not be exclusively associated with women as a victim, as this can be more complex territory. The combination of humour, tragedy and the uncanny creates a distinct sense of unpredictability and unease. It also effectively displays a range of deviant female characters. In ‘A Poem for Lyudmila Petrusheskaya’ the female characters are intentionally ambiguous and attached to no specific ethnicity or cultural identity; it is representative of all types of women and their relationship and experiences with death/murder. The poem is a mixture between the uncanny, magical realist and the realistic:

there once lived a woman
who killed herself then buried
her own body
* * *
there once lived a woman
who strangled her lover with some tights
that she wore for work

In Magic(al) Realism (2004) Maggie Ann Bowers (2004: p. 3) notes how, when differentiating between magic realism, magical realism and marvellous realism:

magical realism, which of all the terms has had the most critical consideration, relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings.

Bower's definition echoes that of Hart and Hart, which is how I have interpreted the magical realism employed in *Matryoshka*. Bowers discusses how magical realism breaks down the distinction between the magical and the real is thus considered a disruptive narrative mode, which is why it is considered best suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries (Bowers, 2004: p. 4). This applies very much to *Matryoshka*; my use of magical realism explores and challenges the perception of women's character and experiences. My intention for 'A Poem for Lyudmila Petrusheskaya' was that the poem would be perceived as both unsettling and darkly humorous:

There once lived a woman who killed
accidentally...
she flung open her bedroom window
without even noticing the cat
perched on the ledge there.

'Bottled Goods' (p. 12) is another example of the darker imagery and magical realism aspect of the collection. The poem opens in the narrative style of Petrusheskaya 'There is a kind girl/ who offers what she can' and depicts a kind, thoughtful girl who seemingly does more for others than they do for her and may be a figure who is taken advantage of. The poem is concise, which makes the twist at the end more effective:

above her bed
is a row of miniature glass bottles
filled with... the shrunken bodies of those

who underestimated her, silent,
clawing frantically on the glass.

This poem is intended to present a woman capable of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviour. The magical realism element of the shrunken people being kept in glass bottles is juxtaposed with the gentle nature of the girl, highlighting the extreme differences that exist within the context of the collective ‘woman’ and in the context of an individual woman. The collection presents deviant and dark characters, but also vulnerable characters and contented characters. For example, ‘Oksana’ (p. 45) depicts a tormented woman unable to have children ‘she pulled away her clothes before cutting out/ her womb, cradling it until the morning’. The woman in the poem has a traditional Russian name and the setting of the forest implies the landscape of Russia, but the focus is not her being Russian, it is the desperation, vulnerability and tragedy of her situation. Though the poem is representative of fertility issues and the physical and mental impact of this on a wider scale, I presented the woman as a specific character to add to the tragic tone of the poem; the inclusion of her name lets the reader into her story that little bit more than the generalised ‘she’ used in other poems. In reference to presenting women who are more contented, ‘Dear Vera Shimunia’ (p. 29) is an example of what I mean by this:

embroider me a star
scattered night sky
with my body sewn
into it as a constellation

Vera Shimunia is a contemporary Russian artist who creates detailed and intricate embroidered landscapes. The intention of the poem is to show a woman who is happy and content with life but also in a state of detachment from the world. The woman asks Shimunia to embroider her a night-

sky landscape with her own body as a constellation, suggestive of a sense of peace and self-appreciation but indicates a sense of detachment and exteriority.

Whilst Petrusheskaya's work inspired the darker characters and magical realism elements in *Matryoshka*, Anna Akhmatova's poetry inspired a different form of characterisation and a distinct aspect of my poet's voice. 'Darling' (p.7) is inspired by Akhmatova's poem 'The Muse', which she opens with 'all that I am hangs by a thread tonight' (Akhmatova, 1924). This is a direct and uncompromising statement, as well as an astute metaphor for the fragility of human nature. I felt that this sentiment was apt for *Matryoshka*, incorporating this into my own poem 'All that you are hangs by a thread — tonight, tomorrow and always.'. I purposely changed the first-person to the second-person perspective to signify a universal 'you' and moved the focus from 'tonight' to 'always'. This was to show the complexity of women and of human nature generally, that we all have the capability of changing our perspectives, acting impulsively and mentally breaking down. The tone of 'Darling' is intended to hone in on the darkly comic mood in *Matryoshka* 'whoever you are do not die young but live dangerously...Black is good for all occasions for the world is an endless funeral'. This is supposed to be suggestive of the close and complex relationship women have with danger and also alludes to the concept of individualism, as dangerously can be interpreted in several ways. The concluding line sets up the themes of loss and death throughout *Matryoshka*, and it represents an ambiguous narrator and subject.

'Slaughter' (p. 51) takes inspiration from Akhmatova's poem 'The Sentence' (1989) which depicts an again ambiguous woman who realises she can liberate herself from her own memory, removing parts of herself or people,

She learnt that she could hack away
the bits of memory she did not want

She learnt she could cut people
off like limbs.

The imagery of the butcher is intended to blur the line between the woman as a victim or monster, in the sense that the poem references how women are often slaughtered (alluding to male violence etc.) but they can also be the slaughterer. In this context, the woman is metaphorically butchering her own life, cutting people off, removing parts of herself she doesn't want and beginning again. The butchering in this sense doesn't necessarily equate to actual violence but places the woman in the aura of violence, showing her closeness to it and her capability of it, and also how it can be a metaphorical form of coldness and 'slaughter'. In 'The poetry of Anna Akhmatova: Living in different mirrors' (2006) Alexandra Harrington (2006: p. 245). notes that:

While Akhmatova's early poetry focuses primarily on 'this world' and on the speaker's processes of perception, her later poetry invokes other possible orders of being and planes of reality, so that the self represented in it is distributed across them and mediates between them. She becomes increasingly inconsistent and elusive, appearing in different reflections and guises so that the original is often difficult to locate. The roots of this multiplication and diffusion of the self can be identified in the early period, where the speaker sometimes conceives of herself simultaneously as 'I' and 'she', and displays a nascent interest in different forms and orders of being.

Harrington's observation of Akhmatova's presentation of women being and her elusiveness in her writing highlights what drew me to her poetry and what I wanted to achieve in *Matryoshka* as a development of this influence. My intention was to present the complex woman in a variety of forms and to convey a sense of inconsistency. Much like Akhmatova's poetry, the poems in *Matryoshka* depict women in different realities and forms, both active and detached. This was to

indicate the spectrum of women's identity and experience. It is also suggestive that women are not a fixed state, but a transient being capable of many forms. Harrington examines a variation of Akhmatova's poems, making note of Akhmatova's suppression of the possessive pronoun, or the lyrical I, suggesting this is indicative of the speaker's sense of detachment from herself (Harrington, 2006: p. 73). This aspect of Akhmatova's poetry is like Eliot's concept of 'impersonality' and a particular reason why Akhmatova's work was influential to *Matryoshka*. The sense of detachment in Akhmatova's poetry is an element of its distinctiveness and creates a sharp focus on the symbolism of the poems.

In the 'Poetry of Anna Akhmatova' (1986) Sonia Ketchian (1986: p. 2) notes how:

Akhmatova's poetry boasts an omnipresent variable persona, herself often a poet. In order to substantiate rich experiences and broad knowledge Akhmatova introduces in certain poems a first-hand, eyewitness familiarity for her speaker with bygone ages, with various people and with other, nonhuman forms of life, through elements of metempsychosis.

Akhmatova's poetry is recognised as being economic and controlled, which the variable persona she employs reflects, as this is indicative of her craft in the execution of her poems and the perspectives they present. Akhmatova's economy in her writing was greatly influential; she effectively presents a captivating image or a message in a concise, controlled tone. I worked towards employing a similar economic tone in *Matryoshka*, which ultimately made the poems sharper and more effective.

Alongside Akhmatova, Russian poets Natalya Gorbanevskaya and Marina Tsvetaeva were also influential to *Matryoshka*. In 'The Displaced Female Voice: Poetry of Natalya Gorbanevskaya' (2017) Muneerah Almahasheer (2017: p. 3). notes on the subject Gorbanevskaya's exile from Russia and the impact of this, that,

ultimately, Gorbanevskaya's physical and cultural displacement from her homeland sharpens the hybridity and ambiguities inherent in her work. Perhaps for this reason, and undoubtedly additionally for others, Gorbanevskaya's poetry has an overall sense of being unmoored or unanchored in terms of its setting, imagery and subject matter. The narrator is often in dialogue with another character, whose identity is again unclear to the reader, evoking ambiguity.

Almahasheer acknowledges Gorbanevskaya's poetry as unanchored and ambiguous in tone, which is similar to the tone I have deployed throughout *Matryoshka*. I feel there's a certain understated profoundness in Gorbanevskaya's poetry; a wisdom, an ambiguity, an eeriness and a directness. These elements I wanted to convey throughout *Matryoshka* as I felt this was effective in underscoring the concept of the complex woman — a complicated, unmoored character. There's a multitude of identities depicted in the collection and much like Almahasheer notes of Gorbanevskaya's style, I wanted to focus on these different characters and spotlight aspects of their identity, but also maintain a sense of ambiguity to suggest a transient individual and one readers could project onto. The notion of the unmoored and transient character further aligns with the collection transcending geographical and cultural borders. 'Tomorrow' was inspired by Gorbanevskaya's poem 'And Tomorrow you'll find not even a trace' (1974) and depicts an ambiguous narrator who wants to be detached and untraceable,

if I had my way

then tomorrow you'd not even find a trace of me

a shadow of what I was

of what I might become.

This is intended to represent that transient and detached character, who has reached a point of wanting to live but almost invisibly. The reference to shadows is also intended to be ambiguous, referring to secrets or grief, or whatever the reader may project. Gorbanevskaya's poem 'But what is there on this dark floor' (1974) and specifically the line 'what is behind the door, in the depths, in the heart' inspired my poem 'Locket' (p. 27). The poem is a satirical take on what is in the depths of the heart and also representative of an emotionally void characters, challenging the perception of women as highly emotive and naturally maternal/caring:

people say her heart is made of gold
but if you open it up you won't find
a tiny picture of her beloved.
Only, nothing at all.

The concluding poem 'Bound' (p. 52) was inspired by and acts as an adaptation of Marina Tsvetaeva's poem 'Bound for Hell', translated by Stephan Edgar in 2012. In her essay 'Marina Tsvetaeva and the Poet-Pair' (2009) Annie Finch notes of Tsvetaeva's tragic life, how she 'hung herself after losing her job, home, and most of her family in the Russian revolution, and watching one of her children starve to death' (Finch, 2009). Of her poetry, Finch (2009) states how Tsvetaeva was,

such a warm poet, so unbridled in her passion, so completely vulnerable in her love poetry, whether to her female lover Sofie Parnak, to Boris Pasternak, or in one of my favourite poems, her passionate ode to her desk, that Akhmatova seems cool and controlled in comparison.

Whilst I was inspired by Akhmatova's economy and sharpness, I was influenced by the lyricism, the form and the tone of Tsvetaeva's poetry. The tragic events in her life add to the melancholy and haunting effect of her poems. Finch (2009), on the notion of 'poet pairs' which she categorises Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva as, notes how,

poet-pairs provide a natural, and apparently a perennial (!), context for appreciation of each of the poets' contrasting strengths. The distinctness of each poet is highlighted in comparison with the qualities of the other.

This contrast is evident in *Matryoshka*, in fact, all of the influences contrast with each other and in turn, create a polyphony of tone, imagery and pace. The concept of Tsvetaeva's poem — that essentially, all women are hell-bound — is darkly humorous but also haunting, an apt representation for my perspective and tone in *Matryoshka*. This poem acts as an effective closing poem as it draws upon the tragic, comedic tone which flows throughout the collection and it reinforces the concept of the complex woman. In one sense, the poem recognises women as a kind of collective through the use of 'we' but it also highlights the different characters within this collective:

Miss Murder, Miss Cadaver
Monarchs and maidens
Lost girls, joyful girls, wicked girls
save themselves for marriage girls
save themselves from marriage girls.

Though it is not an essential factor in why Akhmatova, Gorbanevskaya and Tsvetaeva were influential to *Matryoshka*, it should be noted how all three poets are connected with the turbulence of the Russian political system, loss and struggle. Moreover, they are all considered feminist writers, given that they wrote about the (negative) experiences of women in Russian culture; they

each faced forms of oppression and trauma, thus writing poetry and being active voices against many odds (poetryfoundation.org). Their craft and poetry inspired my own work, but their lives represent aspects of women and their complexity.

A creative tool I employ in *Matryoshka* is ekphrasis. There are several ekphrastic poems, particularly inspired by the art of contemporary Russian artists Alexandra Dvornikova and Natalia Deprina, along with British contemporary artist Melodie Stacey. An ekphrastic poem as defined on Poetry Foundation (poetryfoundation.org) is,

a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the “action” of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning.

In a similar way to the influence of Petrusheskaya, Dvornikova’s art inspired me to create complex characters and to explore darker aspects of the narrative of women’s lives. An example of this is ‘Departure’ which is inspired by an art print of Dvornikova depicting a white hand holding three death’s-head hawkmoth surrounded by a forest. The mother in the poem is a negative voice who is intolerable of what she perceives as an ‘outsider’ and tries to pass this on to her daughter. There are two perceptions or associations I wanted to challenge with this poem. Firstly that of Russia, as for the daughter in the poem, there is only a positive connection to Russia which is the art print by Dvornikova which has ignited her imagination, enabled her to block out the negativity of her mother and inspired her to write. And secondly, the association of the death’s-head hawkmoth. This particular type of moth is perhaps most well-known because of its inclusion in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1998) by Thomas Harris, wherein the killer places a moth cocoon in the throat of his female victims. This poem acts to subvert this typical association and reimagine the gothic female. The

gothic female is summarised by Asmat Nabi (2017: p. 73) in 'Gender Represented in the Gothic Novel' (2017):

There are two main female roles within Gothic literature; the 'predator' and the 'victim'.

The first is dangerous yet powerfully attractive; she helps portray the pain/pleasure paradox that has come to be synonymous with Gothic literature. The latter is fragile and vulnerable, she gives the heroes something to rescue, and is often the prize for their brave endeavours.

Occasionally, however, Gothic writers seem to blur the lines between these stereotypical characters in order to add depth, uncertainty and suspense.

Nabi's reference to gothic writers 'blurring' the line between the two typical gothic female roles is what I intended to do in *Matryoshka*, though in *Matryoshka* I would define it as the gothic woman. The woman holds three moths in her hand and then watches them fly away; this is a position of power compared to the females within *Silence of the Lambs*. The poem also suggests a feeling of serenity and freedom in this magical, gothic setting. In his paper 'The Role of Women in Russian Fairy Tales', Michael Mendis (2009: p. 2) echoes Nabi by noting how women characters are presented,

two-dimensionally, that is, they are portrayed as either good or bad. This division of women into two basic 'black-or-white' categories is an oversimplification of the true nature of women.

thus highlighting the oversimplification of women's agency and identity. In most cultures the gothic female or woman is often portrayed in relation to male counterparts as one to be saved or one to be feared. My creative exploration of the gothic woman changes the relationship between the gothic and the woman to present a more intrinsic and intricate one. 'Adrift' (p. 39) is a poem in response to Dvornikova's painting which shows a woman laying on top of a bear in a small boat. The poem acts

as a reimagining of this scene, but the bear is implied to be the mother of the young girl laid on her chest. The poem is intended to represent two things: the anxieties that present themselves in motherhood and also the position of power of the mother. The mother/bear is a metaphor for the power a mother can hold over her daughter and again the capability to damage. The fact that the bear seems anxious and reluctant to look at the girl represents an awareness of this position of power and also responsibility:

I raise my arm, hold my right hand
in front my face; it is not a hand
but a paw I look down now at the small body.

‘The Girls in the Garden of the Dead’ (p. 23) is a poem inspired by the photography of Natalia Deprina. Much like *Matryoshka*, Deprina’s photographs have an absence of men, instead depicting women in gothic-inspired settings such as woodland and moonlit fields. The subjects can be seen in white dresses with blood stains or naked entwined with the woodland floor. A particular image is titled ‘Ghost of Pale Moon’ which depicts a woman in a white dress holding a crescent-moon-shaped knife, standing beneath the waxing moon. In the poem, I have created a narrative based on Deprina’s images designed to represent the concept of the gothic woman who blurs the lines between victim and ‘monster’,

I will write to Natalia Deprina
and ask her to photograph me
as one of her girls in the garden of the dead
I will let my body sink into the mud
and the undergrowth.

There is no implied male presence in the poem, the focus is solely on the ambiguous gothic woman. The narrator describes wanting to be photographed as one of 'her girls in the garden of the dead' in reference to Deprina. This places Deprina in a position of power as the photographer but also implied keeper of the garden. The discussion in this chapter examines some examples of the cultural, historical and geographical influences which inform *Matryoshka*. The artists, writers, historical figures and landscapes aided me in creating a distinct mixture of characters, scenarios and places. Ultimately, these influences were part of developing the transient, unmoored 'she' character and integral to transcending geographical and cultural boundaries in the collection, contributing to the concept of the complex woman.

Conclusion: A poetic reflection

This final chapter will summarise distinctive elements of *Matryoshka* and how it relates to contemporary poetry which addresses similar themes, as well as poetry that is similar to my own in poetic style and use of technique. Additionally, I will briefly discuss and reflect upon the form and craft in *Matryoshka* and the next steps for the collection. *Matryoshka* is a distinctive full-length collection of contemporary poetry. *Matryoshka* examines the concept of the complex woman, through a combination of autobiographical and fictionalised writing, influences from a rich variety of cultures, histories and landscapes. Through a purposeful omission of direct reference or imagery of men, the collection amplifies the experiences and characters of women. These experiences characters are not limited to presentations of women as victims of the patriarchy or as ‘strong’ women defying the patriarchal structure which encompasses them, though these experiences of women do feature in the collection.

Even in its distinctiveness, *Matryoshka* has affinities with several other contemporary poetry collections. Tara Bergin’s *The Tragic Death of Eleanor Marx* (2017) explores similar themes including love, grief and death adopting a darkly humorous tone and employing folkloric elements throughout. *Eliza and the Bear* (2009) by Eleanor Rees shares similarities with *Matryoshka* in regard to imagery deployed. Many of Rees’ poems adopt a haunting, melancholic tone presenting an array of characters including a woman longing for a child ‘I wake from a dream of you/my lost son’ (Rees, 2009: p. 21) and naturally, a bear ‘I did not know my lover was a bear’ (Rees, 2009: p. 30); a woman longing for a child and a bear can also be found in *Matryoshka*. Infertility issues and infant loss are common theme when writing about women, but the representation of this in *Matryoshka* is distinctive because of the violently tragic way it is presented, by the way of the woman cutting out her womb and cradling it like a child. The bear imagery also differs as the bear in *Matryoshka* is implied to be a woman, whilst Rees’ bear is male, and represents the anxiety associated with

motherhood in regards to the safety of the child and the awareness of a parent's responsibility and also the capability that comes with being physically and mentally dominant over a small, vulnerable human. *Matryoshka* also bears similarities to *What Girls Do In The Dark* (2020) by Rosie Garland in regard to the exploration of women in a gothic and uncanny context. In Garland's poem 'Post Mortem' she writes how 'their hands make you beautiful' and talks of the 'forgotten places of the body' (Garland, 2020: p. 66). Garland's text also has a feminist undertone 'woman answers back, ends up dead' (Garland, 2020: p. 24). Unlike *Matryoshka*, Garland's work can be interpreted as a celebration of women and could be seen to, referring back to Sady Doyle, embrace the female 'darkness' as though it is a feminist action.

Who is Mary Sue? (2018) by Sophie Collins and *Matryoshka* both explore identity, particularly looking at women as complex and flawed characters. Collins' employs many short poems which present, in a similar way to myself, the transient 'she', 'she knew nothing: no language, no history/ her hair smelled of whiskey from the night before' (Collins, 2018: p. 93). Collins' examines identity, shame and trauma in the collection, all of which I also explore in *Matryoshka*. In *The Girl Aquarium* (2019), Jen Campbell presents a range of characters, through the use of macabre fairytales and dark imagery. Campbell (2019: p. 20) explores the female body and definition of beauty,

Girl of organs/

Girl within a wolf

cold fury girl.

Both Collins and Campbell were influential during the writing process and though *Matryoshka* shares qualities of these works, it is independent and distinguishable from them. I have employed folktale and fairytale aspects in my own work much like many of the poets I have mentioned, but I

have done so with my own purpose and in my own style. These elements are integral to *Matryoshka*, however it is not the predominant style and content, much like it is the work of Campbell for example. Collins' work can be considered a feminist text and the book description notes: *Who is Mary Sue?* exposes the presumptive politics...the idea that men *invent* while women *reflect*; that a man writes of the world outside while a woman will turn to the interior. (Faber, 2018). Whilst Collins' writes from a feminist perspective and examines the spectrum of women's identity, our perspectives are different. *Matryoshka* is a considered view and exploration of the complexity of women and is not concerned with the woman in relation to men: it is focused on presenting women as human beings capable of a vast range of behaviours, actions and emotions. As with Bergin, Rees, Garland and Campbell, Collins also uses male characters in her work 'men stay away from the kitchens' (Collins, 2018: p. 51). Though men are quietly, even hauntingly, present in *Matryoshka*, its distinctiveness is that the women in the collection are amplified because of this muted presence. The contemporary poetry collection which *Matryoshka* is most similar to is *Feminine Gospels* (2017) by Carol Ann Duffy. Much like *Matryoshka*, Duffy explores the vast range of women's experiences and behaviours. Duffy presents a range of characters including queens, goddesses, school-girls and virgins. Duffy explores sex, marriage, death and motherhood. As with all the aforementioned poets, Duffy references men 'how they loved her/the men from the press' (Duffy, 2017: p. 14), whilst *Matryoshka* actively does not, purely to amplify the voice of the complex woman.

The use of form and craft in *Matryoshka* is distinct, bespoke and experimental; there is a variation of poetic form and creative techniques displayed across individual poems. Many of the poems are written in free verse, which is to say they are non-metrical and non-rhyming. My intention for *Matryoshka* was for the poems to act as an embodiment of the varied and disordered lives of women. *Matryoshka* contains lengthier prose poems, couplet poems, staccato poems, regular stanza

poems and irregular stanza poems. There is humour, grief and love. The themes I examine are not distinctive to *Matryoshka*, they are universal themes, but my approach to and exploration of them is distinctive. *Matryoshka* explores particular aspects of motherhood — anxieties, unconditional love, jealousy, control. *Matryoshka* as a collection does somewhat challenge certain patriarchal and feminist attitudes to and perceptions of women's experiences in the sense that they show women as human beings and as complex individuals. By experimenting with content, form and character, I have produced an interpretation of the complex woman. Most importantly, I have produced an accomplished, publication-standard collection of poems which are an original contribution to contemporary poetry. *Matryoshka* will be published as my debut collection by Verve Poetry Press in 2022 and a version of the poem 'Stargazing' (p. 46), which I discussed in chapter two, was shortlisted for the 2021 Bridport Prize.

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