Bitchdaughter

A Female Soldier's Creative Response to War

by

Joanne Claire Young

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Abstract

Bitchdaughter – A Poem is a long poem exploring the themes and experience of a serving female soldier in the British Army. The poem examines conflict and war through this lens and considers identity, gender, physical and mental health, loss and absence, motherhood, technology, media, ecology, geopolitical turbulence and the institutions of commemoration across one woman's experience of training and operating as an Army officer.

The poem is accompanied by a 30,000 word essay considering the poet's practise as research. The essay looks at the long poem genre and its application for this project; the experience of institutional and self-censorship; the use of voice across the poem; how the poem might be situated within a Western canon of war poetry; and the inspiration the poem draws from literary and historical examples of female fighters.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

This work is dedicated to the women with whom I serve in the British Army; they work harder, smarter, faster, funnier and with more integrity than I could ever capture on paper.

Also, to my husband Stuart, a kind, calm and talented Army officer who has quietly encouraged and supported me every day in this study, for our two children, and the secure, peaceful world we hope and strive to pass to them.

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Bitchdaughter

a poem

by Jo Young

The Pitch (i)

If you can't explain to yourself
why this is necessary…

…you have to ask yourself

…is this actually necessary?

…exactly

So tell us one more time

…and more concisely

…what is this story and why do we need…

...why do we want, even

…to hear it?

Have you thought about a memoir?
Lots of women writing those now

…lots. And retired Generals.

Why is that?

I don't want to seem as if
I'm explaining your own life to you…

…mansplaining, hahahah.

…not at all. But you have some, you know

…USPs

…funding opportunities

…PTSD – big business now.

…and Chilcot of course

…yeah, doing the wrong thing…

…for the right reason?
As a woman, as a mother, as a *female* mother…

…affected by experience

…trauma

…vilification. Agendas.

…any assault activity to pop in?

…to contrast with battle?

Have you approached the Legion?
We could do something with this…poem.

Have you considered memoir?

The Pitch (ii)

I'll have another go.

I understand that you still don't know
all you would like to know about the victim
and his wild-eyed brother, the hero.
It's not my place, my role -

- let those with splintered panes describe
how it feels to be gunned with dozens
of sharp stones. Instead come and see
how conflict is a mode of life. Human

as mothering, prayer or laughter.
We exist beside it, despite it and sometimes within it.
Please do hate it, but we shan't be without it.
Learn war, filter it, know it; it is human. Or rather

humans are sharks and wars are the wrasse.

A docu-eco-comment-filmpo-longpoem-fem-epic-biog-history about combat-The-North-media-motherhood-loss-love'n'sisterhood-dogs-violence-Vikings-weavers-beavers-and-cracks(-mostly-in-limestone) told through a handful of female viewpoints.

Okay.

Well, why didn't you just say so?

Casting (i)

Harlinde and Renilde – reading in perfect unison for the part of the Scribe:

We illuminate. Pulling breath
through the weft of a story
as weak as fluff.

Pinning fancy onto
reason and fact,
riveting it with stubborn colour

defacing the colophon
with our stocky Germanic
forearms. Nails in linen

and projectiles through tales,
deleting whimsy from maps,
turning flimsy illusion

into hard folio, full macho
history and unassailable comment.

Did someone say German?

Casting (ii)

Eighties-girl idea of a rebel icon reading for the role of the Sister:

Two Cures for the Sisterhood

1. Don’t copy, admire or idolise.
2. The easy way: become allies.

after Wendy Cope

Trailer

STOCKSHOT:
Blackpool Tower, M56 motorway, Pendle Hill

VOICEOVER (~~Ewan MacGregor,~~ Maxine Peake):
A girl from the North of England is drawn slowly, irresistibly to a world of patriarchy, danger and dehydrated food…

Good landscape pictures.
Oh: problem?
But that's Lancashire.

STOCKSHOT:
York Minster, Humber Bridge, River Tees, Doncaster Racecourse

That's better.
Better North.
More EastNorth.
North East.

Better how?
More North?
North East?

STOCKSHOT:
Lower body shots of Army recruits marching c.1995 (TIGHTEN on skirts amongst trousers).

VOICEOVER:

from the tidy parade squares of the Home Counties, to fields and plains and deserts…

Does anyone die?
In battle?

Yes.
Erm, no.
A bit. Maybe.

MUSIC:
Highland Cathedral

DISSOLVE TO:
Chest shot (clearly female) showing medals. Soften focus.

This is a poem?
Not a memoir?
Is it a charity thing?
No.
Sounds cheap.
Pub?

Yep.
Nope.
Nooo. Noooo. No, not really.

It will be.
Pub.

Scribe

Lines are drawn, lines are
written, lines are sung behind jugglers
and muttered beside slot machines
when men tell tales of women warriors

It's been happening for an age
in fire-lit spice markets, in mess halls,
in court rooms and in comments
sections below good-news stories

there will be mothers and daughters,
benjamins and shield-maidens, breasts
removed or breasts bared and eye-popping
strength as she unexpectedly rolls over

reaching out a sword to slice
through the legs of the enemy's horse
always that savour of mal-nature.
    Always the pause before restoration.

We can try stand-up comedy –
    Qanassa walks into a bar and the bar-man
    says 'Cheer up, love, it might never happen' –
it doesn't end well…

or give interviews to Egyptian journalists –

On board the transport plane, I was seated beside Captain Jo. A graduate of English Literature, she wore black sunglasses and a military uniform and assisted me with fastening my seat belt and putting on my safety helmet. However, laughingly, in response to a question posed by Asharq Al Aswat, she stated that if she could go back in time, she would prefer to marry a famous footballer and sit and watch him training and scoring goals…

Blink. Shake it off. Stop smiling.

DISSOLVE TO: three women at a bar table
in a briefing tent, at the battleship bridge;
at ease. Peering, thumbing at scrapbooks
and albums of slim, squinting soldiers.
The storyteller, the cynical sister, the abiding scribe:

the She, the mentor, the mother of all moods:
Hastati, Principes, Triarii.

They know what to tell and it’s not just war.
Gentlemen, peace. Give them the floor.

Storyteller

There on Bitchdaughter tower, two girls lie. SE 6017951170
Smoothed by stone from below, sun from above.
A feeble sun that draws the many thousand
daffodils from burrows in old Viking mantle,
and a powdery stone full of quartz, mica and clay.

One girl has no future. The other does.
Future-girl has no idea how to use it.
The girl with less has always known she will
die very young. Lack of future, lack of
ideas stop neither telling yarns about
Bitchdaughter tower and all the bitchdaughters
and laughing. Mouths wetly wide like daffodils.

The Minster has its back to them, big-bell deaf SE6033752200
to *I think I'll join the Army.* The friend's eyes close
You hate being shouted at. You don't eat meat
then coughs her fibrous pain for several minutes
so that when she stops, the subject has changed itself.

The words carry.
Floating to the top of the city globe,
through gnarly goblin hands, into guffawing
mouths, a petal in a plague beak
to fall back down in a later flurry
of shaken blossom on grit, where
matters begin to arrange.

Sister

The Minster roof
is a canopy
above a limestone forest.
And in that canopy
live many beasts, hobs
and brownies, cast
from hard powder.

Of all the hands
which raised the forest,
Roman, Norman, murky Kings
and of all the fighters who tore
at it, Danes, flames,
non-conformists, none
are recorded on the high
branches. Just the guards,
the market girls or the masons
grotesques with arses, rocking tits
and grimaces peering down on
two girls bathing on the Bitchdaughter.
I could nestle among them
with chins, fucked feet,
& a cross-wife frown
my skirts carved from
all I know now. I'd listen
through rare pomegranate ears
to future-girl saying

I'll probably join the Army

Scrapbook

12 Reasons Why a Girl Might Think to Join the Army

1. 2nd Lieutenant Kate Butler in Series 2, Episode 1 (*It's a Man's Life)* of ITV's *Soldier Soldier* looking at the Black Mountains and telling the men, 'I know this climb from Duke of Edinburgh Award. I can get us out safely.'
2. ~~To please parents? To bewilder parents?~~
3. On the off-chance someone might ask her to tell them about herself.
4. To convince her mum she doesn't want to be a journalist (just think how that would have turned out).
5. The powder blue-berets on TV, cheeks snow-stung, eyes fixed, nougat-sweet children smiling around.
6. The sheer exoticism of the Balkans.
7. Robin Cook saying things like *Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension* and *let's put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy.* Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?
8. Netball
9. ~~Hockey~~
10. Travel, travel, travel.
11. Probably something to do with boys: beat them? join them?
12. A likelihood of having to fight that sat somewhere between *not ever* and *unlikely, but likely enough to take yourself quite seriously for a while.*

It really was that simple then.

Scribe

Sing the Bible-highs of Deborah,
whisper thrills of Jael, Judith and their hot sacks of heads.

Gallop on bronze, launch ships for Boudicca,
raze cities, build gibbets – defend all your home comforts.

Brush dewy complexions on Saxons,
twist borders like hair braids to make gain for Æthelflæd.

Count Pavlichenko's three hundredth notch,
her dialled sights set at sniper-far, her braced thighs tucked shut.

Rally hard to Dhat al Himma's flag,
bring firm evidence of your landscape and state your aims.

Money and souls to Flora Sandes,
let a Yorkshire Lass give you clout against all those doubts.

Storyteller

This was the start of being more alone
than ever before. Future-girl and the less-
than-lucky one start to behave like rubber ducks
sharing an eddy, a refuge from the rapids
drawing in and repelling each other -
irritation, closeness, spite, reconciliation,
bumping together, spinning apart, with watery
ease. Together, apart, together, apart.
The way 6th Form College girls often are. SE 5835748533

Future-girl left her friend,
though it might
have been the other way round.
That clever girl
with less future went on
to prove everyone wrong
fighting it all for longer than planned.
Bitchdaughter warrior. Remember her.
Remember her harder than Future-girl did

as she went off with a fist
full of recruitment leaflets showing
smiling young ladies
in skirt-suits with gin-and-tonic
in small wine glasses
peering through their moussed ‘90s fringes, crawling
below rust-free barbed wire in boiler suits,
doing work to maintain their femininity because
they were told to by the important man
at their Regimental interview.
She was a future-woman
and as it turned out,

she was going to have to listen
to quite a few big men talk over the next decade
while the Bitchdaughter in her slept
like a limpid, unsummoned dragon.

Sister

Father Christmas famously said
Battles are ugly when women fight.
He gets around a bit and I wonder if
he's ever known a battle that wasn't ugly
because that's something I would like to see
wrapped in dewberry ribbons and left
under my tree.

To give Father Christmas some credit
(we must continue to hedge our bets
with this member of the patriarchy) I think
he's saying women create a different *ugly.*
Sweat tracking through a face mask
of mud and sand and the chill-blained
patch on an index finger,
all calloused from cocking and stripping
a rifle are not beautiful in either sex.

(we could have mentioned hacked-off
limbs or blackened scars instead -
just as ugly in either gender -
but too unsettling for dear
Father Christmas to sit right here, just now).

I don't want him to think me a clever cow,
I'll bow to his opinion with a weather-eye
on my future stockings
wrap up a few thoughts
about what he might be trying to say
and pop them in the bran-tub,
for the school Christmas fête:

Ugly are the soldiers' breasts pushed down arm-pits
by double-bra trickery and rigid armour

ugly the mastitic struggle to feed children
in years to come with milk glands flattened to lichen

ugly is the sight and aim of a riflewoman whose helmet
is forced over her eyes by her hair-bun

ugly too are the hair-style solutions to this:
the greased plait, the white-girl cornrows, the premature crop

ugly is the weird female-pattern baldness
from hot-headed beret-wearing and fringe scraping habits

ugly the undermined pelvis, its jigsaw precision
an altered obstacle lying in wait against future exits

ugly then the diastasis recovery and urogynaecology
constraints on endurance running.

Father Christmas has never been so busy,
when all he wanted to say was in support
of male small-team cohesion facing dismantlement
as women clamber into submarines looking
for places to plug in their hair straighteners
and Airwicks; sweeping aside the bulwarks and bastions
of those who say a tank is no place
to change your tampax.

Ugly is the shame a man would feel leaving
a woman injured on the battlefield, but

Santa, it goes both ways.
Aren’t you the one who made us
universal guardians, wrapping up and
sending down toy prams and pet rabbits?

Storyteller

Future-girl took a train
to Wiltshire, back in the day ST 86745 50379
when she felt she ought to get
some credit just for that. It's a long way
past London and to then turn right
with nothing to do but gaze at
crops in flat fields peeling away.

The entrance tests lasted for three days
touching her toes in a C&A bra,
knickers, essays, rope bridges,
rolling barrels down a plank,
climbing a rope in green overalls
and the blurted roll call of Serbian war-lords
memorised from a middle page article.

But for her, these weren't tests. Tests
took place on chairs in sports halls, *auf Deutsch*
or probing her rote-trench of *Measure for Measure*.
This scramble of netball-legs round
a running tack, this earnest YA debate,
these were not the sorts of thing
Future-girl got wrong.

Sister

She was so certain of the rightness of her ambition; so unguarded and lacking in carapace. She imprinted her optimism on everyone around her, self-absorbed like a toddler who has not yet realised that the ends of his fingers mark the limits of his ability to control the world around him. She assumed a future of being met by smiling faces like those of her contented piano teacher or her delighted form tutor. Praise, mentorship, rightness, rightness, rightness and ease. She told her plans to an old lady from church who scolded her for choosing the *Imperialistic* and the *Dangerous*. She told her beloved veteran godfather who scoffed at the plan to join an organisation she could just marry into instead. She told a young soldier she served in the pub who leaned over the bar to murmur blankly that women in the Army were all lesbians or slags, that she should only join if she wanted an education *at both ends*. Each of those moments were a malicious slap. Foolish, selfish, naïve, adolescent. Slap. Slap. Slap. Slap… I add my own slap to that.

Storyteller

She passed the tests because she gathered
success as readily as a child scoops
leaf-gold at autumn time. Without
the slightest bit of surprise or relief
she set her course through ancient
university and on to archetype,
archlord, archprivilege, archcolony, archcitadel
graceful, servile, established, distinguished, excellent
ark of tradition and values and defence-diplomacy,
honour-binding, wellspring of code and principle
instructor of kings and generals.
Royal Military College, Sandhurst. SU 85781 60826

Many years later, under the provisions of the Data Protection Act, 1998, Future-girl made a subject-access-request to discover what they thought about her back in Wiltshire. Although she was a full inhabitant of her future by then and went by a different rank and name, she was alarmed to read that the Wiltshire men had taken account of her *disadvantages*, her lack of *access to top schooling* and praised her tenacity and university placing despite *a Comprehensive education which she did not have in common with other applicants*. A shame-variant found its bubbling outlet somewhere deep in her ego. A puffing, popping, hissing sense that she had always been no better than she ought, and every tiny peeping example came sliding into focus. She had to blink and blink hard to remind herself that she had never needed shame. Surely.

Storyteller vs. Sister

There was something dealt to cadets,
to those stripling women,
a muttering expectation
part of the appeal
we will break down your character and rebuild
you from the bottom up

rebuild how? rebuild to an image?
rebuild why and with what?
Are these words being echoed
at teacher training college, law school
on the graduate scheme at Ernst and Young?
How do you know when you have reached a bottom?
What happens to the remnants when you break down
a Bitchdaughter?
You build
an Army.
An Army of hearts
of hopes
of head-girls with
cheekbones of pearl-apple
of daughters of the North

of women with fathers who might have preferred
to watch sons, short-haired, new suit
carry an ironing board and three shirts,
double-cuff (no garish colours)
up the Old College steps
in their stead.

And as she arranged her listed items on the open shelves,
in precise locations according to a different list:

Scrapbook

underwear ironed into squares,
socks folded into smiles,
boot polish (black), swimsuit (black),
alarm clock, bible and court shoes (black)
notebook, fountain pen, handbag, (leather, small) (black, black, black)
she relocated herself in this future and settled
into number, rank, name.

Scribe

Names are powerful and nothing
but a cardigan or a scarf
to comfort, warm and add colour.
Names are numbers and hypocorisms,
an alpha list, starting
at the top hitting the bottom
and finding your way back again.
Surnames are not our own
they get taken and barrelled. Nick a name
pick a nickname.
Add a rank or a title
align to a role, be a hero. You can be shocked
by the sound of your name being shouted, or soothed
when it appears in the same place
every day at roll call.
Sound your name. Protagonate,
become, inhabit. A scarf which warmed you once
will drain you of colour as you age. A name
is not what they call you, it’s what you answer to.

Storyteller

Her rank was cadet, Officer Cadet -
she relished the formality of it.
The plosives in her surname could shock,
sound spiteful or looming. It was startling.
Those boarding school girls
were much happier
with last names - some queer
kind of higher-born affection.
It was seemlier to be anonymous.
If a colour-sergeant addressed her as *Miss* it would
be spiked with an aftertaste of mockery
or was it conspiracy? It was hard to tell.
Nicknames were scientifically balanced
to tempt offence,
the shortest woman became *the fridge magnet*
the gangliest man was *stud*. Saudi princes
were summoned with an extra hiss
on the esses of *Mississster.*
No one was ever offended.

Scribe

Female bodies are transformed
Deltoids surface to heave
determined chins to a bar
abdominals peek out and withdraw
from meal to manoeuvre
like a nest of scurrisome bunnies,
fleetness happily arrives at winged feet.
Those arms primed to hold
eight-point-four-pounds
by every Tiny-Tears and baby cousin
relax into the mould of barrel and butt.
It's a pleasing transformation
to eye, to ease, to heart rates
to the uniformity of stockinged shins
advancing in slow time,
eyes…*right*
it's an elastic transformation
water will find its level,
form will fill the space around it.

Sculpture of the flesh is a flux
roughed-out by biology or joy
smoothed and carved by effort
but the cast of thought and values
ripens under a patina of hardening plaques,
viciously indentured Verdigris
layered and spun through like seaside rock.

Storyteller

In Old College, a recess -
a nestling alcove beyond view
(see also: *Winston Smith*). In it, a chair
and from there she would shield
herself from any preening, barking
orders and unnecessary join-innery
an extra layer of polish here among
the sidewards glances of big children
trying to be spotted by the teacher.
She would close her eyes, her dry
dry eyes and think of free streets
and long sleeps and wondered if the tears
she saw in others would come. They didn't,
there was gun-metal in her now. The hardening
gripped and ground out homesickness.
The pulsed ridges of her strong stomach,
the narrow smile of those dry eyes
were how she became the man
she thought she could be. One
that rested into his rifle
as if it grew from his own rib,
who loped over babies-heads in Wales
and smoothly coaxed the nipples
of the high-frequency radio into
a coded mutter. That was a soldier
to look at and become then,
upon swellings of esteem, to frequently
climb beneath and smooth up into.

The recess was breached, of course.
As she cupped her glassy, gothic Minster
in its tiny dome, the Bitchdaughter view
cold and smooth in her hands, when Colour- Sergeant
yells at the door *Get up out of that chair.*

Sister

Who can you say it to? The feeling
that this is all for men,
huh? That this life is for the ease
of the marksman, servicemen, guardsmen, guys,
signalmen, cavalrymen, craftsmen, chaps
in left-button flies eating four-man ration packs
Clansman manpacks, Bowman trials, ten-man
rooms and two-man lifts

tinker, tomboy, soldier, bike
rich man, crap-hat, brew-bitch, dyke

You should be able to tell a sister
anything at all, but there's a treachery
and you might simply be wrong. Wrong here
wrong in idea. It happens.
The sisterhood is a rip-tide
with only a couple of ways to survive
(and swimming hard is not one of them).
There's no speaking it
not now or then. Enjoy the view
touch it sometimes, too. Swift
and Bold or *Ubique*, be sure to say
this is what you always wanted to do.

Storyteller

The Colour-Sergeant had an imagination
when it came to standards.
Extra nightly parades to show -
cum removed from skirt, show
bronzer removed from face, show
legs tanned and shaved, show
eyes not rolling like a spoilt princess
but they loved him, ran fast for him,
crawled through wet sand, over
barbed wire and forty-foot obstacles
for him.
Colour inspected their rooms, the tightness
of sheets and the depth of shine
on their toe caps.
He told her to put her contraceptive pills
away in a drawer. Unmilitary mess
which went forgotten for days.
Arms swung higher, chins lifted
he loved them back.
You can put your pills out on the shelf again
he said. *My wife says it's unfair,*
I shouldn't have done that.
It was all four types of love at once.

Scrapbook

Hello Petal!

I'm sure you have taken the Army by the horns already. If it has any.

How is it? Don't answer that…

Joke de jour…

What are the blokes like?

Are you allergic to ironing yet?

We wonder about you every day.

It was lovely to spend a low-key evening with you,

He's off to Hong Kong.

No falling down stairs or arguing,

I'm off to Paris.

(Well only in the taxi and that doesn't count).

He's teaching himself guitar.

I played well, got one of the opposition sent off

(which is like scoring a goal).

He is, as ever, insane.

Sorry I don't have any exciting news, I haven't got my exciting pants on.

I'm broke.

I stayed awake.

We are back together, you'll have to tell me your opinion

I'll have to tell you more details.

I'm teaching Year 7.

I'm playing for the U21s against Wakefield.

I have an infection in my eyeball.

He's a lot less intense.

His Dad has bought an MG, so….

Now that I have overlaboured a very dull piece of information…

I feel like a big hairy pint. What was it Marge Atwood said?

I gave him your address, you can expect a letter of sorts, yay!

This heart was like a TARDIS.

What's that steering wheel doing down your trousers?

I've got our famous photo up in my kitchen.

I went and lost the key in a fight.

I've been in a bit of tizzy.

Isn't it tough to have the world you knew turned upside down all of a sudden.

All of a sudden…

I know D, A and E and I'm practising my changes.

Keep up the good work,

You'll be tops,

Love and thought,

Everyone is very proud of you,

Love and thought,

I've run out of room,

There you go, three pages of nothing

Bye for now. What, NOW?! Yes, NOW!

Love and thought,

Grit your teeth

Nolite te bastardes carborundum

Love and thought,

If you're allowed radios in your room,

listen out for the Beautiful South's new song.

Love and thought,

Love and all my thought.

Dearest friend, love and thought always.

Scribe

Near the stillness of soldiers and in their pausing,
on a sentry's watch, as silverlight closes

nature patrols and fine tunes her edges
dances with optics and gives shrewd flashes

of widened eyeball, white bobtail high-green
and absent black into a night-sight lens.

CONTRAZOOM: over a resting, riflewoman's hand,
fractionally lifted by a mole's badly-aimed nose

SPLIT SCREEN SHOT: a doe, unhunted, undisturbed and curious; an owl's
swoop softer than a blink; a fox and cubs as close as a cup of coffee…

a soldier stops patrolling to pull a fraught lamb from between the shuddering, birthing legs of a mountain ewe, pours tepid water from a black canister over the beast's clogged openings and hunches over a drystone for an hour until the ewe bleats her willingness to mother, word gets around, the creatures of the land mark a sibling, see weapons not aimed at them, sense a guardian, see an ally of the pack and promise to send news of hollows and burrows and soft, old patient stones, they will watch them hurt and howl but will not make things worse; they will watch the struggle and hunger but are nature-neutral in their dumb lack of intervention.

So, Tell Us What Happened in Canada

Storyteller

It's summer of 2001 and there's harmony
on the Alberta prairie. It's symmetrical. 50° 16′ 23.99″ N, 111° 10′ 30″ W
Doctrinal. Mechanically smoothed violence.
Each knows what to expect, tanks point
in predictable directions.
The rhythm,
the tempo of battle ignores
the irritant staccato of logistics.
The orchestra plays on.

The rounds, the grenades, the main armaments
are blank. The sky and the sanded ground is blank.
There is time to wonder about fossils
below tank tracks. To plan the road trip through BC,
Banff and up to Jasper – to drink from jam-jars,
to stare at stars of such cushioned depth
that they begin to crowd down and fill mosquito nets,
sleeping bags and softly chattering mess tents.

After two months she has settled in
to the mock struggle against Redland, the championing
of Orangeland. Time confettied into recce,
plan, orders, sleep-cycle, drive, hide,
resupply, sleep-cycle, recce, orders, two sleep-cycles, eggs,
brew-up, brew-up again. Smoke, recce, fight, hide, hot-pot,
sleep-cycle, smoke, resupply. There is time.

There is a time
when it's hard to be heard.
Her authority newly peeled,

a lieutenant now; scant rank.
But nightly it settles on her; the air
of command, having recced a dip in the ground
channelling trucks, handballing ammo boxes,
setting out extra light sticks, (because
no one wants to be caught going the wrong way at night)
and it works.
Calculating a measure of things, a disbursement

of everything they caravanned.
A non-digital reboot of tiny, hand-drawn catalogues.
Ammo expenditure as notebook entry, fuel usage
as cross hatching, rations as dots, resupply
as pencil marks, NATO Stock Numbers
as shorthand, notebook entry as historical record.
Supplies and their tiny thingness as life and death
except not here in Alberta, where all is a rehearsal

for a war which no one plans to jump-start.
Manoeuvres as Cold-War hangover.

Thirty-six hours after the world felt a crash
the news reached the inner prairie:
the news that the hemisphere had changed.

So, Tell Us What Happened in Canada

Sister

On Monday night there had been a storm so strange
and baffling they couldn't find a way to watch it together.

She had stared at the wild thorny sky and wondered
where to put such temper amongst all that was balanced.

It could not be folded and brought into her tent,
nor siphoned into a jerrycan or coded and delivered by VHF

nor taken ten miles back to the yellow gleam of the cool, clean camp.
Yet the storm made its demands.

It was the last night of mosquitos,
which took her arms and ankles each evening

as if in a pact straight from Kerouac,
and all that weathering becoming her and all that.

Late on Wednesday, her sergeant returned from a resupply,
grabbing armfuls of Sprite, beef jerky

a hot shower, week-old copies of News of the World - and this:
The World Trade Centre was destroyed yesterday.

No pictures, no footage, no 4G facts. No technology to dip into.
They stared into the sky where the storm had ruptured.

I'm telling you now, that was the time to decide, to nod
at the unushered paradigm, to make moves to acclimatise.

So, Tell Us What Happened in Canada

Scrapbook

11 Jun – 74kg - ☹	
18 Jun – prairie	
25 Jun – 73kg – ☺	*Lost in a Good Book* – Jasper Fforde
02 Jul – prairie	*On the Road* – Jack Kerouac
09 Jul – prairie	*Travelling Hornplayer* – Barbara
16 Jul – prairie	Trapido
23 Jul – 71kg - ☺ ☺	*The Blind Assassin* – Margaret Atwood
30 Jul – R&R – 72kg ☹	*Birds of Prey* – Wilbur Smith
6 – 27 Aug – prairie	*Monsoon* – Wilbur Smith
3 Sep – 70.5kg ☺	
10 Sep – prairie	
17 Sep prairie	*White Ladder* – David Gray
8 Oct – Home – 70kg ☺	

Not much to report here…

is it hot? or snowy? I'm confused.

I hope you don't get scurvy. Or do I mean rickets?

bring me some maple syrup. And a bear.

Your fella has been talking to Dad – I had to laugh.

It's probably not something your supposed to warn your girlfriend about…[*sic*]

Will you go to America too?

Love and thought you lucky adventurer!

…but I don't want you running off with an infanteer.

Are there any Mooses/Meese?

So, let's just say girlfriend – for now…tee hee.

Love and thought.

So, Tell Us What Happened in Canada

Scribe

It is the habit of a fresh protagonist
to arrive under a cloud.

To say *under a cloud*
is not to arrive -

under a cloud here
means untrusted; we are literal.

These clouds are the crossfade
that *pause* where all is sure

was it a breath taken, held or released?
Focus on the horizon to see what is next

galloping warrior women, disguised as men
black tresses cascading like bunches of grapes,

a tribe in rescue, a bride
waving her veil with slogans stitched.

The clouds change the tune,
gun the gears. The clouds are saluted. But now

under a cloud arrived a cloud and this cloud
became a bellow for the clouds that followed
a different kind of cloud. One which will smother
storytelling, science and all history. Amen.

A Note on Naming Conventions

Storyteller

Are we satisfied name-wise?
A scarf, now a yoke. A rank, now a slur.
Doris, sweetheart, ma'am, young lady.
What do we know?
We know what is behind her as Future-Girl,
and what she has now between her ears,
on her epaulettes
and between her legs.
We listen for the Bitchdaughters
in their hibernation.
Mrs, Captain, dearly beloved
We are gathered here today to keep track
of these naming agents.
As one climbs ascendant,
she is decoded by a retrograde moon.
The stars might never or yet always align.

They shall not fall from the sky,
nor shall the years deny
all that the human-resources department
holds concreted under the Clyde.

So, are we beyond the minefield?
Let's name her 'soldier' and be grateful
that you (with a drowsy thumb,
and a curious nibble of your tongue)
did not chance on some other page
and (reading 'soldier')
thought it a *him*.

Scribe

When women with fight in their fingertips,
choose men from the line
of battle it is a source of *fitna*
and disorder
as smart as any enemy tactic.

Hair as a hypnotist's time piece, bra strap
as tender lasso. Two-thirds ratio
as irresistible template. Hard-sucked
cigarette as auxiliary cock, finger
tracing droplets on Coke can
as unending consent.

Sister

She chose the first man to step forward
not noticing when he refused
to step back (the wartime convention
of succumbing to marriage only after defeat
in battle being waived in this instance).

It all took place with fairy tale exactitude
and all the while with something pulling
at the very edge of her vision, fluid
as if a banner were being hauled
across a dark canal on fishing wire.
A magpie? A black cat?
A falcon *empiént* smooching the eye socket
of a spatch-cocked black cat on a field of pink poppies, perhaps.

Storyteller

During pre-deployment training in Kent TR 03727 20259
dreams became a super-highway. Dreams which
featured fingers, multiplied and gestured -
forever too many items to count,
there was a constant ticking off and palms
being pressed to craft a path home.

Dreams in which pebbles were marvels
below her prone body. Lifting her firing position
in softening ripples, and sucking her tired legs
like a distraught toddler begging for more time.

Gunshot was constant. If it ceased,
there could be no sleep. If it ceased,
it was for
    samphire-fed sheep or a jolly skiff
    drifting into the danger zone. A cry
    for safety catches! then a silent film
    in the heads of firers where it all
    goes wrong for the want of a still finger.
or once even this:

the littoral like a meniscus, a trembling
overflow, a tense pause
harbouring secret, soggy margins
where unmooring spells are muttered. Charging
up from this globe spikes is a blind and white
abandoned lighthouse. Used for target
indication – *take aim, target, two knuckles right of lighthouse*.
It was never lit and its silhouette against the gloaming
seascape was a vacuum of light,
perhaps the very sump that drained photons from the sky.

Halfway through a four-hundred metre, machine gun,
moving target practice, an old lady arrives at the hut.
She walks at that February day
as if amused by the diluted winter.
She wants, please, to be taken to the cottage
crabbed against the lighthouse wall.
Her childhood home. Requisitioned
by the Ministry of War in 1937.
Never returning until now.

She scrapes the door of government-green gloss
which flake away to a layer of saltish-blue,
the type that makes a lovely stripe, and points
to a patch, cupped in sun,
where her raspberry shrub has grown wild.

Sister

There were cameos in her dreams. They traipsed
into view while Borrowers in bow ties
and top hats cranked steam-punk systems
of morphing scenery. Desert, market, mountain, lake.
The language they spoke; unprintable, unrepeatable

hummed and murmured through headphones –
Makh te dzai, makh te dzai.
salaa daarayn?
Taase wabo te artya larai?

chanted like rows of Victorian orphans –
yak yak nafar,
Chup sai.

memory games, sing songs, tic tac toe
Wishtalay, swadzedalay, wishtalay, sar.

*walk forward, walk forward**
*do you have weapons?***
*do you need water?**
*one at a time**, be quiet**
*shot, burnt, shot, head**

Dari/Pashto*

Lost Things: Afghanistan (i-viii)

Verbatim from the It'sUpHereSomewhereScrapbook

(i) A Selection of Husbands

It doesn't happen straight away,
but female soldiers soon realise
of all the bad things
that could happen at war
losing a husband (disloyalty, not death)
is one of the better-bad-things
especially if the husband
is himself a Bad Thing.

Back home, there was a guy in Glasgow
gone all Guinevere,
a dick in Dundee doing a Delilah,
and more than one baby-face
Helen of Troy in trousers letting down
his fellow-man and his woman-at-war.

There will be karma for this
cuckolding cock-holding
muck-hiding fuck-prizing
when the music stops,
a soldier knows her way ahead
hides the Grail deep in Excel
& squats to piss on clues
to the path she has taken.

She heeds:

- *look at you*, *slim*

tanned, a sexy version
of a thousand-yard stare

peeking through glittering
tear-bedizened lashes.
That shelf you're sitting on
won't be gathering much dust,
you'll be lifted off and on
more often than a hot-
sale dolly in hot-sale season.

She could stay there,
on the high shelf. Enjoying
the view. That fabulous assortment,
her hardened stare all the better
to see them with.

She obeys:
Dangle your x-rated ankle, swinging
shins, little-girl style. Build up
a mockery of defences;
easily scaled, obliging vines -
ladders where you should plant thorns.
Then whistle sweet and clear,
whistle for the wolves. Slide down,
join the pack. Don't look back –
it's no loss at all.

(ii) The Taste for Meat

There were seventy-six female soldiers at the start of this longitudinal study. All were within a healthy BMI range... [*On deployment many of the men around her are consuming protein supplements in an attempt to build lean muscle mass- they begin to fill corners and folds and pockets of air'*]. Volunteers were not pregnant and had not recently exercised. Samples of blood were collected from each… [*the menstruation-objection is the limpest, least scientific objection the patriarchy had to offer in the argument against women on the front line. Most of these bitches have been finding ways to counteract the moon since they were twelve, carrying its weight low like a sandbag for days and miles*]. Inadequate iron (Fe) intake and diminished Fe status have been reported previously in female military personnel and cross-sectional studies indicate that Fe status declines in female soldiers during basic training... [*She's carried a rope of beads in her pocket to measure distance since her Duke of Edinburgh Award. She fingers it madly like a Rosary and in the muddle they become lost with the hardslate tombs of the Black Mountains leaning over them*]. Elsewhere, they are saying that excessive consumption of caffeinated drinks can affect iron absorption... [*She writes home that she is drinking four cans of Diet Coke a day, for wakefulness, for boredom, for weight loss – she can feel her blood fizzing, she thinks about liquid transported by osmosis and transfusions*]. The period immediately after basic training is likely to include arduous Special-to-Arm training and deployment for which optimal physical and immunological underpinning is required... [*eating meat becomes less optional on deployment but she stops at tuna for now: belt-feeds Berocca*]. Data shows that approximately 1.6% of servicewomen over 30 have fertility problems... [*she takes the pill, pack after pack with no break and lies about her drinking*]. However, women are at higher risk of Muscular Skeletal Injury (MSkI) compared to men due to their physiology and this is exacerbated in more physically arduous roles... [*she has never been fitter, she rubs her hand over her neck muscles and it's like touching someone else's shoulders. She feels like a dazzling sculpture that she can't see and can't make sense of*]. The challenges of the future recruiting and operating environment will require Defence to draw upon all available talent much of which is female... [*These bodies ARE the frontline*].

(iii) The Entire Green Spectrum

This is what is missing:
sage, apple
acid, pea
lime,
emerald green

barely a pixel,
the stutter of an old-school start up screen
or the optimism of pansies planted
in ballistic protection walls
fade to ochre.

Mowing the lawn is what they call the counter-insurgency
up in the Green Zone. The Green Zone
is where the fighting is fertile, fully
nourished, stripped of freshness,
with deep greedy roots and so much food.

Green rests beyond them now. Hibernating,
holding breath before sending hell-bent
iris shoots to rise like tiny Excaliburs
from beds back home, where green can return.

(iv) Insomnia

The heartbeat of the thrice-nightly Chinook
a lullaby *-not you tonight-*

lulla- lulla - not yours tonight,
nevertheless, and notwithstanding.

Prince and Princess fled over molten
dunes flung down by a frantic Sandman,

the rotor blades a genie's cough
through talcum air. A pulse,

the tempo of a mum's palm
rubbing a child's grazed knee.

The elsewhere-stitching and transfusing
crafted an eiderdown

from canvas, spreading hair around
her softened face in a satin sea.

Sleep danced and tightened, hard and horse-like,
a deep, thumping, velvet surrender.

(v) The Girl with Less Future from Bitchdaughter Tower

Death does not come from outside, it priests
all life, sucking and spitting like a tide.
Death lay in her lungs as they laughed. Nested,
settled as a friend during stays on the children's ward.
Added thoughts to her essays and sent breath
to her mimicry of Vic and Bob. Rode bikes down Bunny Hill
and ran headlong, hands-held from bullies. Sat in libraries
with sad friends and was patient.

Death saw those who slid into nightclubs and those left standing
at the door.
Skinny young hips, pale pink lips,
death saw.

Death went shopping in Etam and Woolies,
Shoplifted Garfield pens in Fenwicks and smoked Regal
by perimeter fences. Skipped games. Rubbed acne
with Japanese Washing Grains.

**

Death flies to and fro - a heavy-bellied Hercules.
It is binary, brought to a printer, it is news walked to a door.
The soldier knew all about sending death home, so
was surprised to see it arrive that way-
in one of her mum's National Trust notelets.

death be with you in your tearoom waitressing, in your watching
of Red Dwarf on scratchy VHS, in your cidery sweetness
and in your listening to the Wonderstuff.
They were friends from Bitchdaughter Tower and now she was dead.

Death had perched with the gargoyles,
watching those girls and knew
as much as they knew
about the shadows inside the girl-with-less -future.

Still. Death held the post until after the funeral
when finally came the description of mossy churchyard danced-around by lilac, made-over with crocuses, daffodils and perfect buds in their thousands.

A friend lost twice over. *Let us not fear, then.*

After Jaan Kaplinski

(vi) 19 Pounds of Flesh

What tantalising vanity persuaded them to take electronic scales
to their tented city? To measure the steady conversion
of fifteen-point-nine-six pounds of body fat to carbon dioxide
and a further three-point-zero-four pounds to water?

A Sunday morning tent ritual:
twenty minutes extra in bed, then a gathering,
(loud enough to irritate the night-shift nurses
who can't shut the fuck up at three a.m.),
a weigh-in and a renewed renuniciation
of Haribo beneath the strings of fairy-lights;
the muscling sun already draping mirages
over the air-con generators outside.

Faced with unfaithful futures
and homecomings and the soon-to-be
spending of seven months' wages on one big trip to Cuba,
and acknowledging the fresh aversion to burgers,
the dead drought of alcohol, slimming down
was the loss which gave back, but

it was a strange hot-shame in a place
where so much effort was spent
in keeping them whole.

(vii) A Pair of Louboutin's and a Dress of Midnight Silk

My dearest friend, I cannot be your Bridesmaid,
I'm needed overseas
I'm afraid.

(viii) Any Romantic Tendency

There were pillow tanks filled with aviation fuel,
like huge noxious panacotta,
or a hot, black bouncy castle.
She longed to spread out on it,
fill lungs with the fondant air
and float on fumes.

She read *Anna Karenina* late into the night,
resting against the steel rail of her camp-cot,
arriving for work with cheeks streaked
for a dead horse before tucking
the pages deep in the book-swap box
by the women's shower block.

Was it the lack of seaside or the fawn maps
of featureless plateau? The sandstorms bringing
none of the forecasted saviours to a bleak
and birdless sky? A crescent moon, lying
back flat, in the sad knowledge that no one
was gazing up, four-thousand miles east, thinking
of her. Was it the lack of wine? Or the thought
of what to do with those new hard thighs?

War on a desert steppe, lapped by strange
tongues and low, lush valleys; whirling
pirouettes through savage rhymes of history

somehow not quite as romantic
as you might expect.

Scribe

Does a soldier ever end?
Are those boots still on
and the trigger finger curled
right to the very last breath?

Or do they switch fire,
retrain their sights,
go and open gyms,
artisan coffee bars
run hedge funds and drop albums?

Can they write poetry
and experimental novels?
Will they successfully navigate
the loaded expectation
of more severe exit strategies,
move beyond the imagery
layered and folded as tightly
as an origami flag,
the *pull-back-pin-ball-go!*
of ricochet sympathy,
suspicion, holy indifference.

Bounce back up pop-up pirate.
Spawn as Alex, survive like Steve.
Find a story in every pixel, a memo
to every name.

Storyteller

Her name was Malala and they thought she was six,
Malala thought *am I dying*?
and the soldier?
Well, the soldier thought here was a wee angel
on broken wing, crying and trapped
in a web of clinical pathways and supply routes.

Years later: *that name!* could it possibly be?
She peered hard at the TV to see
if the eyes were those same eyes of soft trust,
eyes that had followed an Army nurse
round the hospital tent for days
before finding the courage to say *salaam,*
manana.

With a tick of shame the soldier learned
this was just an Emily or a Jane,
that she'd been in Helmand all that time
without reaching the sensibility to name
the currency of women; their fashions and ways.
There was more than one Malala between
those two wild valleys.
They thronged,
they were legion.

Malala in their hospital was just one.
The chance of striking a Malala
with a truck in the street was high,
there was a density; a critical mass.
Of *course* they took her in.

So many discussions took place around her bed.

Her chance of recovery, of marriage,
of being shunned; the Elders' horror
that her small brown chest,
had been bared, the flesh handled and marked
with a surgeon's Sharpie. The shaken heads.
The sad acceptance, the western insistence
that cultural norms be sacred while elsewhere
    flechette scattered terrazzo patterns in sunlight.
(Decisions had to be made where culture lay
her boundary, (and fear for Malala lay outside)).

Malala made a mother of that furious nurse
and the soldier would visit. Chuckling one minute
at some unrinsed surgical detail of an enemy penis
    and then at the delight Malala took
    in having her hair rubbed to a foam
    with Herbal Essences Grapefruit and Mint
    under a popping hot shower.

They were not to give her books or toys or jeans.
No tops from H&M saying 'Princess in Disguise'.
all the English she learned, she would need to forget,
to remain unmarked and to smooth her path home.

The soldier's Mum was a knitter. Avid.
Prodigious. A huge crate of her craft
arrived in the hope the soldier would deliver
colourful teddies and warmth to the war
    (those at home told themselves what they wanted to hear
    about why their kind, clever girls were needed there).

The nurse and the soldier showed Malala the glut
and her toffee eyes glittered with double-knit hues,
her unbound arm reached out and picked hot

pink, baby pink, a lace trimmed blanket.
They could have come from any-old Oxfam bundle,
        they reasoned.

Malala
was going home the next day.
        Bones had fused; skin's weft woven
and they would leave
        their kindly-wrought trace with her
                after all.

Malala means *grief-stricken*.
There are centuries of reasons to give this name
to girls across many mutable valleys
a bold warrior poet inspires them
                in their dozens now:
                Young love! If you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand,
                By God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame!

A woman
who summoned
the words in her mouth
turned marriage veil to banner,
tired man to avenger.
So is she remembered,
shepherd daughter, breaker of British lines
Malala of Maiwand.

In England, the soldier's mum handed round
a photo at the quilter's circle
of her dusty daughter crouched beside
a squinting, dark-eyed child
clutching a bouquet of knitted favours
and smiling.

The soldier growled at her mum,

it's a bit sensitive, you really shouldn't have

but regretted the tumble of her mum's pride,

the shame of her dampened delight.

Really, it would have been fine – no one would mind.

So, please do share

with poets, quilters and knitters alike.

Scribe

	Hastati were the poorest, youngest and least experienced soldiers in the Roman maniple. Quincunx- tight. Clustered like ova in a uterus or penguins on the ice, one or two darting away then -	
with everyone seeking to attrite enfilade fire from a defilade position the geometry is a wild tapestry, the firing arcs a weaving as fierce as Bayeaux.	the threaded fascia particularly of feet, the currency of a soldier more even than hands, the hummocking pulse of those injuries bunions, blisters bulging from their webbing	folding in like paper pinwheels the corners sharp from hardened thumbs pegged out like crosses taut as guy-ropes, pink as French knots free as macramé
	the five on dice defiled by divisions of twelve, just less than equal parts an embrace or a prison a thin blood-red line strength found in depth *Oh,* Army of hearts.	

Storyteller

The first kick
was sonic
a measured breath,
a quickening
but unhurried salute.
Perfect crescendo
on a key change
as the *Hills of Argyll*
broke pace
and the snares rolled.

Very common thoughts
filled her quickly
a friendly menace
to never be alone again
yet for a few breaths
to be entirely alone
with the knowledge
with the micro-fact
and with an orchestra
of futures.

Scribe

They wrote this then in eyeblack. Translated now
into L'Oréal Infallible Gel Crayon in Browny Crush

still, no clarity is lost through tear drops
though they endure labour and respirator testing facilities,

crawl from birthing pool to side-saddle to cockpit
to UAV console and back to bed.

Dhat al Himma had no time to allow her son
to explore through play and find his creativity,

he would have made a wonderful badminton player;
had a splendid line in patisserie, but for the Byzantines.

Fear of the alternatives wipes out fear for the offspring.
Grace O'Malley slipping on her afterbirth

to lunge across the deck and pirate back at the pirates
forgetting her breathing and leaking colostrum in the process.

Hiding and gentle exile was an option for the fancied heir.
Zenobia was a proud mother. Her little boy

lined up rows of peaches and plums and pretended
to address them like an Emperor. She encouraged him

to practise drawing his face on paper plates,
as if minting a coin.

Women can do nothing to shield
their sons on a transparent battlefield

everything lying naked under satellites
with pop-up values under scrolls and key strokes.

Yekaterina built schools so her boy would have a team,
vaccinated them all so that the team would stay near.

Layers of woven hope and surety. Of earnest, physical
ferocity. And power. Such power.

Now comes the choice: to take every spinning wheel
to destruction (deranged, manic

queen of stick-free, gun-free playrooms)
or open up the armoury to learn

about what the sharp end can do,
what a cold end feels like, and imagine

how they might learn to spin wool without
ever placing their thumb at the tip.

Scrapbook

Notes from a museum trip.

There is more here to use in defence than use in attack.

There is more to defend than to attack, so are shields…

A locket two times bigger than the bullet.
A wooden case holding superstitious grapeshot
…are shields built to repel new weapons, or are new weapons created to dent new shields?

Bullets have been stopped by lockets, Oxo tins and Bibles.

Without rifles, we'd have no dentists.

Death pennies are huge and too heavy to hang on stud walls.

Snipers discarded items that indicated their sniper status to avoid execution.
Marksmen badges and telescopic sights.

Female agents needed to pass as civilians.

Anything for a clean death.

'Field Notes' – 48 page memo book, £5.99 for a pack of three. National Army Museum, Chelsea.

Shaping the Ground - Principes

Scribe

Armour
becomes you. It fits.
You should welcome the gaps
where the airflow is most turbulent,
and where the trace nutrients can trickle through.
We have not evolved to grow an exoskeleton. But we will.
And then every sharp and kinetic thing will need to be redesigned,
maiming and mortal injury will find a fresh vector.

For now,
shrug it on. Soft as sable,
regimented as a Mexican wave.
Chainmail can be as freeing as downward dog
everything becomes heavier with strength. Strength
in layers. In crystallisation. In sedimentation and gestation.
But the gaps hold the strength. It's the tessellation of Lego studs,
the thrust between parted fingers of a swimmer.

Hit
the catwalk
with medleys of *targes* on the down run
scuta on the return. A savagery of high plumage
as you give executive orders with a nasty backhand.
Now draw - billboards of sky painted in the softest leadshot
clouds ticklish with arrows. A low space under glass in your nursery
of curses. Principes, tend to them.

Sister

The Golden Shovel –
'Unarmed Conflict' by Henry Reed

Two-point-six-million words and not one of them love: Various
soft notes in D minor give a warm-up quality and the camera holds/
tightens on medals. It fades to stock shots of an eyes-right and
a slow-mo Challenger tank tossing back kisses of fire even as she rolls
her world-view over the powdery peaks of the moles and
severs the scentlines left by fox patrols. This throws
the dogs. Throw the dogs to the dogs! you don't need a manual and
a risk assessment for this. String-up hammocks and macramé breakfalls
then take the damn leap. Level-up and await the weaponry that will
pixelate/crystalise in the palm of your – in the lap of your – always
complete the double fastening on every pocket and pouch. Come
the stampede you will want to be able to find your flags and whistles in
the dark. Keep things like that on the tip of your – Is it useful,
is it beautiful? Can it pollinate/germinate in this climate and
if it can, will it find hold on a smooth metal wall? Never
underestimate wisteria against razor wire. Glory can be
a reckoning or an offering but is more often the frightened
sibling of a wise misgiving. Give me the strength and aviation fuel to
record as I find. We write scrolls; text as strategy to tackle
uncertainty. Defibrillating code to protect our strides from
that tendency to trip. By all means, cast a forlorn glance behind
as things draw to a close, there is a ticket price for loved-ones: it
is two-point-six-million words with not one of them grace. May
God grant you grace to accept these arrangements. I say this not
to be Aquarian, intriguing or otherwise cosmic. I say this not to be
highly thought of (all we can hope for is a moment in the sun or a clean
death). Simply, mix thriving superstitions and recent NHS advice to
moderate - sunlight and her allies will cut you gladly, whatever you do.
It's awkward and a big pacifist truth, but it has always been so:

that the beginning of love and grace is a heart small as a snow-globe but
with dimensions of a TARDIS. Remember this
science before counting to two-point-six-million and back again. It is
somehow smarter to forgo physics when using the word ‘global’–
fly banners of thoughtbubbles, souvenirs, seedling vines: prepare for war.

...various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
will always come in useful. And never be frightened
to tackle from behind: it may not be clean to do so,
but this is global war.

Scribe

	y = a(1+r)x in all directions at once can look like chaos but chaos is a modern idea and unwelcome here	
in the isotropic soup where things grow, matter skirmishes at the sentry posts of anti-matter		and the Universe can call out ‘Look how you’ve grown! you clever girl!’ As if there was an alternative

Shaping the Ground - Triarii

Scrapbook

These were the most experienced soldiers fighting in the legions of Republican Rome. They had more wealth, more equipment and were often well into their thirties. A legion would hold Hastati and Principes at numbers of around twelve hundred, whereas Triarii numbered only six hundred per legion. These were veterans who fought. They used the weapons of their youth, the *hasta* spear and added to it with *scuta* and chain mail or *loricae* if they had sufficient wealth. In common with the various specialisation badges of today's commando, bomb disposal or paratrooping soldiers, they wore visible marks of their competence and allegiance including feathers on their helmets to give the illusion of height. The Triarii only fought when called forward by the Hastati and Principes. They were a line of last resort yet were the strongest force. *Ad triarios redisse* became a common saying and is often thought to be a cry of despair, a plea. But we are interpreting it here as a song of hope. Imagine the solace to be had in knowing they were at your back. These strong, formidable and practiced troops would wait on one knee, hidden by the soldiers in front, before rising out of the line with their long spears to engage the enemy. It would have been very overwhelming. I think everyone would have found it overwhelming.

Unmanned aerial vehicles fly higher
than any bird species on the planet.

An obstretrician wrote a thread
on Twitter of outrageous things
shouted at him by labouring women.
Ad triarios redisse
was not among them.

Section 52 – Call out for National Danger, Great Emergency or Attack on the UK. Her Majesty may make an order authorising the call out of members of a

reserve force if it appears to Her that national danger is imminent of that a great emergency has arisen.

Satellite imagery easily spots individual insurgents
kneeling behind walls so clear
that a Wolves F.C. tattoo is visible.
Oblivious.

Holding back fighting power
flies in the face of manoeuvrist doctrine.

A child playing hide-and-seek may believe
she can't be seen if she is unable to see the seeker

Your world is transparent and there is no frontline.

Storyteller

Confinement
refined her ideas
about warrior monks.
How would a nun

manage in these maternity cardigans
that have no pockets?
Who's the ascetic?
What next for self-regard?

Still, she can't grow much more
than a fire team
in her own organs.
That's about four men.

If you stretch
to section levels
(that's eight men)
someone is going to die.

She still calls them men.
The fight is reserved
for billowing her body
back into place, for finding

spunk that no man ever
needed to find.
For the balance of needs.
For fresh labour.

Bitchdaughter SE 6017951170
squats and waits

a closed, wild
dream room.

Bitchdaughter - palimpsest
of gone stone
ticker-taping into sky
through braids of willow trees

rooted to Viking weapons
and Roman tokens,
corroding them in earthy knots
& crying their own ponds.

Bitchdaughter – a villa
and a hermitage. A library
of galactic dazzlement,
a repository of memorial

stones for housing retreat
or summoning a relaunch.

Sister

We hoped it wouldn’t come to this,
you roll your eyes at the tin-grey sky
ad triarios redisse.

It helps, you know, to reminisce,
to learn the lesson, or to try.
They said it wouldn’t come to this

the giggling edge of an abyss,
the misquote of a do-and-die
ad triarios redisse.

I track your feet but always miss
hitting the dimensions of your stride.
We’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this

the truffling knack of metastasis,
you, trampling the line between shrug or cry
ad triarios redisse.

You transmit the hope of an activist,
or the dust-coated trucks of a resupply.
We must not let it come to this,
ad triarios redisse.

Scribe

Harlinde weaves red lead around the Ephebic oath. Rubbing bellies - Hestia, Aglauros, Enyo, Ares, Zeus, Auxo, Hegemone, Herakles, Thallo		is herringbone tensile? interlocking arcs of fire, a ratio of text-to- illumination-to-dead- ground. All the fun of the colophon again.
	never forgetting Athena who does not need her belly rubbed, but eyes the translations and encourages improv. Renilde checks the facts	

Storyteller Packs Up

Drawing on various aphorisms about rivers,
roots and apples falling from trees,
the distal locations thereof, the contrast with wings thereof,
and the not-stepping-into-the-same-one-twice thereof

and solemnly noting that towards the end
Odysseus spent over half his time explaining
who he was and that war rages on despite him
and those sessions of earnest (but jaded) divine intervention

and scrabbling around for layman's science
to explain the carbon-hydrogen-we're-all-made-of-stars-ness
of a symbology of Bitchdaughter stone,
placenta, gunmetal, salt-water sweat

and giving it all one last kick in the crack with
cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war
and a nod to Puck, the best of them all
(unruly little sexpot that she is)

and planning the new Christmas menu,
a heritage tomato scheme for the greenhouse SE 7005 4765
riverside bike rides, bug hotels and blueprints
for an approach to leadership,

the soldier does deft origami
on her empty packet of Frazzles,
thinks of flags, thinks of not thinking of flags
and lays her duties in the fruit bowl as an offering.

Closing Credits

STOCKSHOT:
Drone footage. Montage: bird's eye view of city, market stalls, river cruises, a hen do.
POV appears to 'land' on Medieval walls
POV of walker on Medieval walls.

FREEZE FRAME:
Bitchdaughter tower.
PUSH IN:
tracking to closed door in side of tower which slowly opens.

SOUNDTRACK: (REM *Near Wild Heaven*)

MATCH CUT TO:
a delicate antique cross-stitch sampler depicting a cottage, roses, *fleur de lys* and extract from Psalm 91:

the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.

ENDS

Bringing *Bitchdaughter* to the Page

I have only tried to make a shape in words,
using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears,
hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior,
the landscape and paraphernalia of that singular time...

David Jones[1]

Writing *Bitchdaughter* took me by surprise. It was spring-loaded and organic; perhaps like an ivy vine that has been forced to coil-up in a crack of stone until something heavy is moved out of the way to allow size, vigour and nature to unravel all muscular and reptilian across a tidy patio. Or an ingrowing hair.

I have been in the Army, one way or another, for over twenty years. I took my admission tests when I was a seventeen-year-old girl who worked Saturdays in the famous and fancy Betty's Tearooms. I had no family in the forces other than a Grandad who fought in World War Two and de-mobbed a few interesting years later. I was not particularly patriotic, outdoorsy and certainly not extrovert.

I wasn't motivated by a sense of belonging, nor was I running from something or seeking an outsider's hermitage. I was only a very nascent and naïve feminist in 1994; not deliberately setting out to conquer a man's world. I may have had something to prove but looking back from my forties, I have no idea what it was, or whether I proved or disproved it.

Since then, the decades feel like the control sample for an experiment, but I don't quite know what hypothesis was being tested. I had agency, made the choices, but must have always assumed an impermanence. (You see, nothing felt like it would be for ever and the future wasn't due to arrive for a good while yet). I would have

[1] 1937: preface *ix*

been a good teacher, a better librarian, probably an excellent social worker and I have plenty of ideas for running a knick-knack shop, so I have never been able to explain why I joined the Army. More importantly – I have never fully explained, to myself or others, why I stayed.

What was coming was a reckoning with a 'big-S' Self. The Self: a concept which, if understood in terms of Marya Schechtman's hermeneutical view, adheres to the theory that 'human brains are narrative-generating machines and selves are the protagonists of the narratives they generate' (2011: 397). Despite an allergic-avoidance to writing a memoir (I love reading it but am convinced I would hate to write it), I would nevertheless be firing up my own narrative-generating machine and, to rinse-out the metaphor, I would be the one choosing the machine's setting, adding the raw materials and designing the final packaging.

So, *Bitchdaughter* is how I come to understand a life and a set of choices. *Bitchdaughter* is my illumination, explanation, regret, boast, excuse, celebration and acceptance. *Bitchdaughter* is my contribution to a record and *Bitchdaughter* is my home.

Bitchdaughter Tower is a curious and deceptive medieval structure in a less-busy section of the York city walls. It nestles low, flat and smooth and has a perennially locked door in its side. The arrow slits have long since been blocked by Victorians unsympathetic to history, and as teenagers we had no idea what kind of room hid away inside it as we hung out on its roof. It is south of the river and the kids from my school did not roam south of the river in those days. Except - a couple of us did and we'd eddy to Bitchdaughter Tower to get away from others, to lie on the warm stone, hammocked by the history we tried to be unreceptive to, smoking, laughing and dreaming of the future.

With its delicious privacy and its intriguing name, Bitchdaughter Tower drew us girls in. Of course, there is nothing bitchy, daughter-y or otherwise feminine about the name: it is thought to have etymological roots in *le bydoutre* and then Biche Doughter – a nightmare room in which to be imprisoned, high on a promontory and thrust against the wet, south westerly winds cannoning across the vale of York. But then, in York, with its Celtic, Roman, Viking, Norman, Plantaganet, Tudor cross-weaves, its Shambles, Goodrams, Skelders and Whip-ma-Whop-ma-Gates full of violent secrets, you can never quite be sure. We were happily certain about what Bitchdaughter meant and we knew she was there for us.

The narrative-generator fires up: a woman grows older, although perhaps not deeper; becomes stronger but less bold; crystallises and emerges less beautiful; becomes content but sheds pride; learns surefootedness but grows less smart. All of these characteristics, depth, pride, beauty, wisdom, age, are narrative waypoints for the Self of the poem. Each of these characteristics is a determinant in relation to an Other. For this woman, the experience of soldiering is an experiment on the female edge of a hyper-masculine social group and profession which, by its nature and commitment to combat, is already on the edge of the society it serves. Where is the space for 'Self' here? This is a self-inflicted marooning. Caught on the wrong side of the river on a windy battlement with a sly name.

Bitchdaughter is the story of a girl becoming a woman, a soldier, an ally and a mother. It is the story of her relationship with authority, with morality, with duty, with expectation: a journey for her own voice, conscience and body. It is about what,

who and how she loved; what, where and how she framed her understanding of the world.

What it is not is the story of a particular war, Army, moment in history or summary of feminism. It is not an opinion, a treatise, complaint, celebration or commemoration. Yet, when I read her back, *Bitchdaughter* suggests plenty of these things.

This essay accompanies *Bitchdaughter*. It's as much a discussion with myself as an item *submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for*...etc... Consequentially, there is an avoidance of an overtly academic tone; you will read 'I' and you have just read 'you' twice in this sentence alone. I required a different rhetoric and a different register to approach the questions I was asking of mys/Self (small s and Big S). Nonetheless, there is a rigour and an integrity of study which I hope a reader (you) will sense and to that end, I wrap up this introduction with a brief outline of what to expect over the pages of this critical aspect.

I held four questions to heart as I wrote *Bitchdaughter*. They are compass points for the themes, structure, tone, and for the wider primary and secondary reading I undertook. Firstly, form: why a long poem? Is it even a long poem, and if so, what is it doing?

Then, the voices. Most were deliberate from the outset, but a few introduced themselves to me during the writing. I want to examine how they impact upon the imagery and narrative. Who are they, this Soldier, Sister, Storyteller, Scribe and Scrapbook? Not to mention the occasional yelps of others piping up here and there.

The use of voice helped me through various experiences of censorship during writing and I'll elaborate upon that.

There is no getting away from the War Poetry Canon. Nor would I want to. In the third main topic area, I look at the motivations for writing war poetry today and its relationship with commemoration. How does this major 'class' of poetry function in the 21st century and what is place for women's writing within this weightiest of canon?

Finally, I will discuss the influence and inclusion of warrior women upon the themes and imagery of the poem– who were these women through history, myth and fiction? I want to examine what motivated them, what do we know of them and those who chose to write about them?

Who will they be, and who will we all be, in the wars to come?

A Polite and Reluctant Epic

Joining the dots, writing up the oscillations
and the coastlines any way we can.

Caroline Bergvall[2]

Writing Bitchdaughter was a surprising experience and not what I had planned for my early forties at all. I was fairly certain that I didn't want to write about myself or my own experiences in any way, although I was equally certain that it was time to be writing something. I am a Yorkshire woman and in Yorkshire, folk that talk about themselves generate such forceful eyerolling, they can qualify as an alternative energy source. That's not to say that we don't all want to know everything there is to know about folk. Nosey, you see – but we'll find out for ourselves, ta very much. We don't need the protagonist laying out the facts for us. That's 'appen as boasting or worse: bullshit. And guess what? The Army is exactly the same. You don't talk unless you have something to say. Step out of lane and you are Walter Mitty or 'pulling up a sandbag and swinging the lantern'. These were the voices in my mind telling me that I had no place putting my meagre experience as a soldier out into the world, and I was very happy to agree.

I stopped soldiering full-time shortly after having my second child. I almost stopped soldiering altogether but that's a different kind of cliff-edge; one that I may take a peek over another time. The dream was to swap rifle for pen (or at least swap fuel inspection rods and laps of the gym for laptop and dreamy hours in coffee shops) and spend lots of time writing. Novels! I was going to write novels! Stand back,

[2] (2014: 147)

novelist coming through! Except that once I became involved in some writing workshops (on an MLitt course initially), it was the poetry they seemed to like. Clodhopping, image laden nonsense, but with a woman soldiering as subject matter. And that vaguely unique viewpoint seemed to be tickling the attention of some of my kind and encouraging early readers. Slightly less clodhopping poems began to emerge and totter off like confused newborn rhinos across the dusty and unfamiliar savannah of poetry journals and 'zines. I gorged on contemporary poetry and began to have a few successes with individual poems being published and short-lists being reached.

The subject matter was the thing. People seemed interested in it. Female soldiers' war poetry was a fresh concept to many in my workshops. It dovetailed with a broadening feminism, a wide public engagement with wars of the past (the centenary of the Great War) and wars of the present (the West's controversial outputs in Afghanistan and the middle East). Suddenly society was preoccupied with either commemorating or protesting war. Often managing both at the same time.

If we accept the assumption that women soldiering alongside men is interesting, and that war writing in general had fresh things to take aim at in the twenty-first century, and that these things could collide in some poems to offer a different perspective: well, that's got a faint whiff of PhD proposal about it. And that's what I was convinced to pursue...

I say 'convinced to' as if I had no agency. And that may come across as falsely modest, or somewhat attention-seeking. But I defend myself here. I did feel awkward contemplating writing these experiences. Some were borrowed, some fictionalised, some played-down and some exaggerated. I was relatively unscathed by my time on

operations and loved my Army career whereas friends and colleagues of mine had died, lost sight, limbs and sanity. And I didn't know if my unscathedness made me the best or the worst voice for this task. Probably neither.

I simply could not posit myself as a mouthpiece poet for anything beyond my own thoughts and memories. I specifically did not want to protest nor exalt. But I knew I wanted to write something that only a woman and only a soldier would write: a female soldier's poetic response to conflict. Not *the* female soldier; just a singular woman soldiering in the context of the early twenty-first century. The debate around appropriation of experience was growing sharper. Lionel Shriver made her infamous speech in defence of appropriation (wearing a sombrero) in September 2016, just as I began on the DFA programme and I remained conscious of the pitfalls of appropriation ever since. The result was a double-othering of myself as I began to write: othered from soldiering colleagues by the rare occupation of writing poetry and seemingly othered from other writers by being a part of a soldiering experience displeasing to the liberal-minded concerned with social and global justice.

Before I set about with any sort of ambition to write, it would seem that I had accepted a stash of limitations, caveats, apologies and self-imposed boundaries. But here was the plan: I would unhitch from this reluctance and temerity and grab hold of a thundering wagon. I would take my apologia and make it the subject of a Long Poem (the concept having announced its own capitalisation to me early on); an epic or lyric piece of writing with a broad narrative, discursive and descriptive legacy upon which to draw. *Bitchdaughter* would be big, long (but perhaps unavoidably polite and a little bit reluctant).

Whether my self-imposed limitations were cowardice, modest, inspired or sensible, I didn't know but very early on I was settled that this was how to introduce

an element of creative bravery to the project. I wanted to try something that could quite conceivably fail and move beyond simple reliance upon startling subject matter. I settled on giving this subject matter over to the Long Poem.

'Can poems be long at all?' asks George Szirtes (2014: 236). Good question. Does a long poem have to fill a book or is it simply more than a page? Most magazines. journals and single-poem competitions ask for no more than forty lines. The dedicated, biannual Long Poem Magazine asks for poems of more than seventy-five lines.[3] Does this create a definition of a long poem? Of course not, it's not even a start. If a forty-line poem is taken as some kind of benchmark and perhaps deals poetically with one idea, should a longer poem contain several ideas, or should it expand and go more deeply into the one idea? Again, that may be to miss the point entirely.

Edgar Allan Poe (1850) claimed that the Long Poem was 'a flat contradiction' that did not exist, while a century-and-a-half later, scholars such as Sharon Thesen (1991:13) argue that all poets are composing 'the "long poem" of their writing lives' and that these 'life-long poems' only end with the life of the poet. The Long Poem is therefore somewhere in between nothing and everything?

Lynne Keller's (1993: 535) examination of the twentieth century long poem supports Thesen's suggestion that the Long Poem has an organic existence beyond and behind the page. She suggests that in modern times there is a 'sense of poem-as-process' which can include social, anthropological and historical material, circling back round to another idea of Thesen's – that of a 'documentary poem'. It may not

[3] http://longpoemmagazine.org.uk/submissions/

just be the modern which permits this scope and range: in a letter to Benjamin Bailey in 1817, Keats describes the Long Poem as being 'a little region to wander in' with images so varied 'that many are forgotten'.[4] This sense of scope and landscape hints at epic sentiment. The epic form is ancient, its influence is readily sensed within a huge range of modern Long Poems. Keller explains that by 'combining lyric and epic traditions along with the resources of various prose genres' the Long Poem becomes responsive to a range of 'ambitions and perspectives.' (p. 535). That use of the word 'ambitions' is key to my examination of the Long Poem form. I have described how couched my initial creative process was in external considerations of self/other/reluctance/permission and I found the idea of writing a Long Poem simply as an ambitious endeavour very liberating. Despite his deflating opinion of the Long Poem in *The Poetic Principle*, Poe (1850: 2) acknowledges this. He accepts that one motive for writing a Long Poem is to demonstrate 'sustained effort' whilst exhorting the reader to 'forbear praising the epic on the effort's account' and being otherwise thoroughly scathing.

Whether it transpires I had chosen wisely or not, I had decided *Bitchdaughter* was going to be a Long Poem: in order to satisfy my need for a mental obstacle, in order to give me a framework and **also** because I fell in love with *In Parenthesis* by David Jones, a principle influence which has acted as my handrail in many ways over the last few years.

In Parenthesis (1937) is a poem that has defied definition; an epic poem, a novel, an autobiography? All whilst being referred to as 'work of genius' by its earliest

[4] http://keatslettersproject.com/letters/letter-30-to-benjamin-bailey-8-october-1817/ [accessed 1 Feb 20]

advocate, T. S. Eliot who admitted in the book's introduction (p. *iii*) that readers would be excited by the text on first reading 'without understanding it' Jones himself calls it 'the writing'. The writing, the poem, soars through an embedded temporal landscape of the passing of the day through one year. Across the sections (which are called Parts, but seem to act as chapters... see? Just what is this 'writing'?!) the time of day passes while the seasons move on. The 'hero's' progress hangs on the well-known arc of the Great War of 1914-1918 but defiantly resists a plot-line. Blisset (1998: 283) ponders if the poem is to be considered 'an imitation of action' and whether the 'characters will "do" anything or simply suffer'. Do the events have any meaning 'beyond mere succession'? *In Parenthesis* is epic in its invocation of the supernatural, in particular of Welsh myth, and in the scale of the setting. It is dramatic verse, told by a survivor and recalling precise and multi-tonal dialogue. It is deeply lyrical in its soundful and rich language, even in describing the banal (p. 72);

> 'one piece of cheese of uncertain dimension, clammy, pitted
> with earth and very hairy imprinted with the sodden
> hessian's weft and warp; powerfully unappetising'.

There was so much in this book which drew me in and which I admired that perhaps, early on, I was over-influenced by it. There is a navigational trap which is frequently encountered by map-readers of all types of experience. It is referred to as 'making the ground fit the map'. Experiencing this phenomenon, the map-reader (who is lost) will look at her map, whilst standing on a small crag, looking at a tarn with a deciduous forest to her back and look to find those features on the map. She may be lucky, she may pick the correct crag, tarn and forest and therefore be able to

navigate from the correct place. More than likely, she has fitted her reality to suit the map and therefore she is now in more danger than if she were simply lost. She is lost but does not realise it. Without labouring the metaphor too much, this could of course, lead to doom, or it could lead to a much longer, more arduous journey back home. *In Parenthesis* become my map and writing *Bitchdaughter* was the geographical terrain I thought I recognised, until I realised, I was a long, long way from home. However, there is one particular phrase that Jones uses in his Preface which hurtled out at me and granted me the permission to write *Bitchdaughter* and this is it (p. *x)*

> Each person and every event are free reflections of people and things remembered or projected from intimately known possibilities.

There it was. The claim, the ownership and the confidence of those 'intimately known possibilities' – Jones gives himself the authority to write, even while those words are tucked inside apologies for technical inaccuracies (a trench-mortar-bomb making an appearance at too early a date) or for inadequacies of recall, 'at the time of suffering, the flesh was too weak to appraise'. This honesty and this very brief manifesto of what was to follow unlocked my resolve and defined my approach. While the density and style of *In Parenthesis* might have been challenging my navigation, Jones had nevertheless sold me absolutely on spreading out in a Long Poem. Empowered by this encouragement to spread-out, by which I mean, alter tone, voice, viewpoint, geography and time, I felt relief and determination. Jones had gently handed me clues on how to mingle ideas and experience, held in respect for the true events which inspired them.

Like Jones, I had one overwhelming item of subject matter; the female soldier's poetic response to conflict, and I had hugely mixed feelings about that subject matter. I observed how Jones (p. 98) pierces his own subject matter; 'a machine gunner... who strikes the same note quickly, several times and now a lower one, singly...' and adopted the same diverse tactics. That could have led to a poetry collection of separate poems of contrasting tone and viewpoint with that subject matter in common, but I felt instead, right from the start that the contradictions and contrasts I experienced existed not in a dialogue or conversation with, but as an echo to his looping but structured narrative.

A combination of Jones-inspired instinct and the Poe-ian yearning to demonstrate 'sustained effort' had colluded to draw me in to writing a Long Poem. At this point, I had decided against all other perfectly acceptable writing genres: I had chosen the Long Poem form over memoir, fiction and creative non-fiction, or perhaps the Long Poem chose me but why poetry at all? The novel is, of course, the chief storytelling form, and memoir holds the vital ground when it comes to bringing personal military experience to the page. There is barely a retired Service Chief to be found who has not written his own (and they are all men, for now) version of whatever war, peacekeeping operation or Defence spending review he steered the troops through. And in the lower ranks, first-hand accounts of bravery, resilience, horror, humour and redemption can be found relating to almost any recent war, battle or campaign.

Some of this creative non-fiction and memoir comes from women; the voice of the female soldier is certainly not silent; I'll definitely be returning to some of it later on. For now, just one highlight: in 2017 Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly*

Face of War was republished having been banned in 1983 and heavily censored in 1985. It gave voice to dozens of female Soviet front-line fighters, snipers, pilots from WW2. It was a vivid account, very popular and well-publicised in its English translation from Penguin Classics and encouraged me to think about what Alexievich says here in her own introduction (p. *xiv*)

> '"Women's" war has its own colours, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words... simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things.'

This really resonated with me. I was quite clear that I would use the lexicon and the paraphernalia of women's lives without shame or apology. There would be menstruation, make-up, love affairs, diets and softheartedness; knitting, soap operas, homesickness and quarrels. But to offer these glimpses as vignettes (individual short poems, say) would be to make a trinket of those female responses. In holding up a uniquely female item or emotion in a single poem is to isolate and 'other' it, or to make an example of it and invite a humorous, titillated or startled response from the reader. I had done this in single poems elsewhere and while I often enjoyed positive feedback, I was always struck by the sense that it would be a long time until the idea of a female soldier writing to her mum, hanging fairy lights or worrying about contraception would be unremarkable. By approaching the subject matter in Long Poem form, the femininity could be incidental, occur naturally and be less of a sideshow or novelty.

Approaching the themes through poetry allows for a briskness in which trust is asked of the reader. Knowing that poetry is incoming gives the reader the

permission, or perhaps even the instruction to expect less in the way of solidity and accept more at face value; to let in the connections and drift with the ideas. A reader might well have already accepted that, by picking up a poem, they are going to experience things more on a slant than they would in a memoir or novel. The longer the poem; the longer the slant?

I considered this in reading Alice Notley's *The Descent of Allette* (1996) where the initially nameless, female narrator 'I' moves through a set of scenes so surreal and yet so realised in the text. The imagery and action are so jarring, and so prolonged and yet by succumbing to and acknowledging the slant, the reader accepts what she is about to experience as a tangible thing. Quite aside from Notley's surrealism is the requirement she places upon the reader to assent to a fresh and unique marking of measure and phrasing. Each unit of poetry being fixed within its own "double quotation mark". It's surprising how swiftly the eye and ear engage with this and soon the rhythm is internalised (p. 66),

> "I found" "in a cavern," "a huge black crystal" "shot with red;"
> "the size of" "a cubicle," "hollowed out &" "with a door"
> "As I neared the door" "I saw that" "a figure stood inside" "this
> Darkly" "red place" "this immense" "black-red garnet –"

This innovation is strange to the reader, and yet so rapidly becomes natural. Susan McCabe (2009: 275) describes how Notley draws on 'great imaginative liberty and play with biological, social and literary determinants' and makes a new, 'post-contemporary landscape' where the reader must join the poet. Notley, in her 1998 speech essay *The Poetics of Disobedience,* describes this collusion between reader and

poet as 'disobedience'. She writes of her rebellion against dominant social forces and seems to intend the poet and reader to disobey each other, or unite in disobedience, or both... 'The ideal reader, is a very disobedient person', she explains, 'who sees and listens to it all and never lets on that there's all this beautiful almost undifferentiation inside.' Drawing readers into her 'necessity of noncompliance', empowers them to see what is being missed. 'There were no babies in poetry then. How could that have been?...What are we leaving out now?...one must disobey everyone else in order to see at all.' In Notley, I was provided with the reassurance that a reader would consent to staying with even very uncomfortable and unsettling poems of substantial length, and that therein were the possibilities of subversion and challenge.

Caroline Bergvall (2014) also demonstrates this control over the reading-will of the reader in her book length poem *Drift.* Centred around a painful contemporaneous human rights report of the 'Left to Die' migrant boat attempting to reach Lampedusa from Libya in 2011, this long poem switches from epic European literature to modern pop songs, to news report, to etched and distorted calligraphy, to out of focus reportage photography, to graphics of the night sky, and back. It is translingual, multi-discipline and designed to be read, heard and seen – perhaps all at the same time. It 'drifts' and the source material of the human rights catastrophe at its heart melds with a lament for the þ letter now lost from European alphabets, somehow correlating the unspeakable/spoken nature of both. Áine Mcmurtry (2018: 819) explains that the poem's effect is violent enough that it 'deterritorializes the reader, who is reterritorialized as a viewer, and then again as a listener'. The disorientation of the reader is compounded by Bergvall's 'attempt to translate the graphic signs into sound or semantic meaning results in a prolonged act of stuttered impasse', echoing the unruliness into which Notley invites her readers.

Drift is one of the most compelling books I have ever read/seen/ heard and certainly influenced *Bitchdaughter,* although the evidence may be faint. Reading *Drift* was a masterclass in using the focus of a long poem to swing around like a search light, watery at its extremities and burningly bright when close-up. A poem that may generate sea-sickness but allow air-gaps and gulps of cool air along the way.

Drift was navigational in terms of how to compose a Long Poem. It opened up a multi-modal concept just as I was running into Browning's notion that poetry should fall into a category of either lyric, epic or dramatic. [5] Why not all three?

George Szirtes (2014: 236) clarifies this taxonomy by explaining 'epic being concerned with narrative, lyrical with states, incidents and moments, and dramatic with verse as spoken... as part of a dialogue'. Sharon Thesen (1991: 14) suggests that life-long poems that embrace a narrative tone are 'a way of handling that distrust of the "poetic" associated with the lyric voice,' while Whitworth (2010: 195) talks about the 'epic's indifference to novelistic ideas of time'.

A quick York Note/ Wiki search on the topic of Epic provides a list of well-known tropes: there is a hero, in a large setting who must overcome (supernatural) challenges to affect a triumphant homecoming: there will be lists of names and encyclopaedic detail perhaps, a heavy use of epic simile, and the oral, community roots of the epic means the author can assume that the audience is familiar with the narrative outline. Okay. Could this work as the template for *Bitchdaughter?* Yes and no.

[5] George Szirtes' book chapter recalls an anecdote where Robert Browning is said to have asked his excellency the Japanese Ambassador what type of poetry he liked, 'Epic, lyrical or dramatic?' - The interpreter is said to have replied that 'His Excellency's verse is chiefly enigmatic'.

The Epic tradition tends to the hypermasculine, but that didn't stop Alice Notley from redefining the parameters in *Descent of Allette* (1992). There are gendered assumptions for Long Poetry in general if we cast back and ascribe to Poe's idea of 'sustained effort'. Michael Whitworth (2010: 195) senses 'implications of manliness' in this. Yet, despite or perhaps *in spite* of this implication, modern and modernist female poets are drawn to the long poem: Notley, H. D., Alice Oswald, Rachel Blau Du Plessis to name a few. The epic can provide a paper-pattern for the cloth of female exploration and *Bitchdaughter* applies this both consciously and (I now realise) reflexively. Just as *In Parenthesis* uses the 'known shape' of WW1, *Bitchdaughter* inhabits a rolling news-feed world around twenty-first century conflicts; (9/11 and Afghanistan) there is the assumption of audience familiarity. Further in the epic tradition, *Bitchdaughter* invokes a muse, deploys rhetorical features and, traced through the margin-text of precise grid references and latitude/longitude co-ordinates, is a journey and homecoming from Yorkshire to north America to Afghanistan and back.

It is not an Epic poem in that ancient sense, but *Bitchdaughter* does take advantage of the opportunities of the form where it can. In its 'polite reluctance', (from my own title for this section), the poem steps away from any claim of heroism. This is partly the poem's feminine outlook but also a statement about modern times: does 'modernity allow for heroic actions?' asks Michael Whitworth (2010). Jones knew this: his *parenthesis* is structural, metaphorical but also represents humility and a manifestation of mixed feelings about his subject matter. I fancied I sensed what Jones might have felt. Whether value can or should be granted to those involved in controversial, unpopular conflicts is explored later, but it was a challenging subject to weave into an epic framework. It would be impossible to write exultantly about this

subject matter, or as Ezra Pound stated[6], 'an epic cannot be written against the grain of the time...'

The Long Poem, says Anna Reckin (2020: 52), can make 'room for all this'; it can allow an epic backstory to sit alongside marginalia and intertextuality and it can welcome in a lyric mode. One reading of the Browning-anecdote-with-the-Japanese-ambassador is that lyric exists as an antonym for epic (and dramatic) poetry but in *Bitchdaughter* switching between lyric, dramatic or intertextual modes enables the polite, reluctant epic; it facilitates an incongruous, ancient and hypermasculine mode and allows the poem to be *L O N G*. Without this variety, *Bitchdaughter* would not grant the 'resting places' that Anna Reckin finds vital in Long Poems; it would lack stamina, lose energy and would need to become a series of separate, themed shorter poems or... be... a... SEQUENCE!

Back to George Szirtes (2014) for adjudication as to whether *Bitchdaughter* has emerged as a Long Poem, or in fact a long poem sequence. So many Long Poems come in sections; numbered or titled, shifting in font or voice. *Bitchdaughter* does this almost every other page. Did I succeed in writing a sequence and not a Long Poem after all?

Szirtes (2014: 239) describes a sequence as 'a particular order without the "and then"-ness too heavily inscribed', whereas the Long Poem of the modern day can adopt a narrative drive and reclaim some of the story-telling territory ceded to the novel. *Bitchdaughter* is roughly chronological, and roughly in-keeping with the epic trope of a journey followed by a homecoming; but chronology alone does not earn it Long Poem status over Sequence. Szirtes goes on to say that a sequence 'is not a

[6] Quoted in Whitworth (2010: 200)

series of cliff-hangers' and while I don't claim that level of excitement for *Bitchdaughter*, there is a hope that the reader might want to understand what happens next. The segmenting and voice-switching in *Bitchdaughter* may visually suggest a sequence, while its narrative arc implies otherwise. A sequence is held together by a 'consistent, developing exploration' where one enquiry leads naturally to another one. *Bitchdaughter* is held by a more insistent narrative impulse, enquiry is not superior or secondary to recording and reporting. For me, and for what it is worth (because does it matter in the slightest if it is labelled a Long Poem or a sequence?) *Bitchdaughter* is a Long Poem partly because of the way I generated her. I wrote the poem almost exactly in the order it is read now; one section could not be written before the previous one.

Ordering is a fascinating concept within the Long Poem, 'I am not picking up beads to thread on a string' says Anna Reckin (2020: 51). A sequence has an order, but each section can be examined as an individual enquiry as well as a part of a building enquiry. Adding numbers to a sequence can suggest a fixed order, but many poem sequences have been moved and reordered in between publications. Arguably, ordering in a Long Poem is definitive but again not as simple as that. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land's* first appearance in *The Dial* and *The Criterion* was published without section numbers, but Whitworth (2010: 193) points out that all subsequent published texts had numbered sections. Edwin Morgan's *The New Divan* (1977) consists of one hundred numbered stanzas, but by the time the poem was published, much of it had already appeared in sections of three to ten stanzas in magazines *Akros, Ambit, Aquarius, The New Review, Lines Review, Oasis, Sphinx* and several others, and not in the order of composition. *The Guardian* published stanzas 1, 86 and 92

together as recently as April 2020 without any hint of the gaps this might leave.[7] *Bitchdaughter* has an order held or even dictated by chronology and thematic development. It may not be enough to define the poem as Long rather than long-(small 'l')-and-sequential, but I'll take it!

So, I grant *Bitchdaughter* the title of Long Poem. I'm proud of that, not because I value that form over the sequence, but because that is what I felt she needed and that is how I chose to apply my version of Poe's 'sustained effort'. *Bitchdaughter* is a Long Poem because it has the sense of 'and then', and mostly because I want it to be an entity. I'm in real danger of contradicting myself here, though. Some of the sections can, and do, exist as independent poems. *Firing Pins,* a pamphlet by me, published in November 2019 from IS&T Press, is a collection of individual poems. Versions of five of these poems exist as sections within *Bitchdaughter.* I put this down to my limitations as a writer who was addressing two separate creative projects, drawing on the same subject matter at the same time. Forgive me?

Disregarding the danger of scaring myself with brilliant book-length Long Poems, yet inspired by the revelation I experienced with *In Parenthesis*, I continued to seek out and form touchstones. There were verse novels calling me over to tell me how entertaining and fresh they were. Like Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), thrilling, vibrant and with a dazzling array of character; or Max Porter's gorgeous *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015) which is a masterclass of clear instructions on how to approach a poetic narrative in several voices (and a book

[7] https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2020/apr/27/poem-of-the-week-the-new-divan-by-edwin-morgan

which has been described as a hybrid of novella, essay, poem and a play-for-voices[8]); the storied brilliance of Alice Oswald's *Dart* (2010) and *Quiver* by Deryn Rees-Jones (2015); a few more read-throughs of *In Parenthesis* and a sprinkling of *The Waste Land* for good measure.

Whilst I was in danger of over-filling myself with ideas (i.e. other people's ideas) - I needed to get a grasp, and soon, on how I wanted the Long Poem form to work for me. There would be the move through time. Quite a lot of time. More time than Jones, but less than Evaristo. There would be motion across landscapes and continents. Again, more than Jones, but perhaps in measurable amounts compared to Bergvall. And there would be a dialogue that was inter-generational. Not in the father/son mould of Porter, but more between older and younger versions of one protagonist (and it soon became clear to me that it was not always going to be the younger protagonist learning from the older, perhaps in an echo of the way the father in *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* learns from his young sons). Time: Space: Growth: This may or may not have resulted in a loose epic structure. In the end I think, there is a kind-of-quest and a bit-of-a-homecoming, if you like that sort of thing; and I was definitely hanging on Notley's hem after reading her chipping away at the masculinity of the epic genre in *Descent.*

A resistance to end is how Sharon Thesen (1991: 15) describes the impulse towards the Long Poem. I can ascribe to that: if I hadn't brought in a Bible passage to draw a final line under *Bitchdaughter,* she would still be going, five years after beginning and may well start up again yet – the Life-Long Poem within.

[8] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/12/max-porter-books-interview-grief-is-a-thing-with-feathers

Writers of Long Poems, Thesen explains, are seduced by this opportunity to 'continue, to accumulate, to push into new territories', whilst resisting the demands of memoir. I grew in confidence around the idea of creating my own landscape and trusting a reader to walk in and roll with it. The Long Poem provides the time and space for that buy-in. The intimacies of women's lives would be part of my general stride in this Long Poem. A reader would not need to keep stopping and thinking 'Fancy that! A tampon?! How odd...' Sustaining the themes across several hundred lines could provide a world for the reader to enter. If I could make the reader trust the voice(s) they would stay and enjoy the surprises.

The sub-title above describes *Bitchdaughter* as a 'polite and reluctant epic'. This might say something about the voice/s of the poem, (which I will get to) but it's more than that. It's the paradox of the disquiet I've always felt inhabiting a masculine world coinciding with the ambition to write intimately of the female experience of that world. 'If you want to appear in magazines you were probably best not to send them something that occupies...several pages' suggest Szirtes. Writing a Long Poem is the ultimate 'politeness' or reticence – the writing of something seemingly unpublishable: I have huddled *Bitchdaughter* among quite the most extreme of *parenthesis*.

Dazzle, Code and Disruptive Pattern Material

We doubt the decency of our inventions,
and are certainly in terror of their possibilities.

David Jones[9]

Shape, shine, shadow, silhouette, spacing and sudden movement: these are the physical aspects which must be concealed and camouflaged by a soldier conducting warfare in a land environment.[10] At sea, ships are painted to match the sky, not the water, and before the advent of advanced radar they were painted in glorious, cubist 'dazzle' designs to mask or exaggerate the size and speed of craft which were otherwise impossible to disguise. In WW2, military aircraft were painted to look like the sky from below and the land from above, and the ranks of the French Army's renowned '*camofleurs*' were often members of the post-impressionistic artistic movement.

There has always been art in camouflage and concealment.

The Army uniform trousers and jacket which I wore daily, were made from the familiar camouflage 'paint splash' pattern of disruptive pattern material (DPM) the earliest versions of which are said to have been hand-painted by Special Forces soldiers in the 1940s. One of the antecedents for today's SAS were the battalions of The Artists Rifles, territorially-grouped units of artists, musicians, actors and architects who brought their disruptive thinking along with a phenomenal will to fight. DPM is now replaced by the digitally designed 'multi-terrain pattern' (MTP) and soldiers and officers continue to carry camouflage on their bodies throughout

[9] Jones (1937: *xiv*)
[10] *Close Combat – Survivability. Fieldcraft, Battle Lessons and Exercises*. (2017) Combat Publications. Crown Copyright.

almost all aspects of their working day; in the office, the canteen, the workshop, the stores sheds or out in the field.

The principles of camouflage and concealment come in handy in my poetry life. This heritage of fieldcraft alongside artistry is a comfort: I wrote *Bitchdaughter* caught in a paradox of both wanting to have the writing out in the world and feeling very reluctant for it to be scrutinised at all. In many ways *Bitchdaughter* is entirely a work of camouflage; this is how my self-eponymised 'politeness' and 'reluctance' became manifested. The writing of reticence is conversely where *Bitchdaughter* found freedom and I examine here how I navigated this paradox with reference to imagery and voice throughout the poem.

It starts with censorship. Jenkings and Woodward (2014) studied the phenomenon of censorship among the authors of military memoirs and give three types of censorship for consideration; censorship of genre, state and self. I was not writing a memoir (did I mention that already?!) but I was certainly subject to all three of these censorship categories. Far from claiming this to be a disadvantage, I celebrate the constraints. It is perhaps in this (arguably self-imposed) censoring that I found the poetry. Poetry became the dazzle-paint and the disruptive pattern material; imagery was a way of switching radio frequency to avoid interception; extended metaphors could be a target beacon or a low frequency locator sonar, and using a cast of voices, modes and chorus allowed a congested and contested space to evolve, just like the modern battlefield.

Perhaps you might by now be thinking that the entire previous, overlong and mixed-metaphor laden sentence is a further attempt at camouflage – to avoid the question, if you like. So, I'm going to dive into Jenkings and Woodward's taxonomy

of censorship and apply it to my own poetry just as they applied it to the military memoir. In fact, their study sets out very clearly why I might have felt repelled by the idea of memoir as they drew conclusions about the 'limitations on the publication of experience-based accounts of military activities with a claim to veracity...'. I don't *need* anyone to believe me, but I also don't fancy anyone saying that they don't believe me! The memoir form would indeed have censored me, I think it would have been impossible for me to write in any creative way about the subject matter in this genre. I didn't embark upon *Bitchdaughter* in a quest of getting my version down. Instead, the experience was very much more that echo of David Jones' 'free reflections of people and things remembered, or projected' again (1937: *x*).

According to Jenkings and Woodward, the writers of military memoir can find themselves constrained (or censored) by their chosen genre as a result of feeling one of several impulses. An interview with a previous Chief of the General Staff, Lord Dannatt (2017: 9) revealed that he had felt his memoir would function as a part of historical public record due to his high rank and appointment; his ghost-written work would become source material of the future and he needed to be mindful of that. Other, younger and more junior writers were aiming at a *bildungsroman* effect and therefore trod a genre-led path which would demonstrate a growing-up of the author, from foolhardy to heroic. There were genre-focused considerations of readership, with authors feeling they needed to focus upon popular actions or battles, and this could translate into a censoring pressure from publishers. Memoirs written in reply to other versions of the same events become a cyclical process of censorship and validation, for example Andy McNab's *Bravo Two Zero* (1993) was the genesis for Chris Ryan's *The One That Got Away* (1995), Peter Ratcliffe's *Eye of the Storm* (2000) and Mike Coburn's

Soldier Five (2004), each claiming authority and asserting the truth about the events of a particular patrol event in North-West Iraq.

How exhausting the need to be believed must be for the military memoirist; how censored and constrained they must feel by their genre. No such problems for the poet, right? I just need my *free reflections*, surely?

I wrote in the last section that selecting the Long Poem form provided me with the scope and space, but also the rigour which I felt I needed to commit to the writing. I maintain that the genre, or form, has given me freedom most of all. But I want to examine whether there is any chance that I had also succumbed to censorship or editing as a result of choosing poetry and specifically the Long Poem as my 'genre'.

In order to visit how my choice of genre may have imposed a level of censorship upon my writing, I'm temporarily presenting a huge assumption here that the readership of poetry differs to the target audience of a military memoir. It is within this assumption that I find the source of *censorship of genre* in relation to this writing. I will not commit to saying that *I know who reads poetry and who does not,* but I am certain that in writing *Bitchdaughter* I felt that it would only be read by a small number of readers who had, for themselves, an idea of how poetry should comport itself. They might expect a certain amount of innovation, universality, revelation and intimacy, and they would expect beautiful and unexpected language devoid of cliché and proselytising. The assumption might begin and proceed with the idea that those who read poetry hold a claim to understanding or at least appreciating it, and those who do not read poetry hold it in suspicion or simply disregard it. A very porous and un-anthropological boundary if ever there was one as Marianne Moore (1935) demonstrates,

I too, dislike it: there are things
that are important beyond
all this fiddle.

'Who reads this stuff anyway?' Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin asked in 2019 (p. 43), stating that 'I have my people and they are waiting for me' in her essay's opening, but concluding that 'most poetry now is written in the hope of reaching beyond the immediate circle'. This shows a confidence that the writer knows the predicted reader, but may be striving to reach beyond them, and I recognise that. So perhaps, more accurately with regards to my assumptions of readership (and therefore genre-led control), is the assumption that a reader of military-themed poetry is looking for different content to the reader of military memoir.

Bitchdaughter forgoes the *scènes à faire* of military writing. No heroism, horror or depictions of overt combat; no representations of victimhood or tainted valour, no technical descriptions of weaponry or tactical manoeuvres. This was not the detail I wanted to write and perhaps my imagined expectations of the poetry reader (or *my people*) precluded them. To claim that this was an overt set of contemporaneous decisions would be to retro-fit into the neat taxonomy presented by Jenkings and Woodward, but I am happy to acknowledge that however subconscious the editing or censorship might have been, on some level I was writing for a lover of words, feelings and curiosity; a liberal-minded enquirer of fresh viewpoints rather than the seeker of detailed military analysis and warfighting insight. Call that 'censorship of genre' if you will, but as a personality-type I do gravitate towards rules and for me, one woman's censorship is another woman's right-to-roam.

Institutional censorship might sound a bit dramatic with its Soviet undertones and its whiff of conspiracy. Throughout history, there are examples of this ultimate nemesis of creative expression from censorship of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to the banning of J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series from various United States school libraries. Blasphemy, obscenity, criticism of an autocratic regime; these are the bread-and-butter targets of state censorship. So, it's hard to imagine the circumstances under which a *poet* in a democratic country in the twenty-first century might be required to consider this. I don't want to overegg it; I didn't write *Bitchdaughter* as a repressed and fearful minority, but as I continue to serve in the Armed Forces as an Army Reserve officer, there were and are legal and institutional constraints by which I had to abide. This, I routinely factored in and whilst hard to measure, there are ripples of this to be found in the poem.

First up, there is the Official Secrets Act: *MOD Form 134*, signed at various times throughout a military career including enlistment and retirement, required me to confirm that, 'I understand that I cannot retain official information, documents or other material, other than for the purpose of official duty,' and that 'I am liable to serious consequences, which, may include prosecution and imprisonment, if I am found to be in breach of these obligations.'[11]

Serious stuff, especially if I had knowledge of the targeting systems of an attack helicopter or the composition of a revolutionary type of armour. But I didn't. I'd learned some pretty potent spice secrets from a Gurkha master chef and knew some neat tricks for cross-country truck driving, but no state secrets. National security was not at risk from my poetry! However, the MOD rules around what are

[11] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/397822/FOI2015_00621_Official_Secrets_Act_Form_reply.pdf

known as 'non-news media projects' were an impact upon my writing and continue to be so. This is a set of rules and guidance which apply, among other things, to serving and retired service personnel embarking upon creative or media projects drawing upon their experiences in service. It protects the institutions against reputational damage and places MOD ownership and copyright upon profits or royalties. Whether I acknowledge this as censorship or not, I must certainly admit to there being a constraint.

It's far from being a toothless dragon. In the past the MOD has ordered print runs to be pulped[12], has fought million-pound court cases over royalties[13] and serving writers and photographers have resigned or prepared to rather than have their work controlled[14].

I scrutinised *Joint Services Publication 579: Policy and Processes for Non-News Media Projects – Broadcast, Manuscripts, Digital and Features* as I wrote my pamphlet, *Firing Pins* (2019), knowing that, as it was definitely going to be published, it would be subject to inspection under these regulations. There is a very kind and open-minded Civil Servant whose remarkable job it is to read every manuscript, publication and article written by a service person, retired or not. He will then ascertain if there are issues of copyright, intellectual property, personal or national security risk or the disclosure of official information. Also key, is whether individuals are making money (commission, royalties etc) from accounts of events which they experienced as a result of a role and service for which they have been paid for in wages. For example, photographs taken on overseas operations can become Crown Copyright, or writing a memoir about

[12] *She Who Dared* by 'Jackie George' with Susan Ottoway, 1999. Published by Leo Cooper.
[13] A book called *Soldier Five* (covering the same patrol action as *Bravo Two Zero)* was at the centre of a multi-million pound court case between the MOD and the author who goes by the pen-name Mike Coburn. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/the-sas-man-who-wouldn-t-stay-quiet-1.1136564
[14] Martin Figura, well known poet and performer, left the Army in 1997 as a major whilst the Army's media team tried to convince him to amend his candid photography book *This Man's Army (1998)*.

building a school in a warzone could mean any royalties are owed back to the Crown.

The Civil Servant and I spoke about my small poetry pamphlet.

Was I going to be drawing on my personal military experience?

Well, yes, a bit.

Was I going to be making royalties from doing so?

Well, no. This is *poetry* after all, and I am very much the beginner.

But, as there was some prize money and a batch of copies which I was free to sell if I wished, the fact was that, however minimal the profit, the rules applied. I could not overtly draw on my experiences and make a profit. Furthermore, whilst still serving, I must choose my subject matter carefully to avoid reputational risk or contentious issues. The Civil Servant and I had a long chat. This pamphlet, he suggested, would fly low under the radar. It was small, I was not very high-ranking, and the genre offered huge scope for topics and themes to be cloaked in metaphor and imagery. In short: anyone who cared too deeply about *JSP 579* was not likely to be conducting a close-read of my poems. But I needed to be careful and go back to the Civil Servant if I thought I was straying close to the line. A censorship of sorts.

I've brought *Firing Pins* into the discussion for a comparison between my thought processes for *Firing Pins* and *Bitchdaughter*. With *Bitchdaughter,* the same constraints applied, but I felt a bit more daring. There were no immediate publication plans, other than through the DFA submission process and even then, I could have recourse to an embargo if I felt I needed it. So, in *Bitchdaughter* is a Storyteller section which begins (p. 53),

Her name was Malala and they thought she was six,

Malala thought *am I dying?*

This is the story of a little Afghan girl who was injured in circumstances which I am not allowed to refer to and who was brought into the tented hospital in Camp Bastion to be cared for by British medics while her very damaged arm was saved and healed. That is a contentious topic in itself; the circumstances were such that it was not public knowledge back in the UK that members of the host nation population, or the enemy forces in fact, could be treated at the Field Hospital.

It was a strange time. She was bonny, bright, and came under the daily care of the toughened Army nurses who kept me awake each night crashing around, coming off shift into our tent. These were nurses who I had seen brush themselves down after losing British soldiers in their arms; nurses who could cheerfully, professionally, talk about life-saving surgery conducted on injured members of the Taliban; the most brutal and single-focused enemy we could face. And one nurse in particular, who was assuredly *not* there for her bedside manner, was effectively a mother figure to this little girl, Malala, for weeks.

We learned that she had never experienced a hot, running shower before and now loved scented shower gels; that her village Elders had called a *shura* to discuss her future, now that her tiny bare body had been 'seen', that we could not send home for clothes packages as she must be able to integrate straight back into her community without any Western stigma. And that while she learned day-to-day bits of language, we had to hope she would forget most of it.

None of us were mothers at that time. But having Malala around changed us, even while we wished her better and away as quickly as possible.

She was allowed to take a colourful blanket and a very humble toy that my mum had knitted. I have a photo of her with them: a photo that I wasn't really allowed to take and which I crossly told my mum to take off the mantlepiece. And then, years later, having never heard the name Malala before 2006, an incredibly famous Malala appeared on the world stage. I couldn't help but wonder...[15]

As well as the Storyteller section in *Bitchdaughter*, I wrote a sonnet about Malala which I considered putting into *Firing Pins*. I left it out. I would not have met the criteria of *JSP 579*. A small but real moment of institutional censorship.

Who was the censor, though? No one told me what to put in or take out. I was not actively censored. My awareness of the 'rules' and other considerations of how the writing might be perceived caused me to censor or *censure* myself. I deployed stylistic and poetic tactics to facilitate what I wanted to say whilst allying and distancing myself at the same/different times. I hoped to find a way of saying what I wanted to say without appropriating, misidentifying, being unequivocal or final about anything; to present my narrative self without ending the story; to be measured but not judged; to balance the moral, poetic imperative for some truths with an impression of ambivalence (which *is* my truth) – all whilst trying to sound vaguely poetic!

This then, is the censorship of self, the last of the categories discussed by Jenkings and Woodward. But if self-censorship was the prison, I was the most willing

[15] Of course, this was not Malala Yousafzai, the young girl shot by the Taliban who would go on to become a Nobel Prize laureate. It turns out to be a very popular girls' name in the region: girls who are named, as Yousafzai herself was, after Malala of Maiwand, a poet and warrior who became a folk hero after leading the defeat the British in 1850. How history can chime...

victim of Stockholm Syndrome. I relished the opportunity to slap on the dazzle-paint, to move faster than I appeared. 'PAINT MY UNDERCARRIAGE LIKE THE SKY AND PUT STREET MAPS ON THE BACK OF MY HEAD,' I cried as I happily slid into camouflage skin to appear smaller, muddier and a different shape altogether. Self-censorship for me became the tactics of nuance and multiplicity. I wanted the combat and soldiering of my poem to be accessible, warm, growing and polyvocal. I really hope it succeeded because finding this multiplicity was fundamental at every stage to the structure of *Bitchdaughter.*

Edwin Morgan, Ezra Pound; at times they seem to take a deep breath and a run-up at a long poem.

In *The New Divan* (1977) Morgan's impressionistic, elegiac and occasionally surreal long poem sequence, he feels his way into the book by addressing the poem's inspiration, Hafiz, the 14th Century Persian Sufi poet. It could be argued that this is a way of contextualising of the poem and acknowledging the aspects of the poem which appear as an homage; but it also feels like an accelerant. The poet, stepping up to address the whelm of war and love, calls on a third party to help him nudge his way into the subject matter. 'Hafiz, old nightingale,' he asks, '...how could you ever get your song together?' (p. 7). The sequence goes on to address the second person Hafiz for many sections, with the 'I' getting only very passing reference ('I suppose'; 'I don't know') until finally in section 11(of 100) we hear 'My thoughts, like the body are roused' and more of the speaker's intent begins to emerge.

Ezra Pound applies a similar bracket of discourse to *Three Cantos* (1917), choosing to address Browning as he builds his manifesto for writing into the epic tradition. Reworked repeatedly until the much longer *Cantos* emerged (but never

finished), the *Three Cantos* originally published in *Poetry* and *Lustra* has a defensive, imagined discussion with Browning;

> And you'll say, "No, not your life,
> He never showed himself."
> Is't worth the evasion, what were the use
> Of setting figures up and breathing life upon them,
> Were't not our life, your life, my life, extended?
> I walk Verona. (I am here in England.)
> I can see Can Grande. (Can see whom you will.)
> You had one whole man?
> And I have many fragments, less worth? Less worth?

It feels like asking for permission, a wheedling. Yet, by the time this poetry is re-reworked into the longer *Canto 1,* the opening is not at all reluctant or compromising; opening with an unmistakeable commitment to the epic, the translation, 'And then went down to the ship/ set keel to breakers...'

Whitworth (2010: 200) offers an explanation, describing this discursive way-in as a 'problem of intellectual consensus manifested... as a contrast between the spirit of satire and the spirit of epic.' We are back to the argument of whether modernity allows for heroic actions, 'the nation cannot speak through the mouth of one man if the nation does not speak with one voice,' Whitworth goes on to explain. The epic vector does not have the same power in modern times; there is no societal consensus on the BIG themes (war, conflict, love and especially the illegal homosexual love that Morgan was writing) and therefore the epic imperative must

be offered as an option or an interpretation, rather than as the prescription for long modern poems. In these examples, Morgan and Pound devise a discourse with an authority figure to introduce both the manifesto of the poems and their own ambiguous standpoint. They exercise both allyship and distance to what is to come. My interpretation of this is as a paragon of 'polite and reluctant'. That's not to say that their poetry is apologetic or tentative, but it does allow both space *and* intimacy between poem, poet and reader.

Bitchdaughter opens with eight pages of discourse which take the hand of the reader and leads them into ambiguity and polyvocal discourse. 'The Pitch (i)' is in two (bullying?) voices which address up-front the endgame paradox that no one ever needed or asked for *Bitchdaughter* to be written. It's a provocation and a passive presentation of voices undermining the very idea and existence of the whole poem. The voices are an imagined pair of film executives; they don't see why *Bitchdaughter* is worth the effort, they are trying to place a value on her. The imagined voices are sentiments I have felt from others (within the Army and outwith) and mostly, a voicing of aggressive doubts of my own. Pound's 'What were the use/ Of setting figures up...?' finds its echo in 'Have you considered memoir?'

'I'll have another go,' begins 'The Pitch (ii)' before launching into thirteen lines of statement and manifesto. 'The Pitch (ii)' is a boundary setting proclamation and is written in the 'set keel to breakers' mindset. This then allows the semi-ironic and over-long title of the third section 'A docu-eco-comment-filmpo-longpoem...' etc to sit alone, announcing the multiple voices to come, with just a simple assent from the previously bullying exec voices.

'Casting (i)' and 'Casting (ii)' introduce the idea of defined roles for certain voices in the coming poem, before 'Trailer' sets out a picture in words of a rolling

movie trailer with some rather mumbled direction and discussion going on in the background. So, in the end, it is six pages until we first hear from Scribe and the main body of *Bitchdaughter* begins. Even then, we still sit outside the narrative. The opening Scribe section is a broad sweep of the compere's arm; a direct address to a still-settling audience. The screenplay direction is still present, 'DISSOLVE TO: three women at a bar table'.[16] These eight pages are my run-up at the long poem. In them are the suggestion that the poem needs to be debated, sold, heckled, designed and approved (in my sub-conscious, perhaps). These pages are a distancing, a reasoning, but hopefully an affirmation too: the film gets made and the poem is written. We see the 'Closing Credits' at the very end. The idea of setting the poem behind this layer of film helped me to establish the conditions for switching focus from the minute detail to a sweeping landscape; from an intimate thought to a more context-driven generalisation about war; from humour to exposition to criticism. And the film-ness prepares the reader for a narrative arc without a recourse to prose. It is a return Schechtman's idea (2011: 398) of the narrative self;

> '[One] kind of narrative view links selfhood to the capacity to think in narrative terms and to offer narrative explanations... Selves employ the kind of logic found within stories when they describe, explain and choose their own behavior.'

Long poems written in the Epic form would have had, as a reliable assumption, an audience who would be familiar with the events within; modern long poems might need to find other ways of reassuring and signposting the story to the

[16] Scribe maintains access to this screenplay device, on and off, throughout.

reader. These opening six pages are my equivalent of drawing a group around a campfire and asking them to trust enough to settle down for a story. George Szirtes (2014: 246) acknowledges that,

> 'It may be true that the syntax of film has entered the bloodstream of poetry, particularly of long poems, and that we may be able at some stage to talk of long poems in terms of establishing shot, tracking, zoom, face-out and so forth... because common culture is as likely to be informed by films as by books.'

Do these seem like suitably solid reasons for this protracted intro of filmic imagery at the beginning of the poem? I hope so. But of course, what they really did, for me as the author, was provide that run-up or a deep breath, and help to settle and pre-empt a few arguments in my own head. At times, whilst writing, I thought I might go back and delete them. In other words, they were a temporary scaffolding to enable to rest of the work. The tried-and-tested poetry tutor's top-tip of 'delete the first and last line and you will have a better poem' applying to the first six pages, perhaps? But I have left them in.

I think the tentative run-up is part of the narrative now.

The voices of Scribe, Sister, Storyteller and Scrapbook were essential to how the poem was written. I have a piece of notepaper, which I didn't put a date on, but I think it's from 2016. It has been stuck to the wall in three different home-offices (read: boxrooms) and has mug rings, an adult footprint and my child's doodle of a Minecraft villager on it. There is a scrawled reference number

from a telephone call to my car insurance firm and a mysterious set of bank details. It also has this:

Storyteller

-Narrative

-past tense – recent events

-story of a girl joining army

-on to middle adulthood

Grid references

'SHE' – NO 'I'

Scribe

-opens up comment onto history

women in combat

female warriors from other trads

-era, epoch

can access screenplay elements

'THEY' 'YOU'

Sister

-Ally of the soldier-girl

-but cynical – bit nasty/dismissive

-things I wish I had realised

-can undermine the storyteller

'I' 'SHE'

Scrapbook

-ephemera

-should be positive

-positivity is/can be elusive

Scrapbook lists always lead to

comment by Scribe

There was so much I wanted to say about war, combat, and soldiering but with such a big set of mixed feelings that I needed different modes with which to do it. Really all the voices say the same thing: war is human, universal and various. While reading Max Porter's wonderful *Grief is the Thing With Feathers* (2015), the overwhelming sense was of unison. The three contrasting, occasionally antagonising voices, all travelling to an endstate in wildly diverse ways. The voices in *Bitchdaughter* were planned to argue, pull together, pull apart, contrast and chime. I hoped this

would free up the narrative from any sense of consensus, but also point to an inevitability regarding the intractability of war. I hope any reader is able to find bits of value in each of these voices, but for the purposes of this supporting essay, I'd like to offer a few examples of the workload each voice is carrying at various times.

Storyteller gets the first words of the actual narrative. (While the audience meets Scribe first, that's still part of the eight-page run-up.) It's page ten and the story has arrived. With these early lines of the Storyteller, it was important to establish a poetic, lyric tone in contrast with the informality and lack of convention during the screenplay sections. I had read several Long Poems which I admired, and which scrupulously maintain a voice and stanza structure throughout (Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* H.D.'s *Trilogy* or Morgan's *The New Divan*). I wasn't sure I had the stamina for that and was more drawn, in any case, to the switching voices and tones of poems like *In Parenthesis,* and Bergvall's *Drift* (2014). *Dart* by Alice Oswald (2010) is another example, frequently deploying lyrical interludes which act as a respite and a catalyst in moving the narrative along,

> And then I saw the river's dream-self walk
> down to the ringmesh netting by the bridge
> to feel the edge of shingle brush the edge
> of sleep and float a world up like a cork
> out of its body's liquid dark. (p. 28)

Whitworth (2010: 193) discusses the value of having lyrical 'high-points' in a Long Poem. He argues that the contrast between moments of lyrical intensity and

discursive passages in Eliot's *The Four Quartets* is highly significant and that the reader must take time to consider how the discursive passages ('colloquial, didactic and deliberative') serve to heighten the lyric effect, and vice versa: how the non-lyrical can be elevated or magnified by being contrasted with the lyrical passages. Storyteller does remain largely in a lyric mode. This voice has access to some of the most poetic phrases, 'through gnarly goblin hands, into guffawing/ mouths, a petal in a plague beak' or 'dreams in which pebbles were marvels'. There should not be a hierarchy implied in this; the lyric segments are not meant to out-poem the discursive or the prosaic. The value and the effect of each is in the contrast.

Storyteller's voice is allied most strongly to the soldier's frame of mind at each stage. She is a cheery teen, a hopeful pessimist, reliant upon empiricism and observation but slowly growing more streetwise; the bright smile becoming a bit fixed with disillusionment and experience. The character of 'the girl-with-no-future' who acts as a foil to the protagonist's ambition is based on a teen friend and Bitchdaughter Tower ally, Vicky, who suffered from cystic fibrosis. This topic is treated light-heartedly at this stage of the poem, just as it was at that stage of our lives. It's only later in the poem, once Storyteller has developed perspective and abandoned baseless optimism that the reader hears of Vicky's funeral.

The voice of Storyteller is signposted by attention to meter; not rigorous or unfaltering, but more marked than elsewhere. I wanted this voice to be reliable and trusted by the reader and was influenced by Meredith Martin's ideas of meter as a 'connective tissue' (2012: 146) which look back to pre-World War One forms. The discipline of ordered meter had application in the treatment of neurasthenia after the war and could give comfort whilst permitting free expression and emotion, she argues. Storyteller holds the chronology and the narrative together in *Bitchdaughter*

and while the voice may be reticent and predominantly lyrical, it is a voice to be trusted. If an event occurs in this voice, it will be a real-life event. That is why it is Storyteller who is trusted with the precious Malala section. Not to say other voices shouldn't be trusted (Scrapbook in particular is largely a precise archival record) but there is an innate reliability to Storyteller. Storyteller has direct access to the soldier's state of mind and offers realistic glimpses into soldiering and training life which might be unexpected to the reader. For example, on page 26, where the soldier thinks she is managing to find some privacy from her training Colour-Sergeant in an alcove behind the door, or on page 28 as the same Colour-Sergeant relents in the incident of the contraceptive pills. Storyteller's credibility is further developed through use of the accurate terminology relating to weaponry and hardware, 'ammo expenditure... rations... resupply... NATO stock numbers' (p. 33). Here, I was certainly influenced by the narrative voice of *In Parenthesis* and Jones' idiom (p. 172) in relating aspects of John Ball's experience has intimacy and accuracy,

> And next to Diamond, and newly dead the lance-jack from No.5, and three besides, distinguished only in their variant mutilation.
>
> But for the better discipline of the living,
> A green-gilled corporal,
> Returned to company last Wednesday
> from some Corps sinecure,
> who'd lost his new tin-hat...

Jones does not mind leaving his audience baffled by military jargon or technical terminology. Instead, he allows it to create a tempo and a

collusion/inclusion with the reader. Storyteller does this too, using phrases which are commonly understood by a soldier, but which might sound jarring to a civilian reader; 'striding over baby's heads' for the matted grass clumps in marshland which are so hard to move across or 'two knuckles right', referring to the arm-outstretched method of indicating the location of a target somewhere away on the horizon.

Storyteller is afforded occasional passages of exposition. She moves the story on and gathers things together when required. Storyteller is the voice most committed to hints of an epic theme. This is signposted by the right-justified grid references which occasionally appear alongside Storyteller sections. These are accurate ten-figure grids or latitude/ longitude references which trace a physical journey from Bitchdaughter Tower, around the UK, the world, and return to Bitchdaughter Tower at the end; a quest and a homecoming. Influenced (or perhaps encouraged) by Alice Oswald's use of this right-hand margin in *Dart*, Storyteller, uses the page margins to create a density and a story-within-a-story, while conveniently reducing the need for footnotes.

So, Epic-ish, lyrical, reliable, emotionally allied to the Soldier and responsible for framing the narrative: that's Storyteller.

Sister needed a casting committee. I had to think hard about what she would (and could) do and how she would do it. Here is her audition on page 6;

1. Don't copy, admire or idolise.
2. The easy way: become allies.

Based on Wendy Cope's 'Two Cures for Love' from her 1992 collection, *Serious Concerns*, this is calling notice for a cast member who would be an 'Eighties-girl idea of a rebel icon'. The Sister voice acts as a cheerleader and a cynical mentor to the Soldier. She sometimes works to undermine the Soldier-woman, but in a familial way.

Sister is a feminist voice, but one who is not wholly convinced by the benefits of female networking, 'the sisterhood is a rip-tide,' she states (p. 27). This agnostic approach to female camaraderie is borne directly from my experience of, and research into, the phenomenon of women being the enemy of women in a professional domain. Many of the barriers or diminishments we faced were generated by women and serving mothers who had 'managed/ coped/put up with' and as they were just fine, they didn't see the need for change. Women in this mode can be just as responsible as any senior man or male peer for hindering women's progress; the men more likely from ignorance and unconscious bias than deliberate confrontation. She declaims this insidious bias with her litany of gendered language on page 26, 'marksmen, servicemen, guardsmen, guys.' But that's not all that Sister is angry about.

Sister presents motherhood and the female body as a main theme throughout *Bitchdaughter*. Her opening section is an address to Father Christmas, which is inspired by a line from C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe.* 'Battles are ugly when women fight,' Father Christmas tells Susan in the novel, a line which has always stayed with me since being a child. Sister then lets loose with her thoughts on beauty, women's place in combat and the bodily damage we do to ourselves even without stepping foot onto the battlefield. Here, as throughout the poem, Sister talks as a mother, referring to the 'school Christmas fête', 'diastasis recovery' and 'toy

prams'. She has this status throughout the poem and therefore there is a sense that she is looking back and making comment distinct from the Soldier by virtue of age and motherhood. She feels motherly towards the Soldier and her colleagues, seeing them as 'head girls with/ cheekbones of pearl-apple/ ...daughters of the North' (p 22).

Sister gets to make commentary on the ethics and circumstance of war too. On page 41 she relates a dream sequence which is chopped through with sections of the phonetic Dari and Pashto phrase books issued to British soldiers in Afghanistan. But this does not contain the conversationalist vocabulary of a tourists phrase book, instead she remembers the phrases for 'do you have weapons?' and the enigmatic Dari words for shot, burnt and head; 'Wishtaley, swadzedalay, wishtalay, sar.' And, in her commentary during the section subtitled 'So, Tell Us What Happened in Canada', which deals with the events of 11 September 2001, she makes the overt political declaration, 'that was the time to decide/ to nod at the unushered paradigm.' (p. 34). In this too, she has the benefit of hindsight, to which she is able to apply her judgement, cynicism and irritation.

Another way in which Sister is marked as being more evolved is through her move to poetic forms by the end of the poem. This evolution is not hierarchical, she does not achieve superiority, but Sister is the voice that grows in poetic muscle and confidence; her final two passages towards the end of *Bitchdaughter* being a golden shovel and a villanelle. The golden shovel section is the poem's most vociferous statement on the ethics of war. 'Two-point-six-million words,' is the refrain; a direct reference to the length of the Chilcott Inquiry, the public inquiry into Britain's role in the Iraq War 2003-2011. Not one of those words, notices Sister, is love.

Scrapbook is full of ephemera and archive, opening reflection upon passages by, and provoking or sustaining the themes of, the more characterised voices. Scrapbook is a diarist and a cheery, nostalgic collector. The source material for Scrapbook are letters, reports, diaries, keepsakes and souvenirs which have accumulated across my Army career. They are all real.

Quoting Linda Black, the editor of *Long Poem Magazine*, Anna Reckin (2020: 51) writes that the Long Poem provides 'room for all this' and goes on to describe the value of a mesh of

> intertext, metatext, paratext: footnotes and commentary found and invented, formed and deformed, marginalia... lists, tables, definitions and glossaries.

Scrapbook is allowed a good amount of humour, but often the trivial nature of what Scrapbook records is in contrast with the more deadly urgency around. For example, the apparent irrelevancies of the letter extracts on page 29 are followed by a more intense focus through the lens of a rifle's night sight while the triviality of weight-watching in Canada is surrounded by the belated news of 9/11 terrorist attacks. Scrapbook's sections are always followed by the Scribe voice in order to contextualise the minute and detailed with the broader geo-political or world history viewpoint.

Scrapbook is not designed to be wholly lighthearted and fluffy, though. In the voice's determination to maintain normality, femininity, affection and home-life is an accurate record of an insidious and growing homesickness and unease. Scrapbook is also a record of the soldier's battle with her own body, romantic self-worth and ambiguity about combat.

Bitchdaughter's middle, the 'Lost Things: Afghanistan (i-viii)' is given over entirely to the Scrapbook. This is perhaps the section with the most drama and is written to be quite impactful. Therefore, Scrapbook is a vital voice for me. Encountering war in Afghanistan was obviously a very pivotal moment for me as a soldier, but Scrapbook gets to tell the story of how pivotal it was for me as a woman. Taken from scraps of poems, old notebooks, e-blueys, the order of service of Vicky's funeral, a declined wedding invitation which I had pinned to my mosquito net, Scrapbook is an assortment of marginalia which framed those months in a warzone. I never look back at that time and think of the actual fighting (I think I am lucky in that respect). Instead, I look back and think of the daily life; the volleyball, the meals, the weekly chip-butty and how I passed the longest stretches of boredom. Scrapbook may have started as a way of including 'all of this', but ultimately gets to tell the hardest storyline of all.

Scribe sits at the other end of the spectrum from Scrapbook. Scribe has been recruited to place *Bitchdaughter* among a universal continuum of the human nature of war, womanhood and craft. And Scribe *was* recruited, or at least 'cast', (just as Sister was) in the opening section. 'Casting (i)' brings us 'Harlinde and Renilde – reading in perfect unison for the part of the Scribe:'

The genesis of Scribe was a fascination with the idea of a female Scribe in history. In the Western Christian tradition, the majority of Scribes were men. It was a role with status and required extensive education. In the Middle Ages, however, when monastic orders were at the peak of their powers, there is evidence of female scribal activity. Typically nuns, and working under the direction of the male members of the Orders, these female Scribes would copy, illuminate and illustrate

important biblical, religious and legal texts. Harlinde and Renilde are the names of two such female Scribes from ninth century Germany. I decided to have them 'auditioning' for a role when I found a reference to them on a blog by Jillian Mae McKeown (2011) where their work rate was reported as being 'laborious, even to robust men,' which hit a certain chord with me. These were the kind of women who crafted and toiled to put down words; words upon which all of society and culture was built; coloured, tooled, worked and decorated with expensive inks and flashes of gold. In the same blog McKeown, explains that prior to the twelfth century it was rare for a Medieval Christian Scribe, much less a female one, to identify herself within the colophon. It would be a sin of pride to do so. 'Post-12th Century and on though,' she explains, 'the trend of women signing or leaving more direct clues as to their identity increased'. And I love this idea of these anonymous artists leaving breadcrumbs as to their identity. Scholars may go as far as analysing handwriting to work out how many texts were scribed by women, but these little acts of graffiti in the colophon or in the margins are there across the centuries.

There was something in the idea that words are taken out of time when they are 'scribed' and set across history and elevated. Medieval texts which survive today are revered and considered precious, even if their content is mundane (though often it is not). I wanted Scribe to be that link to wider consideration of war. Scribe might use imagery drawn from sculpture (viciously indentured Verdigris), nature (the creatures of the land identify a friend) ,and craft (paper pinwheels, macramé, tapestries, weaving) but what I have tried to give Scribe, is a more global and epochal vision. Scribe has access to a broad sweep of war history. She can call upon heraldry and the 'falcon *empiént'* or the Roman infantry (Hastati, Principes and Triarii). I wanted Scribe to feel imbued with the knowledge and experience of war.

She is not there to expose it or teach about it. It is that she is so full of it, it seeps into everything she expresses. She represents, and presents, the universality of the themes. While she can crouch down and examine the detail as well as any other voice, 'bunions and blisters' or 'ova in a uterus' and can access the modern world through references to cans of coke or artisan coffee bars, her environment is more global and her timeframe is more universal than the other voices. This manifests as concrete poetry in the later sections and in one of these passages she actually does broaden to the whole universe, from 'isotropic soup' to the 'sentry posts of anti-matter'. Scribe is a perspective which is opposite in scale to Scrapbook in many ways and a way of doodling my own mark onto the colophon of war writing.

In the closing section I talk in detail about the influence and source material of female warriors and combat upon which *Bitchdaughter* draws. I have already unavoidably made some mention of this and it is important that it is Scribe who primarily calls upon this theme. She introduces female warriors from the Islamic tradition, the 'shield maidens' and the Amazons. She's a close colleague of Sister when she hits this theme, and like Sister, much of the poetic energy is best highlighted in sections where they speak in couplets, inspired by the poetry of Afghan women writing in landay and the ghazal form which originated in the region. I'm in danger of eating the sandwiches I am saving for later, and so I will return to this idea near the end.

I began this section by explaining that voice became an arsenal of tactics for exposing the very mixed set of feelings and expressions I had about war and conflict. The voices are in part camouflage, in part a self-censoring and in part a structure for

a Long Poem. But mostly they were about freedom and tension. You have met my voices; I must now explain why they all trouble and activate themselves to write about war.

TINKER, TAILOR, POETRY-MAKER

And if they ever in this, our country,
Consider erecting to me a monument,
I give my whole-hearted consent,
But with one condition –

Anna Akhmatova[17]

'British poets in our early 21st century do not go to war,' wrote Carol Ann Duffy in the Guardian in 2009, and it's partly to address this fact that I persevered with *Bitchdaughter* for so long. She states that 'war makes poets of soldiers, rather than the other way round' before going on to explain that 'most of us... experience war... through emails or texts from friends or colleagues in war zones, through radio or newsprint or television, through blogs or tweets or interviews.' This probably still feels very familiar eleven years after Duffy wrote it and it was and still is my start-point and assertion that conflict is an inevitable part of being human. In my introduction to *Firing Pins* I wrote, '[conflict] needs to be seen from many, many viewpoints to be understood, slowed, halted, evolved or otherwise kept in check' (2019: 9). From war, as with death or terminal illness, motorbikes, cigarettes, underage sex and spinning wheels in fairy tales, we try to keep ourselves and our children safe. Really, it is better brought into focus, dismantled, demystified, ridiculed and even valued. War poetry, or poetry about war, can do that.

Today, poetry about war, poetry of war, poetry with war themes and written in proximity to war (which I will, for convenience, now refer to as war poems or war poetry), is written within a lengthy and revered Western canon which stretches back

[17] Epilogue, ii.

to Homer. War remains a rich seam of subject matter emotionally and visually. War has inspired poetry of protest, commemoration, observation, even exaltation. It is a subject that belongs to all humans and the poetic responses are accordingly varied. While some poets approach war overtly as a subject for an entire collection, long poem or project, it is a pervasive enough topic to find its way into the imagery or themes of individual poems by a huge range of writers in the English language. Many poets, who may or may not overtly write about war, and who may or may not identify themselves as war poets (however temporarily) use war's lexicon, imagery and tension in their poems. It's not an unreasonable hypothesis to suggest that almost any poetry collection or anthology will include references to war: it is just as resilient and recurring a poetic theme as love, loss, nature or myth. Examples from recent years might include, Margaret Atwood ('Put down the target of me/ you guard inside your binoculars')[18], Carolyn Jess-Cooke ('We have not passed the urge to obliterate/ The other')[19], Geraldine Clarkson ('one old gold trinket slipped/ between two ribs')[20] or Luke Kennard ('like lanterns in distant inns,// or shrapnel glowing in a battleground'). War might enter individual poems as an intensifying image in support of a wider theme, as a metaphor or as a specific piece of storytelling or recollection, such as in Douglas Dunn's 'After the War' ('pine cones like little hand grenades') or Helen Dunmore's 'The Duration' inspired by wartime loss encountered in Lady Asquith's diaries.[21] I doubt, and there is no evidence that, any of these poets have called themselves War Poets (with capitals!) but war is a part of their vocabulary, imagination and ingenuity in those moments; war language is in their arsenal.

[18] (1976: 161)
[19] 2018
[20] (2019: 25)
[21] (2017: 47)

But what of those writers who do engage more insistently and constantly with war? Perhaps for the duration of a collection, a longer poem or even entire chunks of a career; who are they and why are they writing as they do? Carol Ann Duffy's assertion remains that it is mostly those *around* war rather than *at* war who respond to it creatively. Experiencing war as an observer, a victim, a family member or a non-combatant must be very impactful and inspire poetic expression just as it generates responses in the world of music, film and the visual arts. I don't aim to provide a comprehensive list of twenty-first century war poetry; I certainly can't claim to have comprehensively found and studied all examples, but across the poetry I have encountered around writing *Bitchdaughter* I have formed light-touch categorisation to allow me to sketch a laydown of war poetry today, as it has affected my writing. Andrew Motion sensed a similar trend or tendency to that expressed by Carol Ann Duffy. In his foreword to a section of the Bloodaxe publication *Home Front* (2016: 15) he writes,

> 'These days, we're almost startled to come across first-hand accounts of the front line in collections about contemporary wars. In their place we find poems derived from interviews or current affairs programmes, or with other kinds of oversight and reaction from behind the lines.'

Home Front exemplifies one rich seam of war writing today, and through the canon: that of the soldier's family member. There are four collections contained in the book, two are written by British mothers of soldiers (Isabel Palmer's *Atmospherics* and Bryony Doran's *Bulletproof*) and two are written by US soldier's wives (Jehanne Dubrow's *Stateside* and Elyse Fenton's *Clamor*). These four women write into a well-

known tradition of sisters, mothers, wives and lovers fearing or mourning the loss of their soldier. In the majority it *is* women who write from this viewpoint (poetry of the home-front) and Catherine Reilly's anthologies are rich sources of historical examples. *Scars Upon My Heart* (1981) and *Chaos of the Night* (1984) collect women's war poetry written during World War One and World War Two respectively. They are not solely anthologies of family members, but that is a prevailing theme of both, indicating that much of the poetry of war being written during the early 20th century in Britain and the US was inspired by those experiences. Vera Brittain's *To My Brother* (1981: 15) from which the earlier anthology's title is drawn and the two heart-breaking poems by Vera Bax, *To Richard, My Son* and *To Billy, My Son* (1983: 13) being some of the most resonant examples. The first of these examples is written to a brother, 'I see the symbol of your courage glow', and the others to two sons killed three years apart in World War Two, 'You were a child and full of childish fears'. They resonate because of the authority afforded to them by the integrity of their experience; the ownership of a relationship with warfighting through their loved ones.

The 20th century poems in this home-front category especially those written during World War One continue to be read and heard because of this authority and authenticity. In many other ways, women's war poetry at the time was on the back foot. Left behind by the towering male soldier-poets who were weaving their real-life trauma and warfighting with a surging modernism, Featherstone (2007: 447) explains that much of the women's contemporary war poems have been dismissed as overly romantic, simplistic or Edwardian in tone. But on the whole, the purity of grief or fear found in the war poetry of family and friends holds its own ground against such dismissal. Even poems which imagine a family member, like Margaret

Postgate Cole's exemplary *Afterwards*, ('And if these years have made you into a pit-prop,/ To carry the twisting galleries of the world's reconstruction') are sufficiently rooted in a collective grief to hold resonance and meaning for a wide audience. (Reilly, 1981: 21).

The poets in *Home Front* lay claim to the same familial authority; there is no appropriation here, and no over reliance on the emotional tugs of their relationships as the poems are full of superb craft too. This is war seen through the authoritative eyes of a combatant's loving family member and carried in the hands of skilful poets and it can produce really startling insights. Isabel Palmer's 'this must be how it feels/ to be looking at a rainbow as a child/ steps in front of a car' ('BFPO' p. 42), or Elyse Fenton's 'I'm nodding// on my end, a little pleased by my own insider's knowledge' ('Word from the Front' p. 195). Poems and collections like those in *Home Front* are descendants of the strongest of the family-led (home-front) war poems of the Reilly anthologies and, to my mind, form a solid percentage of the modern war poetry referred to by Carol Ann Duffy. Throughout the four collections there are examples of what a reader may want from a soldier's loved-one writing poetry, in this century or the last; a privileged glimpse of an intensely personal emotion from a safe-ish, home-front distance or the surprise and intrigue as a detail of the hidden and secretive soldiering world is revealed ('Bulletproof' p. 105):

> On our landing there's a bulletproof vest
> I keep stubbing my toe on.
> It doesn't budge, unlike his helmet
> that rolls like a decapitated head. ('Bulletproof' p. 105)

The anthropologist, the journalist, the recorders of war; when they write war poetry, it comes with a fresh set of perspectives, differing from those of the home-front writer. Often these writers will have had first-hand, visual experience of war-fighting, training or the operations which surround these activities. They may have encountered personal danger and may be writing their poetry with a vocational mind-set. These are poets who have set out (or eventually chosen) to interrogate and record war, either as part of their occupation or of their own volition, supplied with an official expertise of some sort. This is active-bystander art in the tradition of Admiralty war artists like Richard Eurich or Leonard Rosoman, or the poetry of Voluntary Aid Detachment volunteers May Wedderburn Cannan and Vera Brittain (yes, she gets to apply to more than one category!). It is a standpoint which can furnish poetry of protest or which can enlighten a reader through its record of incongruous, intimate and violent detail. Active-bystander or onlooker is probably the wrong phrase; it assumes a passivity. Participating non-combatant is another way of looking at it. Either way, these are writers in the thick of combat and choosing to record it in poetry.

War correspondents are superb writers of memoir, reportage and history: a line from Herodotus through Orwell, Martha Gellhorn and on to the likes of Max Hastings, Kate Adie and Marie Colvin could probably tell a reader everything they need to know about every war, battle and engagement involving European and Western nations and beyond. When the experience of war correspondence is brought to life in poetry, there is a hard centre of credibility behind the writing. American poet Yusuf Komunyakaa served as a war correspondent and managing editor of the *Southern Cross* newspaper during the Viet Nam war. He won the Bronze Star, a medal awarded for heroic or meritorious achievement or service, for his

contributions to that war. In the US Army, this role was an active duty. In other words, he was a serviceman, but it is his perspective as correspondent which compels me to consider him as a recorder of war, rather than a participant. In my imperfect and imagined taxonomy, he is akin to a Crimean war nurse or a Red Cross doctor; busy with his day job in a war zone– and it is the perspective and insight of that day job which bears the fruit of his poetry. His poetry collection *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), written in response to his experience in Viet Nam is riddled with punchy first-hand experience rendered in poetry. In *Short-timer's Calendar* (p. 43) he writes,

> Sarge said, 'If you want to stay
> in one piece, don't hang around
> short-timers. They just trip
> over booby traps.' It was like playing
> tic tac toe with God.

A quote from the US poet William Matthews sits on the cover of the book, 'The best writing we have had from the long war in Viet Nam has been prose...' he states before adding, '*Dien Cai Dau* changes that.' This makes my point about how important it is for war to be dissected poetically as well as, say, theoretically or politically. What Komunyakaa's viewpoint allows for is the perspective of a combatant, a sense of the danger, the camaraderie, the normalisation of war with his sharp, correspondent's eye and his imagistic poet's pen. Here in *Jungle Surrender* (p. 37), an ekphrastic poem which addresses the imagery of a Don Cooper[22] painting of

[22] Don Cooper, the artist of the painting *Jungle Surrender* also served in the Viet Nam war as a scout dog-handler.

the same name, he weaves together the voice of a soldier, a civilian, an onlooker, a participant and an appointed recorder of war;

> The real interrogator is a voice within.
> I would have told them about my daughter
>
> in Phoenix, how young she was,
> about my first woman, anything
>
> but how I helped ambush two Viet Cong
> while plugged into the Grateful Dead.

Another poet I awkwardly shoehorn into this active-observer/ non-combatant-participant category is Dan O'Brien, author of several poetry collections including *War Reporter* (2013) and *New Life* (2015). I say 'awkwardly', because it is not his own experiences of reporting that he writes about. Instead, the premise of these collections is based upon O'Brien's intimate collaboration with Canadian war reporter and Pulitzer prize winner, Paul Watson. The relationship is so sustained, close and prolonged that the line between the war reporter subject and the objective poet becomes thoroughly blurred. Over the course of two full collections of dramatic monologue and persona poems, the reader gains experience of
what the reporter/poet/photographer sees. Here, 'The War Reporter Paul Watson on Machismo' (2015: 72):

> So I sit down and I begin

to namedrop where I've been, while he namedrops
the caliber of the handgun he keeps
in his Y-fronts. No longer performing
the age-old journalistic pantomime
of acting like we are innocent, even
when we know we've never been.

There is a fullness and a completeness to the diptych of O'Brien's books. Covering conflicts and disasters from Pristina to Angola to Pakistan to Cuba to Sri Lanka, the books zoom in and out of photographer's, reporter's and poet's perspectives. Sometimes in the action ('The War Reporter Paul Watson Chases the Lion of Panshjir' (2013: 73)) and sometimes retrospective and bound in domesticity ('The War Reporter Paul Watson Also Hates Trucks' (2013: 105)). The sense of universality gained from these varied perspectives, whether seen looking back from Hollywood, from travels in Arctic Inuit territory or from a contemporary warzone, chimes with a remark made by Watson and paraphrased by O'Brien, in his introduction to *War Reporter*, '[War] lives in each of us. In the loneliness and humiliation we all feel. If we can solve that conflict within ourselves then maybe we'll be able to rid the world of war.' The importance of dissecting war, once again.

If O'Brien's collections provide a disorientating, relentless and pervasive drumbeat of poetic response to war, anthropologist Nomi Stone's *Kill Class* (2019) is a laser-precise reaction to a narrower set of experiences. *Kill Class* is nonetheless just as hard-hitting and revelatory in its approach. As an anthropologist embedded into a very kinetic and realistic set of US Army training scenarios her resulting poetry collection, and woman's voice, is added to the chorus of active-onlooking-

bystanding-participants. The poems record her bizarre experience of being embedded for two years in pre-deployment exercises in the USA. These exercises take place in the mocked-up Middle Eastern-styled village and compounds of 'Pineland', populated with a full cast of villagers, insurgents, clerics and characters: a theatre designed to allow soldiers to run through a series of scenarios, attacks and interactions with the civilian population in a hyper-realistic, but 'safe' environment. Stone's discombobulation is palpable, 'I am in war. No, / I am in a game/ of war. I am in a painting,' (p. 54). She is given the fictional character of a Gipsy to role-play and is expected to act this out while she carries out her ethnographic research and writes poetry as a result.

Kill Class is in no way sanitised by dint of being written outside a war zone. Stone notices 'these woods/ where old boys act-out/ a rape to teach war's// dos and don'ts' (p. 55) and is made to kill a rabbit which she has nurtured for food (p. 48). She undergoes the privations of living in the field, the hydration tablets, the 100% Deet and the rough talk, 'Gypsy, do you know/ what we do to traitors?' (p. 47). And, in an experience which I recognise, she is constantly reminded of normality and even beauty amidst depravation and fear, 'Nafeesa, who is beautiful, tells me the words for goosebumps in Arabic.' (p. 39).

Kill Class sits with the idea that mocking-up war in this way is a brutal and surprising aspect of battlecraft training: and it is. My response to this surprise might be to ask, *how else is it supposed to be done?* Of course, the pressures of cost and expediency will undoubtedly lead to greater reliance on technology and virtual reality, but for now, what else could really allow a soldier to train, make mistakes, watch-back footage, reassess interactions, incursions and battles?

During my basic training, I experienced an equivalent mocked-up location; that of a small imaginary town on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It was 1998 and the context was very relevant. Tucked away in a training area in Hampshire, I spent one week as 'security forces' armed with my rifle, riot shields, spent rubber bullets and fire extinguishers facing simulated riots, vandalism and bomb-threats from my fellow-trainees 'acting' various roles. I then spent a week as a member of the civilian population (civ-pop), excited to hear that I had been assigned a role as a cell-leader of one of the (fake) paramilitary organisations. It was, as Nomi Stone discovers, a hyper-real, thrilling and horrible experience all at the same time. I plotted a couple of fake riots and an assassination. I spent a night hiding in a (fake) sewage tunnel eating processed cheese. I drank in a fake bar, while colleagues of mine who had brought drums and guitars played Guns and Roses songs in a fake band called 'ManFat'. The fake pub was raided in a fake snatch by the fake security forces and I was put in a fake prison cell where real water was thrown at me and I felt like I saw a bit too much real enjoyment in the eyes of my fake captors. I remember it all in vivid detail, more than anything else from my training. So, the surprise for me reading *Kill Class*, was that I had not thought these experiences of my own were extraordinary enough to write about. That fake Irish village does not appear in *Bitchdaughter* and I don't know why.

Kill Class, really, is a metaphor for experiencing war through a lens; a lens of theatre (in this case designed for realistic training rather than a paying audience) and a lens of poetry – it is a meta-metaphor, a witness to a witness, rather like layers of observation in the poetry of O'Brien.

Volunteer armies and the wars of political choice, rather than world-wars of existential survival in the twenty-first century have resulted in war poetry of design and agency. That is not to undermine the emotional experience of the family member left behind, the physical danger Komunyakaa was in or the obvious horror experienced by Stone. But there lies in those poems an element of stepping into the experience; perhaps not quite as clear-cut as a choice, but certainly a hint of options for release. However, for the victim, the displaced person, the refugee or the non-participating observer of conflict there is no such freedom. War happens to them, around them and at them and some must record it. Poetry written in this space offers protest, witness and commemoration, acts as a history and as a teacher.

In *Deaf Republic,* by Ilya Kaminsky, violence and conflict in the imagined 'blue canary of my country' merges a rebellion against tyranny with a contemporary love story; grief, memory and anger. The language switches from folklore to reportage to sign language diagrams and asks questions about brutality on all sides, *A City Like a Guillotine Shivers on Its Way to the Neck* (p. 40) states,

> At the trial of God, we will ask: why did you allow all this?
> And the answer will be an echo: why did you allow all this?

Deaf Republic is set among fictional events in the fictional town of Vasenka but has its roots in the poet's earlier life in the USSR and his family's exile to the USA, echoing with prophecies of a history that might face us, even though 'this is a time of peace' (p. 76). Murder begets murder, violence is repaid with violence and hope seems lost, 'Now each of us is/ a witness stand.' (p. 43) This remarkable book is the

poetry of a person who has absorbed the brutalities of life (his childhood deafness, the collapse of the Soviet Union, his family's exile, the growing hatreds in his new country) and works them as a muscle in his writing. A muscle that has grown with him, not as the result of participation in war and political events, but by existing *despite* them as witness, survivor and at times, perhaps, victim. A stanza from Act Two of this long poem concludes (p. 52),

In a time of war

she teaches us how to open the door
and walk
through
which is the true curriculum of schools.

Rock Paper Scissors by Richard Osmond (2019) was written in response to the poet being caught in the Borough Market terror attacks on the 3rd of June 2017. Like Kaminsky, Osmond was witness, survivor and in his ongoing efforts to come to terms with the experience, is a victim too: his participation in the events unvoluntary, but his recording of them in poetry necessary and powerful. The collection is extraordinary, full of doom-laden banality, being 'Eight hours into Rob's stag, which had/ started strong with a pub crawl' (p. 6) and the fatalistic game of Rock, Paper, Scissors which takes them by Uber to London Bridge instead of to a strip club, where they then encounter the brutal vehicular and knife attacks. This viewpoint switches out to startling, but suddenly relevant and apposite *Beowulf* scenes

(his own translations), drawing contrasts with Osmond's night of horror and the violence of the Old English poem (p. 19);

> *The morning after the attack, the mead hall*
> *gore splattered: down revealed*
> *the long benches smeared with blood.*

In some ways, I consider Osmond here to be a war poet of the same tradition as the World War One poets so familiar to us from school days; Owen, Sassoon, Gurney. Caught in a horror they had not expected, in mortal danger and largely powerless, they write poetry as part of the process of making sense of the circumstances and in doing so, reveal the unimaginable to the reader.

Commemoration is often an expectation and a function of war

poetry which may, or may not, have been the writer's motive. A commemorative function for the writing could have been intended, commissioned or may be inferred or imposed by the reader or audience of the poem. 'One of the problems with textual commemoration,' writes Catherine Gilbert (2020: 12), 'is that words fail us; they can never do justice to the horror, pain and loss caused by armed conflict. And yet, people keep writing.' Carolyn Forché, (1993) in *Against Forgetting* prefaces a 'poetic memorial to those who have suffered and resisted through poetry itself'. A poem, she explains, which may be the sole trace of an occurrence is therefore 'Poetry of Witness'. To be heightened in this way, the poems in her anthology, many in translation, operate on a spectrum of individual/social/political and resist any

desecration of those categories. Poetry of witness can 'reclaim the social from the political [and] defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion'. (p.19).

To me, commemorative poetry is poetry *around* war rather than of, or *about*, war and in that sense, it too belongs to anyone who wishes to respond. This sense of ownership can generate tension: tension between writers, recorders, readers and what I will call 'users' of commemorative words and poetry. Jay Winter assesses this tension as arising from three competing impulses emerging in the poetry of World War One (1995: 205). The first a 'civilian motif of the mobilization of the "glorious dead"'. Next the reaction of soldier poets like Owen, Gurney and the French soldier poet, Larreguy against this veneration. And thirdly, the 'resurrection of the dead in poetry' which led to war poets offering 'compassion in the place of political commitment' (p. 210).

These impulses generate loud voices, especially in regard to poetry of the Great War, and in some ways the voices may be disproportionately loud. In a BBC schools' resource, poet Ian McMillan questions whether the commemorative emphasis on World War One poetry has distorted our view of war altogether. He notes that the view of the 'well-educated soldier officers' was a 'minority view expressed through powerful and well-written poetry', poetry which, contemporaneously, existed on an equal footing with other styles and from other backgrounds (and genders). [23] McMillan explains that the building anti-war sentiment of the 1960s coincided with the publication of two key War Poetry anthologies, edited by Ian Parsons and Brian Gardner, which drew heavily on Owen's work and the narrative of the futility of war. This helped to cement war poetry in the UK and much of the West in a commemorative, mournful mode which

[23] https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/has_poetry_distorted_our_view_of_world_war_one/z6d8382 [accessed 4 March 2019]

fits in to a complex web of tropes and traditions of remembrance in which much of UK culture of war is immersed.

War poetry runs risks in taking on the expectations and requirements of these tropes. Commemorative motifs and language might be mobilised to tell the truth (perhaps to power), to venerate, to ennoble and to protest. That's quite a lot to ask and may well not be the poet's intention at all. The commemorative imperative is probably present, in some way, in much of the war poetry I have referenced so far. In *Home Front*, Elyse Fenton (p. 204) writes of 'One-hundred-sixty-six thousand flags/ sodding the lawn' while Bryony Doran's poem 'A Parade in the Rain' bristles with anger and disappointment at an unconsolatory medal parade, for example (p. 117). Commemoration and remembrance are hugely valid and valuable motivations for a poem and the line that needs to be trodden is one between an appropriated victimhood, a venerated heroism and an honest resignation: or preferably ignore all these modes and tell the reader something new about the act of commemoration. The call to remembrance is, after all, a dictate that not all readers wish to receive. Suzy Campbell (2020) dissects the word 'commemoration' in her poetry sequence 'Memoration'. Considering the etymological roots of the word though Old and Middle English, Latin, European modern and modern English languages, she guides the reader through a landscape of response to remembrance,

> **Mameren**, Middle English (also means to hesitate).
>
> ...The dead are thought
>
> about with care; they retreat and stiffen to a list of names.

In her sequence, Campbell brings the mysteries of commemorative impulses into a temporary, clear focus. Conversely, Caroline Bergvall (2014: 38) allows a commemorative narrative to disintegrate and metamorphosise in *Drift* where 'they were tossed about at sea' becomes 'they were ossted about astea', becomes 'Th yw r sst d b t st', becomes 'ttttttttttt' and beyond. In these two examples, Campbell and Bergvall, demonstrate fracturing and fragility of a commemorative impulse in war poetry. This implies that the subject continues to evolve and has never formed a solidity across the canon: not for observer poet, family member poet, victim or soldier poet.

I was aware of how badly I could fail if I tried to commemorate some of the tragedies I was close to during my experiences. I felt that *Bitchdaughter* had no right to a reader's feelings or sympathy in this respect. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq which I trained for or served in were political wars rather than wars of existential survival (other assessments of this are available...) and in terms of the coalition forces, were fought by well-remunerated, volunteer armies. That is not to say that there weren't political, resourcing and leadership actions that I was angry or upset about, but simply that *Bitchdaughter* was not the home for them. The poet must take responsibility for what they write. 'Unlike an aerial attack, a poem does not come at one unexpectedly,' explains Forché (1993: 7) 'one has to read or listen, one has to be willing to accept the trauma.' To avoid themes, events or subject matter is part of what she goes on to describe as 'defense against remembering' and a rejection of associated sentimentality. I can acknowledge that process in my own practise as I look back now.

That said, I did write commemorative elements in the middle of the poem, primarily the Lost Things sequence voiced by the Scrapbook. Viewing it back now, I

see this section as being born of the same bewilderment explored by Campbell and Bergvall, where I was pinning down fragments and ghosts, ephemera and *déjà vu* to receive a sense of resolution. Forché (p. 16) claims that in writing witness, the 'fragment gains urgency'. This idea helped me to understand that Scrapbook, rather than being diversionary light-relief, is the strongest way I could find to represent events and experiences adjacent to the experience of combat; the clearest mirror in many ways. That sequence includes missing the funeral of a childhood friend, (Vicky, the friend on Bitchdaughter Tower) and matches it with regret at losing the chance of a nice pair of shoes as another friend's bridesmaid: how else can I account for such an abhorrent comparison except through the dismantling experience of deployment? Or how else am I to explain the trite delight at losing so much body weight alongside the real threat of bodily injury? It's disconcerting. World War Two poet, Keith Douglas wrote of 'time's wrong-way telescope' in his poem 'Simplify Me When I Am Dead' (1978: 74). Rather than feeling this same metaphysical effect, I feel subject to a kaleidoscope bringing one colour-theme or another to the fore with each fragmenting reshuffle: the fragment gains urgency.

One of the first poems I ever had published was a sestina entitled *Packing Up an Injured Female's Bedspace*[24] and in it I contrasted the homely touches female soldiers tended to make to their tented accommodation pods (fairy lights, box-sets, sun-tan lotion, *Grazia* magazine) with a kinetic convoy ambush resulting in injury. It formed part of a small collection shortlisted for a pamphlet prize. A year later, I was approached by the British Legion for some poetry for inclusion at an event commemorating one hundred years of women in uniform at the National Arboretum. I offered them a poem called 'The Lady Standard Bearer from the

[24] Available in *Writing Motherhood*, p. 133 ed. Carolyn Jess-Cooke

Legion' which described the legacy passed to today's servicewomen by that earlier generation. I was asked by the charity if I had something more 'trauma-based' instead. This told me all I needed to know about the risks of lamenting the victim or venerating the hero(ine) in war poetry, and this is certainly what I mean when I say 'a commemorative function for the writing ...may be inferred or imposed by the reader' a few paragraphs ago. And, going back to Ian McMillan's point, it is entirely possible that this victim/hero narrative is organically rooted in the pre-eminence of the officer-class WW1 poetry still taught in schools today.

Not all war poetry in the 20th century was anti-war and the same can be said today, although overtly *pro*-war poetry in the West is not something I have come across in the published form. In a full circle from the poetry of the victims, bystanders and family members in war is the poetry of the recruiter. This is poetry I assess as being aimed at reconciling the reader with war and mobilising support to its cause. The spectrum ranges from the well-meaning patriot to the self-interested monger and can sound troubling to modern ears. Journalist and poet Jessie Pope wrote in counterpoint to the anti-war sentiment of Wilfrid Owen to such an extent that he originally dedicated 'Dulce et Decorum Est' to 'Jessie Pope etc.' and later amended to 'To a certain Poetess' (Parker: 1987). Her poem 'The Call' is out-and-out recruitment,

> When the procession comes,
> Banners and rolling drums –
> Who'll stand and bite his thumbs-

Will you, my laddie?[25]

While her poetry exalting female war work and its contribution to the suffrage movement are more palatable by today's outlook, Pope's patriotic poetry was very popular, widely read and published at the time. Reactions to Rupert Brookes' poetry veered and continue to veer similarly from those who revere the pastoral beauty of his lyricism and those who found his patriotism naïve and foolish. Did his patriotic poetry entice men to soldiering, did it comfort the bereaved, was it dangerously idealistic or instead, ennobling?

In the West, poetry today is unlikely to be used to mobilise (wo)men in the cause of conflict, but that is not true of everywhere on the globe. In her book chapter 'Yemen's Al-Qa'ida and Poetry as a Weapon of Jihad', Elizabeth Kendall (2015: 247) writes of poetry's ability to 'infiltrate the psyche and create an aura of tradition' and the ways in which this has been utilised in Arab culture to elevate leaders and denigrate enemies throughout history. She examines how poetry was used in the Yemeni region as an 'auxiliary weapon' as recently as 2011 with several Islamic extremist magazines featuring the poetry 'extolling the virtues of, and rewards for, militant jihad'. It is poetry's 'advantage of papering over cracks in logic' and 'guiding the argument into an emotional... crescendo' which makes poetry so potent (and dangerous) in this respect. Considering the profound sonic effects of jihadist poetry recitals to be found on YouTube (even in classical Arabic that will be little understood by much of the audience), she claims that the 'auditory impact of rhymed and chanted poetry is likely to be greater than that of a sermon.' (p. 254) Kendall goes on to discuss the practical, ideological and emotional motives of

[25] Reilly: *Scars Upon My Heart* p. 88

modern Jihadist poetry, demonstrating how verses can give legitimacy and consolidate a continuum of Jihadist extremism. She gives, as an example, this ideation performance of a suicide bomber (p. 257);

> I am among them a ghost exacerbating their torture.
> They will know nothing of my coming and going
> until destruction looms in their public spaces
> and they fall in throngs.

Kendall demonstrates how natural imagery and an alliance with sanctified prophets legitimises and lifts up the Jihadist cause, creating unassailable cultural capital. Calling back to a classical form called *qasida,* the poets generate verse which can readily be adapted into *nashids,* or Jihadist anthems. In territory where internet access is rare and patchy, the messaging capability of hypnotic and heritage-driven poetry and music is sizeable. Kendall continues to assert this, pointing to al-Qa'ida member, Anwar al Awlaqi's inclusion of poetry and song in his pamphlet *44 Ways to Support Jihad.* (p. 253). Coming at this from the standpoint of a leading academic in counter-terrorism, Kendall is adamant that this poetry of war should be treated as military intelligence. She is surprised that counter-terrorism efforts have not made full use of poetry and made it a 'natural priority' in counter-propaganda operations. 'Poetry as a weapon is only being stockpiled in one arsenal,' she concludes chillingly. (p. 262)

In a natural, but contrasting example, the poetry of the UK and US's other principle adversary on the ground since the early 2000s is examined in an anthology edited by academics Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. *Poetry of the Taliban*

is a comprehensive mixture of poetry, some sanctioned and published by the Taliban's cultural committee and some, seemingly, by the Afghani citizens (although also sanctioned and published on the Taliban's official website (p. 13)). Most of the poems are written under pen names, but many appear to be written by, or in the persona of, fighters; they too are recruitment poems in many respects but seem to go wider in their appeal to a rural unity. In the opinion of the editors, this is why the poems of the Taliban, as a body of work, are not as suited to counter-propaganda in the same way as that of al-Qa'ida in Yemen. This poetry is often pastoral, sorrowful, full of love stories and 'eschews the factors that otherwise distinguish the [Taliban] movement'(p. 14). In the book, propagandic *tarana* contrast with more lyrical and evocative ghazals and landay to offer familiar cajolement to rank and file soldiers. 'You can enjoy sleeping on soft pillows and the *palang*'[26], remarks the poet of 'Otherwise' (p. 150), whilst elsewhere there is a widening framework to appeal to a broader alliance and beyond – such as here in 'He Walks' (p. 151);

> Love's enemy will walk in hiding from us;
> We are the hunters; our prey walks in hiding from us.
> He who would wander, riding on the throne of arrogance,
> He is now scared and restless, walking secretly from us.

Much of it is hard to dismiss as one-dimensional recruitment, some contains criticism of the Taliban it supports and there is poetry by women, or at least *a* woman with the pen name Nasrat. I was, of course, drawn to the poems by Nasrat (meaning 'truth') and in particular her references to Malalai (Malala) of Maiwand,

[26] palang – big ornamental bed.

the historical figure who took on significance for me, a western woman, and found her place in *Bitchdaughter.* 'Give me your turban and take my veil,' is the manifesto muttered by Nasrat (p. 143). It was an unsettling feeling to find a fleeting echo between her words, 'you sit among the girls; may calamity fall down on your masculinity', and those of *Bitchdaughter,* 'A woman/ who summoned/ the words in her mouth/ turned marriage veil to banner/ tired man to avenger,' (p 55).

These are powerful poems, even to an ear beyond the reach of the indoctrination they represent. The war poetry of recruitment and mobilisation is designed to be thus; be it in twentieth century Britain, or twenty-first century al Qa'ida /Taliban territory. This is not a trite comparison; as Faisal Devi's preface to *Poetry of the Taliban* points out – the poetry of recruitment and mobilisation and the struggle to 'humanise a long and destructive war' come from a common place of yearning that 'bears comparison to the cultural productivity of the First World War in Europe'.

The Taliban might be writing poems, but I have yet to see equivalent volumes of verse emerging from the UK's elite front-line troops. There is no Poetry of the Parachute Regiment, Commando Odes or Sonnets by the SAS as far as I am aware...

So, was Carol Ann Duffy correct after all? That there is war poetry being written from all angles, in many modes and from all stakeholders except, perhaps, the soldiers themselves? I was fairly certain that I was not writing into a vacuum, and of course I am not. There are soldiers writing creatively far beyond the memoir model on both sides of the Atlantic and many of them poets. In the US, Iraq War veteran Kevin Powers has received great critical acclaim for his novel *Yellow Birds*

(2012) and poetry collection *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting* (2014) both addressing the themes of a soldier's life set against geopolitical turmoil and controversy. Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet* (2007) is similarly impactful in addressing the soldier's experiences in the Balkans and Iraq. 'I tell her I love her like not killing/ or ten minutes of sleep', writes Powers (2014: 5); many of his poems being centred on coming home from war (the bar fights, the traffic jams and the veteran's hospitals which bring it all back), while Turner's poems seem fixed in the battle zone, Mosul, Balad, the street markets and the Tigris river.

In the UK, published creative writing by soldiers is rarer to come by; a bit more hidden and slanted. In one example which appealed to the logistic and supply framework of my own military experience, Theophilus Kwek (2017) writes of his experience as a storeman during his time of Singaporean National Service; the hidden awe in taking care of items, of finding 'strange beauty' in the 'clean light-and-shadow' of the camp. In *Poetry News* (2017) he described this strange and storied mix;

> Our lives here revolve so closely around the things we maintain and manage that they seem to take on lives of their own. Curious lives, and lived in secret against an urgent, prevailing narrative that would bind each sedate field-chair of box of stationery into one all-embracing epic of defending a nation... I discover, this vocation is also an exercise in storytelling.

Elsewhere, I found experimental novel *Anatomy of a Soldier* by Harry Parker (2016) in which field dressings and combat boots narrate the story of the author's dismembering injury and the jolly round-up of anecdote-with-a-dark-belly in Patrick Hennessey's *Junior Officers' Reading Club* (2010).

Published or not, I was able to uncover plenty of soldiers writing poetry in my role as the Army's Arts Engagement Officer. I ran a national poetry competition (with one category exclusively for serving personnel) which uncovered at least thirty serving poets writing poems of varying skill and ambition. We led workshops with recruits in basic training which earned the attention of a columnist from Times 2[27] and I workshopped with some highly entertaining elderly In-Patients of the Royal Hospital Chelsea (naughty limericks a particular speciality). In this role, I found plenty of evidence of the drive to commit the experience of war into poetry which must have existed in the twentieth century - some poetry was trained, skilled and talented, some was simply heartfelt and therapeutic. A series of workshops for US and UK veterans run by Oxford Brookes University gave me a superb insight into the range and depth of quality of veteran's work. Drawing membership from prestigious US writing groups and academic programmes in the UK, these were a formidable group of writers with a range of publishing experience and the resulting anthology, *These Teeth Don't Chew on Shrapnel* is really worth a read, not least for the remarkable poems of John Thampi (p. 44), a captain in the US Army,

> When people talk about war
> they speak as if it were a wayward son
>
> Who demanded half your house and lost it in a game of pitch and toss

In the workshops, the writers were asked to examine a number of modern war poems, mostly written by non-combatants and it was here that issues of appropriation and ownership of experience presented themselves. Looking at the

[27] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-squaddies-who-study-blank-verse-85wzh6ffv> [accessed 2 February 2021]

Home Front Jehanne Dubrow poem, *Reading Stephen Crane's 'War is Kind' to My Husband* (2016: 145) the group were variously annoyed, indignant, amused and dismissive of the poet's claim to have packed her naval officer husband's seabag and to have 'put my photo in/ as well, laid/ it there between/ the Kevlar vest and heap/ of clothes'. I agreed. I would not want anyone disturbing my carefully arranged deployment packing; no one else irons my uniform. It felt strange to be siding with a group of men who were all vocalising their objections to a woman's poem and experience, but there it was. There were limits. It was proprietary. In that moment, I was a soldier poet, with other soldier poets and we were sticking a flag in something that we thought ours.

If ownership of the experience is so vital, why don't more soldiers commit their own to poetry (or painting, or theatre, or cross-stitch for that matter?). Poetic voices of soldiers are available, with some high-profile publications at their head, but the proliferation of these voices is not what it might be, and certainly not when compared to the output of military memoirists and non-fiction writers. Jay Winter (1995: 212), in considering the striking similarities of poetry across the divide of enmity in World War 1 explains that both Owen and the German poet Anton Schnack 'knew that they were killers as well as victims'. There is something about the dissecting of experience through poetry that reveals shame and guilt. There is no hiding place, no padding of words. There is nothing left of the 'romantic figure' for a soldier poet. I found it an uncomfortable experience, at times, to write about my subject matter: I find it unbearably exposing to read it aloud. There are times when I truly wish the words to unwrite themselves and I suggest this reluctance might be an experience shared among other potential, reluctant soldier poets.

The female soldier voice is of particular relevance to the landscape in which *Bitchdaughter* was written. Ambitious poetry from this cohort is in short supply, and I found my main influences in the US. Lynn Hill, a performance poet and US veteran, writes and speaks of her experiences of drone warfare in the Middle East. In her performance poetry collaborating with musicians Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, she explored the alienation, strangeness and horror of conducting drone missions in Iraq, from an operations room in Las Vegas and describes the process in a 2013 interview;

> But the thing that makes Predator drones so unique is that even though I felt like I was a participant I was still 12,000 miles away. And that makes it very different and difficult to kind of compartmentalize the war between your real life and your war life.

Here, Hill is describing a mode of warfare which has become ever more prevalent since she spoke those words. It is a war in which the adversary is helpless on a transparent battlefield (there is no need for camouflage if the very warmth of your body gives you away). She writes and speaks of the utter discombobulation of the hermetically-sealed operator who cannot reconcile the act of killing with a method that feels remote and game-like, 'When I dream, I dream of normalcy'.

Another eye-opening female US soldier poet, is Karen Skolfield in her collection *Battle Dress* (2019). She melds her experiences of violence, bodily guilt and hyper-masculinity with touches of home, beauty and imagination in ways which I recognise myself as striving for in *Bitchdaughter*. 'My daughter's hair an irregular nest' (p. 5) and the soldiers who 'slept/ symmetrically, shavasana' (p. 26) contrasting

with claymore mines and 'IEDs daisy chained' (p. 34). In Skolfield and Hill's work, I find common ground for *Bitchdaughter*. Skolfield and I both evoke (or mobilise?) the senses, with the music of Chet Baker or The Beautiful South or the smell of gun-oil and fumes. Skolfield (p. 46) depicts the interaction of a female soldier with male authority in which a Drill Sergeant declares,

> The males, I can break.
> Break them down, build them
> back up, then they do anything
> for me. Females don't break.

- a voice which chimes with *Bitchdaughter* (p. 21) asking,

> What happens to the remnants when you break down
> a Bitchdaughter?
> You build
> an Army.
> An Army of hearts.

I came to Skolfield's poetry after I had written *Bitchdaughter* and I am glad of that, it resonates so strongly with the themes and imagery of my long poem that I would have found it hard to de-influence myself and at the same time it has been an enlightening experience to reflect on and appreciate the common ground. Like *Bitchdaughter,* Skolfield demonstrates the fracturing of self and body as women try to take on the guise of a man; 'We laughed, our voices too high,/ our camouflage paint

cracking/ into frightened, toothy grins' she says in 'Why I Never Wrote About the Army'. Whilst both *Bitchdaughter* and *Battle Dress* both consider the importance of names, with *Bitchdaughter* offering the idea that 'names are powerful and nothing,' while Skolfield (p. 30) writes;

> The Army – look how it loves
> writing your name over
> and over.
>
> Obsessed, maybe.
> Worn like shame like
> the Army's your man
>
> but he's hit you.

Both Skolfield and Hill weave guilt and shame into a vivid war imagery, working at the tropes of adventure, belonging, expedition and glory until they turn upon themselves. It is the same dichotomous disorientation that I strove for in *Bitchdaughter.* War poetry by soldiers in the twenty-first century does not and *cannot* inspire the same pathos that the war poetry of World War 1: the entirety of a nation's (UK/US) freedom does not depend upon these soldiers fighting and they are fighting unpopular and controversial wars of choice. The hero/killer/victim pendulum can only swing so hard. In the war poetry of female soldiers, a reader can find an opening – the eviscerating shame of Lynn Hill, the intelligent perplexedness of Karen Skolfield and, I hope, something too in *Bitchdaughter*. Writing against the

familiar narratives of war is where the female soldier can bring something new. It can be found in Skolfield's chant of 'Let us say pussy, pussy, pussy/ and hate ourselves', (The Throwing Gap), or Hill taking '63,720,000 seconds to go from me to somebody else' (Capacity) or *Bitchdaughter's* 'petal in a plague beak'. This war poetry sets up a fresh access point. It has a different entry code and is written by women with the unique key-setting.

War poetry can't be presented as a straightforward synopsis or summary. I wanted to avoid a taxonomy-style round-up of highlights, although I fear that may be what has happened! In this section I hoped to present a slice of the landscape in which *Bitchdaughter* was written. There is war poetry that has been part of my education and knowledge base since childhood, long before I entertained the idea of being a soldier; poetry I sought out while writing *Bitchdaughter*; including my companion book *In Parenthesis* which stayed by my bedside for five years; and there is the poetry I have found since I finished writing *Bitchdaughter*. I opened this section with words from Carol Ann Duffy, 'most of us... experience war... through emails or texts from friends or colleagues in war zones, through radio or newsprint or television, through blogs or tweets or interviews.' Well, yes - and long may the poetry of 'most of us' proliferate and prosper. But other poets have experienced war whilst soldiering and we are here in the poetry parliament too.

It remains my insistence that war belongs to us all and must/should be examined widely and clear-sightedly using the tools we have at our disposal as individuals. It does not solely belong to a military historian, documentary maker, or strategic commander of the day: poetry is both a way in and a way deeper. I offer

that within this, the poetry of the female soldier has a slender, nascent, but tenacious heritage into which *Bitchdaughter* is my offering (p, 72);

> The soldier does deft origami
> on her empty packet of Frazzles,
> thinks of flags, thinks of not thinking of flags
> and lays her duties in the fruit bowl as an offering.

Inhumanly Human; Unwomanly Women

Oh to be a woman to be left to pique and pine
When the winds are out and calling to this vagrant's heart of mine
There is a danger in the waters – there's a joy where dangers be -
Alas to be a woman with the nomad's heart in me.

Dora Sigerson Shorter
- pasted into the childhood
scrapbook of Flora Sandes[28]

Ugly, inappropriate, unnatural, subversive. This is the framework in which I find female soldiering set and to which *Bitchdaughter* responds. Whether it is through the tropes of mythical or biblical retellings, the stereotypes of modern cinema and TV, or in political and sociological debate right now, the female soldier is a nuanced and burdened entity. In writing *Bitchdaughter* I wanted to explore what this ugliness looked like, who narrates the stories we hear and why and how does a female soldier survive and succeed this narrative legacy?

'Battles are ugly when women fight', or so Father Christmas tells us in the early chapters of C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). Naturally, the *Bitchdaughter* Sister takes him up on this, asking Father Christmas just what did he expect? And when are battles actually anything other than ugly?

The ugliness: the *unseemliness* of female soldiering is something which I have tussled with for a long time. It is woven through *Bitchdaughter*, persistent throughout global myths and histories of female warriors and has exclusive lodging rights in my self-esteem and perceptions of place in the wider world. Combat is different to

[28] Wheelwright (2020: p. 70)

violence, though. Combat and soldiering being durational and requiring training and whereas instinctive (or even planned) singular acts of violence stand alone in their circumstances. There are, of course, numerous examples of isolated acts of violence committed by women in rage, fear, self-defence, defence of children or revenge. Scribe refers to examples (Jael and Judith) from the Christian Bible in her landay sequence (p. 13). To prepare for and commit to combat is a scaled-up restructuring that requires a reboot of many ingrained instincts, and I am not alone in this thinking this; Karen Skolfield's poem *The Throwing Gap* (2019: 8) is devoted to these themes, 'We willed/ our arms to be boys, our shoulders brutal and male... let us drink and punch our own selves', she declares. There's a wider sense of ugliness at work and it requires the shrugging off of femininity. The Amazon warrior women are often portrayed as having sliced off a breast to enable their archery, symbolic (even if untrue) of de-womanising. In *Bitchdaughter* I wanted to explore this space between the necessary hardening and un-sexing of a female soldier along with the urge and the resourcefulness for retaining femininity. *Bitchdaughter* tracks the female body from her 'scrambling netball legs' to the 'uniformity of stockinged shins'; through a series of hardening deltoids and abdominals ('there is gun metal in her now') to the small renaissance of 'L'Oréal Infallable Gel Crayon in Browny Crush' and fluttering 'tear-bedizened' eyelashes.

Feminine sexual appeal and beauty within stories and histories of female warriors is fascinating. Variously heightened to gain an unfair advantage, or totally hidden to the point of achieving male identity; beauty and female attributes are a weapon to be unleashed or a weakness to be hidden, more commonly (and effectively) the latter. Assuming the clothing and often the full identity of a man has enabled women to join the fighting ranks for centuries. 'Passing women' or women

known to have worn men's clothing in order to enlist and serve aboard ships or in the line, are a frequent feature of 17th and 18th century history. Mary Lacy, Isabel Gunn and Mary Anne Arnold are all examples of this. Julie Wheelwright, author of *Sisters in Arms* (2020) surmises that they would have looked for inspiration from their 17th century predecessor and hero of the Nine Years' War, Christian 'Kit' Cavanaugh, who went by several male aliases but was a woman in disguise- with children, a husband and a strap-on, steel-tube imitation penis. Mary Read and Ann Bonny, female pirates of real infamy and mystery are also known to have dressed as men, to the point of farcical confusion when each began fancying the other in men's clothing to the bemusement of Bonny's (male) lover and dreaded pirate, Calico Jack. These female pirates reaped the advantages of a man's life of crime right up until the point where they were sentenced to death when they swiftly 'pled the belly' in order to commute their sentences and save their unborn children (Wheelwright: p. 45).

Passing as a man is also a common theme and a well-used deception throughout the epic tales of female warriors in the Arabic tradition. The legendary 3rd century Queen of Palmyra, Zenobia, enjoyed a tomboy youth and was 'not recognizable as a woman' in battle, explains Remke Kruk (2014: 17). A popular theme of Islamic *sīra* (or popular epics), Kruk goes on to explain, is the cross-dressing, tom-boy childhood and full male disguise of its female protagonists. Warrior Princess Dhat al Himma pursued boyish activities, knocked suitors unconscious and chose 'dust as her eyeblack' (p. 49), Qannāsa slices the head off a disappointing husband of three days and breaks the ribs and spine of successive horses with her forceful spurring, while the impressive Princess Ghamra (or 'Amr in her male guise) appears disguised as a radiant young man with 'black tresses of hair...like bunches of grapes.' (p. 95). This compelling imagery often finds its way

into *Bitchdaughter,* as direct reference ('galloping warrior women, disguised as men/ black tresses cascading like bunches of grapes' or in references to make-up and the 'breasts pushed down armpits' (pp. 36 and 17).

The reasoning behind male disguise is as varied as the stories in which the theme appears, fictional or factual. In Middle-Eastern *sīra* warrior women are archetypes to highlight the cowardice of enemies and their Armies, or form part of valiant backstories to future heroes and tribes. In the British and North American historical stories of the 17th, 18th and 19th century passing women, there were socio-economic benefits to adopting male performance; these women were fleeing poverty, drudgery, the fists of their husbands, or seeking the riches, adventure and rewards offered by a martial life which household service could not offer. Across these examples, to soldier or sail as a female might require complete denial and disguise while at other times the woman must reveal her sex for survival or perhaps as a narrative device and climax to the story. In the story of Ghamra, she reveals her sex just after she has humiliated in battle the man who had rejected her for marriage, while Read and Bonny prevented further catastrophe to themselves by announcing they were women in the nick of time. Meanwhile, it is likely in many historical instances that there was a tacit acknowledgement of passing women, 'there are as many petticoats as breeches' stated Admiral Mennes in the 17th century. (Wheelwright: p. 45). But truly disguised or not, the multi-layered motivations to dress as a man in battle are global, persistent and seemingly worked.

The uniforms worn by women in today's Armies are at various stages of sartorial evolution. My combat trousers still have tailoring to accommodate male genitalia and fasten 'the wrong way', as do my combat shirts which also have huge multi-function pockets over each breast which are unusable by anyone of more than

an AA-cup size. Caroline Criado Perez (2019) has written extensively about the danger to women in wearing protective clothing and ballistic vests which are designed for men. Thankfully, the comfort, practicality and safety of all uniform types are being addressed by the British Forces, but those moments of intense bodily discomfort that accompany being a women with a large hair-bun under a Kevlar helmet, or a small waist and big bum in men's tailoring have informed several sections of *Bitchdaughter*, not least Sister's response to Father Christmas. Sister is asking, what needs to change? Do we need to be disguised and bundled up as men, or should the clothing and equipment that supports our role be tailored to our needs? I know which answer I prefer, and it involves elasticated waistbands.

Bitchdaughter mainly draws imagery and inspiration from women in history and legend who go to war undisguised: openly women, albeit encumbered with expectations of masculinity. Women who fight as women and therefore have twice the battle. Flora Sandes was born a few miles from my birthplace and 100 years (almost) to the day before my own birthday. After a tomboy childhood (that theme!), she travelled extensively following several exciting pursuits, and dabbled with uniformed service by enlisting in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) and forming her own breakaway group, the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps prior to the outbreak of World War One. So far, so conventional. But, explains Wheelwright (pp. 76-77), her remarkable journey was to turn her back on wartime nursing and become a combatant. Having been rejected as a nurse by the VAD upon outbreak of war, she enlisted into the Serbian Army and nursed on the frontlines for two years. In 1916, finding herself more and more intimately involved in the battle and as an excellent shot and horsewoman, she became acknowledged as a soldier. She 'stripped the Red Cross badge from her arm' and replaced it with

insignia handed to her by her Serbian commander, Colonel Milić. She rose to the rank of sergeant-major and is often described as the only British woman to fight officially on the front lines of World War One. Her story, and the personal links with my hometown captured my imagination and my fantasy of her informs several sections of *Bitchdaughter*. She is invoked in the series of landay couplets voiced by Scribe on page 13, her presence providing a reassurance and encouragement.

Also known to have fought without male disguise is another female pirate (or naval commander depending upon viewpoint), Grace O' Malley. She is said to have given birth on ship in the midst of battle and for her boldness and her contribution to the theme of motherhood she is showcased in *Bitchdaughter* (p. 59) as she 'pirate[s] back' at the pirates. Æthelflæd, 10th century Lady of Mercia waged military campaigns in her own name, battled and negotiated with Vikings, and was key to the founding of England as a unified nation. She chose not to remarry after the death of her first husband Æthelred, ruler of Mercia; a decision she is thought to have made in order to be taken more seriously as celibate women were considered 'manly'. The roaming of these undisguised women, in particular Æthelflæd and Sandes and their links to Yorkshire encouraged me in my usage of the map reference motif which occurs sporadically in the righthand margin of *Bitchdaughter.*

Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985) is a superb source of fighting women's stories. In this book, the author compiles dozens of recollections by women who fought across all lines of battle, primarily at the front, for the Soviet Army in World War Two. First published and heavily censored in the Soviet Union in 1983, it has recently been republished in a much less edited version. Russia, and later the Soviet Union, possess a culture of showcasing female fighters. Maria Bochkareva was the first Russian woman to command a unit in World War One;

her 1st Women's Battalion of Death, despite its mixed record of success in combat, was an example of high patriotism while some 50,000 -70,000 women are known to have fought in the civil war (Wheelwright: p. 62). But even within this tradition of martial women, there is still the acknowledgement of 'ugliness' and the book's very title introduces the subject as being *'Unwomanly'*.

The book chapter in *The Unwomanly Face of War* that deals most directly with women in active combat is entitled 'They Needed Soldiers...But We Also Wanted to Be Beautiful'. The stories told by women in this chapter are full of the visceral bodily struggles of being a woman and fighting an enemy while fighting for their beauty. 'I had beautiful legs. What is it for a man? Even if he loses his legs, it's not so terrible. He's a hero anyway. But if a woman is crippled, it's her destiny that's at stake,' points out Sergeant Maria Nikolaevna Schlelokova (p. 187). In another heart-rending recollection, machine gunner Anna Galai regrets that 'It's a pity I was only beautiful during the war....' (p. 186). The fight for femininity is at all levels from saving up sugar 'instead of eating it, to stiffen our bangs' to using soft grass to wash off menstrual blood until 'our legs were green,' (p. 197). Eventually, 'only one fear remains – of being ugly after death,' (p. 183). Similar concerns affect *Bitchdaughter*: that a 'tank is no place/ to change your Tampax', the welcomed weight-loss and snuck-in hair straighteners alongside longer term medical issues of 'fucked feet', bunions and mastitis. And like the women of *Unwomanly Faces,* the female soldiers of *Bitchdaughter* seek out beauty everywhere. Beauty, explains Alexievich, 'was the indestructible part of their existence,' (p. 184). *Bitchdaughter* finds beauty in the flaking paint of a building at a rifle range, the birth of a lamb during a patrol or the wisteria against razor-wire.

Instead of battles being 'ugly' (or uglier) because of women fighting, it could be argued that Father Christmas meant instead that 'women are ugly when they fight battles', perhaps because they are undermining their traditional female status as carers and mothers. Much has been written about the women characters of the fantasy world-building writers of the 20th century such as Lewis and Tolkien; far too much to summarise here but suffice to say that women being beautiful and women fighting (or showing violence) are often mutually exclusive for these writers. This remark by Father Christmas in Lewis's book is fairly representative of the realisation of female roles and characteristics throughout his works. *The Four Loves* (1960), highlights the constraint with which a woman (and all humans actually) must navigate their psyche and emotions which in turn influenced my writing of the strange relationship between the trainee female soldiers and their Colour-Sergeant in *Bitchdaughter*, 'it was all four types of love at once', (p. 28). In Lewis's final novel *Till We Have Faces* (1956), his taxonomy of beauty and fighting ability reaches a conclusion. In *Letters to an American Woman* (1966), Lewis wrote of *Till We Have Faces* that he had 'talked thro' the mouth of, and lived in the mouth of, an *ugly* woman', that woman being Orual, Psyche's sister. Orual is permitted to fight *because* of her ugliness; her lack of beauty facilitates her fighting. Her looks are masculine echoing those passing and disguised women already discussed, and in Lewis, this is considered an unattractive feature. 'If I am to be hard-featured as a man, why shouldn't I fight like a man too?' Orual asks (p. 225). I first noticed Father Christmas's remark reading *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* as an out-loud classroom book when I was ten. As it lodged in my brain, I had no idea what a deep realm of studied gender assumptions I was being treated to.

While ugliness (manliness or lack of femininity) can be seen to facilitate women fighting and/or is an unwanted but inevitable outcome of women fighting, beauty on the battlefield is just as problematic. *Fitna* is a complicated and ideologically charged Arabic word, the meaning of which is multi-layered and beyond my grasp. However, in the context of the Islamic *sīra* (which I have been able to learn about in the English language through Remke Kruk's enthralling book, *The Warrior Women of Islam)*, the word *fitna* is presented as disorder and strife on the battlefield (p. 59). Women are able to induce it by exposing their long hair, flashing a breast or even losing their clothes. Female sexuality as a source of *fitna* on the battlefield must be subdued, it is a dangerous distraction which must be controlled. 'Hard sucked/ cigarette as auxiliary cock. Finger/ tracing droplets on coke can/ as unending consent,' worries *Bitchdaughter* on page 38. Within this concept of *fitna,* I found echoes of the arguments I have spent my professional life hearing; arguments against women in close-combat teams which prevented UK servicewomen (until 2019) being allowed to serve in the Infantry. Bar-room discussions would almost always descend into a discussion of women inciting sexual tension, having periods, pooing and needing to be rescued more urgently than men if injured: *fitna*.

Ugly, problematic, disruptive, disguised, struggling. Brave, determined, resourceful, wily and violent. These are our role models in history and literature. When you find someone from the next village like Flora Sandes, you hold on tight.

The storytellers have the power. As always, those who own the narrative own the history. Victors, conquerors, winners, writers and tellers are the ones who explain the world to us. This is why I found it important to consider who owns the narratives when I assembled my cast of warrior women. It would do me and

Bitchdaughter no good if everything I responded to was cascaded through a paradigm to which I was oblivious. *Bitchdaughter* narrates an interaction I had with an Egyptian journalist in Afghanistan: I had helped him into his helicopter seat and chatted to him and he later reported in his newspaper that I had told him I would have preferred to be a footballer's wife than a soldier. It's not entirely untrue, but not really what I said![29] Holding an awareness of narrative controls enabled me to navigate the heterosexual male gaze, gendered bias, outright sexism and cultural preferences and uncover what, for me, was important about women in battle through history and literature. 'War stories are intimately bound to concepts of ideology and ultimately belong to the victors of those conflicts', points out Wheelwright (p. 232); this is just as true for battles of the sexes as for global warfare. Scribe plays a part in this. As previously discussed, the occupation and role of a Scribe was generally reserved for men with few examples of women being given credit for scribing. In *Bitchdaughter* the Scribe voice (which I imagine as a collaborative and conversational, allowing for the imagined Harlinde, Renilde and any number of other women to join in) is given repeated opportunities to open up a wider view of history, perform a summarising function or accelerate the narrative.

Remke Kruk, who presents such an accessible and readable synopsis of warrior women in Islamic history acknowledges that those are stories 'composed by and for men.' (p. 35). For all that the *sīra* are full of strident, terrifying women who might slice through a horse's legs or fight to the death with a man, they are brought to us via an oral tradition of male poets giving recitals to exclusively male audiences. As a result, they can reflect 'male anxieties and desires'. However, despite this there

[29] https://english.aawsat.com/archive-search The link to this article broke halfway through the writing of this thesis and the article is no longer available. It now simply exists as an anecdote and a section of text in *Bitchdaughter*.

is a lot for a female audience to chew on: while patriarchal motifs prevail (the warrior women are often married, bear sons and show piety in the end), they are likely to have physically dominated their future husbands in battle and continue their fighting even into motherhood. The motifs of these stories transcended a cultural and language divide for me. Negotiating around the male authorship and audience, I found elements which signalled straight into *Bitchdaughter*. For example, I drew directly on the trope of a new protagonist or turn of events being heralded by a literal cloud of dust, and gasped at the humiliations which the female protagonists are able to heap onto their male adversaries. Kruk explains that by existing in the oral tradition, since prior to the twelfth century at the latest, these epics can be freshened up in terms of societal expectations. They have made their way onto TV and audio already, why not now graphic novels and computer games, she asks (p. 13).

There are narrative considerations behind all the soldiering women I considered. Svetlana Alexievich's marvellous rendering of female soldiers' stories in *The Unwomanly Face of War,* was initially censored as being counter to the official Soviet account of the war and the history of passing women and female pirates is peppered with unreliable narrators and spin. As Wheelwright explains, Isabel Gunn was illiterate and signed her 1806 contract with an 'x' and everything we know of her has been written by the male-led institutions of the time (p.129). Daniel Defoe is thought to be the biographer of Christian 'Kit' Cavanaugh as well as pirate Anne Bonny. (Mary Lacy, though wrote her own story, *The Female Wheelwright* and in that way is unusual.) My favourite heroine, Flora Sandes, wrote detailed diaries and an autobiography, which is not to say that she was allowed full control of her narrative. Her story was heralded (or hijacked?) in the British press, where she was presented as

'the Serbian Joan of Arc' (Wheelwright: p. 78). Meanwhile, everything I think I know (or choose to believe) about Queen Æthelflæd is brought to me via the novels of Bernard Cornwell and the brilliant binge-worthy Netflix *Last Kingdom* adaptations. In these Æthelflæd is a beautiful, politically aware agent of her own fate alongside an equally beautiful, morally upright Viking/Danish Lord Uhtred. The contemporaneous accounts of William of Malmesbury and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles will have certainly been examined by the historically rigorous Cornwell, but even those sources are known to be politically slanted and probably written for favour, and crucially do not contain Æthelflæd's own words. And anyway, the truth might not have made such great TV...

Making great TV and film is stock-in-trade for the female soldier and the warrior woman. Influential, and becoming ever more bankable, these women can be impressive, terrifying and sympathetic: The Wonder Woman reboot, Captain Marvel, Ellen Ripley, GI Jane, Lara Croft; albeit sitting on the shoulders of the less aspirational Private Benjamin. Wheelwright considers the phenomenon and observes that as women in the ranks became visible and an increasingly remarked-upon oddity (around Victorian times), so the sexual titillation quotient rose. Satirical magazines presented images of women in uniform with an 'exaggerated female form with curvy hips, large breasts and tiny feet encased in heels.' (p. 14). The heterosexual male gaze had swivelled and was producing media stereotypes that endure today. The heroine of ITV's TV show *Our Girl* was pretty, petite and super-feminine; the new breed of Marvel female superheroes are both praised and criticised in popular media for their revealing, but empowering costumes.

Film and TV imagery is loaded into *Bitchdaughter*. The references to film casting and screenplay directions at the start and finish frame the poem in this way.

Staring at female soldiering is something the poem tries to invite. At one point, Scrapbook casts back to another TV series, the 1990s ITV series *Soldier, Soldier* which I can truthfully cite as my main reason for visiting the Army Careers Office. The one female soldier I remember in this programme was the short-haired, androgynous and fairly uncharismatic Lieutenant Kate Butler, an unlikely heroine, really. It was a show created by a woman, and perhaps this is why I saw no needless titillation or fetishisation of uniformed women.

Concern of narrative control is also expressed in *Bitchdaughter's* focus upon names. Passing women deployed a number of aliases for a variety of reasons, the women of the *sīra* change names frequently, and most notably as they acquire status and recognition; Æthelflæd is rarely called a Queen due to complexities of Anglo-Saxon politics and succession. *Bitchdaughter* considers the 'naming agents' as rank, slur, nickname, role, accomplishment and a total minefield. She is fascinated by the name Malala, which opens up a reverie about the Persian warrior poet (and defeater of the British at Maiwand in 1880) as well as the modern-day Nobel prize winner who share that name. A story can be attached to someone because of their name but in the Army, names change regularly. This occurs especially with promotion through the ranks and additionally, as a woman, surnames can flip back and forth with marriages and divorce. *Bitchdaughter* is concerned with the legacy of that.

BOBFOC – (Body Off Baywatch; Face Off Crimewatch) is a hushed coded nickname I have heard deployed by servicemen to swiftly and conveniently categorise a woman they have just encountered. Just as readily applicable to civilian women as military but particularly handy for using towards servicewomen who are likely to have an athletic figure due to their training, but equally likely to fail the

attractiveness test as it is 'widely regarded' as being impossible to be pretty in the Army. This is a double bind. No self-respecting servicewoman would want to be found attractive by a man with this mind-set and yet, no one wants to be considered ugly. I've seen women twist themselves inside out trying to fit in to the hyper-masculinity of the Armed Forces; to excel without singling themselves out for scrutiny.

Two decades ago, one female colleague, Gemma, left the forces mysteriously and unexpectedly (to me) only to reappear recently as a personal coach and public speaker. Her story reveals how, after six years of 'no make-up, no heels, anything to blend in' and '[holding a] veneer of defiant perfection at all times', she left the Army bewildered by the sexism and traumatised from atrocities she experienced in Kosovo. She sought 'community in veteran spaces, only to find rooms of men drinking pints and telling war stories' before she tried to take her own life as a 33-year-old mother 'found by the roadside, delirious and choking on my own vomit.'[30] This woman, slightly senior and older than me, was someone I found intimidating and unapproachable, but her demeanour was aspirational (she was extraordinarily fit and inspiring). But there was no room there for us to become friends; no space for me to sense and help her in her vulnerability, nor for her to be seen to mentor someone junior like me. We had to pass as men, or crumble, or try to bubble up and over. I think I managed on a mixture of bluff and role-playing, and survived unscathed, unlike Gemma. It's women like her, as well as male mentors, who are addressed by Sister throughout the villanelle section on page 70, 'We must not let it come to this,/ *Ad triarios redisse*.' This emotional violence, which can beget bodily

[30] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-56253111?fbclid=IwAR0_rR0kOJaFt2AJ-MaEB7OBluwWGXjXzFkxHeE8h2HcsI_S8izVWtkWe4g
[accessed 8 March 2021]

harm, was formative yet surmountable for me. Motherhood swung my focus firmly outward at a time when I may have gone inward.

The 'Shaping the Ground – Hastati/ Principes/ Triarii' sequence is the roadmap for Bitchdaughter securing a place in the order of battle or in life. It coincides with maternity and motherhood and includes references to Bitchdaughter's own pregnancy and childbirth and a roll call of warrior mothers, Zenobia, Grace O'Malley, Yekaterina (Catherine the Great). It heavily draws on some imagery from the Roman infantry; all male, yes, but acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of soldiers at different stages of aging and economic security. Hastati are the poorer, junior soldiers, Principes the better equipped, more experienced fighters and Triarii the imposing elite veterans.

The visual concrete elements of the rigid quincunx square on page 57 evolve to a staggered line, containing gaps and tessellations as *Bitchdaughter* becomes more exposed, yet more secure. This 'thin red line'[31] is an emblem of strength under stress and also, here, representative of the strengths and weaknesses granted by menstruation and maternity (the red line). These pages are combined with poem sections that adhere to fixed poetic forms more than anywhere else; the villanelle 'Triarios' section and the Golden Shovel to Henry Reed's 'Unarmed Conflict' (1991: 55). But it is here, I think where the language becomes most volatile and expressionistic despite a turn to form. *Bitchdaughter* is on solid ground (poetic form) which in turn becomes freeing. This enables *Bitchdaughter* to accept her masculine influences (the Golden Shovel turns to a man, Henry Reed, for example) whilst also challenging the patriarchy (two-point-six-million words refers to the length of the

[31] The thin red line as a concept has its historic roots in the overstretched ranks of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders at the Battle of Balaclava. The Argylls were my own husband's first regiment and this history is part of bedtime-story culture in our household.

critical Chilcot enquiry into the Iraq War.) Crucially this is the point at which *Bitchdaughter* finally embraces, relishes and celebrates the feminine and accepts her structure as a soldier, 'Armour/ becomes you. It fits'. Consequently, a moment of hope is reached in the historical refrain - '*Ad triarios redisse'* or 'fall back to the triarii', which was known to be a colloquial saying of the times. Seen often as a cry of desperation and last resort, I view the saying as a statement of faith: after all that has happened the strongest are still in reserve, to call upon them now is an act of certain salvation.

It is now safe to look away. In the poem, Storyteller can fold up her chair and the Scribes carry out their final checks, wind things up with the Gods and craft a domestic setting for the final frames. The female experience of soldiering and war is complex, and the narratives and legacies are not owned by those of us who live the experience. But that's fine. Filmmakers, authors, photographers, journalists: fill your boots. Where we can, with our stories and histories, our names, identities and hopes, female soldiers should continue to make a record.

Bitchdaughter – A Poem is my contribution to that record.

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